Star Wars Fandom as Modern Enchantment

An Analysis of the Discourse on an Online Discussion Forum for Star Wars Fans

Master thesis

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May The Force Be With You

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

List of Abbreviations

ANH	*Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977)
AOTC	*Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002)
EU	Expanded Universe
OT	Original Trilogy
PT	Prequel Trilogy
ROTJ	*Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* (1983)
ROTS	*Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005)
ST	Sequel Trilogy
SW	*Star Wars*
TESB	*Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)
TFA	*Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015)
TPM	*Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999)

Chapter I

Introduction

Yoda: Yes, a Jedi's strength flows from the Force. But beware of the dark side. Anger, fear, aggression; the dark side of the Force are they. Easily they flow, quick to join you in a fight. If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, consume you it will, as it did Obi-Wan's apprentice.

Luke: Vader... Is the dark side stronger?

Yoda: No, no, no. Quicker, easier, more seductive.

Luke: But how am I to know the good side from the bad?

Yoda: You will know... when you are calm, at peace, passive. A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defence, never for attack.

— *Star Wars: Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)

This quote is from a movie scene that many people all across the world will recognise. On the swamp planet Dagobah, Master Yoda explains to his apprentice Luke the danger of the Dark Side of the Force. The belief in this Force is one of the religious aspects of a long running movie series of which episode eight is currently in the making: *Star Wars*.

1.1. Fantasy Fandom and Religion

There are many fantasy and science fiction movies and books that use and present religion and spirituality as an important part of the imaginary world and narrative created. Well known examples of these are the *Lord of the Rings* books (1954) and films (2001-2003), the *Dune* books (1965) and to a lesser degree the film (1984), the *Chronicles of Narnia* books

(1950-1956) and films (2005-2010), the *Matrix* films (1999-2003), and other fantasy book series such as the *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000) and the *Wheel of Time* series (1990-2013). Generally, the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century saw a rise in the popularity of science fiction and fantasy films, and this included the rise of religious content in these films.

Because I am interested in the intersection of religion and popular culture, the popularity of these films and books with prominent religious elements made me wonder: how do the fans of these fantasy and science fiction movies and books receive these religious elements and what do they do with it? Scholars in the growing study field of fan culture and religion have produced many studies relating to what they call fiction-based, hyper-real, or invented religion(s): forms of religion and spirituality based on or inspired by works of fiction, often from the genres of fantasy and science fiction. The Dutch sociologist of religion Markus Davidsen refers to these forms of religion as 'fiction-based'. Adam Possamai, a Belgian sociologist, calls it 'hyper-real' religion. The Australian scholar of religion Carole Cusack uses the term 'invented' religion.[1] For the forms of religion they research, the Internet and advances in communication technologies have played an important role, since it gives them the means to contact like-minded fans all across the world.[2] Davidsen, Possamai, and Cusack have also researched a specific example of fiction-based religion called Jediism. Jediism is a religious movement inspired by *Star Wars* movies. Members of this movement believe that the Force is real in their own world, the actual world, and they interact with the Force through meditation.[3] There are also *Star Wars* fans who do not call themselves Jediists but do view it as a religious or spiritual inspiration. In his book about fans engaging with *Star Wars* the British professor of film and cultural studies Will Brooker writes

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[1] Important works are: Adam Passamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: a Hyper-real Statement* (Brussels: P.I.E.-Lang, 2005), Adam Possamai., *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), Marcus Davidsen,"Fiction-based Religion: Conceptualising a new Category against History-based Religion and Fandom," *Religion and Culture: an Interdisciplinary Journal* 14, no. 4, 378-395, Marcus Davidsen, "The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu : A Study of Fiction-based Religion," (doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2014), Carole Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).
[2] Debbie McCormick, "The Sanctification of Star Wars: From Fans to Followers," in *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, ed. Adam Passamai (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 169.
[3] Davidsen, "From Star Wars to Jediism: The Emergence of Fiction-based Religion," in *Words: Religious Language Matters*, eds. Ernst van den Hemel and Asja Szafraniec (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2016), 376.

about *Star Wars* fans who see it that way.[4] The work of these scholars shows that there are fans who do something religious or spiritual with the religious content in the *Star Wars* movies.

1.1.1. Secularisation and the Post-Secular Debate

Research in the field of the new religious movements based on fantasy works is connected to the academic discussion about secularisation and the post-secular. The secularisation thesis was that with ongoing modernisation religions would disappear, but this thesis is now largely superseded by theories of the post-secular. The recent phenomenon of fiction-based religions is an example of how religion is not disappearing but rather taking on new forms. The persistence or recurrence of religious practices and beliefs in modern societies is at the centre of post-secularism or the academic post-secular debate. The German sociologist Jürgen Habermas is cited as the one who popularised the term post-secular.[5] In what follows I will briefly discuss secularisation and then discuss the work and influence of three scholars in the post-secular field: Peter Berger, Charles Taylor, and Erin Wilson.

The Austrian sociologist and theologian Peter Berger was influential in the development of the secularisation thesis and later on also in criticising it.[6] Berger's work on secularisation is based on the work of German sociologist Max Weber. Weber recognises a process of far-reaching rationalisation which goes hand in hand with a general disenchantment of society. Berger's theory was that modernity's pluralism undermines stable belief and that pluralism would ultimately lead to secularisation.[7] Like many other scholars, Berger started to doubt the secularisation thesis in his later work and became the most eminent of those who now challenge this thesis.[8] He realised that people continue to be religious in modern societies (with Europe as a possible exception), but that they are

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[4] Will Brooker, *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and Star Wars Fans* (New York & London: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2002), 4.

[5] Jürgen Habermas, "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* Vol. 25 (2008), 17-29.

[6] Steve Bruce, "The Curious Case of the Unnecessary Recantation: Berger and Secularization," in *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, ed. Linda Woodhead et al. (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 87.

[7] Linda Woodhead, introduction to *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, eds. Linda Woodhead et al. (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

[8] Bruce, "Berger and Secularization," 87.

religious in a new ways.[9] This realisation is central to the post-secular debate.

The work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, specifically his book *A Secular Age*, is also viewed important in the development of post-secular theory. Taylor argues that the secularisation thesis is indeed wrong, though we in the West do live in a secular age. He states that secularity consists of "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and [...] unproblematic to one in which it is understood to be one option among others [...]".[10] In Western societies religion is now an option among others and non-religion seems to be the norm. This links to Berger's theory of religious pluralism in modernity. Part of this development is that in modern societies in the West religion has become a private matter and Churches are now largely separate from political structures.

The Australian scholar Erin Wilson, who is an expert in religion, politics, and secularisation, also wrote a critical work about ideological secularism and the public/private divide. In her book *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics* she discusses many shortcomings of secularism and brings another dimension of secularism to the attention. She argues that in Western thought and academia there is a dominant influence of dualism, as a way of making sense of the world. In this context she states that in the West religion and the secular are separated by dualism: something is either 'religious' or it is 'secular'.[11] Furthermore, Wilson argues that the secular/religion divide is connected to the public/private and the rational/irrational divide, with religion being private and irrational while secular is public and rational.[12] She emphasises that the problem with this dualistic discourse is that one side of the opposition becomes prevalent and the other subordinate.

1.1.2. Fandom as Modern Enchantment?

By looking at the literary prehistory of contemporary fantasy fandom the American historian Michael Saler created a theory about fantasy fandom which relates to the broader secular and post-secular debate. In his book *As if: Modern enchantment and the literary prehistory*

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[9] Woodhead, introduction to *Peter Berger*, 2.
[10] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.
[11] Erin Wilson, *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics* (New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 11.
[12] Ibidem, 13-14.

of virtual reality he uses Weber's work on rationalisation and disenchantment in modernity. Saler employs the concept of 'modern enchantment' to analyse early forms of fantasy and science fiction fandom. In contrast to the post-secular debate, Saler states that this modern enchantment, fantasy fandom, is secular and rational in nature.[13] At the same time he argues that fantasy fans use their object of fandom and the imaginary world presented in it to talk about issues that are important to them.[14]

The way in which Saler's work contrasts with theories about religious forms of fans and the post-secular debate led to the focus of my research. Using *Star Wars* fans as a case study I aim to find out what their fan-discourse on religion and spirituality is and what they do with the religious and spiritual themes that are part of their object of fandom. The case study of this thesis is an online *Star Wars* discussion forum called 'Star Wars Saga In-Depth'. I had to limit myself to keep the study feasible, which is why I only selected data from this forum and from certain periods. The case-study will be discussed in more detail below.

The main research question of this thesis is: *In what way do fans appropriate* Star Wars *in a meaningful way and what are the implications of this for research into fandom and religion?* The sub-questions that will allow me to answer this question are categorised:

- *Fandom and religion*

1. How can Star Wars *fandom be defined?*
2. How does the medium influence the fan discourse?

- *Religion in Star Wars*

3. In what way are religion and spirituality part of the Star Wars *saga movies?*
    3.1. What kind of religion or spirituality can one find in the Star Wars *saga movies?*
4. How do the religious and spiritual elements relate to actual-world religions?

- *Star Wars fans and religion*

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[13] Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12.
[14] Ibidem, 18-19.

5. How do the users of the online Star Wars *discussion forum talk about to the religious and spiritual themes in the saga movies?*

6. Which subjects do the users of the online Star Wars *discussion forum talk about in relation to religious and spiritual themes in the saga movies?*

     6.1. Why do they discuss these subjects?

The chapters that follow this introduction make up the main body of this thesis. The next chapter, chapter two, is the theoretical framework for this study. The chapter is formed around the question of how to define the form of fandom and the discussion platform. Chapter three focuses on the *Star Wars* movies and looks into the subjects of religion and spirituality in them. Chapter four is the presentation of the data collected on the online discussion forum ordered according to the themes found using the research question. Chapter five is the theoretical analysis of this data based on the theories presented in chapter two. Chapter six is the conclusion, which will present the answers to the research questions, look at the wider implications of this study, and discuss options for further research. The introduction will continue below with an outline of the *Star Wars* movies and the case study, followed by the description of methods used in this study.

1.2. The Movies: *Star Wars*

Star Wars is an American epic space opera or space fantasy franchise that came into existence in 1977, with the first in a series of currently seven so called saga movies.[15] The movies tell the story of young heroes and heroines that save the galaxy from evil rulers. The stories and its battles take place on different planets and spacecrafts in outer space.

     The *Star Wars* saga movies are organised in trilogies. The first movie was called *Star Wars* at its appearance in 1977. Because of its great success two more movies were made to complete the trilogy. By this time the first movie was renamed into *A New Hope.* In 1999 the first movie of the prequel trilogy came out and in 2015 the first movie of the sequel trilogy

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[15] Space opera is a subgenre of science fiction, a form of adventure stories with space travel, super scientific spacecrafts such as space ships, and many action scenes taking place on those crafts. For more information about this genre see: "What is this Thing called Space Opera," in: *Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction,* ed. Gary Westfahl (Westpost & London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 35-47.

appeared in theatres. With the coming of the prequel trilogy, the existing movies were given an episode number to establish their position in the telling of the story. In order of the story, the current list of movies is:

- *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999)
- *Episode II: Attack of the Clones (*George Lucas, 2002)
- *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (George Lucas, 2005)
- *Episode IV: A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977)
- *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980)
- *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983)
- *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (J. J. Abrams, 2015)

The film studio responsible for the *Star Wars* movies, LucasFilm, made all of the movies. When in 2012 it was announced that *Disney* would buy the film studio and the *Star Wars* franchise, it became clear that there would be a new trilogy. The next movie, *Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* is due to appear in December 2017.

In addition to the saga movies, there are many other movies, novels, games, bibliographies, and comics that take place in the *Star Wars* universe called the Expanded Universe (EU). The EU encompasses all the fictional material published with consent of or by LucasFilm. Some of the material is part of the LucasFilm franchise, such as the *Clone Wars* TV series, but most of the work is written and made by people not affiliated with LucasFilm.

1.2.1. Genre

The *Star Wars* saga movies are often presented as space opera, a subgenre of science fiction, and also as space fantasy.[16] However, among scholars there is a lot of discussion about the definition of the genres of fantasy and science fiction and genres in general.

The difference between fantasy and science fiction is often unclear. For his research Saler does not separate the two genres. Because their stories take place in imaginary or

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[16] Chris Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2016), 1.

fantastical worlds, he refers to science fiction as part of the genre of fantasy.[17] Lester del Ray defines science fiction literature as: "an attempt to deal rationally with alternate possibilities in a manner which will be entertaining."[18] Fantasy is however also often about alternate possibilities, although not always rational ones. In his handbook on film, professor in communication and English Bernard F. Dick argues that there is no clear distinction between horror and science fiction, but presents the role of science (science fiction deals with specifics), time (science fiction reflects on present or evokes future), and experimentation (science fiction experiments with extra-terrestrial worlds and life forms) as one way of distinguishing it.[19] When talking about the genre of *Star Wars* Dick says that George Lucas chose to mix science-fiction with adventure, which is a characteristic of fantasy.[20] Scholar of English Richard Mathews states that fantasy is a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery, or magic–a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, and rationally predictable world in which we live.[21] These characteristics would also apply to *Star Wars*. There are thus different ways of defining science fiction and fantasy, and *Star Wars* seems to be a combination of both.

Discussions about defining genres relate to scholarly debate about the nature of genre in general. Dick writes that genres transcend the limits of their classification. He tells us to think of a genre as "a handle that enables you to get a grasp of a particular kind of movie".[22] This means that in different contexts a genre, the handle, can be defined in different ways. Related to this Susanna Eichner et al. have a pragmatic approach to genre in their article on the reception of the *Lord of the Rings* movies in Germany. They state genre is a discourse, the forming of which is a "contract between film and audience, involving production, marketing, the text itself, critical reception (reviews) and fan discourse".[23] Consequently Eichner et al. treat genre as "a site of struggle and co-operation between

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[17] Saler, *As if*, 3 and 15.
[18] Lester del Ray, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976: The History of a Subculture* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1980), 5.
[19] Dick, *Anatomy of Film*, 173-176.
[20] Ibidem, 177.
[21] Richard Mathews, *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.
[22] Dick, *Anatomy of Film,* 177-178.
[23] Susanne Eichner, Lothar Mikos and Michael Wedel, "'*Apocalypse Now* in Middle Earth': 'Genre' in the Critical Reception of *Lord of the Rings* in Germany," in *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, ed. Ernest Mathijs (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 144.

multiple users", who are the producers as well as the viewers of a media text.[24] Different users can thus have different interpretations of a certain genre and of the genre of a certain media text such as *Star Wars*. Since I am also a user of *Star Wars*, both as researcher and as a fan, I formed my own idea of the genre of *Star Wars*. The imaginary world created in the *Star Wars* saga movies plays a big role in how fans engage with the movies and the stories they tell, and the element of adventure is very important throughout. So to be able to get a grasp of the movies and their fandom, I will side with Saler and refer to *Star Wars* as a form of fantasy.

1.2.2. Reception Theory

This debate about genre is connected to views on audience reception. The question of importance here is: who creates the meaning of a media text? On the one side there are the producers; like all films *Star Wars* is created by a team of filmmakers who have their idea of how the movies should be interpreted. The audience is on the other side, this is the reception side of a media text. There has been a development in academic thinking about this. Against the background of National Socialism and the rise of mass media the German philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer asserted that radio, film, and later on also television, reduce their audiences to passive, non-critical, and obedient consumers.[25] Their thinking was criticised by writers such as the American media scholar John Fiske. In his works *Understanding Popular Culture* and *Reading the Popular* he suggests that individuals give mass-cultural art forms personal meaning, and in doing so actively engage with them.[26] This attitude changed the way scholars viewed audiences, the passive receivers became active agents making meaning. In this research I also view *Star Wars* fans as active audiences who engage with the movies and create their own meaning.

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[24] Eichner et al., "'*Apocalypse Now* in Middle Earth',"144.
[25] René Boomkens*, Erfenissen van de Verlichting: Basisboek Cultuurfilosofie* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Boom, 2011), 205.
[26] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) and *Reading the Popular* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

1.3. Case Study: Meeting the Fans of the Force

Star Wars fandom is a worldwide phenomenon and *Star Wars* fans engage with the movies in a variety of ways. The Internet connects these fans; it is where they find fans from all over the world. Because the Internet is where most *Star Wars* fans find others, this research is based on online communication between *Star Wars* fans.[27] One of the fan activities is talking about their object of fandom, in this case the *Star Wars* movies, via different forms of online communication. The platform of the online discussion forum was chosen because it presents a discourse that is accessible by everyone and contributed to by many. I expect to find average *Star Wars* fans there, which can make this study representative for a larger group of fans. The specific discussion forum, 'Star Wars Saga In-Depth', is one of the many *Star Wars* forums on the website *theforce.net*. This website was chosen because it has many popular and crowded forums. I had to limit myself to one forum for the study to be feasible for a master thesis; one forum holds many years of fan discussions on countless topics. The specific forum was chosen because it is specifically meant for discussions about the saga movies, which is my focus of study. The users also strive to have in-depth discussions about these movies. It is also a long running and popular forum; it has been used for more than fourteen years. This means that I can take samples from several time periods, to gain insight into the development of discourse over time. I specifically want to study their discourse on religion and spirituality, which are in-depth topics. So in brief, this forum holds data that can answer the research questions and which is representative of other forums and *Star Wars* fandom in general.

1.3.1. The Online Discussion Forum: 'Star Wars Saga In-Depth'

The website *theforce.net* is a website by and for *Star Wars* fans. Its slogan is: "The Force.Net: Your Daily Dose of *Star Wars*."[28] The homepage is dedicated to *Star Wars* fan news, all kinds of news articles about anything related to *Star Wars* gathered and presented by fans. A big

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[27] Will Brooker, *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and Star Wars Fans* (New York & London: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2002), xiv.
[28] Theforce.net homepage, 15-05-2017, http://theforce.net/.

subsection on the website is the section called 'Forums', where one can find the *Jedi Council Forums*.[29] To get a sense of scale, this section hosts fifty-one active forums divided into seventeen categories all about *Star Wars* and *Star Wars* fandom. Figure 1 in appendix 1 is an image of all of the forum categories on the *Jedi Council Forums*. The selected forum, 'Star Wars Saga In-Depth', is one of twelve in the category 'Star Wars Films and Lucasfilm Projects.' This category contains the most forums of all the categories. Figure 2 in appendix 1 is a list of the forums in this category. Users of the forums browse through the 'threads',– lines of discussions within a certain subject, started by a user–read posts from other users, and react on them by placing a post. The post generally consists of written text with an occasional image. If a subject they want to discuss is not presented in a recent thread, users may start a thread themselves. To be able to react on a thread people have to create an account for that website or forum, with a username, image, and other information they want to share. On these forums people do not use their real name or picture, but they have a username and often use the image of a *Star Wars* character. In this sense they are anonymous. They might give information like their sex, age, or location, yet not all of them do. For new users of the forums, the website's hosts and managers offer information threads about the workings and rules of the forums. There is for example an overview of the principles of behaviour they expect from the users, as well as a list of disallowed words, consisting of mostly curse and swear words.[30] The list of rules presented in the thread named 'Rules of the Jedi Council Forums' ends with the following statement:

> Finally, use common sense. This is a long list of rules, but they're here for a reason. The nutshell version of the above is "Be nice, don't curse, don't pirate and don't post NSFW ['not safe/suitable for work', erotic or offensive] material." Not everything that may occur is covered by the rules above, and the staff of the JC will use their own common sense in enforcing both the rules and situations not covered above, but in general -- as long as you follow the rules you should be just fine.[31]

This shows that before the users even start writing a post on the forum, there are rules and regulations to be taken into account. At the same time the tone of the rules is strict while

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[29] Theforce.net Jedi Council Forums, 15-05-2017,http://boards.theforce.net/.
[30] "Terms of service," 17-05-2017, http://boards.theforce.net/pages/terms-of-service/.
[31] "Rules of the Jedi Council Forums," 17-05-2017, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/rules-of-the-jedi-council-forums.27141421/.

friendly; they assume users know how to behave. To make sure users follow the rules the forums have so called 'moderators' that check posts and correct people if necessary. Furthermore users can also flag certain posts if they find them insulting.

The forum from which the data is collected, the 'Star Wars Saga In-Depth' forum, is meant for discussions relating to the *Star Wars* saga as a whole. If fans want to discuss a specific *Star Wars* trilogy or movie, or talk about games of *Star Wars* fandom, they use another forum. Like other online discussion forums, the 'Star Wars Saga In-Depth' forum has endless pages or so called threads. The first thread on this forum dates from the 9th of February 2003 and on the 17th of May 2017 this forum contained 3,299 threads and 160,042 posts. This shows that it is a popular forum that has run for a long time.

1.4. Methodology

As Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler write in their introduction in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*: "methods are the rules of the game in scholarly work."[32] So to gain access to information about the way in which fans talk about Star Wars and religion, different methods were used, borrowed from different fields of study. After an exploratory study of literature about fandom and religion led to the main research question of this study, a fitting case study within *Star Wars* fandom was chosen which could answer this question. The methods used to collect and analyse the data from this case study were chosen in line with this research question. This research was split up between two parts with each their own method. For the smaller part, the film analysis, content analysis was used, and for the analysis of posts on the forum the method was discourse analysis.

To find the religious and spiritual themes in the Star Wars movies, the movies were analysed using content analysis. The recurring themes were translated into a set of themes. This set was used in the second part of the research. The themes were used as a selection tool for finding discussions on the online discussion forum about religion and spirituality. On

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[32] Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, "Research Methods in the Study of Religion/s," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2011), 4.

the basis of the religious and spiritual themes, posts on the forum were gathered from different time periods. The collected posts, 252 in total, were structured by coding them with the computer program *Atlas.ti*. The coded data was analysed using discourse analysis, which resulted in many themes and patterns. These themes and patterns were then analysed using the theoretical framework presented in the next chapter. This theoretical framework has seen several revisions and changes during the research process, as to understand the results from the data analysis. The different methods in this qualitative study of religion and fandom will be discussed more thoroughly below.

1.4.1. Analysing the *Star Wars* Saga Movies

To identify and describe the religious and spiritual elements in the Star Wars movies, content analysis was used. In their chapter on content analysis in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* Chad Nelson and Robert H. Woods, Jr., both scholars in communication, explain that content analysis is a form of textual analysis. Here 'texts' are any object, artefact or behaviour that involves symbol use: written transcripts of spoken words or written documents, electronic documents, or visual texts.[33] In this research, the texts that needed to be analysed are a movie series.

There are two reasons why not only the data from the discussion forum but also the Star Wars saga movies were analysed for this research. The first reason is that to be able to understand what the fans were talking about, the researcher also has to know a lot about the object of fandom. The 'Star Wars Saga In-Depth' forum has the saga movies as its focus, thus much information from them had to be gathered to be able to understand the discussions about them. The second reason for analysing the movies is that the religious and spiritual elements in them had to be marked so they could be used as themes for selecting data from the forum. This meant an analysis on two levels.

The analysis of the Star Wars saga movies entailed watching the movies, making notes, and analysing these notes to create a written text about the religious and spiritual elements in them. The movies were watched chronologically, the order in which LucasFilm

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[33] Chad Nelson and Robert H. Woods, Jr, "Content Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2011), 109.

presented them to the world. This way the historical changes between the trilogies could be analysed. This meant *Episode IV: A New Hope* was the first movie to be watched and *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* the last. While watching the movies notes were made about the general structure of the movie by describing important events in the story. At the same time everything that was said about religious and spiritual themes was written down by pressing 'pause' and writing down quotes. When studying a movie it should be taken into account that the story in a movie is told by interweaving sound and image, a blend which is called *mise-en-scène*.[34] Language and discourse in movies are similarly not just written and spoken language. For this reason not only spoken words were written down and analysed, but also descriptions of costumes, music, lighting, positions of characters, and the general feel of certain scenes. A description of how for example the Jedi and Sith are portrayed in the different movies–the main religious or spiritual actors–also needs details about the clothing they wear and the music that plays when they enter a scene. To be able to find the specific conversations and events, the time they took place in the movie was written down. With the gathered notes from watching the movies it was possible to make statements about the discourse on religion and spirituality in the movies. The results of the film analysis are presented in chapter three of this thesis. Based on this analysis a set of words and themes was formed to be used to collect posts from the discussion forum.

1.4.2. Analysing the Data from the Discussion Forum

To select and analyse the data from the online discussion forum, an approach called computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) was used. As American linguist and communication scholar Susan C. Herring states, this style of discourse analysis (DA) focuses on logs of verbal interaction as part of online behaviour; in other words, analysing online behaviour by doing empirical, textual observations.[35] In this case the source of logs is the online *Star Wars* discussion forum on which fans discuss all kinds of subjects related to their

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[34] Dick, *Anatomy of Film*, 18.
[35] Susan C. Herring, "Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behaviour," in *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, eds. S. A. Barab, R. Kling and J. H. Gray (New York: Cambridge University Pess, 2004), 338-376, 2 or 339.

favourite media text. Like with other forms of DA, CMDA is on the one side a methodological toolkit and on the other side a set of theoretical lenses through which a researcher makes observations and interprets the results of an empirical analysis.[36] It is therefore fitting to add some details about it, specifically on how it is used in this research. Most of the characteristics of DA are the same for CMDA, apart from the latter concentrating on communication via the Internet.

1.4.2.1. Discourse Analysis

The object of DA is language, in the broadest sense of the word. In DA, language entails spoken and written language, but also other ways of communicating such as images.[37] Within DA language is not approached as merely reflecting reality, the approach is rather that *language constructs reality*. Theoretically speaking, discourse analysts investigate processes of social construction through the use of language.[38] In this sense language is a form of social behaviour.[39] The assumption is that discourses exhibit recurrent patterns that can be pointed out and researched. So the discussion forum should display certain patterns in the way fans talk about religious and spiritual themes from the *Star Wars* movies. By analysing these patterns in the discourse, one can find out how realities, ideas, or opinions are constructed within it. Language as constructing reality contains the implication that the language people use is not neutral and that it holds meaning. Because of this, using language can have important, often undesired, consequences.[40] Using certain language or specific words can for example exclude people who do not use this kind of language, often without this being the explicit intention of the ones using this language. Approaching language as constructing reality implies that how people use language depends on the context.[41] In the case of CMDA this means that discourses may be shaped by the technological features of computer mediated communication.[42] For the current study it means that the platform where the *Star Wars* fans have their discussions is important; the medium influences the

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[36] Herring, "Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis," 4.
[37] Harry van den Berg, "Discoursanalyse," *Kwalon* 26, no. 2 (2004): 29.
[38] Titus Hjelm, "Discourse Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (Abingdon & New York, Routledge: 2011), 134-150, 134.
[39] Van den Berg, "Discoursanalyse," 30.
[40] Ibidem, 29-39, 31.
[41] Ibidem, 30.
[42] Herring, "Computer-Mediated discourse analysis," 4.

discourse.

DA aims to gather knowledge about how social realities are constructed though discourse and how these constructions can become self-evident and natural.[43] For its study of things that are usually taken for granted, DA is inherently critical. There is however a specific form of this method called critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA focuses on how the constructions of meaning legitimise social inequality: the ideological effects of the construction of meaning.[44] The example of how language use can have consequences mentioned above, how it can create exclusion and inequality, is why CDA is important. There is an element of CDA to the current study, since the discourse on religious and spiritual themes on the *Star Wars* discussion forum could shed light on forms of exclusion there.

1.4.2.2. Gathering the data

The data from the forum was collected and analysed using the toolkit of CMDA. The focus of the CMDA methodology is on language-focused content analysis: looking at how *Star Wars* fans talk about religious and spiritual themes in the movies and religious and spiritual themes in general.[45] The data sample was collected using selection criteria and the set was then structured and analysed by coding it in *Atlas.ti*.

The chosen forum has posts going back to 2003. Analysing all these posts would have been impossible due to the limited size of this thesis. Therefore, a selection was made from the data using 'theme' and 'time' as a sampling technique. The data was gathered using three sets of words. The first set consists of general words relating to religion and spirituality and words derived from them: *religion, spirituality, god, philosophy*, and *myth*. The second set consists of words relating to religion and spirituality in the saga movies: *The Force, Jedi, Sith, good, evil, light side, dark side*, and *midi-chlorians*, found through CA of the movies. The third set was based on theoretical research about the *Star Wars* movies and religion: *morality/ethics, Taoism, Christianity, Buddhism, fantasy,* and *imagination*.

As mentioned, time was the second sampling technique. To get a dataset containing posts from different periods of time, five short periods of a few days at a time were chosen between September 2005 and January 2016.

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[43] Van den Berg, "Discoursanalyse," 33.
[44] Idem.
[45] Herring, "Computer-Mediated discourse analysis," 4.

- Period 1: 20-09-2005 - 22-09-2005

  a few months after the last prequel movie came out

- *Period 2: 23-12-2013 - 25-12-2013*

  a year after knowing Disney was taking over LucasFilm

- Period 3: 13-12-2015 - 15-12-2015

  a few days before *The Force Awakens* came out

- Period 4: 21-12-15 - 23-12-2015

  a few days after *The Force Awakens* came out

- *Period 5: 17-01-2016 - 20-01-2016*

  a few weeks after *The Force Awakens* came out

The logic behind these periods is that it was expected that it would be more crowded on the forum around the release date of the new *Star Wars* movie, as well as not that long after the release of the last prequel. The period in 2013 was chosen because it was a more quiet time on the forum. The posts, information about the user that posted the post, and the themes mentioned in a post were initially gathered in a *Microsoft Excel* file. With the combination of the various sampling techniques a dataset of 252 posts was collected from the forum, all of which are mentioned or discussed in one or more words in the word sets.

1.4.2.3. Coding

To be able to analyse such a large volume of data, the posts were placed in *Atlas.ti* and coded. The sets of words used in the selection of the themes were here used as codes during coding, a deductive set based on the CA of the movies. Two other sets of codes were also added, a theoretical deductive and an inductive set. Based on the theoretical framework for this research the codes *key symbol*, *ironic imagination* and the related concept of *immersion* were added. During the coding process patters and other important themes emerged and were added as codes: *rational argument, actual world, politics, emotion, nostalgia, balance, imbalance, Chosen One, Cosmic* Force, *Living Force, Expanded Universe, Jedi Order, Sith Order,* and *Will of the Force*. As the adding of these deductive and inductive codes makes clear, coding is not just a way of structuring the data so it can be analysed, but also a way of analysing the data. After all the data was labelled, the data about different themes was analysed based on the following research questions: How do the users talk about the specific theme? Which opinions do the users have about the theme? Which themes are discussed in

relation to this theme? And a question that became more and more important: Which themes are not discussed at all or not discussed in relation to another theme? The findings of this analysis are presented in chapter four of this thesis.

Chapter II

Modern Enchantment, the Public Sphere & Appropriation

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will present theories about the form of fandom of the case study, *Star Wars* fandom, and theories relating to the online discussion forum. This will be combined with theories about the activities of fans and fan cultures, which will give insight into the way fans appropriate pop-cultural products. The discussion forum shows the way in which the fans talk about the religious and spiritual subjects, in other words: the fan-discourse surrounding *Star Wars* and religion. Since the forum as a platform for discussion is not neutral and influences the discussions, analysing the platform as a medium is important to be able to understand the discourse on the platform. To analyse the patterns in the discussions on the forum and to ultimately answer the main research question this chapter will present theories from different fields of study. The sub-questions this chapter will answer are: (1) How can *Star Wars* fandom be defined? (2) How does the medium influence the fan discourse?

While looking for a way to understand *Star Wars* fandom and other forms of fantasy and science fiction fandom, I came across a book titled *As if: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* by American historian Michael Saler. His literary prehistory of contemporary fantasy and science fiction fandom offers a new and valuable perspective on media texts that take place in imaginary worlds, their creators, and their fans. For this reason his work will be used as the main theoretical framework for my study. Borrowing from the German sociologist Max Weber, Saler uses the concept of 'modern enchantment' to analyse early forms of fantasy and science fiction fandom. However, to

analyse the current case study I argue that Saler's theory needs to be fine-tuned and expanded. Namely, Saler's use of the 'public sphere' theory by the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls for critical nuancing and post-internet ideas. Apart from presenting Saler's theory of modern enchantment, this chapter will therefore focus on the theory of the public sphere by using Habermas' work as well as the recent works on the public sphere by the Australian sociologist Lincoln Dahlberg and the American communication researcher Nathaniel Poor. To extend Saler's theory and to further analyse the current case study, a theory about 'appropriation' by the French Jesuit scholar Michael de Certeau and a theory about 'key symbols' by American anthropologist Sherry Ortner will be added to my theoretical framework.

2.2. Fandom as Modern Enchantment

The practice of fandom has been theorised by many researchers from different fields of study. Saler added to this with his historical work about fandom and modern enchantment *As if: Modern enchantment and the literary prehistory of virtual reality*. The main body of this work is a detailed description of the rise of organised fandom surrounding three influential Western fantasy and science fiction authors: Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) and J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973). The fantastical books and stories that these men created were not only loved by many people, but the fans of these imagined worlds actually created virtual realities based on them. Saler does not use the term 'virtual reality' to refer to an online or high tech world, but to refer to imaginary spaces that are communally inhabited for prolonged periods of time by rational individuals.[46] This way they become virtually real. His research focuses on the early forms of organised fantasy fandom in the West: the time when fans started communal habitation of imaginary worlds through letter pages of fiction magazines, formed the first clubs, and organised the first conventions.[47] Saler discusses for example the early activities of The Baker Street Irregulars,

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[46] Saler, *As if*, 5-6.
[47] Ibidem, 5.

a literary society dedicated to Sherlock Holmes, founded in 1943 which still exists today.[48] He also pays attention to early fanzines, magazines published by fans, such as *I Palantir*, a fanzine first published by the first Tolkien fan club named *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 1960.[49] The mainstreaming of the Internet and the rise of digital media starting in the mid-1990s changed fan activities.[50] Current fantasy fan activities include clubs and conventions, the letter pages on the other hand are replaced by platforms on the Internet such as online discussion forums, blog platforms, mailing groups, and all kinds of social media. By using platforms on the Internet fans can engage with one another without geographic proximity.[51]

The prolonged habitation of imaginary worlds by fantasy fans is a form of what Saler calls 'modern enchantment'.[52] This form of enchantment is specifically modern, for it is a "disenchanted enchantment".[53] He states that modern enchantment is the "self-conscious strategy of embracing illusions while acknowledging their artificial status" and that it moves away from an essentialist 'just so' position to an 'as if' position.[54] Fans of fantasy stories enjoy the imaginary worlds without forgetting that they are imaginary. According to Saler, this form of enchantment meets the requirements of modernity: it is rational and secular; it is "delight without delusion".[55] That is why he calls it a form of modern enchantment; it is a rational and secular enchantment.

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[48] Saler, *As If*, 116. 221B Baker Street is the London address of Sherlock Holmes. For more information see http://bakerstreetirregulars.com.

[49] Ibidem, 188. The name of the fanzine comes from the magical artifact the palantír, a seeing stone mentioned in the Tolkien trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (1937-1949). The name of the fan club comes from the title of the first book in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. For more information see http://fanlore.org/wiki/I_Palantir.

[50] Karen Hellekson, "Fandom and Fan Culture," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, ed. Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 153-163, 158.

[51] Karen Hellekson, "Fandom and Fan Culture," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, ed. Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 153-163, 158.

[52] Ibidem, 20.

[53] Ibidem, 12-13.

[54] Ibidem, 13.

[55] Ibidem, 12.

2.2.1. Disenchanted Modernity

Saler acknowledges that there are many different definitions and processes related to modernity, but asserts that most concepts of modernity contain a form of disenchantment.[56] Saler uses the work of the German sociologist Max Weber for this idea of a disenchanted modernity. Understanding the modern condition was one of the key subjects of Weber's work. In the historic process of modernisation, Weber recognises a process of far-reaching rationalisation which goes hand in hand with a general disenchantment of society. The British sociologist Nicholas Gane examines Weber's idea of rationalisation and disenchantment in his work on Weber and postmodern theory. Gane states that:

> […] for Weber, the transition to modernity is driven by a process of cultural rationalization, one in which ultimate values rationalize and devalue themselves, and are replaced increasingly by the pursuit of materialistic, mundane ends. The process of devaluation or disenchantment, gives rise to a condition of cultural nihilism in which the intrinsic value or meaning of values or actions are subordinated increasingly to a 'rational' quest for efficacy and control.[57]

So according to Weber, the process of rationalisation connects to forms of bureaucratisation, streamlined production, and the Protestant belief system, which leads to a focus on materialistic ends and ultimately to the disenchantment of society. Disenchantment–Weber's German term is *Entzauberung*–refers to the devaluation and secularisation of different kinds of values. Gane distinguishes two steps in Weber's process of disenchantment: (1) the elimination of prehistoric forms of magical religiosity with the rise of universal religion and (2) the disenchantment of universal religion with the emergence of modern 'rational' science and the advanced capitalist order.[58] Thus, in Weber's terms modernity is on the one side disenchanted due to the loss of magical religiosity, making place for a universal religion on the one side, and on the other side the

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[56] Saler, *As If*, 8
[57] Nicholas Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory: Rationalisation versus Re-enchantment* (Basingstoke, etc.: Palgrave, 2002), 15.
[58] Idem.

emergence of rational thinking in science and a capitalist norm. Saler uses a quote from Weber to make the same point:

> [T]he increasing rationalization and intellectualization […] means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted.[59]

Saler focuses on the rational side of disenchanted modernity. He argues that modernity is not entirely disenchanted, for around the fin-de-siècle a modern and rational form of enchantment came into being.

2.2.2. Ironic Imagination

Saler's modern enchantment is not only modern for its rational character, but also because it is reflexive. That is, by using will and reason one can "keep the imagination in line".[60] He calls this ironic imagination. Ironic imagination is a double-minded way of approaching imaginary worlds.[61] On the one side people think about the imaginary world as being true, in this way they are able to be fully engaged in the story and the world that is created. On the other side people are self-reflexive and know this world is imaginary. This means that you can be fully emerged in the imaginary world and talk about it as if it exists in the actual world, while knowing it is imaginary and therefore being able to step out of it. This form of imagination is ironic because you act like it is real, while knowing it is not. For Saler the ironic distance is a quintessential part of modern enchantment, for it served as a "prophylactic [safety measure] against the beguiling potential of modern enchantment."[62]

Ironic distance is necessary according to Saler, because many fantasy authors try to make their world and story very realistic. A characteristic of fantasy literature is that although the created worlds are imaginary, they are presented as something that is actual or real and they have their own internal logic. Authors use a "reality effect" to establish

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[59] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1998), 139, quoted in Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.
[60] Saler, *As If*, 30.
[61] Ibidem, 13-14.
[62] Ibidem, 39.

verisimilitude.[63] Examples of this are the genealogy and maps Tolkien added to his books about Middle Earth and the technically detailed portrayal of spacecrafts in the *Star Wars* movies. Another effect that is used is the "absence effect," examples of which are authors referring to unpublished events or the lacunas in the story. These enhance the readers' and viewers' imaginative participation, in the process of which they become more involved.[64] Ultimately that is what makes the worlds and the stories that take place in them very attractive. Ironic distance makes it possible for the fans to be more immersive and to talk about elements from it in a rational modern way.

2.3. The Fans are Gathering: Online Public Spheres of the Imagination

According to Saler, the first examples of what he calls the "persistent communal habituation of imaginary worlds" surrounded the famous work of Arthur Conan Doyle: Sherlock Holmes. The fandom around Sherlock Holmes was the first case in which not an author, but the world or a character created by an author became the object of long-term dedicated fandom. Around the *fin-de-siècle* the first Sherlock Holmes society was founded. In the following decades different magazines about fantasy literature were created which contained so called "letter pages," a section in a magazine where they published letters to the editor about subjects of the magazine. It is on these pages that the first large communal habituation of imaginary worlds took place. Fans wrote in to give their opinions and interpretations about the imaginary worlds and stories they all enjoyed and many a fierce discussion took place there. Until the rise of the Internet, this was the way in which most fans talked to one another. Saler argues that letter pages reflected and supported the growing tendency to inhabit imaginary worlds through the ironic imagination in three ways. Firstly, by encouraging readers to contribute their own perception about the imaginary worlds to the letter pages, which facilitated communal participation and made the readers more

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[63] Saler, *As If*, 33.
[64] Idem.

immersed.[65] Secondly, the pages reinforced in the readers' minds the artificiality of the imaginary worlds, making them a manifestation and facilitator of the double-minded consciousness of the ironic imagination.[66] Thirdly, the pages linked the imaginary worlds to the real world, since the public dialogue there focused on both; it made the pages public spheres of the imagination.[67] The pages promoted sustained fan engagement with the object of fandom, in this way serving as step up for imaginary worlds to become virtual ones. The many *Star Wars* fanzines which emerged after the first movie in 1973 are the direct predecessors of online discussion forums about *Star Wars*. An online *Star Wars* discussion forum can thus be seen as part of Saler's modern enchantment.

2.3.1. The Habermasian Public Sphere

The places where fans come together to talk about their object of fandom are what Saler calls "public spheres of the imagination."[68] He borrows the term 'public sphere'–in German *Öffentlichkeit*–from Habermas. In Habermas' terms a public sphere can be defined as a social institution that allows for open and rational debate between citizens in order to form a public opinion, either face to face or mediated.[69] In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* he used the concept for the first time to refer to the historical emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.[70] Saler mentions that Habermas charted the emergences of new public venues: i.a. coffee houses, salons, fraternal organisations, and newspapers. Middle classes, the members of rising commercial and professional classes, used these places to exchange ideas about politics and society, also bringing the public opinion to the government.[71] Saler notices a similar historical development around fans of

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[65] Saler, *As If*, 97.
[66] Idem.
[67] Idem.
[68] Idem.
[69] Andrew Edgar, *Habermas: The Key Concepts* (New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 124.
[70] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989).
[71] Saler, *As If*, 97.

fantasy literature, in the same period, and uses the concept of the public sphere to refer to it. People who really enjoyed the stories about Sherlock Holmes for example started forming clubs and fans of later science fiction works were having continued public dialogue about imaginary worlds.[72] He argues that the persistent communal habituation of imaginary worlds, the modern enchantment, became possible due to the emergence of these new public spheres of the imagination.[73] An online discussion forum for fantasy and science fiction fans might be the twenty first-century equivalent of these new spheres: an online public sphere of the imagination.

2.3.2. Defining the Public Sphere

Habermas' concept of the public sphere has been around for a long time and has been added to and criticised for just as long. Therefore there are many ideas about the definition and criteria of a public sphere. The definition mentioned above is a generally accepted one from a work on Habermas' key concepts. A more specific definition that is very suitable for the current study is one by Dahlberg, a sociologist in the field of media politics, public sphere theory, and digital democracy. He refers to Habermas' public sphere as "the intersubjectively shared space reproduced through communicative rationality".[74] So a public sphere is a shared space that comes into being through a specific form of communication and discussion. 'Communicative rationality' is characterised by rational-critical discourse or discussion where the force of one's argument, not any form of coercion, is what drives the discussion towards greater understanding and consensus.[75] Dahlberg states that the criteria for rational-critical debate are:

> […] reasoned and reflexive exchange and critique of moral-practical validity claims,
> discursive inclusion and equality, respectful listening, sincerity regarding one's motives

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[72] Saler, *As If*, 95.
[73] Ibidem, 19.
[74] Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Habermasian Public Sphere Encounters Cyber-Reality," *The Public* 8, no. 3 (2001): 84.
[75] Idem.

and interests as relevant to the discourse, and autonomy from administrative and economic power.[76]

Moral-practical validity claims concern the claims made related to choices about moral action, choosing what to do in a situation.[77] Discussions about politics and morality are part of this. Inclusion and equality are also a part of the ideal of Habermas' public sphere, as well as respectful listening, and being sincere about one's motives within the discussion. To summarise, ideally, a public sphere is a discussion platform, a space of discourse, that is open to all and agreement should be found through the better argument, not through status or background; good rational arguments and equality are central. Habermas' work on the public sphere has been highly influential and since his first work on it many researchers extended and reformulated it. In relation to my current study, the matter of a possible online public sphere (of the imagination) is important.

2.3.3. The Online Public Sphere

Ever since the Internet became accessible for the general public, fans mostly find one another through the use of the Internet. Online discussion forums are but one option among a whole array of forms of social media and websites of which Reddit, Tumblr, Facebook, and Pinterest are big platforms. The possibility to have conversations and discussions with one another is central in this case; this is what fans started doing in the letter pages that Saler addresses and what is also still a central fan activity. The places where fans discuss their object of fandom, the online *Star Wars* discussion forum for instance, show resemblances to the concept of the public sphere discussed above.

In "Mechanisms of an Online Public Sphere: The Website Slashdot" Nathaniel Poor focuses on the similarities between spaces on the Internet and the public sphere connected to his own case study. His platform of interest is the website *Slashdot*, "an online community

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[76] Dahlberg, "The Habermasian Public Sphere," 84.
[77] Henry S. Richardson, "Moral Reasoning," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2003. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reasoning-moral/ (accessed March 10, 2017).

of computer enthusiasts".[78] Poor's article is useful for the current research because it involves a similar case study. Poor's theory was born when he realised that there are similar ideals connected to the Internet and Habermas' public sphere. He states that the "utopian rhetoric of the Internet" is the potential to connect previously unconnected people, so that they can discuss ideas and reach understandings, often involving democracy.[79] The ideal of the public sphere also concerns the bringing together of previously unconnected people, people who were previously voiceless and who come together to discuss ideas, often related to governance and politics.[80] To be able to claim that his case study, and by extension others similar to it, function as online public spheres, Poor analyses his case study based on Habermas' criteria for a public sphere. Based on the multitude of studies and theories about the public sphere or public spheres, he adapts the above mentioned criteria into criteria of the public sphere that suit the Internet and the spaces there:

1. Public spheres are spaces of discourse, often mediated.
2. Public spheres often allow for new, previously excluded, discussants.
3. Issues discussed are often political in nature.
4. Ideas are judged by their merit, not by the standing of the speaker.[81]

These criteria overlap with the definition of a public sphere as mentioned above, although discussions can more broadly concern moral-practical issues, not just politics. Poor argues that based on these criteria his case study would be an online public sphere. *Slashdot* is a website for discussions about computer news and related issues. It is an open mediated discourse where many issues are discussed by different users. However, Poor explains that discussions there often stray from these topics and turn into for example politics. Within these discussions users judge the arguments made by its merit.[82]

Although *Slashdot* is not specifically an online discussion forum, there are many similarities between *Slashdot* and the *Star Wars* discussion forum. Like the *Star Wars* forum, it is an online platform where users have discussions about topics they are very interested in

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[78] Nathaniel Poor, "Mechanisms of and Online Public Sphere: The Website Slashdot," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10, no. 2 (2005): 1.
[79] Poor, "Mechanisms of and Online Public Sphere," 1.
[80] Ibidem, 2.
[81] Ibidem, 4.
[82] Ibidem, 11.

or passionate about. So despite the fact that *Slashdot* is not created for fantasy and science fiction fans–unless one would say computer fandom is a form of science fiction fandom–these case studies are very much alike. This leads to the assumption that the *Star Wars* discussion forum is an online equivalent of a public sphere of the imagination.

2.4. The Flaws of Online Public Spheres of the Imagination

As mentioned, Habermas' concept of the public sphere has been added to but also criticised and rewritten by many. The critique that stands for the public sphere extends to theories about online public spheres, public spheres of the imagination, and also to online public spheres of the imagination. According to Habermas, the concept of the public sphere was that it approximated the Enlightenment ideal of unconstrained, rational, and equal exchanges between individuals.[83] It was thus presented as an ideal situation, which in practice reflected the social exclusivities of the eighteenth century.[84] Saler points out that these public spheres became a defining feature of modernity, being rational and secular.[85] The downside of these public spheres was and often still is a lot of exclusions, both direct and indirect. The ideal of rational and secular discussions might for instance exclude religious language and logic. Robert Asen, an American researcher in the areas of politics, rhetoric, and culture, starts his article 'Imagining in the public sphere' by explaining that recent theory and criticism of the public sphere has investigated direct and indirect exclusions.[86] Direct inclusions intentionally prevent the participation of particular individuals and groups in public discussions and debates. Examples of this would be the historical exclusion of women, people of colour, and disabled people from public discussion. Indirect exclusions are less intentional or obvious and function tacitly through discursive norms and practices that

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[83] Saler, *As If*, 97.
[84] Ibidem, 97.
[85] Ibidem, 97-98.
[86] Robert Asen, "Imagining in the Public Sphere," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 35, no. 4 (2002): 345-367, 345.

prescribe particular ways of interacting in public forums.[87] The unwritten rules about rational arguments on an online forum might for example prevent less eloquent writers and speakers or people using religious language from being taken seriously. These might be people and groups who were previously excluded directly. Asen states that "indirect exclusions may regulate discourse in various forums even when direct exclusions have been counteracted."[88] This means that public spheres are still indirectly excluding people and groups from discussions that should be open to all.

Public spheres of the imagination were and likely are not very different in this sense. An example of this, which Saler mentions, is that science fiction fandom in Great Britain and the USA existed mostly out of white males for much of the twentieth century.[89] Saler does however emphasise that despite this, many of the public spheres were intended to foster unconstrained, egalitarian, and rational deliberations about topics of public concern.[90] Looking at the examples of fandom he focuses on in his book, he argues that the imaginary worlds of science fiction helped people think and talk about social and political concerns, while at the same time provoking fans to think about alternatives for the status quo.[91] Saler seems to argue that these effects outweighed the exclusions. Although online public spheres of the imagination might be flawed, this does not mean that the subjects discussed there are not meaningful for its users.

2.5. Active Appropriation: Fans as Cultural Poachers

The study of fandom and fan culture in the twenty-first century assumes that fans, the users or consumers of pop-cultural products, are active rather than passive and not merely receptive. Fans are seen as part of a culture of viewers and readers, who receive, appropriate, adapt, and create: they participate. This kind of thinking could not have been possible without the work of the French Jesuit scholar Michael de Certeau, who referred to

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[87] Asen, "Imagining in the Public Sphere," 345.
[88] Idem.
[89] Saler, *As If*, 98.
[90] Idem.
[91] Ibidem, 99.

these active forms of reception as 'poaching'. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*–
published in 1980 under the French title *L'Invention du Quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de Faire* and
published in English in 1984–De Certeau presents a theory about the way in which people
appropriate popular culture. In contrast to Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault he focused
on the agency and active participation of consumers. He viewed consumers as 'the
dominated', but without perceiving them as 'passive or docile'.[92] De Certeau approaches
this based on the contrast between 'strategies' and 'tactics'. People in places of power, who
have an undisputed own place or legitimate domain, such as political institutions and big
commercial companies, use strategic activities.[93] In everyday life the normal people, the
ones without this power and legitimate place, use tactics to make use of the places owned
by others: '[a] tactic insinuates itself into the other's place'.[94] In his book De Certeau explains
this principle through many everyday practices such as talking, reading, and moving about.
In the case of pop cultural products and its fans, the producer of these products is the one in
power using strategies and the fans use tactics to appropriate or poach from this product. In
this way the consumer actively uses the product, creating a culture of participation.

De Certeau's theories were first used in relation to fan culture by the American media
scholar Henry Jenkins. His 1992 book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory
Culture* draws on the work of De Certeau. In it Jenkins proposes an alternative concept of
fans and fandom: not fans as mindless and passive consumers, but as 'active producers and
manipulators of meanings'.[95] He rightly presents (television) fans as: 'readers who
appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as
spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex
participatory culture'.[96] The same can be said about fans of any kind of media text–media
text being any kind of spoken, written, electronic, and graphic communications meant for
public audiences. *Star Wars* fans are thus also active producers who appropriate their
favourite media text for their own use and meaning making. In another work Jenkins argues

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[92] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Barkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1984), xi-xii.
[93] Boomkens, *Erfenissen van de Verlichting*, 175.
[94] De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xix
[95] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 23.
[96] Idem.

that by 2006 (when his other influential book came out), fans had become central to how cultures operate and everyone involved with the media industry takes the concept of an active audience for granted.[97] So while audiences used to be viewed as passive, we now know that audiences and fans in particular are very active; they appropriate media texts in a way that is amusing and/or meaningful to them.

2.6. Meaningful Appropriation: Fandom and Key Symbols

The focal point of discussions in public spheres of the imagination is a specific object of fandom, but often these discussions connect to the actual world. Poor mentioned this in relation to the website *Slashdot*, where actual world politics are discussed, and Saler also pays a great deal of attention to this. Saler states that on the letter pages "discussions about imaginary worlds segued into discussions about the real world", meaning fans switch between discussions about Holmes and Watson to discussions about politics in their country.[98] He even argues that it is easier to debate topics like politics and religion in the context of an imaginary world, let's say J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, than it is to discuss them in a bar. The reasoning behind this is that the context of the fantasy world creates a critical distance that "eases the airing of differences".[99] Hence, fans can have critical and heated discussions about subjects that would normally be difficult to talk about. Since they talk about them related to an imaginary world, it makes it less difficult or at least more approachable. Saler suggests that this could mean that fantasy fans are more tolerant towards other cultures and ways of living.[100] At the same time it has been suggested that fans use their object of fandom to understand or explain personal and actual-world experiences and issues. The opinions about difficult subjects like politics, religion, or morality and ethics, are often culturally or personally significant.

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[97] Henry Jenkins, Introduction to *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1.
[98] Saler, *As If*, 18.
[99] Ibidem, 19.
[100] Ibidem, 161-163.

In her article titled "On key symbols", Ortner writes about important aspects in cultures. Here, 'cultures' does not only refer to the culture of a tribe or country, but also to sub-cultures like fan culture or more specific *Star Wars* fan culture. In her article Ortner focuses on key elements that are crucial to a culture's distinctive organisation, what she calls 'key symbols'.[101] She distinguishes between two kinds of key symbols: 'summarising symbols' and 'elaborating symbols', between which there is a continuum.[102] Summarising symbols represent in an emotionally powerful way what the system means to the participants.[103] An example of this is the American flag, which for some Americans represents 'the American way', a mixture of ideas and feelings like freedom, hard work, and democracy.[104] Elaborating symbols on the other hand, provide vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas.[105] These symbols have the capacity to order experience and are essentially analytic; they provide orientations and strategies for members of a culture for orderly social action in relation to culturally defined goals.[106]

A specific kind of elaborating symbol is a 'root metaphor', a symbol that links or explains many experiences. A root metaphor operates to sort out experience, place it in cultural categories, and help us think about how it all hangs together.[107] The metaphor of a machine can for example be seen as a root metaphor within business culture, where the people and departments are cogs in the machine. This is similar to the idea of a body as a metaphor for the structure of a society, which is present in many cultures.[108] Furthermore, Ortner argues that root metaphors are "good to think", meaning that "one can conceptualize the interrelationships among phenomena by analogy to the interrelations among the parts of the root metaphor".[109] In this way, the root metaphor helps one to think about complex cultural ideas and structures. Within science fiction fandom intergalactic wars, social injustice, or forms of spirituality described in literature and films might function as a way of understanding actual-world wars, political struggles, injustice, and spiritual

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[101] Sherry Ortner, "On Key Symbols," *American Anthropologist, New Series,* no. 5 (1973): 1338.
[102] Ibidem, 1339.
[103] Ibidem, 1340.
[104] Idem.
[105] Idem.
[106] Idem.
[107] Ibidem, 1341.
[108] Idem.
[109] Idem.

needs. The fans appropriate the books and movies to help them think about their own life. This is similar to the point that Saler makes about imaginary worlds in the genres of fantasy and science fiction. According to him these worlds are on the one hand created as autonomous realms, and the fans enjoy them as such. On the other hand these worlds are "good to think with" about contemporary, actual world issues.[110] This leads to the suggestion that imaginary fantasy and science fiction worlds or elements from them can be appropriated as root metaphors by their fans. In this way the battle between good and evil in *The Lord of the Rings* can be used as an elaborating key symbol to understand moral-practical choices and issues in the actual world. So because discussions about imaginary worlds can flow into discussions about the actual world, it might lead to elements from these imaginary worlds becoming meaningful symbols for their fans.

2.7. Conclusion

This chapter presents a theoretical framework for analysing the case study of this thesis. These theories conceptualise the fan discourse on the *Star Wars* discussion forum as influenced by *Star Wars* fandom in itself as well as by the platform. The sub-questions of this chapter were: (1) How can *Star Wars* fandom be defined? (2) How does the medium influence the fan discourse? By using Saler's theory about fantasy and science fiction fandom it can be stated that *Star Wars* fandom is an expression of modern enchantment. This enchantment has the characteristics of modernity, it is rational and secular. By using their ironic imagination fans inhabit the imaginary world presented to them. The place where fans come together to converse is an online public sphere of the imagination. By closely looking at the Habermasian public sphere it becomes clear that an online public sphere of the imagination is thus an online space of discourse about imaginary worlds. The space is open to all and agreement should be found through the better argument, not through status or background; good rational arguments and equality are thus central to it. Although the ideal public sphere is open to all, there are many possible forms of indirect exclusions. The ideal of rationality influences the discourse, since it leads to exclusion of people or subjects seen as

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[110] Saler, *As If*, 127.

not rational and the ideal of equality is not always achieved in practice.

Despite online fan discussion forums functioning as a public sphere with all the forms of exclusion attached to it, the discussions are still important for the fans and can help them understand their experiences. Fans are agents who actively engage with their object of fandom. Objects of fandom, especially fantasy fandom, whether it is *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, or *Harry Potter*, are appropriated in a meaningful way. The imaginary worlds and stories, and elements form them, can work as key symbols for its fans and help explore and understand their experiences inside and outside the imaginary worlds. The *Star Wars* fandom in the current case study could thus be an expression of modern enchantment, rational and secular, and the discussion forum these fans use can be defined as an online public sphere of the imagination. Both are not without flaws, but both can be very meaningful to the fans.

Chapter III

Religion & Spirituality in the World of *Star Wars*

3.1. Introduction

> The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.
>
> —Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977)

In this scene, Obi-Wan Kenobi explains to Luke Skywalker, his soon to be apprentice, what the Force is. In all of the current seven *Star Wars* films there is a prominent presence of this power and the belief in it. The Force and those who master it, among which are those called the Jedi and Sith, are an important part of Lucas' film series.[111] These are some of the religious and spiritual elements in the *Star Wars* saga movies.

This chapter is about the representation of religion and spirituality in the *Star Wars* saga movies, and how these elements are displayed in the story. The fans talk about these elements, so it is fitting to present and analyse them before looking at the data from the forum. This chapter will focus on the product, the movies, and the following chapter focuses on the reception. There are different ways in which religion can be part of movies in the genre of fantasy and science fiction. The current analysis will go into religious and spiritual elements in the *Star Wars* saga movies; elements of religions or elements presented as

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[111] Although the name Sith is not used in the OT, Darth Sidious and Darth Vader are called Sith Lords in the PT. This is one way in which the PT changes the story of the OT; a subject of controversy among fans.

religions in films. This analysis therefore differs from theological readings and interpretations of the movies.[112] Also, I will not analyse *Star Wars* as a religious film, which I define as a film used for religious goals or produced for a religious public. More precisely, this chapter is about the Force, its users, and other religious and spiritual elements in the imaginary world and story created by George Lucas. The movies will be analysed as they are and in the manner in which I interpret them. Lucas' intended reading is only made part of the analysis where necessary.

The twofold question this chapter will answer is: (1) What are the religious and spiritual elements in the *Star Wars* films and (2) how do these elements relate to actual-world religions?

3.1.1. Defining Religion and Spirituality

In this chapter I recognise particularly religious and spiritual elements in the *Star Wars* saga movies, imaginary as well as actual. Within the current study I agree with Davidsen that "[I]n order to distinguish between the generally social and the particularly religious, we need a substantive definition of religion".[113] In his article about the concept of fiction-based religion he conceptualises religion as: "beliefs, practices, experiences, and discourses which assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and/or processes".[114] Since this definition does not rely on communal or institutionalised religion, it suits a research into religion in popular culture such as the current one. Even more so, because defining religion like this seems to encompass the category of spirituality. In the introduction to their work on spirituality and gender, anthropologists Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe argue that defining spirituality is complex, since it is often defined in contrast to religion and differences between these categories vary between contexts.[115] They do however discuss traits of spirituality and contrasting traits of religion, based on what people who use the word 'spirituality' say.

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[112] One of the manifold examples of this kind of analysis is *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* (2004) by Roy M. Anker.

[113] Marcus Davidsen,"Fiction-based Religion: Conceptualising a new Category against History-based Religion and Fandom," *Religion and Culture: an Interdisciplinary Journal* 14, no. 4 (2013): 378-395, 14.

[114] Davidsen, "Fiction-based Religion," 14.

[115] Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe, introduction to *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches*, eds. Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe (New York & London: Routledge, 2013), 6.

Fedele and Knibbe found that people assert religion as fixed, authoritative, gender unequal, hierarchical, status-orientated, has mediated access to divinity, and is hostile to the body and sexuality. In contrast to this people present spirituality as flexible, with absence of authority, gender equal, with non-hierarchical structure, inner development-orientated, with unmediated access to divinity, and body-sexuality friendly.[116] I would argue that these contrasting characteristics of religion and spirituality are all part of Davidsen's definition. I will therefore use his definition for the analysis in the current chapter.

3.2. *Star Wars*: the World and the Story

3.2.1. The World: Planets, Spaceships, Aliens & Droids

The story in the *Star Wars* saga movies take place "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away", as the opening title of every saga movie informs its viewers. The space ships and other technology in the movies however suggest that the movies take place in the far future and lightyears away. What is clear is that the story takes place in an imaginary galaxy. Different planets and moons, as well as space stations in outer space, and spaceships traveling between these places form the setting for the events in the story. Figure 3 in appendix 1 gives a neatly arranged overview of the planets on which most events in the saga movies take place. Figure 4 is a very detailed map of the whole galaxy, which shows the size, complexity, and scale of this imaginary world.

As is to be expected, there are many different species that live on the many planets. Some species build enormous cities and use advanced forms of technology to travel through the galaxy at the speed of light while fighting others with advanced weapons. Other species are portrayed as more primitive, living in simple houses. Most of the central characters in the saga movies are humans. The Stormtroopers, the infantry of the Galactic Empire, are cloned humans.

Besides different kinds of alien species, there are also many droids in the *Star Wars*

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[116] Fedele and Knibbe, introduction to *Gender and Power*, 6.

universe. Droids are robots with a form of artificial intelligence, of which the helpful C3PO and the cheeky R2-D2 are just a few. They play an important role in the *Star Wars* movies. C3PO is a protocol droid, R2-D2 an astromech droid (a mechanic attached to a spaceship which can work in space during flight), and the other major group exists of battle droids.[117] Like Stormtroopers, the battle droids are used in large numbers in times of war.

3.2.2. The Story: Anakin, Luke & Rey

The story in the saga movies is divided into three trilogies, the Original Trilogy (OT), the Prequel Trilogy (PT), and the Sequel Trilogy (ST). The ST only contains one movie yet. The PT tells the story before the OT and the ST the story after it, the storyline therefore starts in the PT.

The PT tells the story of how the young slave Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd and Ayden Christensen) becomes a Jedi in training, how he is corrupted by a Sith lord named Darth Sidious (Ian McDiarmid) and fals to the Dark Side, turning into Darth Vader. He is trained by Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) and later by Qui-Gon's apprentice Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor). Anakin becomes part of the Jedi Order, a peacekeeping organisation that uses the Light Side of the Force and works for the Galactic Republic. Things take a turn for the worse when the power of the Galactic Republic falls into the hands of the Sith Lord Darth Sidious who turns the Republic into the Galactic Empire. He orders the killing of most of the Jedi. One of Anakin's reasons for falling to the Dark Side is his fear of losing his wife Padmé Amadala (Natalie Portman). She is a young woman whom he meets when he is just a young boy and she is the young Queen Amadala of Naboo. She later becomes a prominent member of the senate. The trilogy ends after Obi-Wan places these children with their foster families. Anakin eventually joins the Dark Side, loses in a fight with Obi-Wan, and is placed in a special suit to stay alive, with this becoming Darth Vader. While he is placed in this suit by Darth Sidious, Padmé is in the care of Obi-Wan and dies giving birth to her and Anakin's two children: Luke and Leia.

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[117] The website www.starwars.com, the official website by LucasFilm, has a databank with an endless amount of information about anything in the *Star Wars* movies. www.starwars.wikia.com, Wookieepedia, is an open fan-made *Star Wars* encyclopedia which an even larger amount of information.

The story in the OT starts nineteen years after the end of ROTS. The story surrounds Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), who lives with his foster family on the desert planet of Tatooine. He is also quite young when he goes into training to become a Jedi with the old Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness). In this trilogy Luke has to save his sister Leia (Carrie Fisher) and the whole galaxy from the Sith Lord Darth Vader (David Prowse and voice by James Earl Jones), the Galactic Empire, and its Emperor Palpatine. The Rebel Alliance is fighting against the Empire and Luke joins their cause. He gets help from Jedi Master Obi-Wan and the only other still living Jedi, Jedi Master Yoda (Frank Oz, among others), as well as from the smuggler Han Solo (Harrison Ford), Han's co-pilot Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew), and smuggler and gambler Lando Calrissian (Billy Dee Williams). The trilogy ends with the victory of the rebels over the Empire and the death of both Darth Vader and the Emperor also known as Darth Sidious.

TFA, the first movie of the ST, is set thirty years after the last movie of the OT. The main character in this movie is a young woman named Rey (Daisy Ridley) who lives by herself on the desert planet Jakku. Unwilling at first, she helps the Rebel Alliance to find a piece of a map that will locate the vanished Luke Skywalker. At that time Luke is the last living Jedi. Rey has to fight the First Order, and one of its evil allies Kylo Ren (Adam Driver). The First Order is a political and military faction ruled by Supreme Leader Snoke (Andy Serkis). It rose from the ashes of the Galactic Empire and fights against the restored Galactic Republic. Kylo Ren, who's actual name is Ben Solo, is the son of Han Solo and Leia Skywalker. Leia is now General of the Rebel Alliance. Rey gets help from these rebels, their best pilot Poe Damaron (Oscar Isaac), and an escaped Stormtrooper named Finn (John Boyega). In the process she finds out she is also 'strong with the Force'. At the end of TFA Rey finds Luke on a deserted island.

3.3. The Force and Force Users

Just as in other science fiction and fantasy films, religion is part of the *Star Wars* world in different ways. The most recognisable way in which the filmmakers used religion is in the form of the belief in the Force, which is presented throughout all of the films and is a major part of the narrative. In the iconic 1999 interview by Bill Moyers Lucas stated: "I put the

Force into the movies in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people."[118]The Force religion is presented as the religion of the Jedi, Sith, and all others who believe in it. This section is meant to come to grips with this mystical power, its users and/or believers, and the way this is presented by the filmmakers in the different trilogies of the saga.

3.3.1. The Force

The Force is a central element of the narrative of the *Star Wars* films, because the main characters on both the good and bad side use it and need it to fight their battles. Up until the most recent film, TFA, the main characters on the good side who use the Force are the Jedi and the ones on the bad side are Sith. We come to know more about the Force and how it works through the scenes in which Jedi Masters or Sith Lords explain the workings of it to their apprentices. In TFA there are no Sith and the only Jedi in the movie is not found until the very end. In this movie there are other people who tell the main character, Rey, about the Force. Every trilogy gives more or other information about the Force and its users.

The general concept of the Force is reflected in the quote from the beginning of this chapter: "It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together."[119] So it is an energy that binds everything in the galaxy together. The Jedi and Sith use this energy field for their own goals. This is the information from the OT, in which the Force is more mystical and less on the foreground as in the PT. In the PT there are many Jedi, as well as a Jedi Order and a Jedi Academy, so there is more focus on the Force and more detailed information about it. The PT explains that the knowledge and use of the Force is made possible because of 'midi-chlorians', a microscopic life-form residing in all living cells. The midi-chlorians live in symbiosis with their host; they are mutually beneficent, supplying their host with knowledge of the Force and telling them of its will. The midi-chlorians are first presented in TPM, to explain why Anakin is such a special child. The level of midi-chlorians in someone's body can be measured; higher counts mean

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[118] "The Mythology of 'Star Wars' with George Lucas," Bill Moyers interviews George Lucas, 1999, http://billmoyers.com/content/mythology-of-star-wars-george-lucas/, 12-07-2017.
[119] *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope*, dir. George Lucas, (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm Ltd 1977), Netflix.

that a person can have more knowledge of the Force. A high midi-chlorian count is what is referred to with the iconic phrase 'The Force is strong with this one'. Anakin's counts are extremely high. Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn even thinks Anakin was maybe created by the midi-chlorians, since Anakin's mother says he was born without a father. The midi-chlorians are however only mentioned in the PT. In TFA the given information about the Force is similar to that of the OT. When the girl Rey asks Han Solo, a smuggler who used to fight for the Rebel Alliance, about the Force he says: "I used to wonder about that myself. Thought it was a bunch of mumbo-jumbo. A magical power holding together good and evil, the Dark Side and the Light. Crazy thing is…it's true. The Force. The Jedi. All of it. It's all true." Later in TFA, the character Maz Kanata, a thousand year old "pirate queen", says to her: "I am not a Jedi, but I do know the Force. It moves through and surrounds every living thing."[120] So like in the OT, the Force is a power that binds everything together. The difference is that neither Han nor Maz are Jedi or Sith, they are no force users themselves, but they do believe in it and have knowledge of it.

3.3.2. Force Users

The preferred way to use the Force, the way it can be controlled, differs between Force users. Controlling or using the Force, means being able to bend the energy field to your liking. This way you can use the Force to for example see with your eyes closed, communicate with so called Force ghosts (deceased beings who were strong with the Force), move object and beings, and control minds. Control of the Force at the same time enables looking in the past, present, and future, since one can feel the Force and the disturbances in it–by communication with midi-chlorians. For both Jedi and Sith, training, practice, and study of the Force are essential; one does not become a master easily. TFA does however show that one does not have to be a Jedi or a Sith to use the Force; there are no Sith in this movie and Luke is the last Jedi. The movie does none the less show that training is important, since the untrained Rey and Finn are not yet very capable in using a lightsaber (the laser weapon of Force users like the Jedi and Sith). The movies do not say much about the Sith's training,

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[120] *Star Wars: Episode VII: The Force Awakens*, dir. J.J. Abrams (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm Ltd, 2016), Netflix.

apart from the balance of having always one Sith Lord and one apprentice that learns everything from him. The focus is more on the training of the Jedi. The OT shows Luke's first training with Obi-Wan and later he trains for a longer time with Master Yoda. In the PT there is a whole academy devoted to the training of young Jedi. Young children in training are called younglings. Force-sensitive adolescents having one-on-one training with a Jedi Master are called 'padawans', or 'padawan learners'. One element of their training is that the padawans have to trust their feelings, their sense of the Force, rather than their other senses. Obi-Wan lets Luke practice this in ANH by making him fence of the blasts from a tiny remote (a hovering orb that shoots laser with his lightsaber while wearing a shuttered helmet. In AOTC, a group of younglings is doing a similar training under the guidance of Yoda at the Jedi Academy. For Jedi, controlling their emotions is the way to make use of the Force in a stable way. This means that the padawans have to learn not to have extreme emotions and feelings of attachment, which they can learn through forms of meditation. To help this process, Jedi are not allowed to get married or focus on other significant relationships that could unbalance their control of the Force. For Sith however, control and use of the Force is focused strikingly on the strong emotions and feelings of jealousy and hate that Jedi are not supposed to have. Though there are some discussions about this, it seems the Sith are less in control of the Force; the Dark Side of the Force seems to guide them rather than the other way around. Through strong emotions, the Sith's use of the Force is more explosive and less stable. Because of the nature of the Force, both the Jedi and Sith, as well as other Force users could be evenly matched. Some Force users might however be willing to do more evil things with it. This will become clear by explaining the difference between Jedi and Sith and thus the difference between the Light and Dark Side of the Force.

3.3.3. The Light Side and the Dark Side

An important characteristic of the Force is that it has a Light and a Dark Side. These two sides are not different forces, but different sides of the same force; they are the two sides of the same coin. Sith draw their power from the Dark Side of the Force by using strong emotions such as hate, greed, jealousy, fear, or just strong passion in general. Yoda warns Anakin about these emotions in TPM by saying that "[f]ear leads to hate, hate leads to anger, and

anger leads to suffering". In ROTS he warns him again when Anakin is afraid of losing his loved ones: "Careful you must be when sensing the future, Anakin. The fear of loss is a path to the Dark Side."[121] Sith as well as Jedi Masters like Yoda can feel the emotions like suffering and pain of others. Yoda cannot feel the Dark Side of the Force in Anakin; he can only feel his fear and anger, something which worries him. Unlike the Jedi, Sith do not seem to have control over their emotions, for this is strikingly where they draw their power from. Jedi can use the Force by controlling their negative emotions, by being calm, and focusing on things like honesty, mercy, and self-sacrifice. These are seen as positive emotions or qualities, and are aligned with the Light Side of the Force. The rule for the Jedi is that they are only supposed to use the Force for defence and knowledge of what is going on in the galaxy. In the *Star Wars* films, Jedi therefore protect and serve the democratic republic. With their strong negative emotions, Sith use the Dark Side of the Force mostly for attack and protecting themselves, something which is in accordance with their apparent lust for power. One of the things Sith desperately seem to want power over, is life and death. Darth Sidious lures Anakin to the Dark Side by promising him he can save Padmé. Darth Sidious knows that his own former master (the one he killed in his sleep), could keep other people alive. Near the end of ROTS, when Anakin has become Darth Vader, Sidious states that together they can now find a way to overcome death. With this statement Sidious admits he does not have the skill to do so yet. However, the Jedi do have this power. In ROTS Yoda tells Obi-Wan that Qui-Gon Jinn (Obi-Wan's former master) had succeeded in becoming immortal; he has "returned from the netherworld of the Force", Yoda says. Yoda says he will teach Obi-Wan how to communicate with him. This shows that Jedi and Sith Masters are similar in strength and knowledge of the Force. They just use it in different ways. Summarising, the Force is a flowing energy field which is in and around every being in the *Star Wars* galaxy. Beings can have knowledge of and make use of the Force when they are sensitive to it and train themselves. Jedi are associated with the Light Side of the Force because they serve and protect, Sith belong to the Dark Side of the Force for they use it for their own gain and oppression of others. The following section will discuss the portrayal of the moral dichotomy

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[121] *The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars*: *Episode* III: *Revenge of the Sith*, dir. George Lucas (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm Ltd., 2005), Netflix.

connected to these two sides of the Force.

3.4. Portraying Good & Evil

The narrative of the *Star Wars* films contains a distinction between the good and evil side. The two sides of the Force, the Light and Dark Side, are portrayed by the filmmaker as corresponding with good and evil. Actually, many films have elements of morality in them that challenge the audience to think about them.[122] In the case of *Star Wars* there is a strong form of moral absolutism throughout the movies. To a lesser degree the actions of some characters incite a form of moral relativism. This paragraph focuses on the way the filmmakers have portrayed good and evil in the saga films.

In the OT it is clear that the good side is ultimately meant to overthrow the evil side, the Jedi want to get rid of the Sith. In the PT and the ST there is still clearly a good side and an evil side, although there are also characters who are more ambiguous. In all of this the Jedi, the Rebel Alliance, and others fighting against evil domination are presented as embodying the good and the Sith, the Galactic Empire, the New Order, and the Knights of Ren embody evil. Lucas and the other filmmakers went to a great length to make this distinction very clear through dialogue, the characters' actions, their clothing, their props, the background in scenes, and the music.

As mentioned above, the Jedi are essentially the ultimate good guys in the *Star Wars* universe. Their actions of protecting the people of the Republic are presented as something morally good in the story, as are their calm and merciful ways of dealing with stressful situations. In TESB, Luke goes to Yoda in the Dagobah System for his training. In a conversation about the Force and Jedi, Yoda explains the rule that Jedi only use the Force for defence and never for attack. Most Jedi are dressed in light or natural coloured clothing throughout the different movies. Their clothing, layers of robes, looks somewhat like those of Christian monks. Rey also wears clothing in light and natural colours. When Padmé is no longer queen, she also often wears white clothing, and her children are wrapped in all-white cloths when they are transported to their guardians. The light coloured outfits create a visual

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[122] Philip Gillett, *Film and Morality* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 177.

sign that these characters are innocent and are on the good side. This message is in some shots intensified by the choice of background. One of the shots of Obi-Wan before he fights Anakin/Vader is exemplary: Obi-Wan stands dressed in his light coloured suit with his lightsaber raised high in one hand, while at the same moment the dark red sky behind him bursts open and the white light of a sun shines through. The symbolism of this shot looks like the iconography of a Christian saint–only the halo is missing–or that of the ultimate hero right before his big battle. Another important way in which the goodness of characters is suggested is through the use of music, leitmotivs to be exact. A positive leitmotiv that is often used in the OT is one that sounds like the recognisable *Star Wars*-tune. Of course this is used as the title song for all the movies, but it is also used as a leitmotiv for Princess Leia. Her leitmotiv often sounds light and positive. There are thus many ways in which the goodness of characters is emphasised.

On the evil side, the PT and OT mostly present Sith Lords and apprentices, where the PT has a new evil character and organisation. The evil side is emphasised in the same ways as the good side in the *Star Wars* story. As far as actions could be evil, the deeds of the central Sith Lord, Senator Palpatine also known as Darth Sidious and as the Emperor, could not be more spot on. His only goal is power over the entire galaxy and he is prepared to do everything to get there: destroying planets, murdering everyone who might stand in his way, and always persuading Force-strong people to become his apprentice (he goes through three in six movies). Sidious is almost always dressed in dark colours or black, even in his role as Senator. When he gives orders to his "puppets" he puts a dark hood over his face. The way Anakin is dressed throughout the PT also symbolises his journey to the side of evil. As a young boy in TPM he is dressed in light coloured clothing, but from the start of the following movie he is dressed in dark colours and black. This contrasts with Padmé's light coloured clothing. At the beginning of this movie, Anakin has not seen Padmé for ten years, but he says to her that he has thought about her every day. This attachment and the fear of losing her are not a good quality of a Jedi and a sign of a weak spot for the Dark Side of the Force. Later on, when Anakin has fully become Darth Vader, he wears his full black suit with recognisable helmet and cape. The evilness of the Dark Side and Vader in particular, is emphasised by the characteristic Vader-leitmotiv. In the OT this tune is played every time Vader enters a room or scene. In the prequel trilogy it is also used as motiv for Darth Sidious, the ultimate evil. When Anakin turns to the Dark Side, the tune becomes his leitmotiv. The

actions, clothing, and leitmotivs of characters are thus used to signal the moral side of a character or event.

3.5. Disassembling the Force and its Users: Taoism, Shinto, Buddhism & Christianity

Belief in the Force is introduced above as a religious faith of the people of the *Star Wars* universe. Lucas' idea for this religion is in itself constructed out of different elements, ideas, and concepts form several religious and spiritual sources: it is an assemblage. In the 1999 interview with Bill Moyers Lucas says:

> [T]here's a […] mixture of all kinds of […] mythology and religious beliefs that have been amalgamated into the movie, and I've tried to take the ideas that seem to cut across the most cultures, because I'm fascinated by that and I think that's one of the things that I really got from Joe Campbell [Joseph Campbell, known for his work on the universality of myths] was that — what he was trying to do is find the common threads through the various mythology, through […] the religions.[123]

This quote exemplifies that many of the religious elements in *Star Wars* can be traced back to more than one religion at the same time. This section of the chapter will focus on disassembling the Force and its users and single out parallels with actual-world religions.

3.5.1. Taoism

The various elements of the Force, Jedi, and Sith are for the most part inspired by Eastern religions. The most important part, the Force itself, is presented in the films as a flowing energy field. In his critical postcolonial work on the *Star Wars* movies a professor in theatre arts, Kevin J. Wetmore argues that the Force mostly resembles the central energy from Taoism, the *Tao*. He states that 'energy' is the principle tenet of Taoism. The Tao is a 'non

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[123] "The Mythology of 'Star Wars'," Bill Moyers interviews George Lucas.

present presence' which flows like water, which is similar to the flowing energy that is the Force.[124] Like the Force, Tao cannot be understood intellectually: Obi-Wan urges Luke to use his feelings, not his other senses, to control and understand the Force. In line with this, Wetmore argues that Yoda is the Tao master of the *Star Wars* universe; he does not fight with anger, for this leads to the Dark Side.[125] The complex idea of the Force having both a Light and Dark Side is also seen in Taoism. Good and evil, light and dark, are things which have to be balanced, like ying and yang.[126] The light and dark side of the Force are different sides of the same force, which indeed has to be in balance. Qui-Gon is for example very interested in Anakin because of a prophesy of a person who will bring balance to the Force. Taoism is thus one of the religions from which elements are added to the assemblage of the Force.

3.5.2. Shrine Shinto

A good and evil side to a force or manifestation is also part of another Eastern religion: Shrine Shinto. The central power in Shrine Shinto also resembles the Tao and the Force; it is a generative force which is all around us and creates life. The Force is also all around and inside everyone in the *Star Wars* universe. Unusual or superior manifestations of the vital Shinto power are called *kami*, a word often translated to English as 'ghost' or 'spirit' although 'god' is more accurate. In their article on Shinto elements in a Japanese animated film, James W. Boyd and Tetsuya Nishimura explain that all phenomena are candidates for being a kami, e.g., the sun, moon, mountains, rivers, fields, seas, rain, wind, plants and animals, or great persons, heroes or leaders.[127] To be able to connect to these kami, people need to have a pure and cheerful heart, something which is similar to the way Jedi can make a connection with the Light Side of the Force. Kami are in a way neutral or pure to start out with, how good or evil they are depends heavily on how people interact or treat the kami.

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[124] Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., *The Empire Triumphant: Race, Religion and Rebellion in the* Star Wars *Films* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), 83.
[125] Ibidem, 84.
[126] Idem.
[127] James W. Boyd and Tetsuya Nishimura, "Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki's Anime 'Spirited Away'," *The Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2004): article 4, 2.

The kami of a river which is polluted by people can therefore become evil due to the poor manner in which it is treated. Clearing up or purifying the river would make the kami more benevolent. Good and evil are different sides of a kami, which can be kept in balance by the way people treat the kami. These sides of the kami resemble the Light and Dark Side of the Force.

3.5.3. Buddhism

Other elements of the Force religion seem to be inspired by Buddhism. Meditation as a form of training for the young padawan learners is similar to the Buddhist idea of meditation. Buddhist monks meditate to calm their mind, detach themselves from worldly things, and focus on reaching Nirvana. Through meditation padawans also have to learn to control and let go of their emotions. Meditation is also used as a way to think things over and as a way of feeling the Force. Certain Buddhist teachings about life and death are also used in the *Star Wars* saga according to Wetmore. Yoda for example tells Luke that suffering is linked to fear and hate. Yoda explained to Anakin that he should not mourn those who die and transform into the Force, for attachment leads to fear of losing those people and this fear leads to suffering. This closely resembles the Buddhist idea that attachment to worldly things leads to suffering.[128] The Jedi's detachment from the world also means they cannot marry or be sexually active, which accordingly to Wetmore suggests that becoming a Jedi involves taking some sort of vow of celibacy.[129] This is something which Buddhist monks as well as Catholic priests, monks, and nuns have to do. For the Jedi, there is the Jedi Code which they have to live by, which includes several of the rules mentioned here. Many elements of Buddhist teachings, like suffering and meditation, are thus used to create the religion of the Force in the *Star Wars* movies.

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[128] Wetmore, *Empire Triumphant*, 85.
[129] Ibidem, 86.

3.5.4. Christianity

The religious and spiritual elements in the *Star Wars* saga movies seem at first glance inspired by Eastern religions, since there is no concept of God in the Force religion. There are however quite a few elements which parallel with Christianity and Christian practices. A first detail which shows this parallel is the assumed virgin birth of Anakin. In the PT his mother states that he was born without a father. This element reflects the virgin birth of Jesus Christ with his mother Mary, Jesus being the son of God in Christianity. Like Jesus, Anakin has unparalleled powers and it is expected of him that he will do much good for the world. The way in which Qui-Gon Jinn explains the specific role of the midi-chlorians ("They continually speak to us, telling us the will of the Force") together with that he thinks Anakin was maybe created by the midi-chlorians, makes them sound like the Holy Spirit.[130] There is also a reference to Christ in the OT when Luke (the Jesus figure) faces Vader (the Devil figure) in the cave on Dagobah and later when they fight at the end of TESB.[131] Apart from the way in which main characters are presented, there are also Christian elements in how the Jedi are presented. The Jedi characters seem to be inspired by the image of monks. Like Christian monks the Jedi start their training (teaching) when they are quite young and they dedicate their lives to study of the Force (God) and serving the people. As mentioned above, the Jedi also parallel Buddhist monks and their separation of the world to study. And like Christian and Buddhist monks the Jedi are expected to live celibate lives. This is not an exhaustive treatment of the Christian, Buddhist, Shinto, and Taoist elements in the *Star Wars* saga, but this does present the complex assemblage of religious and spiritual elements which viewers and fans engage with.

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[130] Zachary Ingle, "Jediism as Religion? The Force as Old/New Religious Philosophy," in *Star Wars*, ed. Mika Elovaara (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 61-67, 63.
[131] Ibidem, 63.

3.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I presented and explained the religious and spiritual elements in the *Star Wars* saga films. These elements are part of the imaginary galaxy that George Lucas and the rest of the filmmakers created. The planets, species, and technologies in this world are part of the stage and context for the events in the story of the *Star Wars* saga. The story of Anakin who falls to the Dark Side and becomes Darth Vader, the character that Luke has to save the galaxy from by becoming a Jedi, the story of good Force users who fight the evil ones, of Rey who finds out she can use the Force, a story of democracy and autocrats, of friends and alliances, and a story with many religious elements. By presenting and analysing the story, characters, and beliefs of the saga movies this chapter answers the research questions presented in introduction: (1) What are the religious and spiritual elements in the *Star Wars* films and (2) how do these elements relate to actual-world religions?

The flowing galaxy binding energy called the Force is the most important religious element. The Force is present in all of the trilogies, but not always in the same way. Nevertheless, the Force always has two sides, a Light and a Dark one. These sides correspond with the moral positions of good and evil. The users of this Force, among which the Jedi and Sith, seem to always choose or belong to one side, the Light or the Dark Side of the Force, the side of good or the side of evil.

The idea of the Force and the Force users can be connected to several actual-world religions or forms of spirituality. The Force itself, flowing and two-sided, closely resembles the energy in Taoism. At the same time it is similar to elements from Shrine Shinto. The godlike idea of the kami, with a balance of good and evil, is also similar to the Light and Dark Side of the Force. Other elements in the movies might be borrowed from Buddhism: meditation, control over emotions, and distancing oneself from emotion and attachment. There are also a few elements in the movies which could be seen as Christian, such as Anakin's virgin birth and the Jedi as celibate monks. All of these elements show that Lucas was inspired or influenced by many different religions and forms of spirituality, close to home and even more so far away. It means that people watching the *Star Wars* movies come across many religious elements, quite a few of which are discussed in length on the online discussion forum. This chapter presented the elements in the movies and the

following chapter presents the analysis of the discussions on the discussion forum about these elements.

Chapter IV

Let the Fans do the Talking:
The Fan Discourse

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter put forward an analysis of the religious and spiritual themes in the *Star Wars* movies; it presents an overview of the elements the fans talk about on the forum. The current chapter will present the way in which the *Star Wars* fans on the online discussion forum discuss these themes; it is an emic approach. Though these themes are everywhere in the movies and could spark a discussion about (personal) religion and spirituality, the analysis of posts from the discussion forum shows that fans hardly ever talk about or mention the subject of religion directly. Then, if they do not talk about it often or directly (1) How do the users of the online Star Wars discussion forum talk about the religious and spiritual themes in the saga movies and (2) which subjects do they discuss in relation to these themes? The goal of this chapter is to present the categorised patterns that were found while looking at the users' discussion of religious and spiritual themes from the films. After all the categories, the chapter will end with a conclusion. The categories are based on patterns found while using different analytical approaches. If possible, remarks are made about how certain opinions or ideas of the users change over time. Yet, due to the structure of the discussions on the forum, the data set per time period is not always a representative sample for the period. As a result, most of the presented viewpoints of the users are based whole on the data set, with no differentiation per period. Each category will be illustrated by means of quotes from the data set. When users mention 'male' or 'female' in their user information, the pronouns 'he' and 'she', and 'his' and 'her' are used in reference to them. If this information is not available, 'he/she' and 'his/her' are used as pronouns. Appendix 2 is a

list of usernames and their explanation.

The religious and spiritual themes in this chapter follow from the previous chapter and the same definition of religion and spirituality is used here. In the previous chapter I defined religion as: "beliefs, practices, experiences, and discourses which assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and/or processes".[132] This definition encompasses religion and spirituality. Keeping true to Clifford Geertz's "thick description" I interpreted the data of the study, the fan discourse, within its context of meaning.[133] While I use a substantial definition of religion here, I am aware that this might differ from how the users on the forum would define it. The definition, the themes, and my other concepts therefore merely function as a tool to understand the fan discourse on the discussion forum.

4.2. Religion and Spirituality: Taboo Subjects?

When looking at all the religious and spiritual themes related to the *Star Wars* movies, it is remarkable that the words 'religion' and 'spirituality' are only mentioned a few times. Of all the religious elements 'Jedi' is mentioned most often, which is to be expected since the main characters in most movies are Jedi. 'Sith' is not discussed that often, the movies are more about the Jedi than the Sith. After 'Jedi', 'the Force' is mentioned and discussed most often, mostly in combination with the Dark and Light Side. Interestingly, the 'Dark Side' is mentioned more times than the 'Light Side', which might be because the concept of the Dark Side is mentioned very often in the movies and the Light Side not at all until TFA.

What becomes clear is that the words 'religion' and 'spirituality' are hardly ever used in the data set. The word 'philosophy' is used more often than the word 'religion'. This is somewhat surprising, seeing that belief in the Force can be seen as the religion of the Jedi and the general religious or spiritual concept in the *Star Wars* movies. Most of the times when the word 'religion' is used a user uses it to refer to religions and religious organisations from the actual world, as these users do: "SW philosophy seems to be made up as a mixture of elements of several religions, the most important of which seem to be Christianity and

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[132] Davidsen, "Fiction-based Religion," 14.
[133] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 21

Taoism."[134] And: "I find no logic in their [the Jedi's] recruitment methods. I can recall my father and I [*sic*] talking about how some real life religious organizations do something similar."[135] Only one user used the word 'religion' to refer to the Force by calling it the 'old religion' of Yoda and Obi-Wan in ANH.[136] The users generally call the religion or ideology of the Jedi a philosophy, and the religion of the Sith is also called a philosophy once. However, the users do not specifically talk about the philosophy of the Jedi or Sith. Since all of the users on the forum know the *Star Wars* movies, the users just talk about the Force and it is assumed that the other users know that this is a religion/spirituality/philosophy/ideology connected to the Jedi and Sith in the movies. In a few cases the religions from the actual world are referred to as philosophy or mythology, as by the user called *SW saga fan*: "I love Star Wars for all its references to our classic tales, to our mythology, to our real world history and to philosophy and how it combined all of these elements into a space-fantasy universe."[137] Our classic tales, mythology and philosophy partly originate from religions, but this user does not use that word. Thus, the users only scarcely use words such as religion and spirituality. Although they talk about religious subjects as the Force, they do not use those words; they talk about it as a concept in the movies.

As with the words 'religion' and 'spirituality', the users on the forum only scarcely talk about their own religious belief and background, most of the times they only refer to it indirectly. In a few cases the users do give a clear indication of their own religious or spiritual belief. A user by the name *mandragora* started a thread in September 2005 with the title 'Taoist struggles to sort out confusion - on darkness and light, issues of balance, and Jedi and Sith', which together with the knowledge of Taoism he/she displays in the posts leads to the conclusion that this person is a Taoist or at least very interested in this.[138] A few other users also give an indication of their personal belief. When talking about the indoctrination of young children by the Jedi, the user *darth-sinister* says:

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[134] Mandragora, 20-02-2005, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.
[135] LZM65, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.
[136] Only one kenobi, 26-12-20013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/page-2.
[137] SW saga fan, 18-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/what-people-want-out-of-star-wars-films.50037966/.
[138] Mandragora, 20-09-2005. http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.

Real life religions aren't all that way. Only those who pervert the faith will go out of their way to brain wash someone. Such as radical Islam extremists. The Catholic Church does have certain spiritual rituals that they wish to observe, but they are not inflexible. If one chooses to join at a later age, they are free to do so and undergo certain rites to be confirmed as a Catholic.[139]

The phrase 'pervert the faith' indicates he himself is religious and his knowledge of Catholic rituals suggests that he could be of this Christian denomination. Another user states:

I believe that by our choices we create the world we live in. I don't believe in some great sky-king who will either rain down terrible punishments for our 'sins' nor that this 'sky-king' will make everything all better...there, there.[140]

This is not directly a reference to a religious belief system, but he does mention that he has a philosophy of life, which is already a more personal remark than most users post. It is clear that it is uncommon among fans on the forum to talk about personal belief or their religious background. Actually, there is nearly no reference to personal information or stories in general.

The few people that do tell personal stories and talk about religious belief are sometimes ignored or rejected by other users, of which there are a few examples in my data. The best example of this is the way users reacted to the Taoist user *mandragora* and his/her struggles mentioned above. *Mandragora* seems have personal issues, religious or philosophical, with the way the Force is presented in the movies. He/she displays a lot of knowledge about and personal interest in religion and philosophy, specifically Taoism. Other users do not seem to share this knowledge or interest and merely argue from the perspective of the movies and the logic displayed in them. Some users make an effort while answering the questions *mandragora* asks, but not in the same depth, which in an indirect rejection of the discussion. The user *Master_Shaitan* reacts the most in this thread and eventually he/she directly rejects the discussion by saying: "But for me - good and evil does exist - as long as you dont [*sic*] overcomplicate it" and later he/she says: "I'm not necessarily

[139] Darth-sinister, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/
[140] Only one kenobi, 20-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/was-yoda-fully-sane-on-dagobah.50025389/page-2.

interested in debating the nature of good and evil [...]".[141] These reactions show that this user does not want to discuss the subject in the same depth as the user who started the discussion and eventually he/she shuts the discussion down. In my data, this is the most explicit example of rejection of a religious and personal subject. More often, users just ignore a post or a part of someone's post. In a discussion about Anakin's desire to be a great Jedi one user states: "[P]ersonally, I relate very strongly to the fear of loss -- of losing those I love, of being alone. And there is little I would not do to save those I love."[142] This is a very personal statement about loss, but everyone in the threat ignores it. These examples hint that personal stories, religious or otherwise are often ignored or shut down. There are however only a few of these examples in my data, since there are not many discussions about these subjects to start with.

4.3. Room for Interpretation: Saga movies, Canon, and EU

In his movies George Lucas created a world and a story that can be grasped and understood in many ways, as the users on the forum do. In spite of Lucas' intended meaning and reading, the viewers of the story can have all kinds of interpretations. Alongside the *Star Wars* saga movies, there are many more alternative tales, interviews with George Lucas, and the user's own personal background and knowledge, which together with the space for interpretation in the movies, creates a world of different interpretations.

4.3.1. Different Sources

The saga movies are but one element on which the users on the forum base their ideas and interpretations. The saga movies are generally referred to as the "canon", the official story.

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[141] Master_Shaitan, 21-09-2005, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.
[142] PiettsHat, 26-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/page-2.

For information about these movies the users on the forum can also read and watch interviews and extra's on DVD about George Lucas, in which he often explains the intended interpretation, as well as non-fictional books about the process of making the movies. Many fans on the forum take the words of Lucas very serious, and just as many base their ideas just on the movies. Lucas' interviews are not really talked about as canon or not-canon, since they are not a fictional *Star Wars* story. However, alongside the movies there is a whole other world of *Star Wars* tales that presents supplemental and alternative storylines: the Expanded Universe (EU). The opinions about what is and is not part of the *Star Wars* canon vary; a majority of the fans sees only the saga and often also the TV series by LucasFilm as canon, but for many the EU is also part of the canon.

The different ideas about what is part of the *Star Wars* canon, the wealth of alternative tales and ideas that the EU offers, and the information given by Lucas in interviews make clear that the users on the online forum have many difference sources to form their ideas about the *Star Wars* story and its concepts. In many cases it is not possible to know what each user on the forum sees as canon, unless they mention it explicitly, as this user does: "To me the EU doesn't matter. Let's talk what's canon currently."[143] This user named *Zenwalker* does not see the EU as canon. This is one of the few cases in which someone explicitly rejects the EU as canon, a lot of the times users just talk about it or not, without saying they accept or reject it as canon. The next quote is from a discussion about the strongest Sith. A more common way to mention the EU is how a user named *BriXman* does it. Talking about Darth Plagious as the strongest Sith he says: "And according to the EU, which so far is the only explaination [*sic*] we have to what happened before and during TPM, the only reason he was killed was he was not prepared."[144] This user uses the EU explicitly as a source for his ideas about the strongest Sith. Other users for example mention names that are not part of the saga, which also hints that they know of more than the saga movies. In most of the posts the EU or the word 'canon' is not mentioned and it is therefore not always clear what the users use as sources for their opinions. Using their own choice of canon and other knowledge the users on the discussion forum form different opinions and

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[143] Zenwalker, 19-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/strongest-sith.50037892/.
[144] BriXman, 18-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/strongest-sith.50037892/.

interpretations about key elements in the saga story.

4.3.2. Interpreting the Force

The key religious concept in the saga movies is the Force. The movies present it as an energy field that binds everything in the universe together, and it has a Dark Side. The users have several ideas about how one should describe the Force: as an energy (field), a divine power, an entity, with or without agency, and so on. In a discussion about the Force, its two sides, and balance, *Anakinfansince1983* writes she likes "the idea of the Force as an energy field that surrounds all living things and binds them together".[145] In a similar discussion from another period *SomeRandomNerd* adds that the Force can flow through you and that there is something called 'The Will of The Force'.[146] So the Force is an energy field with a will. These are all elements that are mentioned in the movies. By some users the Force is described as more than an energy field. The user *darth-sinister* describes it as a divine power when talking about Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi putting their faith in the Force: "[…] they know that the Force itself isn't going to do anything directly. But it has presented with the person who can put it right. There's nothing wrong with putting faith in a divine power."[147] So he describes the Force as a divine power that does not have direct power over events, but can present itself to someone who can do this, like Luke. Described in this way, the Force also has some level of agency. It is not entirely clear whether these elements are also there in the movies; the presentation of the Force and its attributes leaves room for the viewers own interpretation.

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[145] Anakinfansince1983, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-force-and-moral-compass.50036200/.
[146] SomeRandomNerd, 20-09-2005, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.
[147] Darth-sinister, 21-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/was-yoda-fully-sane-on-dagobah.50025389/page-2.

4.3.3. Interpreting the Light Side and the Dark Side

In the movies the Dark Side of the Force is an important concept, since the ultimate bad guys, the Siths, use it. In the OT and PT they only mention the Force and the Dark Side of the Force. The first time the Light Side is mentioned in the saga is in TFA, so only since December 2015. At the same time, early versions of the script talk about two sides of The Force. The Dark and Light Side are discussed in many ways in this data set and users hold different opinions about what they are and how they relate to each other.

The users on the forum do not really agree about there being a Light Side as well as a Dark Side. The user *mandragora* started the above mentioned thread about his struggles with the idea of the Light and Dark Side. He asks many questions about how the Light and Dark Side should be seen. In reply to this, *SomeRandomNerd* states that "there is [no] such a thing as the "light side"- for the Jedi, there is The Force, and it has a Dark Side". So the first user does think that the Force has a Light and a Dark Side and the other is of the opinion that there is no Light Side, just the Force and a Dark Side. As said, the movies do not offer a definite answer.

Apart from the discussion about whether there is a Light Side or not, the users also have different ideas about what the Light and Dark Side entail. *Master_Shaitan* says that the Light Side has balancing attributes and the Dark Side has unbalancing attributes:

> The Light Side of the force refers to the attributes that lead to balance - compassion, love and selflessness […],"and "[t]he dark side of the force refers to the attributes that lead to imbalance […] - hate, anger, greed and selfishness.[148]

In the movies the Light and Dark Side are also strongly connected to good and evil. Many of the users on the forum, across all periods, disprove of this moral dichotomy connected to the Force. Because of his Taoist background, *mandragora* finds this idea of light as good and dark as evil too limited and he wants to explore it more: "What exactly is meant by the Dark Side and the Light Side of the Force? […] And is it justified to infer […] that the Dark Side is assigned the value of 'evil', given that destruction of the old is always a precondition for

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[148] Master_Shaitan, 21-09-2005, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.

something new to emerge?".[149] This user's disagreement with the moral dichotomy is probably due to his background and non-dichotomy thinking about good and evil. A few years later a user named *LZM65* agrees with him:

> […]I find it hard to accept the idea that dark or darkness means evil or negative and that light means good or positive. Dark or black can also mean something good or positive. Light or white can also refer to something evil or negative. Or both phrases could refer to something other than moral compass. To simply use both phrases as a way to describe moral compass in this simple manner strikes me as constricting and absolutist.**[150]**

Like *mandragora*, she also thinks that dark and light do not have to be bad and good, negative and positive; something dark can also be positive, destruction can be a positive thing, as well as the other way around. These two users are rather elaborate in explaining why they do not like the moral dichotomy or moral compass attached to the Light and Dark Side. Many other users agree with them, but use fewer words. Related to the Light and the Dark Side interpretations, there are also several different interpretations of the Jedi and Sith.

4.3.4. Interpreting the Jedi and Sith

The good-evil dichotomy and Light and Dark Side of the Force are related to the good and bad guys in the movies: the Jedi and Sith. In the saga, the Jedi make use of the Force (or the Light Side of The Force) and the Sith use the Dark Side. As mentioned above, the users on the forum talk more about the Jedi than they do about the Sith.

The fact that the users do not talk about the Sith in general that much is partly because they seem to agree that the Sith are evil and that they are the bad guys in the movies. This agreement on their evilness is visible in for example a thread about whom is the strongest Sith, on which the users also point out the Sith's evil doings: "Sidious took over everything, killed most of the jedi [*sic*], and sent the remaining into hiding. I'd say he's the

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[149] Mandragora, 20-02-2005, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.
[150] LZM65, 20-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.

strongest Sith ever."[151] This post is from a thread about Sith in general, but on the forum there is more talk about specific Sith characters, mostly Anakin/Darth Vader. At the end of the OT Luke tries to save his father because he beliefs that there is still good in him, which Vader proves by killing Darth Sidious/Senator Palpatine. The PT tells the story of how good Anakin became the evil Vader, in which this idea off the flawed person instead of the evil one is expanded. Some fans like this, others do not. Talking about portraying Vader as evil in the OT and as flawed in PT, *lukestarkiller77* writes: "The net result leaves one half of the saga unsatisfying, at least for me. In other words, if I'm to recognize valor in Anakin's actions and sympathize with his choices, it really undermines Luke's quest in Eps. IV-VI."[152] So he/she is not that keen on the use of both views on the character in one saga, because it influences the view on the events in the OT. One of the few ways in which the users do discuss the general character of the Sith is when talking about the presentation of good and bad guys in the saga. A user in a discussion about the Force as moral compass says: "I will say that if TFA has returned to a straightforward depiction of heroes and villains instead of trying for "flawed" heroes and "misunderstood/correct" villains, I will be a happy fan."[153] This user seems to be a fan of the good-evil dichotomy connected to the Jedi and Sith, where others find the presentation of the Dark Side and the Sith as plain evil too limited and prefer a bit more nuance.

The presentation of the Jedi in the saga movies is also interpreted in different ways by the users on the forum. The fans have a mixture of ideas about the perfect Jedi. Generally, they agree that Jedi need to be balanced, because then they can keep the Force in balance. But what is balance and what is a balanced Jedi? A lot of users agree that the Jedi should use the Light Side to destroy the Sith, so that balance can return. *Master_Shaitan* puts it this way:

> The light side of the force refers to the attributes that lead to balance - compassion, love
> and selflessness. The Jedi mandate is to keep the balance. Good and evil always exist but

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[151] MidKnighT, 17-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/strongest-sith.50037892/.
[152] Lukestarkiller77, 21-09-2005, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.
[153] Anakinfansince1983, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-force-and-moral-compass.50036200/.

they must battle to stop the Dark Side from eating away at the balance. So a Jedi uses the light side of the force to keep it balanced.[154]

This user states that a Jedi is balanced when he/she uses that Light Side, since the Light Side has balancing attributes. There is also a group of users that is of the opinion that the norm of Jedi behaviour is extreme and not balanced. One user explains it this way: "If the goal is balance between everything, how can this be achieved by avoiding the Dark Side and destroying the Sith? Isn't the real matter setting up an order that seeks balance between darkness and light, creation and destruction, […] and thus PT-Jedi and Sith?"[155] A suggested solution for this is the concept of Grey Jedi, an alternative group or order of Jedi that are not as extreme as the Jedi presented in the saga. In a discussion about the Dark and Light Side, *Davey_Wan_Kenobi* writes about this:

> I know it has been briefly brushed upon in various old EU material, but I always wished that at some point in the Star Wars saga, someone would pay more literal attention to the whole 'balance of the force' idea and adopt a kind of gray Jedi philosophy of balancing both sides of the force. This would be the best answer to the obvious downfalls of the Jedi Council's strict dogmatic doctrines in the PT as well as addressing the obvious mistakes of dark siders in general.[156]

This user sees the Jedi as well as the Sith as too extreme and opts for the Grey Jedi philosophy as a solution. This option is not presented in the saga movies, but as he/she states, it has been mentioned in the EU. Fan-made websites such as Wookieepedia[157] pay a great deal of attention to the subject and there are numerous images of the Grey Jedi Code. The idea of the Grey Jedi is a clear example of how the room for interpretation in the saga movies, combined with knowledge of EU can lead to new ideas within the Star Wars fan community.

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[154] Master_Shaitan, 21-09-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.

[155] Mandragora, 20-09-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.

[156] DaveyWanKenobi, 17-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.

[157] Wookieepedia is a fan-made Star Wars website, which contains a Star Wars encyclopaedia. The Internet link is http://starwars.wikia.com, with Wikia being a free wiki hosting service used mostly by fan communities.

4.4. The Force: New Concepts, New Words, New World Views?

The different sources and interpretations resulting from among other things the diversity in the fans' world views and knowledge, and their familiarity with the EU, lead to alternative and new ideas about the Force, Jedi and Sith, and the Light and the Dark Side. The new trilogy and the spin-off movies that are still to come will also not only focus on Jedi and Sith. As far as we know now, some users remark, Kylo Ren and Snoke from TFA "technically aren't Sith"[158]. This could mean that the saga story will further develop the idea of other Force users than the Jedi and Sith.

Generally speaking, the users present alternatives for the Jedi and Sith as the only Force users in the *Star Wars* universe. This becomes noticeable because the users use and discuss words and concepts that are not present in the OT and the PT e.g. Force user, dark sider, Grey Jedi, and Force sensitive. What catches the eye is that these are not mentioned once in the earliest data selection period, which is in 2003. Those periods in 2013, 2015, and 2016 do all contain some of the new concepts. It could be that for some reason the fans' ideas about how the Force could or should be used, changed in between of these periods. It could be that the EU had effect on this, because these words are used there. So users who are familiar with the EU might have different views and vocabularies. Unfortunately this is not something that can be firmly concluded on the basis of this data set.

Besides their different backgrounds and knowledge, many users on the forum seem to have an important critical reason for wanting an alternative for the Jedi and Sith: they are too extreme. The saga movies, especially the OT and PT, talk a lot about balance in the Force. It is quite apparent why the behaviour of the Sith is too extreme, but the saga movies generally present the behaviour of the Jedi as the right way. With quotes from several interviews with George Lucas, one user points out that the filmmaker himself also thought the extreme views of the Jedi were the right ones.[159] Numerous fans on the forum do not agree with Lucas. Within the same discussion as this post about Lucas' intention, *LZM65*

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[158] Darkspine10, 18-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/who-is-your-favorite-sith-lord.50037893/.
[159] Darth-sinister, 23-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/page-2.

says: "[…] I believe he [Lucas] had portrayed two groups - the Jedi and the Sith - who had approached the Force in extreme (and wrong) ways. He was not saying that the Jedi's and the Sith's extreme views on the Force were right."[160] So this user does think the views of the Sith as well as the Jedi are extreme and wrong. In a discussion about the Light and Dark Side the user named *SateleNovelist 11* also critiques the Jedi: "The Old Jedi Order [shown in PT] was too stringent in regard to one's emotions. Also, Yoda and Obi-Wan trained Luke to be a Jedi but they did not prohibit him from marriage or anything like that. They learned from their mistakes. Both the Jedi and Sith have flaws."[161] Although the Jedi do learn from their mistakes, she still thinks the Jedi are not perfect. She also says: "Human nature, or sentient nature, dictates that an individual can be cognizant of one's own individuality and needs. One cannot simply be a pure ascetic and deny everything. This is, for me, the Buddhist way of interpreting a Jedi. There needs to be a middle way, not extremes."[162] So she sees the portrayal of the Jedi in the PT as too extreme and puts forward her own more moderate idea of the Jedi. Some other users have heavy critique on the Jedi when it comes to the way they handle their young students, the padawan. The PT explains that the Jedi Order takes young children with potential to become a Jedi away from their parents to study. *Darth-sinister* puts it lightly by saying: "The Jedi's approach was a bit extreme when it came to taking the young, but at the same time, also a bit logical."[163] In the same discussion, about the Dark and Light Side, *LZM65* reacts by stating: "I find no logic in their recruitment methods. […] These "recruits" are really too young to embark upon a religious indoctrination at such a young age."[164] So these users critique several views and actions of the Jedi and state that they as well as the Sith are quite extreme and sometimes wrong. The fact that the Jedi are not always seen as perfect by the users of the forum is one reason why they use words to describe beings that do something with the Force with other words than just Jedi or Sith. The concept that links most of the others and portrays the general trend of an alternative for the Jedi and Sith is 'Force user', and it links to the idea of 'Force sensitive' and 'dark sider'.

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[160] LZM65, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/page-2.
[161] SateleNovelist11, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.
[162] SateleNovelist11, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.
[163] Darth-sinister, 23-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.
[164] LZM65,22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.

4.4.1. No Jedi or Sith: Force User, Force Sensitive, and Dark Sider

In the saga movies from the OT and PT, the only beings that make use of the Force are either Jedi or Sith. The PT has however no Sith and only one Jedi as of yet. Some users on the forum leave the option open for other beings to make use of the Force, by opting for the word 'Force user', 'Force sensitive' or 'dark sider'. They already used these words before TFA came out.

4.4.1.1. Force user

Although most users that use the new words do not talk about other kinds of Force users, some do and others seem to leave the option open by using the term 'Force user' instead of Jedi or Sith. It could also be that the users just opt for this word as a general word for Jedi and Sith together, but together with the use of other new words and concepts, it does seem to suggest that the users on the forum keep their mind open for other Force users beside the ones from the PT and OT. In a discussion of the Force, Dark Side, and Light Side in 2005, *Master_Shaitan* uses the term Force user in this manner: "The unifying force (cosmic force) refers to the powers the force users get from the force […]".[165] This is the only post from this selection period that contains this word. He/she uses Force users to refer to those who use/control the Force, but does not mention any others besides the Jedi and Sith. In 2013 one user talks about non-Force users, as to refer to those people unable to use or control the Force: "In AOTC, Obi-Wan goes to see Dex to get help and powerful non-Force users (such as Jango Fett) are a match for some Jedi."[166] Just like *Master_Shaitan*, this user also does not talk about other Force users than the Jedi and Sith. In the discussion about the strongest Sith in 2016, a user by the name *Zenwalker*, who probably favoured Darth Sidious/Emperor Palpatine, said about him: "Not only a powerful force user, but also became emperor." A user called *BriXman* also left a post in this thread and he uses the word 'Force user' to refer to Anakin: "Honestly, Plagueis [sic] trained the Emperor, who took over the galaxy. And according to the EU […] the only reason he was killed was he [sic] was not

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[165] Master_Saithan, 21-09-2005, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.
[166] PiettsHat, 26-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/page-2.

prepared. He also CREATED the chosen one [Anakin], the strongest force user in the galaxy. I say plageuis [*sic*]." As this quote shows, this user is also familiar with the EU and seems to accept it as part of the canon. A concept that relates to Force user and which also does not originate from the saga movies is Force sensitive.

4.4.1.2. Force sensitive

The word 'Force sensitive' refers to the fact that beings in the *Star Wars* universe can be sensitive to the Force. In the PT this means that they have a high midi-chlorian count, but in the OT and ST this is less measurable. In ANH Yoda says about Luke: "The Force is strong with this one". In a way it is the potential for doing something with the Force. In TFA the character Rey could be described as such. She is not a Jedi or Sith (yet), but she does have a link with the Force. In the discussion forum some users call this being sensitive to the Force and those people that are, are called Force sensitive or Force sensitives. Rey could be described as this and later on she even becomes a Force user.

In an in-depth thread about the whole *Star Wars* saga, the user named *Piettshat* comments on the fact that Jedi are not allowed to have families by saying it is a good thing, saying that otherwise there would be really strong 'Force sensitive families'.[167] So he/she talks about families with people in them that could become a Jedi or Sith as Force sensitive families. The other way in which this idea of Force sensitivity is discussed, is in a discussion about midi-chlorians, blood transfusion, and cloning, a discussion that will receive more attention in paragraph 4.6.1. The user that posted the first post in the thread mentions Force sensitives and non-Force sensitives: "[...] couldn't someone who is NOT force sensitive could get a transfusion of Skywalker blood and suddenly be force sensitive?" Just like the concept of Force users, those who make use of the Force, the idea of Force sensitives could be and is indeed adopted to refer to alternative users of and ways of using the Force.

4.4.1.3. Dark sider

The previous new words are mostly used by the fans on the forum to refer to Jedi or non-specific users of the Force. The concept of the 'dark sider' specifically refers to those who use the Dark Side of the Force, such as the Sith do. Kylo Ren and Snoke are of yet not coined

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[167] PiettsHat, 26-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/page-2.

as Sith, but they are definitely dark siders. In the context of a thread about the return of the Sith in the *Star Wars* movies, one user mentions that terms such as 'dark siders' are mentioned in old EU novels at the end of the nineteen eighties.[168] So the word 'dark sider(s)' probably originates from the EU, something which partly seems true for the other alternative words too. A user by the name of *DaveyWanKenobi* talks about dark siders in the context of critique on the Jedi and Sith, and about the idea of the Grey Jedi: "This [Grey Jedi] would be the best answer to the obvious downfalls of the Jedi Council's strict dogmatic doctrines in the PT as well as addressing the obvious mistakes of dark siders in general."[169] This user choses to use the word dark siders to refer to Sith and other beings making use of the Dark Side of the Force. He could just as well say 'the obvious mistakes of the Sith', but he chose to say 'dark siders', which could imply that he imagines that there are more (groups of) people that use the Dark Side of the Force. The middle way concept of the Grey Jedi was already mentioned above but will be more clearly explained in the next paragraph. It is the only specific alternative for the Jedi and Sith that the users talk about.

4.4.2. Grey Jedi

The only specific mention of Force users that are not Jedi and Sith are the Grey Jedi. The users see these as a less extreme form of the Jedi from the saga movies. In the saga movies there is much talk of balance, which is also discussed by the users on the forum. As one user mentions, this concept of the Grey Jedi originates from the EU:

> I know it has been briefly brushed upon in various old EU material, but I always wished that at some point in the Star Wars saga, someone would pay more literal attention to the whole 'balance of the force' idea and adopt a kind of gray Jedi philosophy of balancing both sides of the force. […] Somehow I doubt this idea will come up even in the ST, but moderation is indeed the correct path, both in fantasy context and reality.[170]

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[168] Vthuil, 23-11-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/when-did-the-sith-return-to-star-wars.50016484/.
[169] DaveyWanKenobi, 17-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.
[170] DaveyWanKenobi, 17-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.

This user by the name of *DaveyOneKenobi* thinks the Grey Jedi philosophy is the best way to balance the Force, as a solution for the extreme ways of the Jedi and Sith. Not everyone agrees, as this strong reaction by *The_Phantom_Calamari* shows:

> Developing the heroes into "Gray" Jedi would be a perversion of Star Wars' message. The push and pull between light and dark in Star Wars is based around yin and yang: [posts image of yin yang sign, black and white] Do you see any gray on that thing? No. There's dark and there's light. Within the dark there's a little bit of light, and within the light there's a little bit of dark, but they're not mixed together."[171]

For this user the idea of Grey Jedi is a 'perversion' because it mixes the Light-Dark Side and the good-evil dichotomy, which were presented very clearly in the movies. This user also seems afraid that by mixing the light and dark into grey, one would not be able to tell them apart anymore. Later on in the discussion, *DaveyOneKenobi* makes clear that this limited light-dark dichotomy does not seem that attractive and he finds more positive things in the Grey Jedi concept. He says: "The whole Yin and Yang dynamic is a bit...boring, in my opinion. It's too black and white (literally) and really limits where they can go with it. [...]It's too predictable. This is why I liked the few instances (or concepts) of Gray Jedi better, as they were always more interesting to me."[172] He/she thinks that the dichotomous portrayal of the Jedi and Sith is too predictable and finds that the Grey Jedi could be more interesting and have more options. Although only this one user really mentions the concept of the Grey Jedi and not many users in the discussion really react on it, it nevertheless shows that there is a wish for more nuanced or at least less strictly good or evil characters. Luckily, the first movie in the ST seems to offer this with the character of Kylo Ren. He is not a Sith and in the movie you see his struggle with choosing between good and evil. Many of the quotes mentioned above also show that the users have discussions on a rational level.

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[171] The_Phantom_Calamari, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.
[172] DaveyWanKenobi, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/page-2.

4.5. A Rational Discussion

The discussion forum is naturally meant to be a place where fans can have discussions about everything related to their subject. What is worth remarking is that most users that talk about the topics from the data selection do this in a very rational, i.e. reasonable or well-considered manner. However diverse the opinions and views of the users, within the data selection of this research, the majority of the people prefer to have rational discussions with each other in which they formulate good rational arguments. This says something about the standard of a forum like this, but it also says something about the level of dedication the fans have. There are different ways in which the users create their arguments and different elements that show the rational character of their discussions.

4.5.1. Presenting a Good Argument

There are several ways in which the users build a strong rational argument. As mentioned above, the users do not only have the saga movies themselves, but for example also the EU and interviews with George Lucas to give them information. When they use this information in their arguments some users use a proper reference to the source. *Darth-sinister* is one of the users that seem to have many quotes from interviews with Lucas ready to help his arguments. In his posts he generally combines his own words with quotes from Lucas' interviews from different sources: DVD's with movie commentary, magazines, papers, etc. In a discussion about Anakin he says: "He's [Lucas] said this about Anakin," after which different quotes following, like:

> "There's always this good in you. And the good part is saying 'what am I doing?'. Then the bad part kicks in and says 'I'm doing this for Padme, I'm doing this for the galaxy and so we can have a better life'. But the good part is always saying 'WHAT AM I DOING?!'" -- George Lucas to Hayden Christensen, Hyperspace webdoc.[173]

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[173] Darth-sinister, 20-01-2017, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/why-does-it-seem-like-people-fall-to-the-dark-side-easily.50037929/.

After the last quote he concludes with: "He is evil, but there is also good within him. But the evil takes over the good and he suppresses the good deep down until Luke begins to reach him."[174] The discussion was about whether Anakin is evil and whether Lucas also thinks this. The combination of quotes and own lines makes a strong argument for the case that there is also good in Anakin. *Darth-sinister* also uses a proper reference to his sources, by mentioning the people from the interview, where it is published, and often also the year.

The users use different kinds of sources for their arguments. Talking about the Grey Jedi, *Darth Caliban* posts several lines from the TFA novelisation which he copied from *Wookieepedia*, the *Star Wars* wikia: ""First comes the day. Then comes the night. After the darkness. Shines through the light. The difference, they say, [i]s only made right. By the resolving of gray. Through refined Jedi sight. Journal of the Whills, 7:477" http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Journal_of_the_Whills." In this post he does not write anything else, just the quote. But it shows that the users use different sources for making a point and that they are capable of making a proper reference to these sources.

Besides different sources that the fans refer to in a correct way, the users also have knowledge at hand of specific topics besides *Star Wars* that they use for their arguments. One user for example seems to know about Freud and his work when he states that the Dark Side of an individual is like the Id.[175] He also posts a link to a Wikipedia website about defence mechanisms, a Freudian construct, to give some background information about his ideas. He uses his knowledge to show his line of thought and then to make his point about the Dark Side. Besides these different elements to build an argument, some users also state that they prefer these kinds of arguments.

4.5.2. Nostalgia and Rationality

The rational character of the discussions on the forum is clearly shown within the posts that mention the subject of nostalgia. These posts demonstrate that there are several opinions

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[174] Darth-sinister, 20-01-2017, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/why-does-it-seem-like-people-fall-to-the-dark-side-easily.50037929/.
[175] Lt. Hija, 18-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/why-does-it-seem-like-people-fall-to-the-dark-side-easily.50037929/.

about the role that nostalgia plays in the preference for the OT or the PT, which in itself offers insight into the users' view on rationality and emotion. The online Cambridge Dictionary states that nostalgia is "a feeling of pleasure and also slight sadness when you think about things that happened in the past".[176] So nostalgia is having positive feelings toward things from the past, for example a trilogy of *Star Wars* movies. A long time user of the forum, *only one kenobi*, started the 'SW Saga In-Depth In-Depth Discussion Thread'. In his post he starts by explaining that he does not like the PT that much and that the reason for this is not because of nostalgic feelings for the OT, but because the PT alters the story or the interpretation of the story told in the OT in a way that he dislikes. He says: "So, here's as concise a reasoning for my dislike of the PT as I can put together - explaining that it is not just about nostalgia but about how the PT is a very different story (which is reasonable in itself) but which is meant to inform about the OT and thus alters the OT."[177] He makes very clear that his dislike of the PT is not just for nostalgic reasons, but for other, more rational reasons. After this remark he goes into detail about the many things that are not right in the story told in the PT. Another user, by the name of *MOC Vober Dand*, also makes clear that liking the OT more than the PT is not for nostalgic reasons. He/she says the way of filmmaking and storytelling are the main reason and ends by stating: "The fact that this type of storytelling / film making was more prevalent in an earlier time doesn't mean that favouring it is driven only be nostalgia."[178] So this user also emphasises that he/she has other (good) reasons to prefer the OT over the PT. These two users seem to imply that liking a movie or trilogy just for nostalgic reasons would not be a good enough reason. They enforce this opinion by explaining in detail the rational reasons for preferring one trilogy over the other.

However, other users do not share this opinion of nostalgia. In a thread about what people want out of the *Star Wars* movies, a user named *Zenwalker* says: "Entertainment first and foremost. Second, they are very nostalgic for me, because I have been watching since

[176] "Nostalgia," *Cambridge Dictionary*, 30-10-2016, http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/nostalgia.

[177] Only one kenobi, 23-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/.

[178] MOC Vober Dand, 23-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/.

'77."[179] This user makes very clear that for him nostalgia is an important reason for watching the *Star Wars* saga movies, he does not deny or hide it. A few users on the forum take it a step further by putting quite some effort into explaining how nostalgia works and defending it as a reason for liking something. *Ord-Mantell70* states: ""Pure" nostalgia can play a certain part in critisizing [*sic*] the PT and strongly preferring the OT, especially for those kind of movies (OT) that enthralled millions of young people and had such a deep imact [*sic*]." After which he lists several reasons why this is the case. Another user, *Cryogenic*, shares this opinion and boosts the point he is making by saying it is a "sign of human frailty" and comparing it to "a body's immune system rejecting a foreign tissue", after which he concludes that nostalgia is "far more pervasive a psychogenic entity than you're granting".[180] These two users see nostalgia not necessary as a good reason for preferring one trilogy over the other, but as an inevitable reason. They argue that fans or humans just experience this emotion and that despite there being other reasons, they cannot deny that nostalgia plays an important role. This discussion about nostalgia within *Star Wars* fandom has shown that that there are users on the forum that prefer rational arguments (good reasons) over emotional ones (nostalgia), but also that on both sides of the discussion the users make a great effort to present each other with solid arguments to put across their unvarnished opinions and ideas. In a majority of the threads, the users gravitate towards having solid rational discussions with good rational arguments.

4.5.3. Democracy and Rationality

A few users on the discussion forum also talk about the political situation in de *Star Wars* saga movies. For the most part the discussions about politics are conducted by only a few users in this data set. These discussions do however clearly show that the users are capable of high-level discussions and that many of the users are very dedicated to the discussions and the subject.

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[179] Zenwalker, 19-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/what-people-want-out-of-star-wars-films.50037966/.
[180] Cryogenic, 23-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/.

The users *only one kenobi* and *PiettsHat* have a discussion about politics in *Star Wars* and the actual world. This connection with the actual world will be discussed in the following paragraph, but a few other examples form their discussion are in place here. The name of the thread they are taking in is 'SW Saga In-Depth In-Depth Discussion Thread', which already hints at the level of the discussion: in-depth. Also, both users react several times and their posts are very long. Talking about how democracy is presented in the PT, *only one kenobi* says: "What we see as representing (in terms of what 'The Republic' represents conceptually) democracy is a centralised oligarchic institution - with no sign of 'the people' taking part in the process."[181] So he criticises the way democracy is presented in the PT and the words he uses make clear that he is very well-read and knowledgeable of this subject. As a reaction on what *PiettsHat* said about certain political practises in the USA he expresses his opinion of the posed arguments: "It happens in the US of A so it is democratic? An interesting, if questionable, argument."[182] In this way *only one kenobi* is critical of the movies as well as the arguments that the other users on the forum post. Where he is mostly very critical of the political situation in the PT, *PiettsHat* tries to put across that this portrayal of democracy and the political situation in general has a function in the story, namely as the presage of the OT. He states: "It is meant to be a poor representation of democracy because it is a failing system. We're not supposed to see the Senate as representative of a democracy but of a complacent, lazy, corrupt system."[183] Just like *only one kenobi,* he also came to the conclusion that democracy is poorly represented in the PT. Then he takes the argument a step further by also presenting his analysis that this was done deliberately by the filmmakers as a backstory for the OT story. Other users also see the quality of their discussion, one named *Cryogenic* says: "Good political discussion above, guys. Great posts by PiettsHat and darth-sinister: erudite, articulate, and succinct. Bravissimo!"[184] The users in this discussion come across as intelligent people who know a lot about *Star Wars* and are dedicated enough to have a complex and articulate discussion about the subject of politics and democracy. This

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[181] Only one kenobi, 23-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/.

[182] Only one kenobi, 23-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/.

[183] PiettsHat, 23-12-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/?_debug=1.

[184] Cryogenic, 23-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/?_debug=1.

is one more example of the rational standard on the discussion forum. This rational standard will also be evident in the following paragraph about the way in which the users connect the *Star Wars* universe to the actual world.

4.6. *Star Wars* and the Actual World: Biology, Politics, and Morality

The *Star Wars* saga movies offer countless subjects to talk about on the discussion forum, some of these subjects are at the same time suitable for a connection to the actual world. This means that the users address a subject or discussion point from the *Star Wars* universe and combine this with information or knowledge from the actual world. Most of the times they do this to make a stronger argument for their case, as a few examples from the previous paragraph on rationality show.

      The discussion subjects mentioned below are nearly all of the actual-world related discussions found in the data set and they are also the most elaborate. Biology is discussed in one thread, politics in a few, and morality in many threads. Threads contain many posts and can be contributed to by many users, so these subjects are discussed by more than one user. One case of a link to the actual world outside these subjects is a post by *Kuro* in which he uses ideas about how elderly people think to make a point about Yoda: "My point is that most people are set in their views by a certain age, which Yoda was certainly past. [...] You see, time speeds up as you age (http://bit.ly/1STkgNI). Name me one real-life person who had a major philosophical shift during the last 2% of their life."[185] On the bases of research on age and time from the actual world, this user makes a point about Yoda's actions. He uses a link to a mathematical article on a website where people can post and discuss all kinds of writings. Unfortunately the information in this article does not seem to be verifiable, but it is unclear whether the user knew this. In the biological discussion of midi-chlorians in the next paragraph, the users do use information that seems verifiable.

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[185] Kuro, 11-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/lightsaber-skills-or-force-skills-overall.50029054/.

4.6.1. Biology

In the data set there is one particular discussion that combines actual-world-expertise with a subject from the *Star Wars* universe: a discussion about midi-chlorians, blood transfusion, and cloning. The first post in the thread contains a question about blood transfusion. Although this user does not agree with the idea of midi-chlorians, he is still curious about the logic behind it. He asks two questions that are paraphrased here: 1) If a Jedi receives a blood transfusion (from a non-Force sensitive), will his/her midi-chlorian count fluctuate? 2) If a non-Force sensitive receives blood from say for example Yoda, could this person then suddenly be Force sensitive?[186] So this user, *DarthIshyZ*, takes a subject from the *Star Wars* universe, midi-chlorians, and combines it with something that is possible in the actual world, blood transfusion, and he asks questions about it that have not been explained in the *Star Wars* saga movies. In the movies the midi-chlorians are presented as a mostly spiritual concept, though they can be counted. Some users state that they indeed only see it as a spiritual concept.[187]

Many other reactions on this post really go into detail on how this would biologically work in the actual world. One user asked whether midi-chlorians can reside in stem cells or only in differentiated (specialised) cells.[188] A question which suggests that this user knows what differentiated cells and stem cells are and how they work. Another user, *Jo B1 Kenobi*, relates the midi-chlorians to an actual-world equivalent on which they might be loosely based: mitochondria.[189] A mitochondrion is part of the cells that make up most kinds of organisms, including plants, fungi, insects, and mammals and it is described as the power supply of the cell.[190] *Jo B1 Kenobi* reacts on a question about the clonability of midi-chlorians and argues that if they are like mitochondria, then they would be cloneable. She follows this conclusion with a critique: "For me the problem with having a biological model for force

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[186] DarthIshyZ, 13-05-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/midichlorians-and-blood-transfusions.50030187/.

[187] LZM65, 13-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/midichlorians-and-blood-transfusions.50030187/page-3.

[188] Admiral Volshe, 13-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/midichlorians-and-blood-transfusions.50030187/page-3.

[189] Jo B1 Kenobi, 14-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/midichlorians-and-blood-transfusions.50030187/page-3.

[190] James W. Kalat, *Biological psychology* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2008), 30.

sensitivity is that it then makes certain things like cloning follow logically whether we like it or not and whether it makes a good story or not."[191] So this user seems to know a lot about this subject from the actual world, enough to make arguments about how a concept from the *Star Wars* universe, midi-chlorians, would work.

This discussion is a great example of how users use their actual-world expertise to come to a conclusion relating to an imagined concept. The following topics will show that there are more subjects from the *Star Wars* universe that users have discussions about while using information or expertise from the actual world.

4.6.2. Politics

In the *Star Wars* saga movies politics play an important role in the story, granted this is more the case in the PT than the OT and the first movie of the ST. Because this subject is prominent in the movies, it is unsurprising that the fans on the forum discuss it. Half of the time when they discuss the political situation in the movies, especially the abuses, the users relate it to the political situation in the actual world. Almost all of these discussions are held in period two of the data set. This period is from the 23th of December 2013 until the 25th of December of that year. In this period the United States of America (USA) had just faced a financial crisis which even led to a federal government shutdown at the beginning of that year.[192] Many of the users mention in their user information that they are from the USA. It could therefore be that because of this the users on the *Star Wars* discussion forum started to talk more about the connection between the flawed political system in the *Star Wars* movies and the political situation in the USA.

There are several instances of political abuse that the users on the forum pay attention to, a few of these will be discussed below in as far as they relate to the actual world. Talking about the storyline in the PT one user states: "So, right from the beginning of the PT the Jedi have become the Jedi Order. The concept of the Jedi has been morphed into

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[191] Jo B1 Kenobi, 14-12-2-15, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/midichlorians-and-blood-transfusions.50030187/page-3.
[192] Brad Plumer, "A very simple timeline for the debt-ceiling crisis," *Washington Post*, 08-10-2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/10/08/a-very-simple-timeline-for-the-debt-ceiling-crisis/.

a body of government attached to a governmental system - and each has a dependency on the other […]."[193] This user makes clear that this dependent relationship between the Jedi Order and The Galactic Republic is not a good development. His critique is that this is too different from the situation in the OT, but he also seems to hint that a spiritual group like the Jedi should not be so strongly related to the government. This is only an indirect link to actual-world politics. Other posts make a direct connection. Further on in this discussion a few users go into supposedly undemocratic things that Padmé and Anakin said. In AOTC Padmé and Anakin have a conversation about her term as senator and politics in general. Anakin says: "The people you served thought you did a good job. I heard they tried to amend the Constitution so you could stay in office." Padmé replies by saying: "Popular rule is not democracy, Annie. It gives the people what they want, not what they need." This statement is one that some fans struggle with, because it seems to suggest that the people do not know what is good for them and that they need a political elite to decide this for them. As a reaction on this statement, *PiettsHat* says: "Because that is actually a huge problem in democracies today. One of the reasons so many Senators/Representatives keep getting elected over and over again is because they have clout and can get federal money for their particular constituents."[194] So this user sees a similarity between things that *Star Wars* characters say and events in the actual world, in this case the unfair re-election of representatives in the USA. *Only one kenobi* also reacts strongly against Anakin and Padme's statements by saying: "This is 'the people' as mob. This is an oligarchic/aristocratic/elitist argument of rule by the qualified elite. Is this the basis of common law and the American constitution? It most certainly is not." This user critiques the statements from the movies by pointing out that they are not correct according to the American constitution and common law. Later on in the discussion *only one kenobi* also states that because the democracy is so poorly represented in the PT, "[w]hat is there that is worth saving that we find in TPM?"[195] The user that replies the most on his posts, *PiettsHat*, reacts to this by saying:

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[193] Only one kenobi, 23-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/.

[194] PiettsHat, 23-12-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/?_debug=1.

[195] Only one kenobi, 23-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/.

[…] by your argument, there is nothing in the USA worth preserving and we should just become Nazi Germany instead of trying to fix our horrifically flawed democracy. What's worth saving about the USA? We've got the NSA spying on the citizenry, corporate interests running amok in Congress, an apathetic public (where most can barely be bothered to vote), and a deadlocked political situation on Capital Hill [*sic*].

This user is rather critical of the political situation in the USA, but he still thinks that there are elements in it that are worth remaining. With this argument he also criticises the statement by *only one kenobi* that there is nothing left in TPM to keep for a further story. These statements show that the users on the forum make connections between the imagined political situation in the *Star Wars* movies and the political situation in the actual world in their discussions in different ways.

4.6.3. Morality

The users on the forum talk a lot about topics related to morality, e.g. the Light and Dark Side, good and evil, and the Force as moral compass. The *Star Wars* saga movies invite and challenge the viewers to think about the events and the actions of characters in the films. A user by the name of *darth-sinister* posted quotes from interviews with Lucas to resolve the issue of good and evil in the saga movies, posts like these do however not stop other users from talking about what good and evil are in the *Star Wars* movies or in the actual world.[196] Like the subject of politics, morality is very much part of people's everyday life. Morality in the form of a battle between good and evil is also prominent in the *Star Wars* movies. A link between actual-world experience and ideas about morality and *Star Wars* is therefore easily and often made. Morality is also a more personal subject. This means that the users sometimes unintentionally share something of their personal moral ideas in their posts about for example good and evil in the *Star Wars* story. This unintentional mention of personal moral ideas is also discussed here as a link to the actual world. Some users clearly display that they have well-defined ideas of what good and evil are and right or wrong are,

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[196] Darth-sinister, 23-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/page-2.

which hints at moral absolutism. Other users make clear that they do not think good and evil can be clearly defined, which points to moral relativism.

4.6.3.1. Moral absolutism

There are many different ways in which the users talk about clear-cut moral ideas and the actual world, because good and evil are strongly linked to the Light and Dark Side, and the Jedi and Sith in the saga movies. In a thread about the Force as a moral compass a user by the name of *Lt. Hija* makes clear what he thinks are evil or wrong actions: "In general (and in real life) I believe your actions qualify as "dark" when they come at the expense of another being."[197] So this user sees dark as the equivalent of wrong or evil, and an action is dark when it is at the expense of others. Another user makes clear that evil people like the Sith also exist in the actual world: "People like the Sith in real life scare me, and, sadly, they ain't [*sic*] uncommon."[198] She adds a personal note to her opinion of these evil characters and links it to the actual world by stating that there are actual people that behave and think like the Sith characters from the *Star Wars* universe.

Quite a few of the other users judge the moral choices the characters from the movies make and how realistic they are. Anakin is mentioned the most in this context; he faced a dilemma–wanting to save Padmé–and had to live with the consequences of his choice–Darth Sidious as partner, killing many Jedi, becoming a Sith, and not knowing his children. In a discussion about how realistic some moral actions in the story are one user states that some elements are realistic: "I think there are a great many people who will say that the ends justify the means. One of the most chilling examples I can think of is how the United States utilized torture following the September 11 attacks."[199] By referring to an event from the actual world, this user makes the point that the *Star Wars* characters who display the idea that ends justify means are realistic; these kinds of people exist in the actual world. Several events in the *Star Wars* movies are actually based on things or events from the actual world that George Lucas was inspired by. One user lists some of the things that Lucas supposedly saw as good and evil in a thread about moral ambiguity in the saga movies: "Big business and banks evil. Executive power, evil. Military industrial complex evil. Peace

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[197] Lt. Hija, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-force-and-moral-compass.50036200/.
[198] SateleNovelist11, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.
[199] PiettsHat, 26-12-2013, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/page-2.

loving yet naive senators good. Jedi, ultimately good. Soldiers good but just pawns."[200] This user makes a statement about what the clear evil and good things are in the movies in a post in which she argues that she does not see that much moral ambiguity in the saga movies until TFA. In a discussion about Anakin's actions, a user named *ImpreciseStormtrooper* points out that explaining the actions of the bad guys can be a slippery slope: "I'm sure you could point to any monster from history and identify their point of view. Slippery slope, though." He continues by saying: "Frankenstein is clearly a victim of his own tragic circumstances. Doesn't make throwing that girl down the well any less evil."[201] So to make clear that not all evil actions should be justified, he mentions the fictional character of Frankenstein as an example. He is not an actual person, but a well-known fictional character from outside the *Star Wars* universe. In a discussion about Anakin's actions, some users use concepts from the actual world to classify the level of evilness of his actions. *Lt. Hija* says that Anakin killing children in AOTC and in ROTS are not morally the same. One is manslaughter and the other is premeditated murder. So this user uses non-*Star Wars* juridical terms to describe Anakin's actions and on the basis of this he concludes that one is more evil than the other:

> What we saw in AOTC was **manslaughter** [bold from original post]. Anakin didn't go to this camp to murder Tuskens of all ages and gender. He went there to free his mother. When she died in his arms, he was angered and ended up in a mad rage. What we saw in ROTS was **premeditated** murder. Even if he was "ordered" by his new master to kill all Jedi in the temple, Sidious didn't expect him to do that personally (hence the troops). He simply could have ignored the children or leave it to the troopers (which was one of the earlier screenplay versions). Instead he saw personally to it. He had a choice but the choice he made was pure evil. It's as simple as that.[202]

The last action is seen as more evil or despicable, because he made the choice himself. Another user, called *Iron_lord*, calls the events in AOTC second degree murder and says that the killing in ROTS would not have been any better if the troopers had done it, it even might

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[200] CheckSix, 19-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/moral-ambiguity-in-sw.50037727/page-2.
[201] ImpreciseStormtrooper, 20-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/why-does-it-seem-like-people-fall-to-the-dark-side-easily.50037929/page-2.
[202] Lt. Hija, 20-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/why-does-it-seem-like-people-fall-to-the-dark-side-easily.50037929/.

have been hypocritical of Anakin then.[203] This user also has a clear idea of what wrong and right are.

4.6.3.2. Moral relativism

Unlike the users above, quite a few other users seem to move more towards moral relativism in their remarks about *Star Wars*, morality, and the actual world. Some are quite critical of the strict good-evil dichotomy that the saga movies display, as mentioned above in the paragraph on interpretation. By arguing for a certain point of view on morality within the *Star Wars* universe, users also disclose their own moral viewpoint, with a less direct link to the actual world. Talking about the question whether Jedi are good and Sith evil, the Taoist user named *mandragora* states that he/she finds this idea rather 'unsatisfactory', because "there is no universally accepted notion of what is ?good? and what is ?evil? even in Western ethical systems".[204] So this user makes a more general statement about morality in the actual world, to explain why he/she struggles with this idea in the movies. This user argues that there is no universal guideline for good and evil. With this statement he/she actually discloses that this is also his/her personal idea of morality. In a discussion about the Light and Dark Side, and good and evil one user also makes a remark in which his/her moral ideas shine through:

> The absence of light does not and should not automatically mean something negative.
> One can be blinded by the light as much as being blinded by darkness. Being in the dark
> or being in the light can both be positive or negative. Isn't it all about the situation or the
> moment?[205]

Arguments like this one make clear that the user's moral viewpoint is more relativist than absolutist; this specific remark is actually a good example of moral relativism. One user argues that the story of Anakin, as a good man turning evil in the PT, is not realistic:

> […] not least because I don't think people transmute instantly into green eyed monsters,
> nor do I think that people make such a singular choice […] but also because he [Lucas]

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[203] Iron_lord, 20-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/why-does-it-seem-like-people-fall-to-the-dark-side-easily.50037929/.
[204] Mandragora, 20-09-2005, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/taoist-struggles-to-sort-out-confusion-on-darkness-and-light-issues-of-balance-and-jedi-and-sith.21635052/.
[205] LZM65, 22-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/the-darkside-and-the-light.50035584/.

does not give us a man. I don't mean by that that Anakin is a boy, I mean that he gives us a deistic super-hero.[206]

So this user states that Anakin's struggle and story of going to the Dark Side is not realistic or recognisable, because Anakin is not a normal man to begin with. He furthermore states that people in the actual world do not change that suddenly and do not chose for one side completely. So he says that people and actions in the actual world are not totally evil or good. Another user seems to use her own experience and moral ideas to say something about Leia's behaviour. In a discussion about Leia in TFA and whether she can forgive Vader, this user says that Leia can indeed forgive him, because she is now a mother and a wife. In the same post she mentions that Leia "understands more than ever, unconditional love of someone even when they've done horrible things."[207] This user probably speaks from her own experience as a mother and wife, something which influences her idea of how to deal with good and evil behaviour. She implies that the unconditional love makes even horrible things forgivable, which is a hint at the background of this user, a background that seems to influence her ideas about morality. TFA and the PT movies contain more moral ambiguity than the OT, which led to critique as well as praise. One user talked about the moral ambiguity in those movies and shared a personal realisation:

> [...] now as a middle-aged man, we see how little things like "democracy" and "freedom" and "goodness" can mean; that they can be used as propaganda tools by anyone, and sometimes you don't know until those things are compromised who the good guys truly are...or if everything and everyone are by nature just shades of grey.[208]

These lines show the process of his thinking about general human concepts like freedom, democracy, and goodness, concepts that can become blurred and mean different things in different contexts. This has consequences for this user's thinking about the nature of humans and morality, which has become less well defined. This user presents an interesting stream of thought that led to his renewed ideas about morality, ideas that hold up true for

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[206] Only one kenobi, 25-12-2015, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/sw-saga-in-depth-in-depth-discussion-thread.50017195/page-2.
[207] IamZam, 20-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/did-leia-forgive-vader.50036607/page-2. Zam refers to Zam Wesell, a female Clawdite bounty hunter from AOTC.
[208] Keycube, 13-01-2016 (first post in thread), http://boards.theforce.net/threads/moral-ambiguity-in-sw.50037727.

the imagined world of *Star Wars* as well as the actual world. It is a perfect example of a post in which the *Star Wars* universe and the actual world are intertwined.

4.7. Conclusion

The data presented in this chapter shows that there are endless possible discussion subjects when it comes to *Star Wars*. However, the research question is focused on more specific subjects. The questions which this chapter answers are: (1) *How do the users of the online Star Wars discussion forum talk about to the religious and spiritual themes in the saga movies and* (2) *which subjects do they discuss in relation to these themes?*

The first thing that caught the eye was that the users on the forum barely use the words religion and spirituality, although they talk a lot about subjects related to it, like the Force. The few times they use it, they refer to a religion from the actual world, such as Christianity or Islam. Sometimes they use the word 'philosophy' to refer to religion, but generally speaking they just do not talk about the subject directly. This suggests that religion and spirituality are maybe taboo subjects here, or that the users do not find these subjects very interesting or important. Taking about the form of the discussions, the users seem to prefer rational discussions with good arguments. They build their arguments in different ways, for example by using quotes from George Lucas or by referring to events or rules from the actual world. The effort that is put into these arguments shows how invested many fans are in the subject of their fandom. The users might not mention the subject of religion or spirituality that much, but they do talk plenty about the *Star Wars* subjects related to it and they have an abundance of different interpretations and ideas about them. In the movies The Force is the central religious element, to which all of the other elements, such as the Jedi, Sith, Light and Dark Side, relate. This chapter shows that there are many different ideas about what the Force is, how a perfect Jedi or Sith acts, and even more about what the Light and Dark Side are. The Light and Dark Side are mostly discussed in relation to morality, good and evil, right and wrong. Some of these interpretations are due to differing religious or spiritual backgrounds and knowledge of the EU. It could well be that this led to alternative words and concepts to refer to the users of the Force. So at the one hand the users prefer to have rational discussions in which religion and spirituality are hardly mentioned. On the

other hand the users talk about the Force, Dark and Light Side, and morality in abundance, while using new concepts to do so and making links to the actual world and their personal lives. This implies that the forum is somewhat of a secular and rational environment that the users enter to also talk about subjects that they are really invested in, which sometimes relate to their personal lives.

The *Star Wars* topics mentioned above often stimulate the users to use expertise or ideas from the actual world to talk about them. Politics and morality are the two subjects that are most often related to the actual world. Both subjects are a big part of the *Star Wars* storyline and both also occupy people's minds in the actual world. In a time where there was great turmoil in the American government, the users on the forum talked a lot about the abuses of the government in the *Star Wars* movies and related it to abuses of the American government. In the posts that relate to morality, the users often talk about the Light and the Dark Side of the Force and question whether these indeed correspond to good and evil. What is right and what is wrong are questions that users often answer on the base of their own moral ideas. The movies challenge them to think about the actions of characters and the events in the films. So how wrong or evil the actions of Anakin are, are answered on the base of people's personal moral ideas. These personal ideas are in a way also part of the actual world. How artificial this analytic distinction between imagined and actual might be, it does help to see how intertwined these worlds are for the users on the forum.

To conclude, the users do not talk about religion and spirituality that much and they have mostly rational discussions. Looking at the definition of religion from the introduction, I found that generally the users talk about religion in *Star Wars* (i.e. the Force and related elements) in abundance but not in a religious manner and not in relation to their own beliefs. This could mean that the *Star Wars* forum is a secular and rational environment. It might suggest that the users are somewhat detached from the subjects they discuss on the forum. When it comes to religion and rationality, none of them indicate that they see religion as something non-rational and no one says that it is not allowed to discuss religion on the forum. It could be that the form of fandom in general and the platform itself dictate this way of talking and that the people on the forum just comply with these unwritten rules.

At the same time, these same rational discussions show that the users are actually very much invested in writing about the Force and the related subjects discusses above. Moreover, it shows that the imagined *Star Wars* universe is part of the users' own universe.

The discussions about morality and the actual world show that the movies inspire the users to talk about these subjects. This way the users may come to grips with some of the actual world subjects by talking about them in the context of *Star Wars.* This could ultimately mean that their fandom and activities on the forum helps build their identity and guide their comprehension of the world around them. In the next chapter I will use an etic approach and analyse the findings in this chapter with the conceptual framework presented in chapter two.

Chapter V

Star Wars Fandom: Modern Enchantment & Key Symbols

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will argue that the activities on the online *Star Wars* discussion forum can be seen as a form of modern enchantment, that the forum functions as a public sphere, and that *Star Wars* is appropriated by the fans to serves as a key symbol. Apart from making these points I will also go into the implications and effects of *Star Wars* fandom as modern enchantment and the forum as public sphere.

Saler argues that the prolonged habitation of imaginary worlds by the first fantasy and science fiction fans is an expression of modern enchantment. This enchantment is modern because it is rational and secular; the requirements of modernity. I will argue that the activities of the *Star Wars* fans on the online discussion forum–the *'Star Wars Saga In-Depth'* forum on *theforce.*net–can be viewed as an expression of modern enchantment in the same manner. According to Saler this means that it is rational and secular, that the fans use ironic imagination, and that the platform where they discuss their object of fandom is a public sphere of the imagination. This leads to the assumption that there are types of exclusions there, while at the same time (elements from) *Star Wars* can be 'good to think with' and appropriated as a key symbol by its fans. These findings can explain the patterns found in the data as well as further nuance Saler's theory about modern enchantment. This chapter will systematically analyse the data patterns on the basis of the theoretical framework.

5.2. Inhabiting the *Star Wars* Universe

The fans in this case study inhabit the *Star Wars* universe by talking about the stories that take place in this universe and by having discussions about different elements of the universe on an online discussion forum. The fans have these discussions because they like the imaginary world that Lucas created and want to spend time there by talking about it with other fans. The previous chapter for example showed that fans on the forum have discussions about who is the strongest Sith, how to define The Force, whether they approve of Anakin's actions, and how midi-chlorians work. Actually, all of the discussions described in the previous chapter would be an example of fans inhabiting the imaginary world that is the *Star Wars* universe. The same would be true for the other *Star Wars* forums hosted by *theforce.net*, although not all of the forums focus on the saga movies. Generally speaking, the behaviour of talking about the *Star Wars* universe on an online discussion forum, like the fans of this case study do, would qualify as inhabiting an imaginary world, and is therefore a form of modern enchantment. There are more reasons for qualifying this behaviour as modern enchantment.

5.3. The Ironic Imagination of the *Star Wars* Fan

The modern form of enchantment that Saler writes about is modern for its rational and secular character. According to Saler this entails that fans keep their imagination in line; they are reflexive and do not believe the imaginary world to be true in the actual world.[209] The fans do this by using their ironic imagination; they act like the imaginary world is real, while knowing it is not. This double-minded way of approaching imaginary worlds was just starting to be popular in the historic period that Saler writes about, and nowadays it is what fantasy fandoms like *Star Wars* fandom are built on.

When the users on the *Star Wars* discussion forum talk about their object of fandom they constantly use their ironic imagination. Most of the times they write about imaginary

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[209] Saler, *As if*, 30.

world and the stories taking place there in the same way as they would about something from the actual world. When *Master_Shaitan* says that '[…] a Jedi uses the Light Side of the Force to keep it balanced' when talking about the Force and balance, he does not use words to imply it is a fictional concept he refers to–a similar sentence could have been used to talk about a high-wire walker using an umbrella to keep his balance. The users in the bio-medical discussion about the clonability of midi-chlorians also talk about the subject using the same logic they would when talking about the actual-world equivalent mitochondria. The many discussions in which users connect the *Star Wars* world to the actual world also show that these people are not 'deluded' and know very well it is an imaginary world. Due to the self-reflective attitude of the ironic imagination, none of the users in the data sample say anything that suggests that the *Star Wars* movies are anything but fiction. At the same time they develop new ways of talking about the Force and its users, and make connections between events in the *Star Wars* universe and their own experience. They do all of this in a rational way while using rational arguments. This shows that in order to discuss *Star Wars* related subjects the fans pretend that the world, stories, events, people, and so on are real. Some users do refer to the *Star Wars* world as imaginary by for example calling it a 'space-fantasy universe'.[210] Most users do not however mention it explicitly, but among fans and on this discussion forum it is implied that people know they are talking about an imaginary world. This type of pretend, this way of ironically using imagination, is at the same time a serious thing. The quality of some of the discussions and arguments show that although the users know it is an imaginary world, they do take it seriously. These examples make clear that the users on the discussion forum use their ironic imagination and can talk about the *Star Wars* universe as if it were real, while at the same time knowing it is not. And when talking about religious subjects in *Star Wars*, i.e. the imaginary beliefs, practices, experiences, and discourses which assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and/or processes analysed in chapter three, they do so without believing they are real in the actual world. So the users talk about (imaginary) religion but not in a religious manner. This is exactly how the ironic imagination works. And it means that the users' activities are

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[210] SW saga fan, 18-01-2016, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/what-people-want-out-of-star-wars-films.50037966/.

indeed a form of modern enchantment.

5.4. The *Star Wars* Forum:
An Online Public Sphere of the Imagination

Based on the data and Saler's theory I have argued that the activities of the *Star Wars* fans on the forum qualify as a form of modern enchantment. Saler states that the places where fantasy and science fiction fans talk about the imaginary worlds are public spheres of the imagination. The public spheres that his research focuses on are the letter pages in fan magazines of which the online discussion forum is a post-internet, and thus online, equivalent. Therefore this *Star Wars* forum could be an online public sphere of the imagination. This way of defining the discussion forum explains some of the findings of the discourse analysis presented in the previous chapter.

The characteristics of Habermas' public sphere are that is an "intersubjectively shared space reproduced through communicative rationality".[211] This means that ideally a public sphere is a discussion platform, a space of discourse that is open to all and agreement should be found through the better argument, not through status or background. Good rational arguments and equality are central. The *Star Wars* forum is indeed a publicly shared space in which people are used to have discussions with each other. Namely, it is an open discussion forum where anyone can create an account and partake in the discussions. A distinguishing feature of communicative rationality is that the force of one's argument is what drives a discussion towards agreement, not any kind of coercion or status. Anyone can create an account and username, without having to mention anything about who you are. The effect of this is that other users for example do not know the gender, land of origin, or profession of other users; adding to an ideal of equality. The use of properly formulated arguments by so many users on the discussion forum shows that the fans take good arguments seriously. This becomes apparent from for example the structure of arguments and the use of sources for their information. The fact that the discussions are about an

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[211] Dahlberg, "The Habermasian Public Sphere," 84.

imaginary world does not seem to influence the level of the discussions. The conversations on the discussion forum are also generally polite and respectful, and users compliment each other on their arguments and provided information. The written rules of the discussion forum, which the moderators uphold, influence the form of the discussion, while at the same time there seem to be many unwritten rules about how to talk on the forum. A written rule of the discussion forum is that users are not allowed to (physically) threaten or insult each other, and it seems to be an unwritten rule that you are taken more seriously if you present a good rational argument. The discourse on the discussion forum is influenced and shaped by these written and unwritten rules, which leads to the forum functioning like an online public sphere of the imagination.

5.5. The Flaws of a *Star Wars* Public Sphere

The online *Star Wars* discussion forum seems to have the characteristics of an online version of Saler's public sphere of the imagination and the activities of the fans on this forum are a form of modern enchantment. Research about public spheres has shown that public spheres are not flawless and that there are types of exclusion which oppose the ideal of inclusion and equality. By extension it could mean that the *Star Wars* discussion forum has the same flaws. Although Habermas' ideal of the public sphere was that of unconstrained, rational, and equal exchanges between individuals, Asen explained that recent theory and criticism of the public sphere has investigated direct and indirect exclusions.[212] Asen argued that direct exclusions are often counteracted on many forums, but indirect exclusions, the discursive norms and practices that prescribe particular ways of interacting in public forums, are not.

The discourse on the *Star Wars* discussion forum has many written and unwritten rules that influence and shape the norms and practices on the forum. The summary of the written rules reads "Be nice, don't curse, don't pirate and don't post NSFW material," with NSFW meaning 'not safe/suitable for work', an internet term used for erotic or offensive

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[212] Asen, "Imagining in the Public Sphere," 345 and Saler, *As If*, 97.

content.[213] These rules do not explain the focus on rational discussion and very limited mention of religion. The gathered data is from discussions about the religious and spiritual themes in and outside the *Star Wars* universe, so it might have been expected to find conversations about religion or spirituality, maybe even about personal religion. The previous chapter shows that the users on the forum use the words religion and spirituality scarcely and although belief in the Force is the religious system in the saga movies, the users hardly ever refer to it as such. The users also seldom refer to their own religion, spirituality, or philosophy of life. When they do, it is indirect. Findings like these suggest that it is a norm of this forum that these subjects are not welcome or even unacceptable. This norm can be seen as a way of indirectly excluding fans that want to talk about these subjects. It is not direct exclusion, for the rules of the forum do not read "No discussion of religion" and other users also do not say anything close to this. There is however at least one case in which someone's discussion was directly rejected and a few cases of posts that are ignored by the other users. By not reacting on a comment about religion and spirituality, and almost never discussing it, people who want to use religious language and those who want to talk about religion are excluded none the less. Before users post a comment, they probably observe the discourse on the forum first, and by doing so they learn about the unwritten as well as the written rules. Hence, the secular norm that seems to reign on the *Star Wars* discussion forum remains the status quo and is leading to exclusion.

As discussed above, the *Star Wars* forum is not only secular but also rational in nature. The norm of rational discussions is the practice relating to this. In the previous chapter many of the rational practices of the forum users are displayed, from different substantiated views on the Force and Jedi, to well-founded discussions about nostalgia, midi-chlorians, world politics, and moral decisions. Like a norm of secularity, the norm of rationality similarly excludes fans that do not comply with it. This means that fans who express an opinion based on an emotional personal story would not be taken seriously by most of the other users. And in many discussions badly formulated arguments are not payed attention to. The secular and rational norm of an online public sphere of the imagination that hosts a modern form of enchantment indirectly excludes those who do not comply to

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[213] "Rules for the Jedi Council Forums," last modified on 03-06-2017, http://boards.theforce.net/threads/rules-of-the-jedi-council-forums.27141421/.

this ideal.

5.6. *Star Wars* Appropriated as Key Symbol

An imaginary world like the *Star Wars* universe can be very meaningful for the fans that spend much time in and around it. Throughout the data it is clear that the fans actively engage with *Star Wars* and appropriate it in the way that they find amusing or relevant: they have their own interpretation, use new concepts, express their unvarnished opinions, and they have personal and meaningful discussions about it. And although the researched online public sphere of the imagination is not as inclusive and equal as the ideal, the fans' conversations imply that *Star Wars* helps them think about the actual world and their lives outside of the imaginary world. Ortner talks about a type of symbol that can provide a vehicle for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas: an elaborating key symbol.[214] These symbols can help members of a culture think about complex cultural ideas and structures. In fact, Saler argues that imaginary fantasy and science fiction worlds are 'good to think with' about actual world issues.[215] For *Star Wars* fans, elements from the movies and stories might be appropriated as an elaborating key symbol. The imaginary ideas, events, and construct could help them think about contemporary issues in the actual world. The Force is the central religious element in the movies, to which the other elements relate, and fans also talk about it in relation to the actual world. In the previous chapter many examples of discussions about actual world subjects are presented, some of which concern complex cultural ideas. The discussion about blood transfusion and the clonability of midi-chlorians is such an example. Both the workings of the imaginary concept, midi-chlorians, as its actual word equivalent, mitochondria, are complex. Cloning is an even more complex subject. By referring to the actual-world equivalent of the imaginary concept, the users try to understand the imaginary concept. The discussions about actual-world politics and morality are more obvious examples of how elements from the *Star Wars* world can help fans think about complex cultural ideas.

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[214] Ortner, "On Key Symbols," 1340.
[215] Saler, *As If*, 127.

Because the political situation in the *Star Wars* galaxy is such an important part of the saga movies, there are many events and elements that fans can talk about. The previous chapter shows that especially when it comes to the abuses within politics, the fans talk about the *Star Wars* events as well as actual world issues. The period in which the most of these discussions are found, is also the period of a financial crisis in the USA. Users on the forum talk about the actions and ideas of *Star Wars* characters to point out what is wrong with certain actions and ideas in their actual world. By for example analysing the dubious ideas about democracy in the PT movies, some users formulate an idea about what is wrong with democracies in the actual world. This shows that the users, the *Star Wars* fans, make use of the events and ideas from the *Star Wars* movies to better understand and critique the actual world.

The *Star Wars* saga movies are in many ways about moral ideas, about good versus evil and choosing the right side. In this way the movies provoke the viewers to think about these moral subjects. It was therefore to be expected that there would be abundant conversations about good and evil, light and dark, Jedi and Sith, and morality in general. The link with actual world events and life choices by the users of the forum was less expected. With these discussions the fans do however show in another way how *Star Wars* can help them understand the actual world. Because morality is such a big part of people's everyday life the users unintentionally hint at personal ideas with it. Be it moral absolutism or a form of moral relativism, their personal values shine through. By looking at the different discussions related to morality it becomes clear that some fans use the situation in the *Star Wars* movies to better formulate their non-Star Wars ideas about morality, meaning their personal beliefs about morality in general. *Star Wars,* and more specifically the Force, is thus 'good to think with' for its fans and in this manner it works as an elaborating key symbol in their lives.

5.7. Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter provides use with insight into the case study as well as wider conclusions. I have shown that *Star Wars* fandom on *'Star Wars Saga In-Depth'* forum on *theforuce.net* is an online public sphere of the imagination. It is a place where fans talk about

their object of fandom, express opinions, present interpretations, and expand the story created in the media text. They do all of this using thought-out arguments to convince one another. The discourse in this public sphere is for the most part rational and secular in nature, although this is not a written rule of the forum. Here this means that rational arguments have the upper hand, religion is hardly discussed, and personal religious beliefs even less so. The users do discuss the imaginary religious elements in the *Star Wars* movies, but not in a religious manner. This seems to be an expression of certain unwritten rules–rules which work as a type of indirect exclusion–typical for the classic public sphere and a characteristic modern enchantment. For this reason the *Star Wars* fandom on this forum is an expression of modern enchantment.

The data furthermore shows that although the conversations are secular and rational, they can still have meaning and value beyond plain entertainment. The forum, as an online public sphere of the imagination, brings people together to talk about *Star Wars*. As active agents the fans appropriate it in a way that is meaningful and interesting to them. And in itself, the imaginary world of *Star Wars* is 'good to think with' about actual-wold issues and can work as an elaborating key symbol for *Star Wars* fans.

Chapter VI

Conclusion: *Star Wars* Fans & Meaningful Appropriation

Yoda: Careful you must be when sensing the future Anakin. The fear of loss is a path to the dark side.

Anakin Skywalker: I won't let these visions come true, Master Yoda.

Yoda: Death is a natural part of life. Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force. Mourn them do not. Miss them do not. Attachment leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed that is.

Anakin Skywalker: What must I do, Master Yoda?

Yoda: Train yourself to let go... of everything you fear to lose.

— *Star Wars: Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (George Lucas, 2005)

6.1. Introduction

In this scene Anakin expresses his fear of losing people close to him and Jedi Master Yoda explains he has to train himself to be able to deal with this fear. Yoda is my favourite *Star Wars* character and his words seem appropriate to start a concluding chapter with: it is not about loss but about completing the cycle that started in the introduction.

This thesis is about *Star Wars* fans and how they approach and deal with a series of movies rich in religious and spiritual characters and themes. With an online discussion forum for *Star Wars* fans as a case study and by finding out what their fan-discourse on religion and spirituality is, the goal of my study was to gain insight in what the fans do with *Star Wars*. The main question of this research was: *In what way do fans appropriate* Star Wars *in a*

meaningful way and what are the implications of this for research into fandom and religion?
As a build-up for the answer to this question I start by answering the sub-questions in a different order than the chapters: I begin with the movies, than the fan-discourse, and end with fandom and modern enchantment. After the answer to the twofold main research question, the chapter will be completed with a few suggestions for further research.

6.2. Religion and Spirituality in the *Star Wars* Saga

The starting point for this research was a space fantasy movie series in which religion and spirituality are a key part of the story: *Star Wars*. I analysed the saga movies to then answer the following two sub-questions: (1) In what way are religion and spirituality part of the Star Wars saga movies and (2) how do the religious and spiritual elements relate to actual-world religions? I found the answer to this question by closely watching the movies myself and preforming a content analysis.

The short answer to these questions is that there are many religious and spiritual elements which are interwoven with the story and the elements parallel several actual-world religions. The longer answer is however more interesting. While using a substantial definition of religion I identified the Force, Force users like the Jedi and Sith, the Light and Dark Side of the Force, and the portrayal of good and evil as religious elements. The Force is part of the storylines around the heroes Anakin, Luke, and Rey, since all of them have a connection which the Force and use it with the intention to do good things. This is how the world-binding Force is associated with moral action, since the Light and Dark Side of the Force are good and evil respectively. The Force users called Jedi are connected to the good side and the Sith to the side of evil. With this the struggle between good and evil which is central to the *Star Wars* saga story, is connected to the religious concept of the Force.

The Force and the Force users connect to several actual-world religions. I found parallels with Taoism, Shrine Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity, which shows the effort of Lucas to combine elements from different forms of religion and spirituality in his movies. The flowing energy that is the Force corresponds the most with the Taoism. In Taoism energy is the principle tenet of Taoism, like the Force it has two sides, and this energy is best understood by feeling it. The two sides of one energy or force are also found in Shrine

Shinto; the idea that how one approaches a force or deity influences the way it presents itself–good or evil–can be recognised. The Jedi and the way in which they deal with the Force is what I identified as Buddhist as well as Christian parallels. The Jedi live as monks: they start their teaching when they are young, live celibate lives, study the Force in great length, and practice meditation. Although the Force in itself mostly parallels the Taoist *Tao*, Qui-Gon Jinn's explanation of the midi-chlorians (the life forces that connect Jedi with the Force) does resemble the Christian Holy Spirit. This is the assemblage of religious and spiritual elements in the *Star Wars* saga movies.

6.3. The Fan-Discourse on Religion and Spirituality

The case study of this thesis is the online discussion forum The '*Star Wars Saga In-Depth*' forum on *theforce.net* and my data was the discourse on religion and spirituality there. This discourse gave me insight into how fans discuss a movie series rich in religious and spiritual material and their meaningful appropriation of those movies. The discourse analytical questions I answered were: (3) How do the users of the online *Star Wars* discussion forum talk about to the religious and spiritual themes in the saga movies and (4) which subjects do the users of the online *Star Wars* discussion forum talk about in relation to religious and spiritual themes in the saga movies?

The analysis of the collected data resulted in different categorises of fan-discourse. Firstly, I recognised that the concepts religion and spirituality are hardly ever used and only a few fans talk about their personal life and religion. This is the only noteworthy finding of what the fans do not do. The rest of the categories are examples of what the fans did do, and there is a great diversity. In their discussions about the Force, Jedi and Sith, Light and Dark Side, and morality they express different opinions and interpretations, use different sources, argue for new concepts, and try to unravel complex *Star Wars* concepts. Many fans prefer to do this with well-considered arguments and they occasionally make connections between the imaginary *Star Wars* galaxy and the actual world. So the fans discuss the religious and spiritual themes in many different ways and connect them to a variety of subjects.

6.4. *Star Wars* Fandom as Modern Enchantment

For an analysis of the fan discourse I first needed to know how to define the group creating this discourse. I found that knowing the group helped me understand the discourse and knowing the discourse helped me understand the group. The sub-questions I aimed to answer in relation to this were: (5) How can *Star Wars* fandom be defined and (6) how does the medium influence the fan discourse?

With the use of Saler's theory I can now conclude that the fandom on the forum is a form of modern enchantment. Saler calls modern enchantment disenchanted enchantment. This means that the fans use the double-minded consciousness of the ironic imagination to be at once close and distant to their object of fandom. By doing so, they inhabit and appropriate the fantastical imaginary world, the *Star Wars* universe, without believing it to be true. Since they maintain an ironic distance, the fans can talk about belief in the Force and all the religious elements relating to it without doing so in a religious manner; they do not belief that these things are true in the actual world. Hence, the fans are enchanted in the modern way Saler presents: the fans are secular and rational and so is their discourse. Another characteristic of this modern enchantment is that the imaginary worlds the fans inhabit can be 'good to think' with about actual world issues. In the conversations on the forum the fans did indeed have conversations about actual world subjects. At the same time the data showed that fans actively engage with *Star Wars* and appropriate it in a way they prefer, as the theory of De Certau and Jenkins explained. The discussions on the forum also show the potential of *Star Wars* as an elaborating key symbol, for which I used Ortner's theory. So *Star Wars* fandom is an expression of modern enchantment. And meaningful appropriation of the imaginary world is a part of this.

The medium itself, the discussion platform, can also be understood using Saler's theory. The forum should be perceived as an online public sphere of the imagination, of which the unwritten rules are that it is secular and rational. These are the characteristics of modernity as well as the classic Habermasian public sphere. Other characteristics of this public sphere are that one should come to agreement on the basis of good arguments and never threaten each other. The '*Star Wars Saga In-Depth*' forum has these same

characteristics. I can conclude this based on the structure and rules of the forum on the one hand and the analysis of the data on the other hand.

6.5. How do Fans Appropriate *Star Wars* in a Meaningful Way?

My research demonstrates that *Star Wars* fans appropriate the movie series in many different ways. The imaginary world that they inhabit via ironic imagination is a source for endless conversations, such as those on the online discussion forum. The fans use the medium of the forum, which functions as a public sphere of the imagination, to exchange opinions and interpretations with other fans, and come to conclusions about complex and meaningful matters in the story. Using different sources of information alongside the saga movies, they then form opinions and come up with new ideas which the *Star Wars* filmmakers never presented in the movies. By doing so, they appropriate the movies and make them their own. Apart from simply being amusing and stimulating, which is also meaningful for the fans, the fans also appropriate the movies in a more personal fashion. They combine knowledge and experience from the actual world and their non-*Star Wars* lives with events and subjects from the *Star Wars* story. These links between the imagined and the actual world are made with ease when the fans talk about complex and personal subjects: biology, politics, and morality/ethics. A complex concept such as cloning and midi-chlorians becomes even easier to comprehend when compared to an actual-world equivalent. The related subjects politics and morality also become easier to understand when connecting them to actual-world events and ideas. At the same time the intermediary function of the imaginary world makes these laden subjects more approachable and simple to discuss. In this manner, *Star Wars*, is an elaborating key symbol for its fans, who appropriate it to not only have fun, but also to help them understand their lives and struggles outside this space fantasy world.

6.6. Implications of my Research for Further Research

In the introduction of this thesis I discussed other research which relates to fandom and religion. The research about fiction-based religion focuses on the religious and spiritual appropriation of pop-cultural objects by their fans. These new forms of religion and spirituality in Western modern societies are examples of how religion still exists and develops, although secularist thinking expected otherwise. My research contradicts this trend, since the fandom and medium in my case study are still secular in nature. The post-secular debate came into being because of the persistence and revival of religion, and there is now new research into the role of religion in places where religion is still often shunned. My research could be part of this debate, as an example of the continuing secularity in certain public spheres.

The first point my study makes clear is that there are a lot of fantasy and science fiction fans who do nothing religious or spiritual with their object of fandom. The fans in my research appropriate the *Star Wars* movies, but not in a religious or spiritual way; they use the movies as a key symbol, not to become a Jedi. This does not prove that there are no fans who are religiously or spiritually inspired by *Star Wars* on this discussion forum, but it does prove that they do not discuss it there. This links to the research of Taylor, who argues that religion has become a private matter. The online discussion forum seems to be a public domain, where religion has no place. This means that that the medium has more impact than I expected. The research about *Star Wars* fans by Brooker mentions several fans who see *Star Wars* as spiritual inspiration. And in there is also a fiction-based religion inspired by it. My research differs from this because I exclusively used an online discussion forum as a source of data, and in those other research (e-mail) interviews were used as a method. This shows that the medium of the discourse influences the findings and that religion is indeed for the most part seen as a private matter.

This relates to the second point I want to make here, that modern enchantment and public spheres of the imagination are not innocent or flawless. Within the framework of research about fandom and religion in modernity my study explains that although religion is taking on new forms, there are still places that are very much absent of religion and

spirituality. I have shown that Saler's research is very valuable when researching case studies such as my own. However, the secular and rational character of modern enchantment and public spheres of the imagination show that the harmful dualisms Wilson refers to are found in many different domains. A public sphere that is purely rational and secular in nature can have negative consequences. The unwritten rules of these spheres result in different forms of exclusions, of which I have found a few examples in my data. I furthermore assume that indirect exclusion mostly takes place when a user observes the forum's discourse and decides to not post a comment that diverges from this discourse. Moreover, discourses in these public spheres maintain dualistic thinking which wrongly equates religion with irrationality ('delusion') and the private domain. The effect of such dualistic thinking is something researchers like Saler need to be aware and critical of.

6.7. Suggestions for Further Research

Now that my research is finished, I see many new options for further research in this field. I will present these ideas in a short list below.

1. For many people, *Star Wars* is more than just the movies I have discussed in this thesis. The whole of the franchise, all material presented, is used and referred to by many fans. For this study I only focused on the seven movies, but for further studies other material should be studied. This way one can find out what the status of these materials is and whether the use of them by fans is in any way new or innovative.

2. Fan discussions about politics in the actual world spring from the political situation portrayed in the movies, which is an example of how *Star Wars* can function as a key symbol for its fans as well as making the online forum function as a public sphere. It would be fruitful to do comparative research into other online forums focusing on fantasy or science fiction movies that also have politics as a subject and/or focus. This could expand the research about fandom and public spheres.

3. This study could be an exploratory research for finding historical developments in the thinking of the fans on the forum. This study has data samples from five different time periods, but they are too small to draw many conclusions about how opinions or ideas differ and/or develop between periods. Also, most of the users are not only active on the forum of

this study, since they have more interests and knowledge than just the saga movies. Some users also know a great deal about the EU. It could therefore be fruitful to have larger samples that are more representative for the time period. Another possibly rewarding approach would be to sample by user. This way, like with an interview, the sample shows a more continuous flow of argument and ideas per user. One could compare the development of ideas of several users and theorise about the way in which different users express themselves on a medium.

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Appendix I: Map of *Star Wars* Galaxy

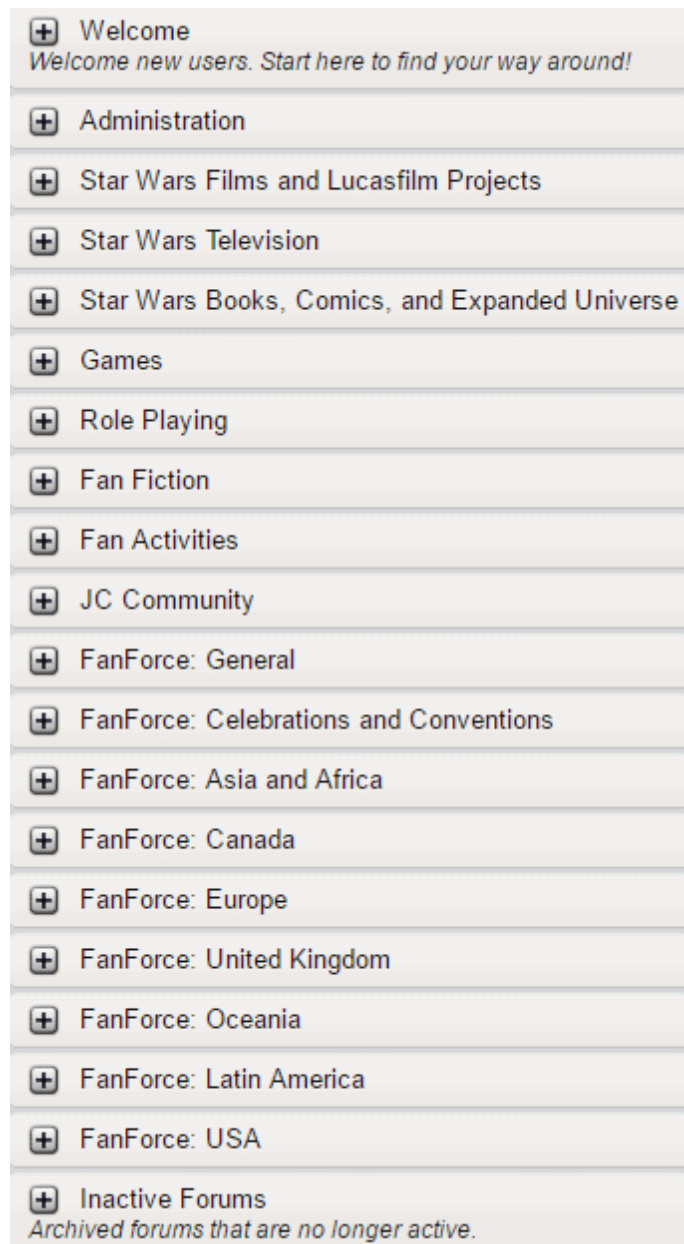| **Figure 1**	*Forum categories on the Jedi Council Forums*

| **Figure 2** | *List of forums in the 'Star Wars Films and Lucasfilm Projects' category* |

Rogue One: A Star Wars Story
Discussions: 337 Messages: 62,140

Star Wars: The Force Awakens
Discussions: 3,006 Messages: 730,539

Star Wars: The Last Jedi & IX - Spoilers Allowed
Discussions: 713 Messages: 260,462

Star Wars: Anthology - Spoilers Allowed
Discussions: 213 Messages: 21,047

Star Wars: New Films - No Spoilers Allowed
Discussions: 186 Messages: 11,831

Star Wars Community
Discussions: 9,625 Messages: 1,995,444

Prequel Trilogy
Discussions: 6,500 Messages: 514,386

Classic Trilogy
Discussions: 9,318 Messages: 386,421

Star Wars And Film Music
Discussions: 1,825 Messages: 71,575

Lucasfilm Ltd. In-Depth Discussion
Discussions: 1,088 Messages: 25,372

Star Wars Saga In-Depth
Discussions: 3,299 Messages: 160,042

Star Wars: Episode VII and Beyond (Archive)
Discussions: 1,480 Messages: 85,519

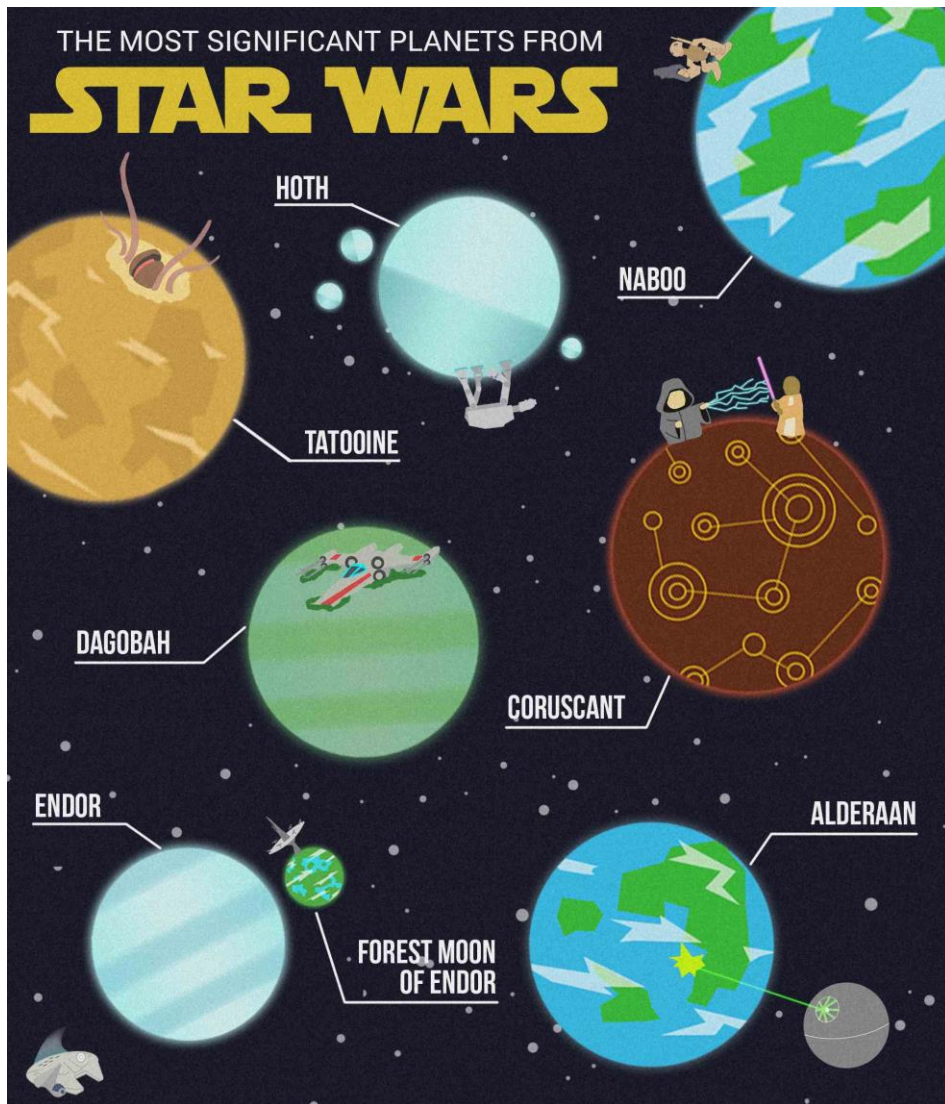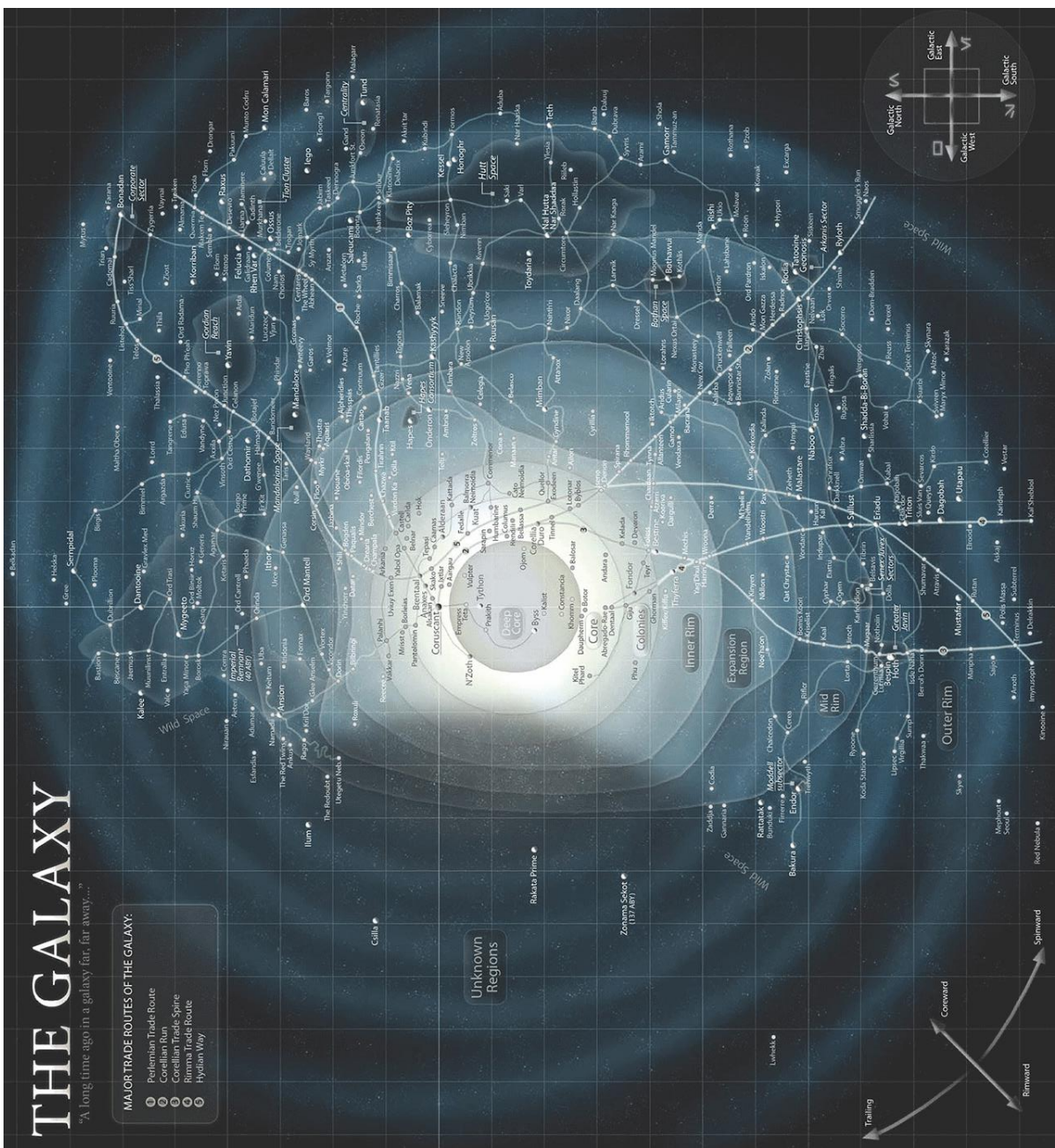| **Figure 3**	*Infographic of important planets in the Star Wars universe*

Figure 4	*Map of the* Star Wars *Galaxy*

Use this hyperlink to see the original image and enlarge it for more detail:

http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_SULXWciuoM8/TTM8yox0oSI/AAAAAAAAAYI/1boX5xn2Cxw/s16
00/star-wars-galaxy-map.jpg

Appendix II: List of Usernames

Admiral Volshe
Admiral is the senior command rank in the *Star Wars* universe, the name Volshe cannot be traced back to anything related to the *Star Wars* universe, so it might be the (sur)name of the user.

Anakinfansince1983
Anakin is a main character in the PT and he becomes Darth Vader, the main evil character in the OT. This user has been a fan of Anakin since 1983, when he was only known by the name Dart Vader.

BriXman
BriXman seems to have no specific meaning or reference, other than this user's name. Maybe it has something to do with bricks or strength, like a man of brick.

CheckSix
This is probably a random nickname unrelated to any fantasy or *Star Wars* universe.

Cryogenic
Cryogenic is a word for extremely low temperatures.

DarthIshyZ
The first part of this name, Darth, is the title for Sith lords. The second part does not relate to anything but this users real name.

Darth Caliban
Darth is the Sith Lord title. Caliban is a character from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the name of a fairly unknown weapons manufacturer in the *Star Wars* universe.

Darth_sinister
Sinister could refer to the Sinister Six, a fictional super villain team from the Marvel Comics. This team is especially against Spiderman. Sinister is also a 2010 horror movie by Scott Derrickson. The word sinister means evil or malignant. Adding

the title Darth, which is only used by Sith Lords, would make the nickname even more evil.

Darkspine10   Spine may refer to one of the many astronomical places such as mountains, planets or an asteroid field in the Star Wars universe. Also, there are many biological creatures with the addition of 'spined' in het *Star Wars* universe. 10 could be the year of joining the forum and dark an evil addition.

DaveyWanKenobi   Wan Kenobi is part of the name for Obi-Wan Kenobi, one of the most important Jedi in the Star Wars saga who trains both Anakin as Luke Skywalker in the Force. He was Qui-Gon Jinn's padawan. Davey is probably the first name of this user.

IamZam   Zam refers to Zam Wesell, a female Clawdite bounty hunter from *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*.

ImpreciseStormtrooper   Refers to the fact that most Stormtroopers, the clone soldiers from the saga movies, seem to be bad at aiming and shooting with their blaster guns.

Iron Lord   Most likely refers to the medieval multi-arcade computer game that was originally made for the Atari ST, published by Ubisoft in 1989. It is also the title of a Russian historical movie from 2010. It could also be a more aristocratic version of Iron Man a superhero in the Marvel universe.

Jo B1 Kenobi   Jo is probably the first name of this user and B1 Kenobi is a reference to Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Lukestarkiller77   Luke Starkiller was the name for the main hero in the first *Star Wars* movie in one of George Lucas' scripts. He later changed it to Luke Skywalker. The director of TFA, J.J. Abrams, put a small reference to the old name in his *Star Wars* movie: he named the base of The First Order 'Starkiller Base'.

Lt. Hija	Lieutenant Hija is the name of a human lieutenant of the Imperial Navy during the Galactic Civil War in the *Star Wars Universe*. He is the person who spots an escape pod leaving the Rebel ship that Darth Vader and the Imperial Navy boarded in *Episode IV: A New Hope*.
LZM65	LZM could refer to the user's full name with year of birth or with the age of the user. Another option is that this LZM refers to the author L.Z.M. Lightbrick who wrote a fantasy book called *The Dryatrix*.
Kuro	Kuro seems to refer to An'ya Kuro a.k.a. dark woman, a mysterious and enigmatic Jedi master who. Like Obi-wan Kenobi she survived the Order 66 (the killing of the Jedi, order by Darth Sidious/Senator Palpatine) and was eventually killed by Anakin/Darth Vader. She was known for her harsh and brutal techniques in training padawans. The word 'kuro' has a lot of meanings: the black belt in karate, a Japanese male name which means 'ninth', a place in East-Java.
Mandragora	Mandragora is the Latin word for mandrake, a poisonous herbaceous plant associated with magical rituals, for the roots are shaped somewhat like a body with arms and legs. The plant also features in the *Harry Potter* movies, in which the roots of the plants have a deadly scream when pulled out of the soil.
Master_Shaitan	Shaitan is the Hindi word for Satan or Devil. Master is a title used in the *Star Wars* movies for Jedi who are fully trained (e.g. Master Yoda, Master Qui-Gon Jinn). This user calls himself Master Satan.
MidKnighT	Midknight is a character in the game *Strife*. It is said that "MidKnight is part white knight, part black knight. He is seldom

what he appears to be. Coming out of the order of the Knights of the Silver Sands of Tempra, he is dominating and set in his archaic ways."

Without the k it reads as midnight, a comedy networks or a synthwave music duo. It might also refer to a 2008 thriller called the Midnight Movie among others with 'midnight' the title.

MOC Vober Dand	Vober Dand is a character that first appeared in TFA. He is a controller serving in the Resistance's Ground Logistics Division. MOC could stand for Member of Congress, so a title.
Only one kenobi	This refers to the *Star Wars* character Obi-Wan Kenobi.
Ord-Mantell70	Ord Mantell is a planet in the *Star Wars* universe mentioned in the EU, but never in the saga movies. 70 is probably the birth year of the user.
PiettsHat	PiettsHat seems to have no specific meaning or reference.
SateleNovelist 11	Satele could refer to Satele Chan a female Jedi Grand Master and Jedi Councillor who lived during the Great Galactic War in the EU. The addition novelist could means that this user writes (fan fiction) about her. The number 11 could mean the year of joining the forum.
SomeRandomNerd	This user name probably means exactly what it says. Or it refers to a blog about ICT and sci-fi films/games/books.
SW saga fan	This literally means 'fan of the *Star Wars* saga'.
The_Phantom_Calamari	This name suggests some connection to the movie TFM movie. The Mon Calamari (also known as Calamari, Calamarians, Mon Cal, Mon Calamarians, or rarely Mon Cala) were one of the living species indigenous to the planet Dac. The most featured

character of this species in the *Star Wars* saga movies is Admiral Gial Ackbar.

Vthuil

This seems to refer to a person who is associated with the graphic design of a variety of fantasy/science fiction drawings/ illustrations.

Zenwalker

This user name appears to be a variation on Skywalker, which is the last name of a couple of main characters in the *Star Wars* saga Walkers are also a type of walk tank in the movies used by the Galactic Republic and the Galactic Empire during the Clone Wars. Zen refers to a Japanese form of Buddhism in which concentration meditation is the main topic.