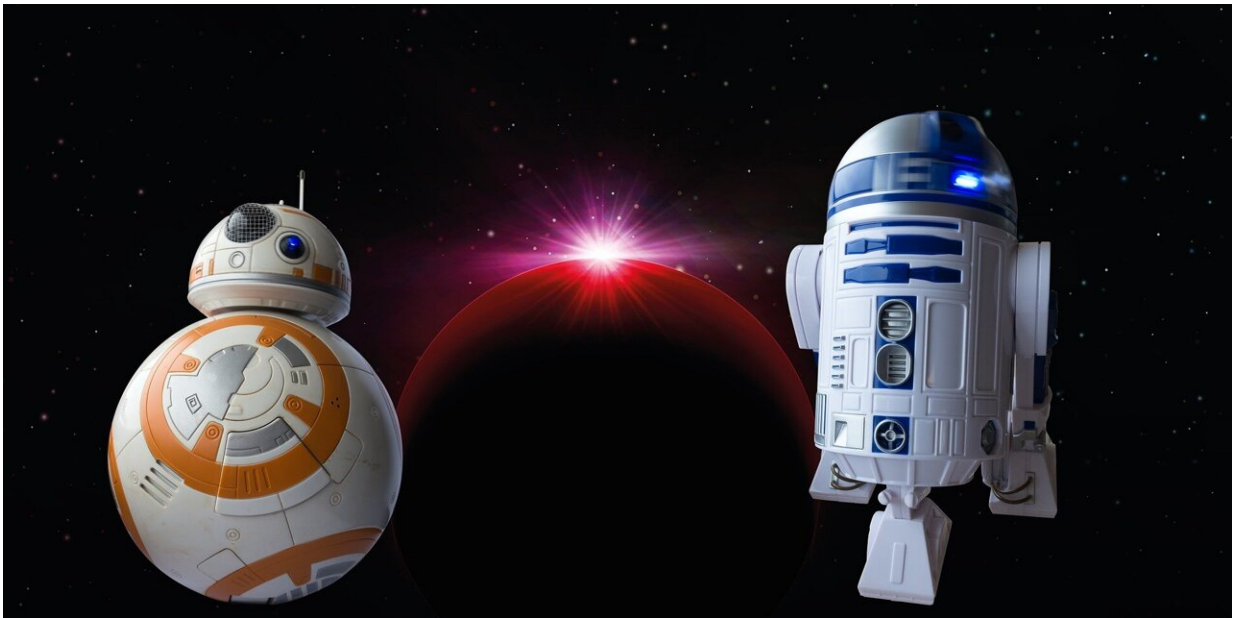


How our shared need for belonging made May the 4th a sacred Star Wars holiday

May 2 2023, by Abby Weingarten



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May the 4th is almost a religious holiday for Star Wars fans, when they make annual pilgrimages to re-released films in theaters, attend costumed conventions and plan themed parties.

If "The Force" is defined as "a mysterious energy field created by life that binds the galaxy together," then May the 4th (as in "May the force/fourth be with you") is the calendar equivalent of that binding

communal energy. The holiday, also known as Star Wars Day, was built by fans on a grassroots level to forge a sense of community and belonging (something humans have needed more than ever since the solitary height of the pandemic).

"In studying [human social behavior](#), I find that a fundamental need in people's lives is the need to belong. People get that need fulfilled in a number of ways—whether by attending church or joining a bowling league—but, for some, it's through simply gathering around a common cult interest," said Gregory Webster, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Florida (UF). "For fans of Star Wars, May the 4th has become a kind of cultural phenomenon that provides that opportunity for connection."

Webster has not only studied this need for belonging and connection, but he has also published research on why certain fantasy narratives in modern media connect so deeply to the human psyche. Last fall, he co-authored "[Personality perception in Game of Thrones: Character consensus and assumed similarity](#)" for the American Psychological Association's *Psychology of Popular Media* journal.

The study examined Big Five and Dark Tetrad personality perception for 56 characters from the popular book-based TV show, and it showed that nearly all characters were "gray" (meaning they displayed both good and bad traits, which made them universally relatable). This type of storytelling and character development is equally evident in the Star Wars canon, which has fueled the longevity of the fantasy narrative.

"Star Wars is compelling because it follows that hero's journey narrative arc. People want to watch changes over time in terms of how a character evolves from good to bad (not just a character being a good guy or bad guy the entire time)," Webster said. "When you see characters that you care about and identify with, and when they face some of the same

ethical choices in everyday life that you do, you really connect with them."

And people long to connect with other people who connect with these same stories and characters. This common thread, and the desire to continue interweaving, is what leads to fans creating events like May the 4th (which does not have a definitive origin but may likely date back to the release of the first Star Wars film in 1977).

Certainly, the holiday has gained more mainstream appeal since the advent of social media, as fans from across the world have bonded and brainstormed thematic gatherings. As the franchise continues to grow, with series like *The Mandalorian* reeling in new generations of fans and Disney+ adding the Lucasfilm collection to its offerings, so does the global popularity of May the 4th.

Andrew Selepak, Ph.D.—a professor in UF's Department of Media Production, Management, and Technology—often examines the communal impact of Star Wars in the context of media psychology and pop culture.

"Because the Star Wars universe exists in a fantasy realm, people look to it as a form of escapism. The more disconnected we become as a society, people have more of a need for a communal experience and escapism from a world that is not a great place," Selepak said. "Connecting like this was particularly important during COVID, when people around the world were isolated. At the end of the day, we are social creatures, and May the 4th is a great communal idea, especially in 2023."

In a word, May the 4th is wholesome. It is a genuine way for fans to connect to a world set in a galaxy "far, far away" with people who sometimes live far, far away—and to relate about stories that are near and dear to their own hearts.

"At a time when neighbors can be divided over politics and everything else, having something that can bring people together like May the 4th is good thing, and there's no rivalry in it," Selepak said. "If you're a Han Solo fan and someone else is a Darth Maul fan, you're not going to be combative over that; you're still going to show up at the same events and appreciate how someone else dressed up as another Star Wars [character](#). We need more opportunities for this kind of positive connection these days."

Provided by University of Florida

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