

What can we learn from Star Wars about the future of tourism? Absolutely everything!

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Abstract

Purpose – This viewpoint is a response to Yeoman’s (2022) editorial on Sunderland AFC and the future of tourism. This viewpoint aims to outline the lessons one can learn from Star Wars about the future of tourism.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reviews the live-action movies and series of the Star Wars franchise.

Findings – The paper derives specific conclusions in the following directions: the future technology in travel, tourism and hospitality; the tourists’ motivation and behaviour; the management of travel, tourism and hospitality companies; destination management; economy and society and lessons from the franchise.

Originality/value – This is one of the first papers to elaborate on the lessons one can learn about the future of tourism from the Star Wars live-action movies and series.

Keywords Future tourism, Star wars, Science fiction

Paper type Viewpoint

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Star Wars: a global cultural phenomenon

Star Wars, “a myth for our time” (Gordon, 1978), is a global cultural phenomenon. The movies, the live-action and the animated series have triggered a cultural revolution since the debut of the first movie of the original Star Wars saga (New Hope) in 1977. Star Wars are everywhere. Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader, Sheev Palpatine/Darth Sidious/The Emperor, Luke Skywalker, Leia, Han Solo, Chewbacca, R2D2, C3PO, BB8, Rey, Finn, Poe, Ben Solo/Kylo Ren, Jedi masters, rebels, resistance fighters and imperial stormtroopers, the Death Stars, star destroyers, Millennium Falcon, spaceships and many other characters, species, places, weapons, vehicles and technologies from the Star Wars universe look at us from books, magazines, posters, websites, T-shirts, hats, toys, stickers, coffee cups and countless other media channels and merchandise products (Guynes and Hassler-Forest, 2017). Youngsters dress in Jedi costumes or stormtrooper uniforms, duel with lightsabre toys, greet with “May the Force be with You” and recite lines from the movies. They play electronic games inspired by the saga. The Star Wars section of Disneyland (*Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge*) opened in May 2019, providing park visitors with a real-life Star Wars-themed experience. The music of the movies, composed by John Williams, has received cult status and some of the themes, such as the main theme, the Imperial March (Episode V) and the Throne Room March (Episode IV), are regularly performed at concerts or as background music at events.

As a cultural phenomenon, Star Wars, however, has long left the realm of entertainment and leisure. Some characters, such as Luke, Leia and Rey are perceived by thousands of fans as behavioural role models (The Story Geeks, 2018). A brand new religion was created, namely Jediism, based on the teachings of the Jedi from the movies (Cusack, 2016). Authors discuss the philosophical,

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Note: *The title of the viewpoint in Aurebesh – the writing system of the Galactic Basic Standard language in the Star Wars universe.

political, legal, economic, social and ethical issues that the saga raises (Brode and Deyneka, 2012; Casey and Kenny, 2021; Eberl and Decker, 2016; Rousu *et al.*, 2022; Sunstein, 2016; Wetmore, 2017); evaluate the evolution of costumes in the movies (King and Ridgway, 2019); characterise the fans of the saga (Völcker, 2016) and discuss the immersive process in the Star Wars-role play community of Second Life (Guitton, 2012) and the retro branding of Episode I (Brown *et al.*, 2003). Psychologists analyse the personalities of the main characters (Bui *et al.*, 2011; Guerrero and Cunanan, 2021). Engineers assess the feasibility of robots in the franchise (Murphy, 2018). Lecturers (including the author of this viewpoint) use examples from Star Wars in their classes in psychology, political sciences, strategic and operations management and planetary science, amongst others. A Ukrainian politician is even dressed like Darth Vader (Zaporozhtseva, 2018). The Star Wars myth has permeated the cultural fabric of Western societies. It is sustained by thousands of fan communities and events that gather fans from around the globe, many dressed in costumes of their favourite characters, create a sense of community and help nurture fans' identity with the Star Wars subculture. In addition, hundreds of social media groups, pages and video channels dissect every movie trailer, every official announcement by Lucasfilm/Disney and every rumour; they share photos and create fan videos related to Star Wars. As evident, the Star Wars franchise inspired a growing body of research due to its significant cultural impact, but researchers have not looked at the saga through the lens of tourism and hospitality – a gap that will be partially filled in by this paper.

This viewpoint is a response to Yeoman's (2022) recent editorial *Q. What can we learn from Sunderland AFC about the future of tourism? A. Absolutely everything*. Here I outline how the Star Wars franchise hints at the (distant) future of travel, tourism and hospitality and how it goes beyond the great experience of Sunderland AFC. The conclusions below are based on the live-action movies and series: Episodes I-IX, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, *The Mandalorian*, *The Book of Boba Fett* and *Kenobi*.

The future technology in travel, tourism and hospitality

1. Artificial superintelligence (Bostrum, 2014) has not been achieved. The Republic, the Empire, the Second Republic and the First Order are run by biological entities rather than artificial superintelligence.
2. Robots will be specialised to perform specific tasks (Ivanov and Webster, 2020) – translations (C2PO), serving food and drink (in Episode VI R2D2 serves drinks on Jabba the Hutt's sail barge), repairing and refuelling vehicles (the repair droids), serving as battle droids, etc. Although R2D2 and BB8 have many tricks in their sleeves (ops, robotic bodies), no robot can implement a very diverse set of tasks.
3. Humans and robots can work together in hospitality companies (Tuomi *et al.*, 2021). In Episode II, Dexter Jettster, the owner of Dex's Diner, uses a WA-7 waitress robot.
4. Robots will play a supporting role in tourism and hospitality, augmenting rather than replacing the employees (Ivanov and Webster, 2020). In Dex's Diner, the robotic waitress helps the biological waitress and the owner rather than replacing them.
5. Robots are everywhere but humans and representatives of other species often prefer to implement some of the tasks themselves instead of transferring these tasks to the robots. In Episode II, Anakin carries some of the suitcases after he and Padme Amidala arrive on Naboo.
6. Travel requires the physical transportation of tourists' bodies and teleportation may not be feasible. This is probably because the events in Star Wars took place a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Hence, Star Trek's teleportation has not been invented yet.
7. Robots can be customers (Ivanov and Webster, 2017a), although some biological entities refuse to acknowledge this. In Episode IV, the human bartender of Chalmun's Spaceport Cantina in Mos Eisley on Tatooine refuses to serve Luke Skywalker's droids ("We don't serve their kind in here").

8. Tourists do not need to worry that they would not speak the local language. Electronic translators (e.g. the translator collar worn by the mayor of Mos Espa in “The Book of Boba Fett”) or droids (e.g. C3PO) come to the rescue.
9. Teleconferencing will be widely used in communications and often it will replace business travel. Some of the members of the Jedi Council participate in the Council’s meetings through holograms.
10. Mass space travel requires spaceports with a design and operational procedures similar to the modern-day airports (see Episode II in the Kenobi series).
11. Sunderland AFC is the galactic football champion, but its players have been replaced by robots. It is a pity that Disney/Lucasfilm failed to acknowledge this in the movies.

Tourists’ motivation and behaviour

12. Gambling and luxury make destinations attractive for high-paying tourists (Iloranta, 2021; Richard, 2018) – e.g. Canto Bight on the desert planet Cantonica in Episode VIII.
13. Panem et circenses (Bread and circuses/entertainment) are still key motives of tourists’ behaviour (Dubois and Dimanche, 2021). Recall the pod racing in Episode I and the fathiers (a horse-like species) in Episode VIII.
14. Safety and security play a key role in travel although people sometimes travel to high-risk destinations. In Episode II, Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi take care of the safety and security of Padme Amidala whilst she is on a diplomatic trip to Coruscant and other planets.
15. Sometimes people need to travel incognito – in Episode II, Anakin and Padme travel disguised as refugees.

Management of travel, tourism and hospitality companies

16. Arrogance and overconfidence (e.g. Darth Sidious) can lead to the demise of any tourism/hospitality company owner/manager.
17. Diversification is an important strategy – do not put all eggs into one basket (Evans, 2015). The Empire got nearly financially bankrupt due to the construction of the two Death Stars that got easily destroyed. The First Order repeated their mistake with the Starkiller base.
18. Staff uniforms create the impression of order and professionalism (e.g. the Empire and the First Order), but staff actions show whether these impressions reflect the reality. Hence, hospitality companies need to have impeccable staff uniforms to make a good impression on tourists (Tu *et al.*, 2011) but the employees need to act professionally as well (not only to have a professional appearance).
19. Centralisation of decision-making in tourist companies and fear lead to inaction or wrong actions (e.g. the Empire and the First Order). Decentralised management motivates people, although sometimes they may be desperate and hopeless (e.g. the Rebellion in Rogue One).
20. Cultural awareness will continue to be vital in tourism. This is the way to understand, respect and go along with the multitude of cultures and species in Star Wars and beyond. Diversity matters.
21. Tourism and hospitality employees and managers need to follow Yoda’s advice: “Unlearn what you have learned”. Sticking to old practices does not bring competitive advantages to tourism and hospitality companies or their employees.
22. Managers and owners need to know when it is time to step down and allow someone else to manage their companies. The Empire and the First Order fell for that same reason – Sheev Palpatine’s (aka the Emperor, Darth Sidious) obsession with power.

23. The design of facilities needs to be robot-friendly to allow for robots' mobility on the premises of hospitality companies (Ivanov and Webster, 2017b).
24. Although robots are everywhere, decisions in travel, tourism and hospitality companies are not automated (Ivanov, 2022) but are taken by biological entities.
25. Simplicity goes in hand with posh design. In the future, there will still be hotels and restaurants for every pocket.

Destination management

26. Overtourism will continue to be a major issue for some destinations (Perles-Ribes *et al.*, 2021) – e.g. Coruscant.
27. However, the fact that some destinations are largely deserted and depopulated (e.g. Tatooine) does not mean that interesting things cannot happen there. They may drive the events in the whole galaxy!
28. Community collaboration is vital in destination management (Gori *et al.*, 2021; Hartman *et al.*, 2020). It is important not only to attract visitors to the destination but to repel unwanted visitors as well. In Episode I, the Gungans and the Naboo work together to defeat the droid army of the Trade Federation.

Economics and society

29. Tourists need to consider the currencies and payment modes accepted at the destination because not all currencies and payment modes are applicable everywhere. Even republican credits are not good on Tatooine (see Episode I).
30. Religion will still play a role in society. The Jedi, the Mandalorians, the Sith and others have their own spiritual beliefs that guide their actions.
31. Do not underestimate the power of ordinary people to change societies. In Episode IX, they win the final battle against the new fleet of the Emperor on Exegol.

Lessons from the franchise

32. Good storytelling is important (Hartman *et al.*, 2019). It attracts cinemagoers to cinemas and tourists to destinations!
33. Evolve the destination/tourism company's offer. The Star Wars ideas, characters, plots, planets, etc., evolved throughout the episodes. Companies and destinations should evolve too.
34. Destinations and tourist companies need to give multiple reasons for tourists to choose them. Lucasfilm/Disney produced not only the nine core cinema movies (Episodes I-IX) but two spin-offs, animated and live-action series as well. Each of them gives an additional reason to watch, discuss, love and hate Star Wars.
35. Venues with spectacular views will still be preferred for hosting special events – e.g. Padme and Anakin's wedding scene in Episode II.
36. Merchandising contributes significantly to revenue generation and maintaining relationships with customers. It is important not only for tourists' memories but for the bank accounts of tourist companies as well.
37. Enactments create experiences – Disney introduced Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge in its theme parks.

38. Close work with fan communities/tourists stimulates word of mouth and sales – the official Facebook page of Star Wars (<https://www.facebook.com/StarWars>) has over 19 million fans.
39. Memes are important to maintain word of mouth and Star Wars memes have been wildly successful.
40. “All senses” experience – John William’s iconic music of Star Wars will continue to echo throughout the galaxy. Hospitality companies need to pay attention to the music/sound as part of the ambience.
41. Destinations and tourist companies need easy to remember slogans. The Star Wars movies are abundant in catch phrases that are embedded in the minds of fans such as “May the Force be with You” (various characters, all movies), “I have a bad feeling about this” (various characters, all movies), “The Dark Side of the Force is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be unnatural” (Sheev Palpatine, Episode III), “Do. Or do not. There is no try.” (Yoda, Episode V), “My disappointment in your performance cannot be overstated” (Snoke, Episode VIII).
42. The Star Wars movies trigger movie-induced/film tourism – tourists visit places where the Star Wars saga was filmed (Escher *et al.*, 2008).

As evident, the Star Wars saga can inform a lot about the future of tourism similar to Sunderland AFC. Additionally, this viewpoint supports the notion that science fiction as a whole can help us paint “tourism’s unknown yet plausible future” (Postma, 2021, p. xiii).

May the Tourism Force be with You!

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