

Honors 293[H]: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the *Star Wars* Universe
CRN 87417

Dr. Jay Cole, Benjamin Ross, Sam Gorski, and Tyler Trayter

Fall 2021

Tu and Th, 2:30 – 3:45

Honors Hall, Room 120

Course summary

What can a work of fiction set “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away” tell us about our own society here and now? Since its cinematic premiere in 1977, *Star Wars* (an umbrella term referring to the entire franchise) has captivated the imagination and inspired enthusiasm around the world. By any financial metric, *Star Wars* has been incredibly successful. Over the last four decades, more than \$40 billion in *Star Wars* merchandise has been sold. The movies have grossed over \$9 billion in revenue. Perhaps even more important than its financial success, however, is the impact that *Star Wars* has had on culture and society. From innovative filmmaking techniques to the creation of a new religion, and from coining neologisms to influencing scientific research, *Star Wars* resonates strongly with diverse audience for a variety of reasons. This course will explore some of those influences and use the *Star Wars* franchise as an interdisciplinary mirror to examine our culture and society.

Course readings and viewings

Required:

Star Wars: Thrawn, Timothy Zahn

Additional course readings will be provided by the instructor from these and other sources:

The Military Science of Star Wars, George Beahm

The Science Behind Star Wars, Mark Brake and Jon Chase

Myth, Media, and Culture in Star Wars: An Anthology, Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka (editors)

Sex, Politics, and Religion in Star Wars: An Anthology, Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka (editors)

The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell

The Science of Star Wars, Jeanne Cavelos

Star Wars and Philosophy: More Powerful Than You Can Possibly Imagine, Kevin Decker and Jason Eberl, (editors)

The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy, Jason Eberl and Kevin Decker (editors)

The Physics of Star Wars: The Science Behind a Galaxy Far, Far Away, Patrick Johnson

Star Wars Psychology: Dark Side of the Mind, Travis Langley (editor)

Star Wars and History, Nancy Reagin and Janice Liedl (editors)

The World According to Star Wars, Cass Sunstein

Star Wars: The Essential Atlas, Daniel Wallace and Jason Fry

The Empire Triumphant: Race, Religion, and Rebellion in the Star Wars films, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.

Viewings will be drawn from the following media and from other sources:

Live action movies: Episodes I-IX, *Rogue One*, *Solo*

Live action television series: *The Mandalorian*, seasons 1 and 2

Animated series: *The Clone Wars*, *Star Wars Rebels*, *Star Wars: The Bad Batch*

Course topics, readings, viewings, and activities

Thursday, 19 August

Course introduction and syllabus overview; defining the *Star Wars* (SW) franchise and canon

Tuesday, 24 August

SW and comparative mythology: How does SW reflect mythological archetypes across cultures and times? How did Joseph Campbell influence George Lucas?

Readings: Campbell, pp. 1-37

Viewings: clips from Bill Moyers interviews with Joseph Campbell and George Lucas

Thursday, 26 August

SW and comparative mythology: How does Luke's story represent the "hero's journey"? How do Leia's and Rey's stories represent the "heroine's journey"? What do Campbell's critics say?

Readings: "The Memo That Started It All" by Vogler; Deyneka in Brode and Deyneka, pp. 31-47; Thompson in Eberl and Decker, pp. 261-273; Murdock, *The Heroine's Journey*

(<https://maureenmurdock.com/articles/articles-the-heroines-journey/>)

Note: West Virginia Pop Con at Mylan Park is postponed until August 2022

Tuesday, 31 August

SW and religion: definition(s) of religion; Lucas' views on religion

Readings: Fielding in Brode and Deyneka, pp. 25-47; Routledge in Langley, pp. 148-158

Thursday, 2 September

SW and religion: analyzing the spiritual dimensions of the Force, Jediism, and Sithism

Activity: SPAR (spontaneous argumentation) will be explained

Tuesday, 7 September

SW and religion

Activity: SPAR #1 on Jediism and Sithism

Thursday, 9 September

SW and philosophy: definition(s) of philosophy; what can SW tell us about some of the "big questions" regarding balance, ethics, fate, identity, rights?

Readings: various authors in Decker and Eberl

Tuesday, 14 September

SW and philosophy: Stoicism; free will; moral responsibility and moral status

Readings: various authors in Eberl and Decker

Thursday, 16 September

SW and philosophy

Activity: SPAR #2 on sentience and rights

Tuesday, 21 September

SW and politics: analyzing motives in political behavior of individuals and nations

Readings: excerpts from Barber, *The Presidential Character*; Walt, *One World, Many Theories*

Thursday, 23 September

SW and history: concepts for analyzing history; examining parallels between human history and the SW universe (war, dictators, rise and fall of empires, revolutions)?

Readings: Reagin and Liedl, pp. 1-122

Tuesday, 28 September

SW and history: SW and history: continue analysis of parallels (racism, slavery)

Readings: Reagin and Liedl, pp. 123-150, 177-281; Howe in Brode and Deyneka, pp. 11-25

Thursday, 30 September

SW and rhetoric: analyzing Palpatine's speech, *Declaration of a New Order*

Tuesday, 5 October

Activity: in-class trial—Is Palpatine is a war criminal?

Thursday, 7 October

Fall Break—no class session

Tuesday, 12 October

SW and economics: aurodium, banking guilds, and debt

Viewings: *The First Victory of the Galactic Empire Was Over Its National Debt*

Thursday, 14 October

SW and criminology: criminal behaviors (bounty hunters, mercenaries, smugglers, syndicates)?
What are the functions of crime in the SW universe?

Readings: excerpts from Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*; LaRocca in Eberl and Decker, pp. 89-99

Tuesday, 19 October

Activity: Thrawn book report due; discussion of Thrawn during class [discussion led by Ben]

Thursday, 21 October

SW and women's studies: examining depictions of women in the SW universe

Readings: Bowman in Eberl and Decker, pp. 159-171; analysis of female characters in *Star Wars* by *Los Angeles Times* staffers; Liedl in Reagin and Liedl, pp. 151-177

Tuesday, 26 October

SW and women's studies

Readings: "*The Last Jedi* is the First Properly Feminist *Star Wars*," Tracy King; Kus and Scarlet in Langley, pp. 84-95; Wood in Langley, pp. 134-148

Thursday, 28 October

Activity: SPAR #3 on feminist role models

Tuesday, 2 November

SW and ludology: What can we learn from SW about we spend our "leisure time," from games of skill to games of chance? Why is gambling so prevalent in SW?

Readings: excerpts from *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Johan Huizinga;

“Let the Wookiee Win: The Story of Dejarik,” Tim Veekhoven
Activity: learn to play sabacc; final paper topics are due

Thursday, 4 November

SW and ludology: evolution of SW video games [discussion led by Sam]
Activity: watch and discuss clips of SW video games

Tuesday, 9 November

SW and geography/astrography: introducing the shape and scope of the SW universe
Readings: excerpts from *Star Wars: The Essential Atlas*, Daniel Wallace and Jason Fry

Thursday, 11 November

SW and geography/urban planning/ekistics: exploring cities in the SW universe as a guide to possible futures of human cities; SW film sites from Death Valley to Tunisia
Readings: “Urban Planning and Design in the *Star Wars* Epic,” Jack Skelley; Gulliver in Reagin and Liedl, pp. 282-304; Shea, “*Star Wars* locations that actually exist” (CNN Travel)
Activity: match the real location with the SW location

Tuesday, 16 November

SW and biology/medicine: midichlorians and mitochondria; Bacta tanks; Carbonite; Spice [discussion led by Tyler if his schedule permits]
Readings: Hom, “The Real Biology of *Star Wars*’ Midichlorians”; excerpts from Cavelos

Thursday, 18 November

SW and physics/engineering: hyperdrive; tractor beams; repulsorlifts; weapons; mining
Readings: excerpts from Brake and Chase; Johnson

Tuesday, 23 November and Thursday, 25 November

Fall Recess—no class sessions

Tuesday, 30 November

SW and music: John Williams, the maestro; psychology of music; use of music for signaling and narrative purposes
Readings: “*Star Wars* music: what were John Williams’ classical influences?” by Jay Gabler; “Sounds of the Empire: Analyzing the Themes of the *Star Wars* Trilogy,” Doug Adams; “How John Williams’ *Star Wars* score pulls us to the dark side,” Frank Lehman; Davis and Kraemer in Langley, pp. 244-256
Activity: listen to and compare musical excerpts from Williams and other composers

Thursday, 2 December

SW and film: What cinematic techniques influenced George Lucas, J.J. Abrams, and Rian Johnson? How have Lucas’ techniques transformed filmmaking?
Readings: interviews with Lucas, Abrams, and Johnson; “10 Things *Star Wars* Can Teach You about Filmmaking,” David Biggins
Activity: watch and discuss the www.filmschoolrejects.com profile of the cinematographers of the franchise

Tuesday, 7 December

Activity: SPAR #4 on Lucasfilm and Disney

Thursday, 9 December

Last day of classes
Final presentations

Friday, 17 December

Scheduled final exam (no final exam in this course) from 8 a.m. – 10 a.m.
Final presentations

Take-home exams

There will be four take-home exams during this course, each focused on a different set of topics. These exams will consist of essays questions that will ask students to draw on course lectures, discussions, readings, and viewings to analyze *Star Wars* from different disciplinary perspectives. Due dates will be announced in class.

Exam #1: comparative mythology, religion, philosophy

Exam #2: history, rhetoric, economics, criminology

Exam #3: women's studies, ludology, geography

Exam #4: film, music, science, engineering

Class debates

There will be four in-class debates during this course. These debates will rely on the SPontaneous ARGumentation (SPAR) rules and format, which will be explained in class prior to the first debate. Each student will play a different, randomly-assigned role in each debate (e.g., speaking for the affirmative, speaking for the negative, serving as a judge). These debates are intended to be a fun way to learn how to make an effective argument and a respectful way to exchange opinions, all while drawing on the material covered during class.

SPAR #1: Jediism and Sithism

7 September

SPAR #2: Sentience and rights

16 September

SPAR #3: Women in *Star Wars*

28 October

SPAR #4: Lucasfilm and Disney

7 December

Class trial

There will be one in-class trial during this course. This trial will be a modified version of a legal trial, with a team for the prosecution, a team for the defense, and a jury. In the trial, we will determine if Palpatine is a war criminal.

Trial #1: Is Palpatine a war criminal?

5 October

Book report on Thrawn

Each student will be asked to read Thrawn, by Timothy Zahn, a novel about a character who has appeared in a number of *Star Wars* novels, shows, and games. In a report of 500 words or more and due on 1 October, each student will be asked to respond to these prompts: based on the book, what are your impressions of the Empire? How does the book treat anthropological and sociological concepts such as speciesism, xenophobia, and rising through a military hierarchy? Based on your prior knowledge

of *Star Wars*, how does the book affirm or differ from your knowledge on topics such as alien life, the Empire's brutality/wickedness, and the nature of the Rebellion? For students without any prior knowledge about *Star Wars*, what opinions do you have about the book and the story presented to you? What do you think of Thrawn as a character?

Final project

Using *Star Wars* canonical material only, each student will apply her/his academic major to conduct an analysis of a *Star Wars* in-universe topic. For example, an engineering major might examine the structural qualities of an Imperial Star Destroyer, a criminology major might examine the motives of a major crime syndicate, and a music major might analyze the different musical instruments featured in SW movies. The expectation for this project is that students will use the analytical tools and principles of their own major(s) to write an in-depth paper about an element of the Star Wars universe. Topics for the final project are due in class on Tuesday, 2 November, to allow time for the instructors to confirm the suitability of the topic. A grading rubric for this project will be provided. Students will present their projects beginning on Thursday, 9 December. Order of presentations will be based on a random drawing.

Grades

The maximum number of points for this course is 1000, allocated in the following manner:

Participation (SPAR debates; trials; class discussion)	100 points
Book report on <u>Thrawn</u>	100 points
Take-home exams (4 @ 100 each)	400 points
Final paper and presentation	<u>400 points</u>
Total	1000 points

Thus, your final grade for this course will be based on the following scale:

900 – 1000 = A
800 – 899 = B
700 – 799 = C
0 – 699 = F

Academic Integrity Statement

The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, instructors will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of their courses. For the detailed policy of West Virginia University regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the West Virginia University [Academic Standards Policy](#). Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see your instructor before the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

COVID-19 Syllabus Statement

WVU is committed to maintaining a safe learning environment for all students, faculty, and staff. Should campus operations change because of health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic or other campus-wide emergency, it is possible that this course will move to a fully online delivery format. If that occurs, students will be advised of technical and/or equipment requirements, including remote proctoring software.

In a face-to-face environment, our commitment to safety requires students, staff, and instructors to observe the social distancing and personal protective equipment (PPE) guidelines set by the University at all times. While in class, students will sit in assigned seats when required and will wear PPE according to current University guidelines. Students who fail to comply may be referred to the Office of Student Conduct for sanctions.

COVID related absences fall under the University attendance policy found here: [attendance](#). As detailed in the policy, a student who becomes sick or is required to quarantine during the semester should notify the instructor. The student should then work with the instructor to develop a plan to complete the course learning outcomes while he or she is absent.

Inclusivity Statement

The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion.

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in your classes, please advise your instructors and make appropriate arrangements with [the Office of Accessibility Services](#). (<https://accessibilityservices.wvu.edu/>)

More information is available at the [Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) (<https://diversity.wvu.edu/>) as well. [adopted 2-11-2013]

Statement of Core Values from WVU Honors College

We lead.

The Honors College teaches students to be leaders in their classrooms and in their communities, pursuing a spirit of innovative thinking, responsible and accountable conduct, and extraordinary achievement. We model that leadership by fostering innovative learning environments that are test-beds for excellent teaching across the curriculum, and by epitomizing the integrity that we expect in our students.

We explore.

The Honors College helps students cultivate a curiosity about the world around them; develop persistence and resilience in solving the academic and social problems they encounter and research; and pursue an adventurous spirit that embraces intellectual risks for the sake of personal, academic, and community growth.

We build.

The Honors College builds an environment that empowers its students to construct their own solutions to individual and collective problems; to work harder and more deeply in the scholarly, research, and experiential activities they undertake; and to forge connections with peers, mentors, and community partners to better share our knowledge.

We work together.

The Honors College hosts an inclusive community of scholars by collaborating with faculty and staff

across the entire campus; by facilitating connections among students through social and academic activities in both their living and learning environments; and by encouraging them to expand the scope of their work to include local, regional, and global contexts.

We are Mountaineers.

As a prominent component of West Virginia's flagship institution, the Honors College cultivates an attitude of service to the Mountain State, our broader region, and the world. By combining a service mindset with the leader's stance, the explorer's vision, the builder's work ethic, and the community's collaboration, we embody and model the Mountaineer spirit.