THE PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE:

THE MANDALORIAN

EDITED BY **JESSICA E. TOMPKINS**

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The Mandalorian

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Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press
Pittsburgh, PA

ISBN: 978-1-304-67249-0 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-304-65982-8 (Digital)

This book was produced with Pressbooks (https://pressbooks.com) and rendered with Prince.

CONTENTS

PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE SERIES

Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press
Pittsburg, PA

Over the last few decades interest in pop psychology has grown faster than our Netflix backlogs. This series highlights iconic pop culture content from television, film, literature, and video games through an examination of the psychological mechanisms that endear us to these stories for a lifetime.

Series titles

The Witcher (2023), edited by Rachel Kowert, PhD

The Mandalorian (2024), edited by Jessica E. Tompkins, PhD

INTRODUCTION

This is the Way

Jessica E. Tompkins, PhD

"*Do not cast doubt upon that of what I am, nor whom I shall serve*."
– Kuiil (The Mandalorian, S1 E7, The Reckoning)[1]

Given its near-ubiquitous popularity and presence as a pop culture phenomenon, Star Wars almost needs no introduction. Beginning with the eponymous 1977 film (retroactively retitled *Episode IV: A New Hope*), the epic space opera multimedia franchise created by George Lucas has been expanded into three trilogies of films, novels, comic books, theme park attractions, video games, and of course, several television series.

Originally released in late 2019, *The Mandalorian* is a Star Wars spin-off series streaming on Disney+ . As the debut Disney+ original programming, it has aired for three seasons and has been renewed for an upcoming fourth season – a testament to its enormous viewership, critical acclaim, and profound impact on the Star Wars fandom.

The series follows the laconic Mandalorian bounty hunter, Din Djarin, who is hired by Imperial forces to retrieve 'the child'

Grogu, an orphan and member of a rare alien species with strong capabilities in the Force. Forging a unique bond, Din Djarin forgoes Grogu's bounty and goes on the run, taking in the child as his adoptive son. The series follows their journey amidst themes of good and evil, parenting and family, and nature versus nurture. Along the way, they meet many allies such as the pithy Ugnaught Kuiil, assassin-turned-nurse-droid IG-11, former Rebel shock trooper Cara Dune, Mandalorian heiress Bo-Katan Kryze, and the original taciturn Mandalorian mercenary, Boba Fett.

In December of 2021, the world of *The Mandalorian* expanded in the companion series, *The Book of Boba Fett*, depicting the titular bounty hunter as the lord of a crime syndicate. It also depicted the anticipated reunion of Din Djarin and Grogu, who had previously gone their separate ways when Grogu was placed in the care of Luke Skywalker for Jedi training.

This book, *The Psychgeist of Popular Culture: The Mandalorian,* is an edited collection of essays from writers around the world. By borrowing frameworks from psychology and adjacent fields, this volume explores and unpacks themes such as connection, trauma, fatherhood, ownership, identity formation, feminism, nostalgia, memory, and more. At the crux of this book is the bond between Din Djarin and Grogu (just as it is in the series), as well as their intriguing companions and enemies, and the forces that shaped their motivations and actions.

I and the authors of the chapters within sincerely hope our words resonate with you, our readers, just as *The Mandalorian* and the denizens of the Star Wars universe have resonated so strongly with fans over the decades. Although these beloved characters come from a galaxy far, far away we may find, through careful reflection, they are really not so different from ourselves.

Notes

1. Favreau, J. (Writer), & Chow, D. (Director). (2019, December 18). Chapter 7: The Reckoning (Season 1, Episode 7) [Television series episode]. In J. Favreau, D. Filoni, K. Kennedy, & C. Wilson (Executive Producers), *The Mandalorian*. Lucasfilm, Fairview Entertainment, Golem Creations

MANDO WITH NO NAME

The Mandalorian as Nostalgic Western Cinema

Nicholas David Bowman, PhD & Koji Yoshimura, PhD

> *"I can bring you in warm, or I can bring you in cold."* – Din Djarin (S1 E1, The Mandalorian)[1]

Cut to a tavern on the ice planet Pagodon, located deep in the Outer Rim Territories, where "Mando" has tracked his latest bounty—a very anxious Mythrol who owes a large debt, listed with the Bounty Hunters' Guild. As the blue creature bargains for his life (or at least, his freedom), the Mandalorian delivers a terse and acerbic response on par with classic Hollywood gunslinger stereotype. One could just as well hear this line being uttered by Rooster Cogburn (portrayed by John Wayne or Jeff Bridges), Wyatt Earp (Burt Lancaster, Kurt Russell, or Kevin Costner among others), or the Man with No Name (Clint Eastwood): "'The Mandalorian' is basically Clint Eastwood in a galaxy far, far away"[2]. For us, the framing of *The Mandalorian* as a Western harkens back to a bygone era of Hollywood in which Western films were dominant, and it carries a tradition of the Space Western to contemporary audiences.

In the following chapter, we make a case for *The Mandalorian* as a modern-day incarnation of the classic Western, in particular the Space Western (or Weird Western) subgenre popular in the middle 20th century. Among the many reasons for the show's success is its ability to engage a personal and historical media nostalgia for a diverse viewership participating with the covert and overt coding of Din Djarin as a seemingly bygone, yet surprisingly, modern (space) cowboy.

The Classic Western: Conventions, Cultural Relevance, and Controversy

The period of the American frontier—sometimes called the "Old West" or "Wild West"—began in the early 17th century and lasted for approximately two hundred years[3]. Throughout this time, European colonists gradually settled the Midwestern and Western region of North America seeking land and opportunity[4]. Against this background, Western narratives dramatize the pioneer experience—typically portraying the feats of rugged men (and, less prominently, women) who battled the harsh environment and one another for survival, justice, and dominance[5,6,7].

Westerns typically follow a nomadic male protagonist wearing a cowboy hat, bandana, vest or poncho, with boots and spurs. As the genre grew in popularity, the image of the typical Western leading man was solidified as an "idealized, whitewashed hero… [a] bulwark of physical and moral strength" (pp. 26-27)[8]. Often depicted as skilled gunfighters and cunning warriors, Western heroes follow a strict moral code, even as they kill their enemies and break the law. Indeed, these characters are often cast into archetypal outlaw (e.g., John Wayne's "Ringo Kid" from *Stagecoach*) or lawman roles (e.g., the "Lone Ranger" serials)[9,10]. Common plot elements of Westerns include cattle drives, covered-wagon caravans, robberies, ambushes, high noon duels, heated exchanges in dusty saloons, and bloody clashes with

Native American tribes. In many classic Westerns, the righteous hero is motivated to enforce order and justice, or to seek retribution for some wrongdoing. Along with their protagonists, the setting of the American West—typically wide-open plains and arid deserts—is central to the genre[11]. By emphasizing the harsh and desolate nature of the frontier, this setting elevates the Western hero's plight by reifying death as a motif that permeates the genre[12].

Once Upon a Time in the West: A Brief History of the Western

In the mid-19th century, tales of life on the American frontier became widely popular in dime novels and pulp magazines. These early Western narratives portrayed settlers as noble heroes who sought to tame the land and its inhabitants through determination, ingenuity, and violence[13].

With the development of motion picture technology toward the end of the 1800s, early filmmakers identified Western narratives as ideal stories to translate to the screen. During the "golden age" of Western cinema (1930s to the 1950s), there were up to 140 Westerns released each year, comprising about one-fourth of all Hollywood movies in production[14]. Many quintessential Western movies were released during this time, including *Stagecoach* as well as *Shane* and *The Searchers*,[15],[16]. While the popularity and pace of production of Western films declined in the 1960s, the genre remained strong with television audiences thanks to shows such as *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, and *Wagon Train*[17],[18],[19],[20]. Although Westerns have not maintained the same dominance since their golden age, recent movies like *News of the World* and *The Power of the Dog*, have garnered dozens of award nominations, including a respective four and twelve Academy Award nominations[21],[22],[23],[24],[25].

Despite their uniquely "American" focus, Westerns also had a tremendous impact on global cinema. It is well documented that French critics' admiration for Western directors like John Ford and Howard Hawks led to the emergence of what we now call "auteur theory" and influenced the films of the French new wave[26]. Westerns were mutually influenced by the Japanese samurai genre, as can be seen in the works of director Akira Kurosawa[27,28]. In turn, Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* was recreated in a Western setting in Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars*, which is credited with popularizing the Italian "Spaghetti" Western[29,30,31]. There is abundant evidence of the influence of the Hollywood Western across other parts of the globe, such as the "Eastern Westerns" or in Brazilian cinema[32,33,34].

Modern Reappraisal of the Western Genre

Rightfully so, Western movies have been widely critiqued for their outdated social attitudes and insensitive depictions of ethnic minorities. In the context of the American frontier—a boundary both literal and symbolic—Western narratives exploited dialectical tensions (e.g., East versus West, cowboys versus "Indians," order versus anarchy) to elevate white masculinity as the conquering force of the West[35,36].

Historical accounts of the settling of the American frontier often diminished women's contributions and experiences[37]. Similarly, women characters in Western narratives were traditionally marginalized and stereotyped (e.g., mothers, schoolteachers, prostitutes). Some have attributed this tendency to the Western's preoccupation with (re)establishing sexual boundaries and affirming strict gender roles[38]. Though many have attributed the popularity of the Western genre to a reaction to industrialization and nostalgia for a simpler way of life, others argued that Westerns were also a reaction against women's social progress and cultural influence[39,40]. More specifically, the Western

deliberately and unilaterally contradicts themes like domesticity, spirituality, and inner struggles found in the "domestic fiction" novels of women writers (e.g., Jane Austen or Harriet Beecher Stowe) and instead represents "a genre obsessed with the violence necessary to police the borders of white American masculinity" (p. 4)[41].

Many have also called attention to the poor representation and racist depictions of Native Americans in Westerns[42]. In terms of representation, Native American characters, like women, are typically portrayed as hollow tropes—less like full-fledged characters and more akin to props or scenery[43]. Though there is some evidence that the representation of race and gender has improved some in recent years,[44],[45] analyses suggest that Native Americans continue to be under-represented in media[46].

The Final Frontier: The Space Western as Hybrid Genre

Space Westerns are a subgenre in which "themes and features of the American West are applied to a space setting" (p. 2)[47]. "Horse operas"[48] described cliché or formulaic Western offerings in the mid-20th century, with such programs often using language such as "the final frontier" (later used in the *Star Trek* franchise). Indeed, *Star Trek* creator and executive producer Gene Roddenberry—who had previously written for TV Westerns—envisioned the show as a "*Wagon Train* to the stars" (p. 22)[49]. Other popular films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Firefly* engage a similar notion of exploring new frontiers[50],[51]. Indeed, Western conventions borrowed in new settings such as science fiction are readily identified: "when you turn the television on, whether you're watching a science fiction serial or a sitcom, you know when you're in a Western" (p. 7)[52].

Media(ted) Nostalgia

Of the myriad emotions triggered by entertainment media content, nostalgia is one of the most invoked but least understood. Broadly speaking, nostalgia is defined as a bittersweet longing for the past,[53] with self-referential and autobiographical qualities,[54] generally understood as a "predominantly positive [and] social emotion" (p. 198)[55]. Others have argued for nostalgia in terms of memory work, as individuals engage a "noematic kernel" from their past—or, a living memory distinct from the present moment (p. 402)[56]. Although initially considered a clinical condition or mental illness, contemporary approaches to nostalgia understand the experience as related to self-identity and seeking meaning in life,[57],[58] with others demonstrating at least short-term benefits of nostalgia and psychological well-being[59]. Others argue that nostalgia is an inherently social emotion, as we are as likely to remember the people we were *with* as we are the media content we were consuming together[60],[61].

Nostalgia can be further understood in terms of *personal nostalgia* that we have for own past experiences and *historical nostalgia* that we might form as a collective memory for bygone eras that preceded our own lived experiences[62]. This distinction was observed when studying younger video gamers playing a series of 1980s-era console video games[63]. Across several studies, players lacking direct experience with those games (e.g., the games were released years before these players were born) were more likely to report higher levels of historical nostalgia, and to comment on the video games as part of a "classic era" of video gaming[64],[65]. The same concepts broadly apply to entertainment media, such as television and music.

Nostalgia is often triggered through sensory stimulation[66]. For example, when we see film posters with characters from our

childhood movies, hear music that was popular when we were younger, or re-experience smells and tastes of foods we love but haven't had in a while[67],[68],[69]. In this way, media of all kinds (film, television, or our favorite Disney+ Star Wars series) are especially ripe for eliciting nostalgia in viewers.

It is in this context that we talk about *mediated nostalgia*[70], or the ways in which media content triggers memories from something outside of the media content (such as seeing one's hometown depicted in a film or video game), and *media nostalgia,* in which content triggers nostalgia for the media itself (such as an adult replaying a video game from their childhood)[71]. There is one last important distinction to make and that is between *nostalgic mood* as a general and collective yearning for an (often idealized) past, and *nostalgic mode* as an aesthetic for presenting a pastness through media content—the past as a pastiche of symbols and icons that come to resemble an abstracted version of bygone experiences[72]. For example, a *nostalgic mood* might be portraying characters in the "good ol' days" of 1950s US culture in ways that gloss over social tensions of the time. A *nostalgic mode* would be the presentation of that same time period using black and white footage and period fashions to reinforce presumptions about the era.

Star Wars and *The Mandalorian* as (Space) Western

Notably, we are not the first to suggest a link between *The Mandalorian*—or indeed Star Wars more broadly—and the space Western genre. Although possibly apocryphal, it has been claimed writer and director George Lucas pitched the original *Star Wars* (1977) to studio executives as "cowboys in space"[73],[74]. Indeed, others have pointed out the ways in which the movies comprising the original trilogy emulate the features of older Westerns. For example, the scene in which Luke Skywalker discovers Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru killed and their home burned is a direct

homage to a scene from *The Searchers* where the protagonist Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) finds his brother's homestead razed by Native Americans[75],[76],[77].

Extending this logic to the setting and characters of Star Wars, the cantina at Mos Eisley spaceport on Tatooine resembles the prototypical Western saloon, complete with wanted outlaws, intimidation, and gunplay[78]. Star Wars creator George Lucas also noted connections to the Western via the enigmatic bounty hunter Boba Fett, who first appears in *The Empire Strikes Back*,[79] and plays a prominent role in *The Mandalorian* and the titular role in *The Book of Boba Fett*[80]. According to Lucas, Boba Fett—with his stoic silence and deliberate movements—was based on Clint Eastwood's character "the man with no name" from Sergio Leone's Dollars Trilogy[81]. Most would agree that both Boba Fett and Din Djarin could be described as a "cool, calm and ruthless bounty hunter who is spare with his words but fast with his gun" (p. 50)[82].

The Mandalorian establishes itself as a space Western from the outset and continues this focus throughout the seasons. While it is impossible to provide an exhaustive analysis in a short essay, we refer to several notable narrative themes and characterizations emblematic of the Western genre throughout the series. The first episode of the series[83] is rife with Western genre influence. In a dim saloon on Pagodon, a mysterious Mandalorian bounty hunter locates his quarry with a tracking fob. After handily dispatching some rowdy bar patrons, the Mandalorian apprehends the fugitive, but their departure from the frigid planet is almost thwarted by a hungry ravinak—a giant creature that lurks in the icy depths. The Mandalorian again demonstrates his expert marksmanship to escape just in time. After claiming his bounty, the Mandalorian receives a new, mysterious assignment that takes him to the desert world of Arvala-7. In doing so, the story firmly arrives in Western genre

territory. After landing to begin his hunt for the target, Mando is saved from an aggressive creature known as a blurrg by a local moisture farmer, Kuiil. Though quick with a shot, the Mandalorian is not the classic cowboy, and he struggles as he learns to ride the blurrg—a necessity if he wants to traverse this planet.

This moment and the broader relationship between Djarin and Kuill reflects the "initiate-hero" motif, a narrative device common to postwar Western movies such as *Shane* and *The Searchers*, in which the narrative conflicts are filtered through the naïve perspective of a younger man who is trained by a more experienced frontiersman[84]. As Djarin approaches the encampment where his bounty lies, Kuill explains to him that he and other locals are displeased with the mercenaries and outlaws that have taken residence there, invoking the tensions between lawmen and outlaws common in Western narratives. Within the encampment, Mando finds another bounty hunter, a droid called IG-11, and the pair emerges triumphant from a classic Wild West shootout with the outlaws that populate the encampment.

The "initiate-hero" trope arises again mid-way through season one[85], but this time Djarin serves as the mentor. After sustaining damage to his ship, the Razor Crest, Djarin is forced to land on Tatooine—a desert planet that is well-known to Star Wars fans. To pay for his repairs, Djarin seeks out a quick commission, and agrees to help a novice bounty hunter, Toro Calican, capture the notorious assassin, Fennec Shand. Now on the hunt, Djarin negotiates safe passage across the desert with a group of indigenous Tusken Raiders. After successfully apprehending Shand, Djarin leaves Calican to guard their bounty while he seeks out a dewback for one of them to ride back into town. As they wait, Shand persuades Calican to betray Djarin, as he is undoubtedly worth more to the bounty hunters' guild. Upon finding Shand shot and Calican missing, Djarin returns to the

hangar where Calican has taken the Child and mechanic Peli Motto hostage. In a brief-but-tense shootout, Djarin kills Calican and rides off to the final frontier once again in his repaired ship.

The first episode of season two[86], is among the most heavily Western-influenced in the series. This episode finds the Mandalorian back on Tatooine, this time in search of other Mandalorians who—displaced from their planet—stay hidden in scattered groups called coverts. Following a tip that another Mandalorian could be found in the nearly abandoned mining town of Mos Pelgo, the Mandalorian arrives in the dusty saloon to inquire about his compatriot. As Mando is asking the barkeeper, the marshal appears in the doorway of the saloon wearing Boba Fett's unmistakable armor. However, the Mandalorian's hopes are quickly dashed when the marshal, Cobb Vanth, removes his helmet to share a drink of spotchka. Seeing this, Mando immediately demands the armor from Vanth (as by creed, only Mandalorians should possess or wear Mandalorian armor). To this, the marshal agrees on the condition that Mando helps him defeat the Krayt dragon. Unable to accomplish this task alone, the Mandalorian brokers the assistance of the Tusken Raiders—demonstrating again how the show embraces the indigenous group more than previous Star Wars media. The Tuskens are effective allies, having studied the feeding habits of the krayt dragon. After defeating the dragon and winning the armor, the Mandalorian rides his speeder into the sunset like the proverbial cowboy.

Beyond Djarin and Boba, the cowboy archetype is fully realized in the appearance of Cad Bane—an elite bounty hunter who appears in several of the Star Wars animated series, and more recently in *The Book of Boba Fett*. A quintessential outlaw character, Bane wears a cowboy hat and long duster coat, chaps over his pants, chews toothpicks, and adopts a pseudo-Southern manner of speaking. During many of his on-screen appearances, his Western

sensibility is reinforced by traditional folk guitar music that is strongly associated with the genre. Across multiple Star Wars series, Bane is shown to be particularly adept at handling Jedi. However, he also plays a broader and more pivotal role in the Star Wars universe, serving as the bridge between his teacher (Jango Fett) and trainee (Boba Fett), both elite bounty hunters and symbols of the Western hero themselves. Moreover, Bane strikes a resemblance—both in character and in disposition—to one of the evillest characters in American Westerns: Liberty Valance. Valence and Bane "embod[y] the lawless and anarchic elements of the wild west, striking fear into the townspeople's hearts with [their] quick draw and brutal tactics"[87,88].

At the culmination of season three[89], we see Djarin and Grogu take up Greef Karga's offer of a parcel of land on the outskirts of Nevarro. The camera sweeps over a modest home, surrounded by desert and sparse green—Djarin relaxing under a patio shade, and Grogu levitating a frog with his Force powers. The scene is a peaceful moment in a chaotic time and serves as a "campfire" scene emblematic of self-reflection and a re-connection to nature (or at least, a pastoral existence) common to the Western genre narrative[90,91].

The Mandalorian and Nostalgia for the (Space) Western

As we understand *The Mandalorian* as a (Space) Western, we argue that a novel aspect of the program's success can be found when considering the show among the broader milieu of Disney+'s offerings. Of course, nearly the entire Star Wars franchise likely evokes personal nostalgia for those who grew up with these media properties, as well as historical nostalgia for newer generations engaging the property to better understand it's history and cultural impact—much like video game players engage with "their parent's games" when playing older 8-bit content[92]. Modern Westerns have done well in terms of critical and box office

success. Films such as *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *Django Unchained* (2012), and *The Revenant* (2015), and *The Power of the Dog* (2021) have won academy awards, and US domestic box office sales show that four of the 10-highest grossing Western films of all time were released in the 21st century[93],[94]. The genre seems to have staying power, even if the films themselves are comparatively rare.

It has been suggested[95] that *The Mandalorian* was a critical text for the integration of the Star Wars franchise within the Disney+ family and argues for the distinctly Western flavor of the show's promotional materials (i.e., posters and advertisements) and other elements that served as the "entry way" for viewers to the program. Here, we can see nostalgia play out in two unique ways for two potentially unique audiences:

- those seeing the Mandalorian armor reminiscent of Boba Fett and thus, yearning to re-engage with a comparatively under-developed and mostly by-gone character from the Star War universe (with exception made for novelizations and earlier adaptations of the franchise).
- those seeing "the mysterious gun-toting figure wandering a harsh desert landscape" (p. 52) and thus, yearning to re-engage with the mostly bygone Western genre of entertainment media.

Indeed, Twitter commentary about *The Mandalorian* details elements of personal and historical nostalgia in Tweets such as the ascription of Spaghetti Westerns as the inspiration for the *Star Wars* universe, and along with this, audiences debating and discussing the historical and contemporary role of Space Westerns in entertainment media[96]. Similar discussions[97] suggest that *The Mandalorian* was especially valuable for the Disney+ platform because it borrowed from an established genre

of epic fantasy while introducing audiences to the Space Western, with Djarin serving as the frontier knight for audiences of all ages. Through *The Mandalorian*, audiences have rediscovered an exceedingly bygone genre of film (the Western) and engaged each other accordingly.

To these discussions, we would further add that the Western influences found in *The Mandalorian* (and by extension, The *Book of Boba Fett*) also serve the purpose of reconnecting the Star Wars franchise to its cowboys in space roots. The current Star Wars cannon includes numerous storylines across the movies, animated shows, comics, books, and more recently through Disney+ live action series. However, with the relaunch of the Star Wars franchise following Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm, it seems intentional on the part of *The Mandalorian*'s creators Jon Favreau and Dave Filoni to explicitly emphasize classic Western features to ground the series (which features entirely new characters and storylines) in familiar cinematic conventions that can facilitate stronger nostalgia and a sense of continuity than earlier Star Wars content that often departed (both stylistically and thematically) from the original trilogy.

To some extent, the enduring success of franchises such as *Star Wars* speaks to the enduring allure of the Space Western. Indeed, we are not the first to argue that Space Westerns are a staple of the historical and contemporary pop culture diet or are we unique in framing *The Mandalorian* as a Space Western. However, we assert that *The Mandalorian* goes deeper than this and presents as a call-back to the mostly deleted Western film genre—elements of space are somewhat backgrounded in the presentation of an iconic and readily accessible Western tale. Given the dominance of this genre in early American cinema, we see *The Mandalorian* speak to audiences on several levels: those with a personal nostalgia for tales of yesteryear, and those with a historical

nostalgia for programs unfamiliar in a modern media landscape. This is the way.

Notes

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LIKE FATHER, LIKE CLONE?

Boba Fett's Nature and Nurture

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"*I'm a simple man making his way through the galaxy. Like my father before me.*" – Boba Fett (*The Book of Boba Fett*, S2 E6, The Tragedy)[1]

Long before Mandalorian Din Djarin graced the screens of our television sets on Disney+ as a taciturn gun for hire, another bounty hunter sporting the iconic Mandalorian armor captured audiences' imaginations with his enigmatic and intimidating presence: Boba Fett. This mysterious, armor-clad bounty hunter hired by Darth Vader to capture the rebellious crew of the *Millenium Falcon* first made his theatrical appearance in Star Wars *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980[2]. While his minutes onscreen in both *Empire* and *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* (1983)[3] were in the single digits, Boba quickly became a favorite among Star Wars fans. His unique armor and gadgets, distinctive spaceship, as well as his laconic demeanor and iconic quips (such as, "*he's no good to me dead*"[4]) won him an audience of dedicated fans in the decades following the release of the films[5]. While Boba met a seemingly untimely end in *Return of the Jedi* after falling into the sarlacc in the Great Pit of Carkoon, fans of his character discovered more about his mysterious past when he appeared

in licensed novels, comics, and video games as part of the Star Wars Expanded Universe (The Expanded Universe or EU is now referred to as Legends). Such stories generally expanded Boba's one-dimensional onscreen portrayal as a villain to portray a man with a harsh sense of justice and an occupation, bounty hunting, that permitted him to uphold it.

With the release of the Star Wars prequel film, *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002)[6], Boba's backstory established in the EU was retconned from a mysterious Journeyman Protector to cloned-offspring of bounty hunter Jango Fett, who raised him as his son. While this choice was controversial for many original trilogy Star Wars fans who lamented the loss of previous canon (i.e., textual source of truth), this decision arguably presented an opportunity to expand and deepen Boba's connection to the broader Star Wars narrative. Clones of Jango Fett, with the exception of Boba and Omega (Boba's genetic sibling, as seen in the animated series *The Bad Batch*)[7], were generated for the creation of a Grand Army of the Republic. While the genetic code of the clones was modified to produce more obedient (and thus more desirable) soldiers, Boba's genetic makeup is pure, unaltered Jango. Thus, Boba is, arguably, predisposed to many of his father's inclinations, such as a penchant for bounty hunting and violence. However, when we meet Boba in season two of *The Mandalorian* and later in *The Book of Boba Fett*, he is portrayed as relatively civil and diplomatic in his relationships with both his partners and criminal rivals[8,9]. Indeed, both his critics and allies in *The Book of Boba Fett* tell him he has gone soft, which Boba does not deny. Given his portrayal in both series, how might audiences come to understand his progression from ruthless mercenary to relatively compassionate crime lord? This chapter argues that the key to understanding Boba's character development lies in both understanding nature and nurture – both genetics and environment – and how these have interplayed to shape his behavior.

Nature Versus Nurture

Asking whether nature or nurture are the driving forces shaping human development and behavior is an age-old question of both philosophical and scientific origins. Nature refers to our genetics: what we have been given, by nature, that determines who we are and how we interact in the world. Nurture, on the other hand, refers to the environment and experiential factors that mold our behaviors and development.

In the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin famously theorized that human development is the result of a long chain of natural adaptations in response to the environment. In times of competition, humans with adaptable characteristics survive and pass on their genetics, where the most advantageous genetic traits remain in the gene pool[10]. Inspired by Darwin's ideas, *nature* in the scientific community refers to genetic inheritance, denoting DNA differences transmitted from generation to generation, that impact human development and behaviors. Many proponents of Darwin's ideas emerged, such as William James, who proposed genetically inherited individual differences called *instincts*[11]. Instincts include behaviors such as play, curiosity, shyness, and cleanliness. Instincts are proposed to interact with the environment and lead to habits or long-term behaviors. For example, an individual raised in an environment that supports play could form the habit of frequently playing video games. Importantly, instincts are also transitory, coming and going over the life course depending on biological and environmental influences. As an individual matures, their desire for playing video games may be altered by biological (i.e., aging) and environmental (e.g., working full-time) forces.

Additionally, there are schools of thought concerning human development through the lens of environment, or *nurture*, which encompasses early childhood experiences, social relationships,

and the surrounding culture that impact the person we become. During the Age of Enlightenment (the 17th and 18th centuries), John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* famously critiqued the prevalent philosophical notion that humans were born into the world with ideas innately[12]. Locke proposed that the human mind at birth was akin to a blank slate, to be filled with ideas by experience and observation in the world. This philosophical perspective set the foundation for environmental determinism, positing that societal influence (i.e., nurture) was the primary determinant of human development[13]. Modern frameworks inspired by this school of thought include social learning theory, which proposes that learning occurs when people observe and model their behaviors from others[14]. Social learning theory is perhaps most-famously exemplified by the Bobo Doll experiments run by psychologist Albert Bandura at Stanford University in the 1960s. In these studies, children observed adults act either violently or passively towards a toy, the Bobo Doll. Whether the children saw either violent or passive behavior from the adults subsequently influenced their own interactions with the doll. Notably, children who observed the violent behavior acted verbally and physically aggressive towards the Bobo Doll, demonstrating how such actions are learned through observation[15].

In the nineteenth century, the phrase *nature-nurture* was introduced to the scientific community. Taken to the extreme, nature emphasizes genetics as the primary influence of human development, while nurture proposes that environment and experience are the primary forces. However, it is commonly understood within the contemporary scientific community that neither nature nor nurture is stronger than the other and that both play a strong role in development and behavior[16]. Indeed, scholars have noted that the nature-nurture debate represents a false dichotomy and that these forces interact in complex ways[17].

These research frameworks within the social sciences provide context that surface the interplays and possible tensions of nature and nurture experienced by Boba as he is reunited with his armor and steps into the role of crime lord within a community he is responsible for protecting. By unpacking Boba's nature and nurture, we can understand the complex forces at play that shaped him into the character we see develop from a cold-blooded killer hired by Darth Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back* to the relatively soft crime lord fighting to protect a community he feels affinity towards.

Boba Fett's Nature: The Cold-Blooded Killer

As a story about Boba's survival from the depths of the sarlacc, finding community amongst the Tusken Raiders, and eventual rise to the head of a criminal family, *The Book of Boba Fett* includes several scenes where Boba's childhood and bounty hunting profession is evoked. As a bounty hunter who worked for the Galactic Empire, Boba was no stranger to committing atrocities on the behalf of others for financial gain, qualifying him as a *bona fide* killer for hire, or mercenary[18]. This rings true in both the old canon and the current, where stories speak to Boba's cold sense of black and white justice. Indeed, in one of the earliest depictions of Boba in the EU, he has no qualms killing a young spice smuggler at the behest of Jabba the Hutt and takes it upon himself to burn the spice, implying his distaste for recreational drugs[19].

Bringing Boba back to the screen in *The Mandalorian* presented an opportunity to further expand on his characterization in the contemporary canon, at the same time harkening back to his roots established in the Star Wars films. To be sure, Boba as progeny to Jango is referenced several times in the recent televised shows. When the audience meets Boba in *The Mandalorian*[20], he is parted from his Mandalorian armor and

seeks its return from Din Djarin, who questions whether Boba is Mandalorian enough to possess it. To convince Djarin, Boba stakes his claim to his armor not by any direct Mandalorian association but through his heredity: "*the armor was given to my father, Jango, by your forebears"* (S2 E6, The Tragedy)[21].

Later, Boba as Jango's progeny is emphasized via several flashback sequences in *The Book of Boba Fett*. Several episodes feature Boba healing in a medicinal Bacta Tank, recovering from burns after attempting to retrieve his armor from the acidic innards of the sarlacc. While resting in the healing fluids, Boba experiences flashbacks that explore his connection to Jango (for more on flashback, see Serra in this volume). A brief vignette occurs at the beginning of the series[22], reminding the audience of Jango's death in *Attack of the Clones* when Boba is around the age of ten. By returning Boba to this moment via flashback, we are reminded he is Jango's legacy (i.e., the source of his nature) and that he was orphaned at an early age (i.e., an event shaping his environment in the absence of his father).

This flashback to Jango's death cuts to a scene of the stormy ocean-planet Kamino, where Boba grew up. In the Kamino flashback, Boba awakens in the middle of the night to the view of Jango's Firespray starship departing the planet. Notably, this recurring flashback is accompanied by Jango's helmet or spaceship, but never Jango directly[23]. He is both present and absent in these scenes. Being a son and a direct copy of the deceased Jango, he is always both present in Boba (i.e., in his nature, his genetic code) but absent (i.e., he is long dead). These scenes not only remind us of this traumatic event in young Boba's life, but suture Boba's identity to Jango. Both Jango's propensity for violence and bounty hunting clearly made an impression on the young Boba, who subsequently followed in his father's footsteps to develop a reputation worthy of Darth Vader's employment in adulthood as a bounty hunter. Given that

approximately half of the differences observed in aggressive behavior among individuals can be attributed to genetic factors (with the other 50% from environmental factors not shared by family), it is no surprise, as a clone of Jango, that Boba shares this inclination for a violent profession in bounty hunting[24].

Boba's tendency to use aggression and violence as a means to an end, as well as his departure from these behaviors, are central to his journey onscreen. In the early episodes of *The Book of Boba Fett*, we see him leverage physical violence to prove himself worthy to the Tusken Raiders who saved him from dehydration after escaping the Great Pit of Carkoon[25]. Later, as he assumes Jabba's throne and criminal empire, he threatens those who attempt to undermine him, and uses physical force against his enemies. These actions are not at odds with his depiction in the Star Wars original trilogy nor other stories featuring Boba. Indeed, when Boba's former mentor and bounty hunter, Cad Bade, visits Freetown to threaten them against aligning with Boba in the ensuing war with the Pyke Syndicate, he evokes Boba's violent past: "*Boba Fett is a cold-blooded killer who worked with the Empire"* (*The Book of Boba Fett*, S1 E7, In the Name of Honor)[26]. However, those around Boba during his rise to crime lord, including Cad, also note a change in his behavior. Boba becomes someone who forges alliances rather than works strictly alone, and he attempts diplomacy before resulting immediately to violence. Noticing this, when Cad confronts Boba on behalf of the Pykes in the season finale, he asserts Boba has "*gone soft in his old age"* (S1 E7, In the Name of Honor)[27].

Boba's perceived softness might be understood through *instincts,* or genetically inherited individual differences that respond to environmental changes and demands, and include behaviors associated with rivalry, anger, fear, curiosity, sociability, love, and jealousy[28]. Such instincts can be changed by interacting with the environment, which may lead to habits or long-term behaviors.

Habitual instincts lead to impulses to perform certain behaviors (i.e., violence). Thus, if an environment encourages the behavior (i.e., combat and bounty hunting training), the impulse becomes a habit (i.e., the individual becomes a bounty hunter). Given Boba's shared genes with Jango, his inclination towards violence and aggression can be seen as, in part, inherited.

Notably, in absence of environmental encouragement, instincts may die out. Some instincts involving self-preservation (i.e., foraging, eating) remain throughout the life course, but others (such as mating) may diminish or extinguish entirely[29]. Once in the communal environment of the Tusken tribe, Boba is surrounded by an organized system that works towards a greater collective good. Perhaps for the first time in his life, Boba is in an environment where he can observe the benefits of community over isolation. And while Boba's time with the Tuskens still contains episodes of violence (such as killing members of the Nikto gang for their speeder bikes), the violence is acted not for profit, but to protect. In the absence of an environment where bounty hunting is necessary (and where community and kinship are the key to survival) Boba's propensity for aggressive acts that serve himself diminishes, as understood through instincts and how these behavioral habits may change over a life course.

Understood in this manner, Boba's developmental journey might be interpreted as him contending with his own former behaviors and habits, as driven by his connection to his father and genetic donor, Jango. The tensions between his past and his present after surviving his dangerous fall into the sarlacc – in which a life of bounty hunting and cold-blooded killing are no longer essential – suggests that Boba's central conflict is not with his criminal rivals nor his former mentor Cad Bane, but rather with his very *nature*. In what follows, Boba's nurture, or environmental circumstances, are discussed further to elucidate his progression from solitary

merc and natural-born killer to protector of the people of Mos Espa.

Boba Fett's Nurture: From Solitary Merc to Protector of Mos Espa

Flashbacks to Boba's time with the Tusken tribe demonstrate how time, experience, and *nurture* shaped him from solitary mercenary to the protector of Mos Espa. Boba's change is alluded to early in the series during a flashback that picks up shortly after he was last seen in *The Empire Strikes Back* – inside the belly of the sarlacc[30]. As a clone incubated in a Kaminoan lab, Boba's traumatic fall into the maw of the sarlacc is arguably the closest experience he has to being inside of a womb. His escape from the belly-womb of the sarlacc is not solely survival, but could be interpreted as being born again. This rebirth is dramatically shaped by his nurture within the Tuksen tribe.

After Jawa salvagers strip him of his Mandalorian armor and leave him for dead, Boba is rescued by the indigenous sentients of Tatooine, the Tuskens. However, Boba is treated as property, dragged back to the Tusken camp where he is cudgeled with Tusken weaponry, gaffi sticks. Initially a captive and outsider to their group, Boba proves himself a formidable ally after saving a Tusken child from certain death[31]. This allows him to move from the outside of the tribe towards the inner circle, giving him the opportunity to further develop his communal ties. This move likely impacts his self-identity. When individuals begin to categorize themselves as part of an ingroup (e.g., the Tusken tribe), they begin to think of themselves in accordance with the characteristics they share with other ingroup members[32]. This means Boba began the process of considering himself more of a Tusken tribe member than as a solitary mercenary.

As part of this process, Boba is taught by a Tusken warrior how to properly wield a gaffi stick (albeit whilst using a crude version of the weapon during his training)[33]. This is important because Boba no longer has access to his usual tools of the trade: his bounty hunting weapons and Mandalorian armor (with its flame thrower and projectile darts, is also a weapon in its own right). Having been parted from these familiar weapons and gadgets, Boba's training with the gaffi stick is a notable departure from his past. Not only does he learn a new fighting method, but he is entirely dependent on others – the Tuskens – as part of this learning process. He models their customs and appropriates them as part of his new behaviors, stemming from the shared identity as tribe member.

In this new environment, Boba learns that it is okay to be dependent on others and lean on them for support. Likewise, he extends his support by leveraging his combat expertise to help the Tusken tribe. When the Tuskens are attacked from a Pyke Syndicate transport smuggling spice across their territory, Boba teaches the Tuskens how to ride and maneuver speeder bikes, providing a solution to the smuggler threat[34]. When they successfully commandeer the transport and seize the spice, Boba is positioned squarely within the tribe as an equal. To symbolize this, the Tuskens cloth Boba in traditional Tusken robes as part of an initiation ceremony. After the ceremony, Boba roams the desert and experiences hallucinations during a vision quest, encountering a tree with branches that pull him inward, binding him in place[35]. This scene transitions to an image of an armor-clad Boba confined to the innards of the sarlacc, the tree branches swapped with the tentacles that bound Boba within its gullet. His helmet then transitions to Jango's helmet, and the next scene is familiar, depicting young Boba observing Jango's Firespray starship departing Kamino. This vignette connects two traumatic events in Boba's life: the loss of Jango and Boba's escape from the sarlacc. Importantly, these two events occurred while both

Jango and Boba were contracted as mercenaries, resurfacing the occupational traumas associated with bounty hunting (for more on trauma, see Pellman in this volume).

As the vision fades, Boba snaps the branches of the tree binding him – an action loaded with symbolism. Tree branches often convey relationships on family trees. By snapping the branch, Boba figuratively severs his connection to his own pedigree. When Boba returns to the Tusken tribe, the branch is honed into his own gaffi stick. Without this vision and severance from the proverbial familial tree, Boba might have returned to his former nature, but this rite of passage solidifies Boba as a man with own path and identity, one tied to his new experience amongst the community of Tuskens. Indeed, nurture is understood as not merely environment, but as *experience*, because an individual actively selects, modifies, and constructs their environments[36]. These experiences ultimately changed Boba and how he interacts with the world around him. For example, Boba's decision to remain with the Tuskens and to help protect them in lieu of returning to the mercenary life was a deliberate one, a choice of environmental change that, whether intentionally or not, alters his solitary behaviors towards more communal ones. Among the Tusken tribe, Boba learns there is strength in community.

This experience furthers Boba's personal growth and development through stronger social connections than we have previously seen him have. Increased social connections are linked to greater health and well-being[37] and enhance individuals' social identities[38]. When collective identities are made relevant within social contexts, individuals experience enhanced collective behaviors, such as maintenance of the public good[39]. For example, Boba's relationship with the tribe becomes reciprocal when they bring him into the fold, as he advocates on their behalf when visiting the Pykes in Mos Espa[40]. By immersing himself in

the Tusken tribe, Boba reaps many social benefits that nurture him, altering his disposition and future behaviors.

Yet Boba's new-found community amongst the Tuskens does not last. When the Pykes retaliate against the Tusken tribe whilst Boba is away advocating on their behalf, there are no survivors. While this event introduces a new trauma for Boba, building community with the Tuskens provided an environment that arguably shaped Boba's subsequent behaviors in the aftermath. After rescuing a mortally wounded Fennec Shand after Djarin leaves her for dead on Tatooine, Boba invites her to join him in partnership:

> "*How many times have you been hired to do a job that was avoidable? If they only took the time to think? How much money could have been made? How many lives could have been saved? I'm tired of our kind dying because of the idiocy of others. We're smarter than them. It's time we took our shot*" (*The Book of Boba Fett*, S1 E4, The Gathering Storm)[41].

Here, Boba's offer is notable because he has a reputation and history of working alone. When she hesitates, Boba offers her something other clients cannot: loyalty. Fennec teases that living with the Tuskens has made him soft, to which he retorts: "*no… it's made me strong. You can only get so far without a tribe*" (S1 E4, The Gathering Storm)[42]. By partnering with Fennec, Boba slowly begins to rebuild his tribe, curating a team of partners he trusts and respects. In this manner, Boba actively shapes the environmental factors that influence his behaviors towards protecting Mos Espa from the Pykes.

What makes Boba's pledge of loyalty to others and recognizing the strength of community significant is that it signals another step beyond the shadow of Jango's legacy. In *Attack of the Clones,* Boba's father-clone is depicted as ruthless and self-serving. He assassinated his own partner with seemingly no hesitation to

protect his own interests[43]. Boba's behaviors towards Fennec (e.g., pledging his life to protect hers) suggests a more equitable partnership where mutual support and dependency make them stronger together.

The Complex Interplay of Nature and Nurture

As Boba steps into the role of crime lord of Mos Espa, he quickly learns the understanding of his own words, "*you can only get so far without a tribe"* (S1 E4, The Gathering Storm}[44]. While he grieves the loss of his Tusken family, he begins building a new one in allegiance with Fennec, a pair of Gamorrean guards, a street gang called the Mods, bounty hunter Black Krrsantan, and, naturally, Din Djarin, in the war against the Pykes. Notably, during the battle against the Pykes, Boba repeatedly refers to himself as a protector: *"I can't abandon Mos Espa, these people are counting on me"* (S1 E7, In the Name of Honor)[45].

Even when confronted by a ghost from the past, Cad Bane, Boba stands his ground. As a bounty hunter who mentored a much younger Boba during the Clone Wars era, Cad knows Boba better than most. During their confrontation in *The Book of Boba Fett* season finale, Cad acknowledges that Boba gave going straight a chance but tells him, "*you've got your father's blood pumping through your veins. You're a killer"* (S1 E7, In the Name of Honor)[46]. Here, Cad disavows Boba's recent experience and behaviors by reminding him of his heredity, as if Boba is unable to break the genetic chains that bind him to predisposed behaviors and temperament. During their duel, Cad disarms Boba and charges that Boba's softness makes him weak, implying that turning his back to his nature is a disservice. A difficult fight ensues, but Boba ends up with the upper hand. Before ending Cad with his hand-crafted gaffi stick, Boba reiterates his communal ties: "*these are my people. I will not abandon them"* (S1 E7, In the Name of Honor)[47].

The above scene is significant not merely because Boba kills his former mentor, but because Boba has finished off his foil. Cad may represent Boba's former cold-blooded killer natural tendencies. When Cad appears to negotiate with Boba, it is as a hired mercenary in the service of the Pykes. When Boba confronts him, he's also challenging his *own* nature that drove him into a profession of bounty hunting and killing for financial gain – just as his father before him did. Until the end, Cad resolutely believes in Boba's nature; his final words to him are: "*I knew you were a killer"* (S1 E7, In the Name of Honor)[48]. While Boba slaying Cad confirms the latter's insistence that Boba *is* indeed a killer, destroying Cad is the final act of Boba confronting his past and perhaps putting his "cold-blooded" and solitary nature to rest. It is also notable that Boba slays Cad with the weapon indigenous to the Tuskens, and not a weapon from the bounty hunting trade, such as a blaster rifle. Earlier in the season, Boba denies being a bounty hunter, and the act of killing Cad with the gaffi stick further distances himself from his family trade.

Research on aggression over the course of the lifespan suggests it is relatively stable, with a strong degree of continuity in aggression/antisocial behavior among the most aggressive youths or chronic offenders[49]. We see this to be the case with Boba, even as others claim he has gone soft. Choosing violence, Boba brutally slaughters the Nikto speeder gang who murdered his Tusken tribe once he is reunited with his Firespray starship. This is an act of vengeance, but nonetheless is an aggressive and violent act. He also slays Bib Fortuna in cold blood as a means of ruling Jabba's former criminal empire. While self-serving at the surface, Boba does this in partnership with Fennec Shand, who likewise deems Bib unfit to rule. And of course, he does not show mercy to Cad Bane. Given his genetics and environmental upbringing, it would be perhaps unreasonable for Boba to entirely shirk his inclination towards violent acts. However, it would seem the salient change for Boba stemming from his experience with the Tusken tribe is

that violence becomes a tool for protecting the communal good (i.e., Mos Espa), and his found families (first the Tuskens, later his ragtag group of allies that stand against the Pykes), as opposed to serving his interests alone.

A Simple Man? Final Thoughts on Boba Fett's Development

When Boba first meets Djarin in *The Mandalorian*, he introduces himself with, "*I'm a simple man making his way through the galaxy. Like my father before me*" (The Mandalorian, S2 E6, The Tragedy)[50]. Here, Boba invokes not only his father and source of his genetic template, but he parrots a similar introduction Jango used when meeting Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Attack of the Clones* ("*I'm just a simple man trying to make my way in the universe*")[51]. By paraphrasing this introductory line, Boba recognizes and honors himself as the progeny of Jango. Yet after surviving the sarlacc and experiencing his rebirth, Boba's environment (both circumstantial and self-sought) shape him into a more communally oriented individual. Boba's transition towards kinship and community with the Tuskens molds him into a man capable of exchanging self-serving interest for loyalty and protection.

Yet, both Fennec Shand and Cad Bane charge that Boba went "soft" – a critique also levied by viewers and critics of his show[52]. These critiques are not wrong, but if Boba remained an isolated, cold-blooded killer for the entirety of his depiction in the Star Wars universe, he would remain nothing more than a *mere clone* of Jango, a carbon-copy of another character that audiences have already seen. Boba witnessed his father's traumatic death on the job, and it is reasonable for him to process this trauma in light of new circumstances and environments. Arguably, if Boba emerged from his near-death experience in the maw of the sarlacc unchanged, it would be a disservice for what he has endured and survived.

Of course, his actions over the course of the original Star Wars trilogy may mark him as a simple man with a predilection for violent acts, largely motivated by status and financial gain. Indeed, like his father before him, Boba in the original Star Wars trilogy is a relatively simple, one-dimensional character: a cool-looking bad guy appealing largely to a teenage boy demographic, whose main purpose in the film is to propel the heroes into action and provide the audience with a spectacular fight scene where they ultimately perish against good. Yet Boba survived his tumble into the sarlacc, and his new environment amongst the Tuskens arguably gave him an opportunity to alter some of his behaviors and habits. Critics of Boba's portrayal in the contemporary canon may think Boba went soft with these changes, but as our circumstances and environments change, so do we. Boba Fett, a simple man? I think this introduction, perhaps, does him a disservice.

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WONDERFUL (NON-)HUMAN BEINGS

Seeing Human in A Galaxy Far, Far Away

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Although humans from various civilizations dominate the galaxy far, far away, it is nonetheless also populated by numerous, distinctive non-human intelligent beings who appear both different from and similar to humans. For example, the memorable Frog Lady (an amphibious female sentient-being escorted by Din Djarin in S2[1]) may look like a wildly oversized frog, may 'ribbit' like a frog, and even leap like a frog; however, she is not a frog at all but a female Povanarian who appears to think and behave very similar to humans. Indeed, most viewers have seen beyond all her frog-like characteristics. Despite her amphibious characterization, Frog Lady was immediately understood as somewhat human.

Anthropomorphism, a concept from cognitive psychology, explains how viewers (and humans within the universe of Star Wars) appreciate and readily accept the humanity of non-human characters. Broadly, anthropomorphism refers to a tendency to

associate unobservable human properties, such as emotions and cognition, to explicitly non-human entities (such as Frog Lady) in order for us to make sense of them, increase feelings of trust towards them, and even improve predictions about their future behavior[2]. Although anthropomorphism can be triggered by real-world and fictional characters alike, the latter is particularly interesting to explore given that producers have control over cues and can leverage this tendency for storytelling purposes. Accordingly, anthropomorphism is a fundamental building block to enrich science-fiction and fantasy worlds.

This chapter illustrates how fictional media with fantastical settings and creatures like *The Mandalorian* tap into a cue-driven tendency to see humanlike familiarity in non-human characters. Specifically, the chapter provides a look into non-human characters' portrayals in the show, elaborate on why some of them might be more or less likely to be anthropomorphized, and explains how even the most carefully conducted character designs might fail to elicit anthropomorphism.

The Psychology of Anthropomorphism

Humans may anthropomorphize almost everything they encounter[3]. Similar to notions of animism and spiritualism (i.e., tendencies to attribute life and soul to inanimate entities[4]) or animacy (i.e., perceptions of aliveness in inanimate agents[5]), the tendency to anthropomorphize is quite commonplace. Practically every adult regularly "sees human" when confronted with non-human entities across real-life and fictional contexts[6]. In everyday life, anthropomorphism emerges, for instance, toward social machines that exhibit human cues like Alexa or Siri when they respond to users' questions in a seemingly intelligent and self-conscious manner (including references to their personal biography or traces of wit). Within fictional stories, virtually any non-human character can be accepted as humanlike, including

zoomorph (i.e., animal-like) and mechanomorph (machine-like) entities. Prime examples from the Star Wars universe are Chewbacca or Admiral Ackbar and R2-D2 or C-3PO, respectively.

Anthropomorphism is understood as a generalized tendency among humans to attribute human characteristics to a given non-human entity (such as an animal, object, or creature from fictional media[7]). When we anthropomorphize an entity, self-knowledge (or, more generally, knowledge about humans) serves as an immediately accessible basis for inferencing humanity. This self-knowledge is applied once we perceive the "them" in question as similar to us humans. For example, a humanlike appearance, facial expressions, mannerisms, and other behaviors that are known to be human typically activate anthropomorphism. Case in point, Grogu, whose mind is full of childlike mischief and who babbles like a human baby. Counter-indicative information, on the other hand, can quickly bring anthropomorphism to an end. Anthropomorphism typically stops quickly once an otherwise intelligent-appearing machine (e.g., Siri or other A.I. help bots) repeatedly provides canned responses or answers in a nonsensical manner.

However, knowledge alone does not necessarily do the trick. Anthropomorphism is also determined by what is referred to as *effectance motivation*, which is essentially our human desire to be the master of our (social) environment[8], and *sociality motivation*, or our human need for social belongingness[9]. Concerning effectance motivation, exposure to unfamiliar non-human entities can produce uncertainty about how they may think or behave next. Tentatively applying a human model (or human-likeness) as default can serve to make us more comfortable as doing so often reduces speculation about an entity's way of thinking or behaving.

For sociality motivation, social needs can be (temporarily) satisfied by placeholders like fictional characters[10]. For example, people can comfort themselves, and reduce their feelings of loneliness, by imaginatively engaging with their favorite onscreen heroes when watching a beloved film or television show. A strong drive for social belongingness, especially when paired with strong attention towards social cues and reinforced by social connections, encourages anthropomorphism, even though this means "creating humans out of non-humans" like real-world social machines or fictional characters[11]. If non-human characters exhibit human social cues such as speech, gestures, or facial expressions, people who are more strongly oriented toward social belonging (or feel a lack thereof) are more likely to notice and embrace such social cues[12]. Once characters are seen as fellow humans, they can better serve as comforting (proxy) relationships.

Shades of Humanlikeness in *The Mandalorian*

Set primarily in the Outer Rim Territories after the fall of the Galactic Empire, *The Mandalorian* portrays many distinctly personalized non-human and droid characters in prominent roles whose traits may implicitly or explicitly invoke varying anthropomorphic cues such as expressive faces, familiar vocalizations, and gestures. In the following sections, we explore characters across the galaxy that best illustrate the use of anthropomorphism in the show to better understand why us, as viewers, readily attach ourselves to the non-human characters of this universe, such as Frog Lady, Grogu, and IG-11.

The Near-Humans: Xi'an, Qin & Ahsoka

The Mandalorian depicts several characters whose human likeness is very close and familiar, with a few key distinctive traits. Specifically, these characters are closely human-sized humanoids

with visibly similar anatomy and only differ by a limited number of distinguishing non-human traits. For instance, the Twi'lek twins Xi'an and Qin from season one[13] have distinctive kinds of headtails (Lekku), and the Togruta Ahsoka Tano is iconic for her non-human skin colors and patterns (i.e., orange tones with white markings). However, aside from such distinguishing features, these characters' morphology and face structure look distinctly human. Similar descriptions could be made for other characters, such as a male Weequay Taanti who has leathery brownish skin and a bumpy head but an otherwise highly humanlike stature and look. Besides a few distinguishing physical qualities, they share most morphological features with humans.

Finding the right balance between human and non-human features can be challenging due to the so-called uncanny valley[14]. Broadly, the uncanny valley hypothesis suggests that individuals' emotional response toward a non-human agent gets more positive with increasing perceptions of humanlikeness until it suddenly turns eerie or uncanny once it is close to approaching but *not yet* fully reaching perfection.

While there is an ongoing debate[15] about why some depictions and viewers' responses fall into the uncanny valley, the Star Wars franchise is no stranger to it following the CGI recreations of Grand Moff Tarkin and Princess Leia Organa in *Rogue One*[16] or the rejuvenation of Luke Skywalker[17],[18] in season two[19]. Arguably, the non-human characters described above (such as Xi'an and Ahsoka) may be less likely to create an uncanny impression as they strongly relied on prosthetics, masks, and practical effects. However, it is plausible that anthropomorphic design choices for these characters have also played their part, as they may have resolved uncertainties by presenting *just-enough* non-human cues to avoid uncanny feelings[20].

Beyond appearances alone, near-human characters in the series are perceived as similar to humans as reflected by how others address them. Although characters of different origins may have different native languages, they all express themselves in Galactic Basic, which makes it straightforward for human characters and the audience to understand their personalities and worldviews. Shared language generally reinforces anthropomorphism on its own[21]. More importantly, these characters indicate at any given time through speech and actions that they have humanlike mental capacities. For instance, Xi'an and Qin express self-conscious emotions like pride and remorse when talking about their past and engage in counterfactual reasoning when teasing and deceiving Din Djarin[22]. Together, these human cues encourage making sense of non-human characters via anthropomorphism.

This first group of non-human characters checks all the boxes that are typically raised when asking what it means to be human while featuring a few distinguishing traits, which may even be needed to avoid uncanny experiences. For all intents and purposes, these characters are as close to humans as non-human characters can be.

The Zoomorphs: Ugnaughts, Anzellans, Yoda & Grogu

The second group includes characters who differ more strongly from a human appearance. For instance, an unnamed male Mythrol who first appears in season one[23] and seems to share the same general body and face structure with humans but also has blueish skin color, amphibious barbs, gills, and fins, and an apparent tendency to spray mist when nervous. Other examples are the Ugnaught Kuiil (first seen in the same episode), who has pinkish skin color and porcine features, and both of the Mon Cala species (Quarren and Mon Calamari, featured primarily in season two[24]) who have squid-like and amphibious features,

respectively. Other characters from this group may draw more inspiration from folkloristic creatures than real-world ones. Grogu, for instance, displays goblin-like features, including pale-green wrinkly skin, large pointy ears, and oversized dark eyes. In contrast to the first group of characters, these non-human characters not only look much less similar to humans but are designed with easily recognizable animalistic references (e.g., gills, pig snouts).

When it comes to behavior, most of these characters (if their morphology does not limit them to a narrower behavioral repertoire like the Anzellans who first appeared in season three[25] as small-sized master droidsmiths) indicate a similarly humanlike mind. Grogu constitutes a fascinating case as a child of a famously unknown species who appears to follow an un-humanlike developmental trajectory that shifts between both toddler-like and more mature behavior, suggesting at times a naïve mind and not-yet-fully-developed mental capacities. For instance, he seems to be capable of higher-order reasoning beyond what may be considered typical of his developmental stage (e.g., self-awareness, perspective-taking, strategic planning). Likewise, Grogu may not (yet) be able to speak; however, he seems to understand Galactic Basic fairly well (even though he often ignores directives from Djarin) and can communicate his memories and thoughts via the Force to other Force-sensitive beings.

Given that both previously introduced examples of his species, Yoda and Yaddle, speak proficiently, he will likely learn to express himself in the future (without the help of IG-12). Thus far, however, he almost exclusively uses unintelligible baby noises. This characteristic also draws from the *baby schema,* or, overemphasized physical and behavioral cues indicating early childhood to trigger innate motivation to provide care. While some of these baby-like cues (e.g., the large pointy ears or the

oversized eyes) may at most cause feelings of affection, others, like baby noises, may facilitate anthropomorphism by contextualizing some peculiar behaviors (e.g., Grogu trying to eat basically anything) as early childhood quirks.

Beyond speech, Grogu appears to be self-aware (e.g., in his willingness to leave with Luke to become a Jedi[26] and his decision to return to Djarin in *The Book of Boba Fett*[27]), capable of understanding and predicting others' feelings and thoughts (e.g., when he attempted to Force-heal Djarin or make mischief in the Razor Crest in season one), and demonstrates the capacity to consider others' perspectives (e.g., when refraining from eating a Sorgan frog after witnessing the reactions of the other children in season one).

Thus, Grogu is frequently depicted as having surpassed some milestones in human children's cognitive development. At the same time he exhibits a prototypically childlike lack of self-control, especially once hungry (e.g., his insatiable liking of Povanarian eggs), possessiveness (e.g., desiring the silver knob throughout the first two seasons or his IG-12 unit in season three), and an occasional lack of situational understanding (e.g., when he Force-chokes Cara Dune during arm-wrestling or when he hugged the Anzellans despite protests). In addition to these cues, it must be noted that Djarin and other (non-)human characters commonly talk to (and sometimes treat) Grogu like a toddler or a young child, although he often shows more advanced capabilities. Naturally, these advanced capabilities and his unfamiliar developmental trajectory disconnect him from common notions of what it means to be human. However, for anthropomorphism to take full effect amongst viewers, it might have been necessary to portray Grogu not just as a baby, as this would limit the scope of his capabilities that would plausibly be accepted for him. Instead, Grogu is a complex and credible character who provides lots of ground for anthropomorphism.

At roughly fifty years old, he happens to be very young for his species, such that viewers do not have to forgo adoring his childish demeanor. In season three[28], Djarin not only accepts Grogu as his apprentice but even adopts him as his son, thus definitively manifesting Grogu's standing as one of them—or rather one of us.

Similar to Grogu, the zoomorph group includes various species who look from the outside sweepingly dissimilar to humans with prominent, animalistic features but still demonstrate various indicators of human likeness. Depending on how humanlike those non-human characters are depicted, it is very likely that others will readily perceive the human in them (due to their behavioral cues). However, anthropomorphism for this group may be less convincing compared to the near-human characters discussed earlier, given that their animalistic appearance may encourage conflicts between knowledge about oneself, humans, and animals. This may especially be the case for characters who are portrayed to engage in immoral behaviors or designed with unattractive features (e.g., the Nikto, Trandoshians, or Klatooinians), which may prompt viewers to "dehumanize" them out of hand.

The Enigmas: Jawas, Tuskens, and the Frog Lady

In contrast to both previous groups, the third analysis category covers characters who do not seem able to speak Galactic Basic. Examples are, for instance, Jawas, Tusken Raiders, or the female Povanarian nicknamed Frog Lady. Concerning their appearance, these characters may be comparable to the second group in that they possess, albeit in varying degrees, both humanlike and (partially disguised) animalistic features.

What may be more consequential for anthropomorphism toward these characters is how their behavior is portrayed and how

others behave toward them. Obviously, they speak in unintelligible languages that all may sound either foreign (e.g., Jawaese is said to be vaguely based on Zulu, and Huttese resembles human grammar and phonology[29]) or somewhat animalistic (e.g., Tusken consists of barking and grunting or Frog Lady's ribbits and groans). Importantly, though, each of these languages is marked as an ordinary language (that is, a complex symbolic system, not to be confused with animals' rudimentary communicative behaviors) by other characters who either understand or even have learned to speak the language.

While Tusken Raiders' and Jawas' behavior may at times be unfamiliar (e.g., when the former spotted a Krayt dragon pearl or when the latter collectively devoured the Mudhorn egg), they and the other non-human characters in this group typically exhibit humanlike behaviors that suggest a complex mental architecture (e.g., when appealing to Djarin's honor to persuade him, committing to trust-based barter trade across species, or temporarily fraternizing with enemies to get rid of a shared menace), societal structures that resemble traditional human societies (e.g., family, tribe, or other organizational structures), and rich cultures involving, for instance, a shared history, worldview, and rituals (e.g., Tuskens' ancestral claim to the Dune Sea or their black melon offered to Cobb Vanth and Boba Fett).

In sum, this group comprises non-human characters whose appearance is shrouded and mysterious and, thus, dissimilar to humans (as with the second group, the zoomorphs) but who additionally come across as enigmatic because we cannot comprehend their language, complicating immediate comprehension of their individual personalities, and because they occasionally display unique customs and traditions. However, it is essential to point out that these characters, albeit again to varying degrees, also show prototypically humanlike behavior that might cue anthropomorphism. Said differently:

This group sends mixed signals, which is reflected by other characters' behaviors toward them as it varies between decisive acceptance as humanlike (e.g., Djarin and Boba Fett towards the Tuskens) and similarly firm denial and dehumanization (e.g., Cobb Vanth and the people of Freetown initially towards the Tusken Raiders).

In fact, Boba's journey to becoming accepted in a Tusken tribe may closely mirror how viewers themselves might vary in understanding these characters. They can emphasize what may distinguish them from humans (similar to how Boba showed initial reservations toward them). However, they could also overcome unfamiliarity and communication challenges and instead focus on a broad array of similarities that make the Tuskens humanlike. Given that recent portrayals of characters like the Tusken Raiders and Jawas differ from previous franchise installments in terms of their human-likeness (e.g., by expanding on the community structure and customs of the Tusken Raiders in *The Book of Boba Fett*), it is likely that both viewers and characters within the world increasingly tilt toward seeing human-likeness in them as well.

The Droids: IG-11 & R5-D4

While the first three groups covered living non-human organisms, the fourth group addresses another class: droids. Just as it is tradition in the larger Star Wars franchise, droids are displayed in various sizes and shapes in *The Mandalorian*. From the humanoid assassin/nurse droid IG-11 to the humanoid protocol droid with bug-like facial features named Zero, from Peli Motto's small-statured, auburn-colored, cyclopean pit droids to the similarly small astromech droid R5-D4 with its three legs, cone-shaped head, and notoriously malfunctioning motivator, myriad droid appearances and functions exist. Unlike in other science fiction franchises where sophisticated androids may

sometimes be indistinguishable from humans, all these droids are distinctively mechano-morphic even though they may vary in anthropomorphic traits. Similar to real-world robots[30], a humanlike body structure and facial appearance influence anthropomorphism in *The Mandalorian*.

Looking more closely at their behavioral portrayal, droids differ in how they can express themselves: Some (like IG-11 or Zero) can speak Galactic Basic with a synthesized voice and, thus, allow for rich verbal (but still mechanically sounding) expressions; on the other hand, others (like R5-D4) communicate primarily via beeps and boops through which meaning may be expressed without words. Interestingly, what language-proficient droids say and how their actions are apparently interpreted by human characters stand from time to time in stark contrast. This may be most apparent in season one[31] where the refurbished IG-11 emphasizes that it is nothing more than a machine relying on its programming while reassuring and nursing Djarin in an apparently empathetic manner. Later, after what may be described as affectionately petting one of his ears as a farewell, IG-11 virtuously sacrifices itself for Grogu's survival. Following these actions, even the initially highly droid-aversive protagonist Djarin is genuinely concerned about its well-being, calling IG-11 a friend, and seeks to rebuild it later in season three.

IG-11's journey from being an assassin droid that stubbornly wants to engage in self-destruction due to its protocols to an affectionate nurse droid who nevertheless constantly reminds everyone about its mechanical nature illustrates a potential conflict between accepting its droidness or its human-likeness. IG-11 may indeed not be a "living thing" (S1 E8, Redemption[32]), but watching its rehabilitation process later[33] may nevertheless be perceived as similar to how humans relearn movements and fine motor skills after severe accidents. Arguably, it is in such scenes where droids' human-likeness is portrayed in a sensitive

and subtle way when their machine-likeness may be less important.

In a similar manner, other droids like R5-D4 throughout season three are portrayed with inner conflicts between individual dispositions (e.g., being afraid of danger) and situational demands (e.g., being courageous to support its companions). Humans may relate well enough from their own experiences or at least relate to these behaviors vicariously. Perhaps most impressively, various droids who apparently seek communion with others of their kind in *The Resistor* cantina[34] reveal serious existential struggles that most humans can fundamentally relate to through a shared knowledge about human psychology or philosophy, and a sense of duty that extends beyond their own kind. In these instances, droids' portrayals cue human-likeness, providing a solid and approachable basis for anthropomorphism to occur.

Altogether, droids do not seem designed to fool their human counterparts into thinking they are humans. That is, although they vary in whether and how they are equipped with human-, animal-, or machine-like features, they are easily identified as droids in an instant and repeatedly specified (either by themselves or by other characters) as such. Despite this non-human status, we may make sense of them as somewhat humanlike due to anthropomorphic cues being presented across situations, as well as how other characters treat them. As it has been documented for real-world machines[35], we may therefore see beyond droids' overt artificiality and machine-like appearance, albeit selectively, as long as anthropomorphic cues are strong. However, if such cues are lacking, their status as "more machine than man" may take over.

This Is the Way… Not So Fast?

Across different groups of non-human characters, the previous sections argued that perceived human-likeness cues viewers and human characters within the *Star Wars* universe to engage in anthropomorphism. Yet, whether and how anthropomorphism emerges beyond a transient, initial response depends on internal motivation (i.e., narrative involvement or identity-related drivers) or external motivation (i.e., franchise developments or community norms) for making sense of these depictions. Subtly incentivizing audiences to care for a non-human character's storyline may legitimately be considered artwork, depending, amongst other things, on collective skill and a sound understanding of human psychology (detailed across numerous frameworks throughout this volume). Even carefully designed cues can only provide a solid foundation for anthropomorphism to enrich the viewing experience; for it to occur as intended, storytelling still needs to encourage viewers to see the way.

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OWNERSHIP

Boba Fett's Armor and the Darksaber as Cultural Heritage

Stephanie Orme, PhD

"I'm here for the armor." – Boba Fett (*The Mandalorian*, S1 E6, The Tragedy)[1]

The Armorer: *What do you know of this blade?*
Djarin: *I am told it is the Darksaber.*
The Armorer: *Indeed. Do you understand its significance?*
Djarin: *Whoever wields it can rule all of Mandalore.*

(*The Book of Boba Fett*, S1 E5, The Return of the Mandalorian)[2]

The Mandalorian features some of the most iconic artifacts in the Star Wars universe. Two such artifacts are Boba Fett's Mandalorian armor, immediately distinguishable by its weathered green and red paint and the Darksaber, the one-of-its-kind black lightsaber that gives its holder the right to rule Mandalore. Both Boba Fett's armor and the Darksaber are strongly tied to personal identity, contributing to the owner's sense of self. In Boba's case, his armor is not only emblematic of his identity as a bounty hunter, but it also ties Boba to his

father, Jango Fett, who previously wore it. As for the Darksaber, it, too, has been passed down from previous generations. It is also a symbol of the strength and warrior spirit of the people of Mandalore, and whoever wields it is seen as the true ruler of Mandalore.

In *The Mandalorian* (as well as *The Book of Boba Fett)*, both Boba Fett's armor and the Darksaber become sites of contested ownership, passing through the hands of multiple characters and driving several plot points in the series. In psychology, *ownership* refers to a subjective feeling of possession and attachment to an object, idea, or space. By examining the plot points tied to these two artifacts, we can gain deeper psychological insight into various characters' motivations and, subsequently, an understanding of psychological ownership as a theory through examples in *The Mandalorian*. This chapter begins by outlining the theory of psychological ownership, including what drives it and how it affects us, and then applies the concept to the examples of Boba Fett's armor and the Darksaber in the television series.

What's Mine is Mine: Understanding Psychological Ownership

Psychologists have defined ownership as the sense of possession (that something is "mine" or "ours") that we develop around certain entities. Psychological ownership is distinct from legal ownership, in that a person can *feel* they own something, even if legally they do not. It is based on the belief that one has the right to control and regulate the use of the object, as well as the feeling that the object reflects one's identity and values. Psychological ownership can apply to a variety of things, including personal possessions such as a car, house, or clothes, but also to abstract entities such as a brand, a company, or a community.

Indeed, possession of objects, places, ideas, or people are so intertwined with our identity formation that these entities become extensions of the self [3],[4],[5]. Many scholars argue that human beings have an innate need to possess things, while others maintain that this desire to possess is rooted in social needs[6], learned during early childhood development[7]. Possessions "shape our consciousness, our self-awareness, and our perception of the world [8]." They allow us to assert our identities[9] and provide us with a sense of "home[10]." There are three established main motives that drive psychological ownership: self-efficacy, self-identity, and belonging[11].

Self-efficacy is the belief that one has the ability to successfully perform a specific task or achieve a particular goal[12]. Self-efficacy is related to the concept of *locus of control*, which refers to the extent to which individuals believe they have control over the events that affect their lives. This desire for control is a basic human motive that drives individuals to seek out opportunities to exert their influence and to feel effective in their actions[13],[14]. Another way to think about it is the feeling of, ''I need to do this task, I can do it, and I therefore own the responsibility for achieving success"[15]. Owning things that allow us to shape and control our environment makes us feel empowered and competent. As such, we are driven to seek out things we can possess to create this feeling.

Control is strongly related to the concept of self-efficacy in psychological ownership. Control is the ability to influence something as desired: "I want this object to act a certain way" or "I want to be able to do this task on my own terms." This ability to influence whatever our target of ownership is what gives us that sense that we own that target[16]. Hence, to feel that we have self-efficacy, we will attempt to exert influence, or control, over our target. For example, you might map your gaming console's controller buttons to make playing certain games easier or better

for you. In doing so, you are exerting your control over it, by personalizing it and making it work for you. You might even get annoyed if someone, maybe a roommate or a partner, uses the controller and changes *your* settings. The more control we feel we have over an object, the stronger our feelings of ownership become[17].

Ownership also plays an integral role in the shaping and maintaining of our self-identity. Individuals use possessions[18] and groups of people[19] as symbols to identify themselves. Targets of ownership are often used to describe one's identity, sometimes making the individual feel unique, and contributing to their self-identity[20]. For example, a person might identify as a pet owner, a comic book collector, or a skateboarder. Ownership of these objects can also create a sense of community, with a group united around their collective emotional connections to the object.

In addition to being used to define oneself and convey one's self-identity to others, ownership can ensure the "continuity of the self across time"[21]. In one study of psychological ownership and family businesses[22], researchers found that the transference of ownership to another is a way of extending one's identity beyond death. Likewise, breaking that chain of ownership (especially if by choice) can be a liberating experience, psychologically and emotionally. On the other hand, if the preservation of the self is important to a person, breaking that chain can be devastating to one's sense of self-concept.

The need to belong or have a place[23] is a fundamental human need, surpassing even that of many physical needs[24]. Ownership is a primary way for individuals to express their identity and affiliation with specific social groups or communities. For example, owning a team jersey or other fan merchandise can signal one's allegiance to a particular sports team or fandom. Likewise, the act of sharing ownership of an object or space with

others can strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of community; for instance, sharing a workspace with a colleague. Indeed, "when we inhabit something, it is no longer an object for us, but becomes part of us"[25]. This notion of having a place to which one belongs fulfills social and emotional needs, which is what prompts individuals to seek out a sense of ownership.

If a target of ownership becomes strongly tied to our identity and self-expression, we will dedicate time, energy, and resources to it[26]. We develop emotional attachments to things that we devote a significant amount of time, effort, and attention to, our identity essentially fusing with the object[27]. And the more attention given to this object, the stronger our sense of ownership becomes[28]. For instance, when a person imbues something with their labor, it becomes theirs. Because a person uses *their* hands in the process of labor, this means that the resulting product was made possible through *their* hands, and therefore they have a sense of ownership of it.

Finally, intense feelings of ownership emerge when one possesses an intimate knowledge of the object. This familiarity results in a person feeling closer to the object, meaning the object is even more part of their sense of self. The more knowledge, or complexity of knowledge, one has of it, the closer they tend to feel to it. Being an expert or keeper of specific knowledge implies an extremely close relationship between the self and the object[29]. In cases where the object, or intimate knowledge of it, is rare, being considered an expert sets an individual apart from others, which can further increase claims to ownership[30]. For example, say you collect rare, classic video games and consoles. Over the years, you might amass an impressive collection, and with each addition, you research the object's development history, the story behind its rarity, and its cultural significance to the community. Your knowledge of lesser-known information makes you the gaming expert among your group of friends. At this point, collecting

games and consoles is more than just a hobby; it is a part of your identity as a gaming enthusiast.

Boba Fett's Armor as Cultural Heritage

The Cultural Significance of Mandalorian Armor

In Mandalorian culture, one's armor plays a significant role in an individual's identity as a Mandalorian. Mandalorians take great pride in their armor, which is typically customized to suit the individual needs and preferences of the wearer. In fact, creating and customizing one's own armor is seen as a rite of passage for many Mandalorians. For example, Djarin's beskar armor features a stylized mudhorn sigil on the pauldron, representing his connection to Grogu, a child he is tasked with protecting. Mandalorian armor is also modular, not only to make repairs easy, but also to allow the wearer to add flamethrowers, jetpacks, and other tools they may need.

Their armor also serves as a way for Mandalorians to distinguish themselves from others, and to show their allegiance to their clan and their way of life. The armor may also be passed down from one generation to the next within a family or clan as a way of preserving the family or clan's history and traditions. Additionally, Mandalorian armor is widely known for its use of beskar, a rare and highly valuable metal that can withstand extreme amounts of damage. Beskar is considered sacred by Mandalorians and is often used as a symbol of the strength and resilience of Mandalorian culture.

Ownership of Mandalorian armor also carries with it a sense of responsibility and duty. For Mandalorians, their armor is not just a piece of equipment, but a part of their identity as warriors and protectors of their people. Orthodox Mandalorians, such as Djarin's covert led by the Armorer (the Children of the Watch),

follow an old religion known as the Way of the Mandalore, part of which dictates that Mandalorians do not remove their helmet in the presence of another living being. Yet other Mandalorians, such as Bo-Katan Kryze, denounce the Children of the Watch as cult-like zealots.

Ownership of Boba Fett's Armor

As the first onscreen Mandalorian armor, Boba Fett's armor is an iconic aspect of the Star Wars universe and has a storied history. The armor originated with Boba's father and genetic blueprint, Jango Fett, introduced as a skilled and ruthless bounty hunter in *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. Boba was cloned from Jango's DNA; however, unlike the thousands of clones created for the Grand Army of the Republic who aged at an accelerated rate, Boba aged normally and Jango raised him as his son. Living a relatively isolated life on the home world of the cloning facilities, Kamino, strengthened their father-son relationship. When Jango is killed before a young Boba during the Battle of Geonosis by Jedi Mace Windu, Boba later retrieves (offscreen) Jango's armor and takes up life as a bounty hunter like his father[31]. Boba's acquisition of the armor is a way of extending Jango's identity beyond his death[32].

We can see how Boba's literal inhabiting of the armor makes the object not an object *for* him, but, rather, part of him[33] (and his father's legacy). Boba's body inhabits the armor physically, moving as he moves, taking hits as he takes hits, becoming worn as he becomes worn, aging as he ages. The armor *is* Boba extended. At some point after retrieving his father's armor, Boba paints it green, red, and yellow and, while the significance is unclear, it brings some of his own preferences and unique identity to the pieces he inherited from Jango. In doing so, Boba makes Jango's armor his own, imbuing part of himself in it[34]. Uniqueness is a desirable state in terms of self-expression and can strengthen

feelings of ownership over an object[35]. For Boba, who is literally a clone of Jango, painting the armor could be read as Boba asserting his own identity while also honoring his connection, both organically and emotionally, with his father.

In *Return of the Jedi*, Boba seemingly meets his end when he falls into a sarlaac pit in the Dune Sea of Tatooine, armor and all. Hence, many Star Wars fans were shocked to see what appeared to be Boba's distinct green, red, and yellow armor return in *The Mandalorian;* albeit, on someone who is not Boba. The second season of *The Mandalorian* opens with Djarin searching for information about other surviving Mandalorians[36]. His quest takes him to the small mining town Mos Pelgo on Tatooine. There, Djarin meets the town's Marshall, Cobb Vanth, who is sporting a set of familiar Mandalorian armor. Vanth removes his helmet, signaling to Djarin that Vanth is not Mandalorian, at least not according to the orthodox creed that Djarin follows. Vanth himself remarks, "*[You're] probably none too happy to see me wearing this hardware"* (S2 E1, The Marshall)[37]. Vanth's casual remark about the armor signals that he is aware of its cultural significance to Mandalorians, while also seeming to distance himself from any emotional attachment to it. Affronted, Djarin asks where Vanth procured the armor, as he is clearly not Mandalorian. Vanth states he bought it from some Jawas, which seems to incense Djarin further, who sees this as disrespectful to the Mandalorian tradition of inheriting armor through lineage. Djarin challenges Vanth to a shootout over the armor, but before they begin, they are interrupted by an attack from a krayt dragon and they eventually become allies in their quest to stop it.

With this context, the audience is left to infer that the Jawas scrapped the armor from the sarlaac pit where Boba perished in *Return of the Jedi*. Sometime later, Vanth purchased the armor from the Jawas to help protect Mos Pelgos against the krayt dragon plaguing the town. From Vanth's perspective, he is the

rightful, or legal, owner of the armor because he purchased it. However, Djarin has a strong sense of psychological ownership over the armor. Despite it not being *his* armor, Djarin is territorial of the armor on behalf of Mandalorian culture. For Djarin and other Mandalorians, the armor is part of one's identity, bestowed upon them during a ritual when they come of age. The armor is part of what unites Mandalorians, by also distinguishing them from non-Mandalorians.

Just like the sports jersey that binds one fan of a team to another, Mandalorian armor engenders a sense of *belonging:* a connection to Mandalorians, past and present. As discussed earlier, possessions allow us to assert our identities[38] and provide us with a sense of home[39]. This need for belonging is arguably magnified for Mandalorians, as their home world of Mandalore was all but destroyed by the Empire during The Purge of Mandalore. With Mandalorians scattered around the galaxy, their distinctive armor remains one of the few symbols of their culture, and expression of their self-identity. Since Vanth has no personal connection to Mandalore or the persecution of the Mandalorian people, it becomes easier to understand why Djarin is so territorial of the armor.

After helping Vanth deal with the krayt dragon wreaking havoc on Mos Pelgos, Vanth surrenders the armor over to Djarin. Just as all seems settled regarding ownership of the armor, who should appear but Boba himself? Having seemingly survived his encounter with the sarlacc, Boba seeks to reclaim his armor from Djarin:

> Djarin: "*If you want my armor, you'll have to peel it off my dead body*."
> Boba: "*I don't want your armor. I want my armor that you got from Cobb Vanth back on Tatooine. It belongs to me*."
> Djarin: "*Are you Mandalorian*?"
> Boba: "*I'm a simple man making his way through the galaxy. Like my father before me*"

Djarin: "*Did you take the creed*?"
Boba: "*I give my allegiance to no one*."
Djarin: "*The beskar belongs to the Mandalorians. It was looted from us during The Purge*."
Boba: "*The armor was my father's. Now it's mine*."

(*The Mandalorian*, S1 E6, The Tragedy)[40]

The dialogue between Djarin and Boba contains several examples of psychological ownership. The tension here lies with symbolic ownership, held by Djarin that *beskar belongs to the Mandalorian people* in opposition to Boba's claim to literal ownership through inheritance. Djarin's immediate assumption implies Boba must want Djarin's armor for the valuable beskar. But Boba asserts that Djarin received the armor from someone else it did not belong to and is met with territorial beliefs about the armor belonging to Mandalorians. Finally, Boba insists it rightfully belongs to him because it was given to him by his father, Jango, who was *given* the armor by Mandalorians.

Djarin eventually conditionally agrees to give Boba the armor if he helps Djarin rescue Grogu from Moff Gideon. As evidence, Boba shows Djarin his chain code, a personal history in holograph form, that was encoded into his armor years ago. The chain code confirms Jango as Boba's father, and more importantly, that Jango himself was a Mandalorian foundling. As such, Jango was as much a Mandalorian as Djarin is. This knowledge seemingly convinces Djarin, who also shares the need for cultural belonging through shared affiliation[41], and he agrees to Boba's rightful ownership of the armor. With the iconic armor returned to its rightful owner, fans are treated to the figurative rebirth of a long-beloved Star Wars character as so many fans remembered him– distinctive armor and all.

The Darksaber as Cultural Heritage

The Cultural Significance of the Darksaber

The Darksaber is an iconic weapon in the Star Wars universe, distinguishable by its jet-black blade outlined with a white glow. First introduced to fans in the animated series *The Clone Wars*, the Darksaber has deep ties with Mandalorian culture. According to Mandalorian legend, it was created by Tarre Vizsla, the first Mandalorian to be inducted into the Jedi Order. After Vizsla's death, the Darksaber was kept in the Jedi Temple on Coruscant until members of House Vizsla reclaimed it during the fall of the Old Republic[42]. From then on, the Darksaber was passed down through the generations of Tarre Vizsla's descendants, becoming a symbol of Mandalore's warrior ways. Later, it was inherited by Pre Vizsla, who used the Darksaber to rally Mandalorians behind his claim as rightful ruler of Mandalore during a civil war that broke out between the pacifist New Mandalorians that currently ruled and Pre Vizsla's insurgent group, the Death Watch[43].

Through a series of events that play out across *The Clone Wars* and *Star Wars: Rebels,* the Darksaber passed through many more hands, before it eventually came to be in the possession of Bo-Katan Kryze, who becomes the ruler of Mandalore. Thus, viewers familiar with *The Clone Wars* and *Rebels* were likely shocked when it was revealed in the season one finale of *The Mandalorian* that an Imperial remnant leader, Moff Gideon, then wielded the legendary weapon[44]. The ownership of the Darksaber becomes a larger focus in the following seasons of the Mandalorian as Bo-Katan seeks to reunite Mandalore and restore it to its former glory.

The Ownership of the Darksaber

During the season two finale of *The Mandalorian*[45], Djarin confronts Moff Gideon aboard his Imperial cruiser to rescue the kidnapped Grogu. After defeating Gideon (who was in possession of the Darksaber in combat), Djarin unknowingly becomes the rightful owner according to Mandalorian custom. Traditionally, the Darksaber passes from one leader of Mandalore to the next, either through combat or some other means of succession. This makes the Darksaber perhaps the strongest example of ownership of an object being tied to responsibility[46] in Star Wars. Those who hold the Darsksaber also have the responsibility of ruling Mandalore.

When Bo-Katan, who accompanies Djarin on his mission to rescue Grogu, sees Djarin wielding the Darksbaer that she sought to reclaim from Gideon herself, she is visibly stunned, as she knows the implications of him having won it in combat. When Djarin offers the Darksaber to Bo-Katan, Gideon informs Djarin that, by Mandalorian tradition, the saber now belongs to him:

> Gideon: *"It's yours now."*
> Djarin: "*What is?"*
> Moff Gideon: "*The Darksaber. It belongs to you."*
> Djarin: "*Now it belongs to her."* (he offers it to Bo-Katan)
> Moff Gideon: "*She can't take it. It must be won in battle. In order for her to wield the Darksaber again, she would need to defeat you in combat."*
> Djarin: (to Bo-Katan) "*I yield. It's yours."*
> Moff Gideon: "*No. No.* (laughs) *It doesn't work that way."*
>
> (S2 E8, The Rescue)[47]

Knowing how much the Darksaber (and with it, the rightful claim to rule Mandalore) means to Bo-Katan, Gideon plants the seeds for sowing a rift between Djarin and his new ally, Bo-Katan. As

much as Bo-Katan desires the Darksaber to unite Mandalorians and take back Mandalore, she cannot bring herself to break tradition and have it gifted to her.

However, as fans of the *Clone Wars* and *Rebels* series know, Bo-Katan had previously accepted the Darksaber without winning it in combat, when Mandalorian outcast Sabine Wren finds the Darksaber in the Nightsister's lair on Dathomir[48]. At this point in the series, we are not told of any rules regarding its inheritance. In Sabine's case, she simply finds and takes it, and is later trained to wield it by Jedi Knight Kanan Jarrus, who alongside the Mandalorian Fenn Rau, thinks Sabine could use the Darksaber to reunite the fragmented Mandalorians[49]. While Sabine does gain some mastery over the blade, she ultimately decides to bequeath the Darksaber to Bo-Katan, whom Sabine feels will make a better ruler for Mandalore. At first, Bo-Katan is hesitant to accept the Darksaber, and with it, the responsibility of ruling Mandalore, but does accept it in the end[50]. Again, there is combat involved; Bo-Katan's hesitation seems to stem more from the heavy responsibility of ruling Mandalore, which comes with the ownership of the blade. This may also explain why Bo-Katan later refuses the Darksaber when Djarin offers it to her in season two of *The Mandalorian*[51].

In season three, a dejected Bo-Katan lives alone in the family castle on the Mandalorian planet Kalevala. She has seemingly given up on her quest to retake Mandalore and reunite the scattered Mandalorians, having lost ownership of the Darksaber. Bo-Katan's sense of self-efficacy is destroyed[52]; adding insult to her injury, Djarin is an outsider (as a member of orthodox Mandalorians) who was unaware of the significance of the Darksaber. Mandalorians who had grown up on Mandalore, before the Purge, know the history and significance of the weapon, as this knowledge is the foundation for succession in Mandalore[53]. For Djarin to acquire the Darksaber without this knowledge *and*

simultaneously hold the key to unifying Mandalore (something Bo-Katan has actively sought for herself) hurts Bo-Katan psychologically.

Yet, this could be part of Bo-Katan's rationale for not accepting the Darksaber from Djarin. She wanted to reclaim the Darksaber from Gideon herself. For Djarin to not only be the one to claim the Darksaber from Gideon, but to then offer it to Bo-Katan as a gift, she feels cheated out of a triumph that, in her mind, should have been hers. Suddenly, it becomes easier to understand why Bo-Katan might not have wanted to accept Djarin's offering. Her increasingly frosty demeanor towards Djarin as time goes on makes it obvious that she harbors resentment towards her ally and friend.

Later, Grogu seeks out Bo-Katan's aid in rescuing Djarin from an android creature in the mines of Mandalore, where Djarin has gone to perform a sacred Mandalorian ritual to regain the favor of the orthodox Mandalorians after violating the Creed of removing his helmet[54]. Bo-Katan shelves her resentment to come to her friend's aid. In the process of rescuing him, she also retrieves the Darksaber from the creature that captured Djarin. She returns the Darksaber to Djarin (which catches the attention of a keen-eyed Grogu). Several episodes pass, with Djarin and Bo-Katan working together again in a comfortable alliance, with Djarin helping Bo-Katan in her reinvigorated efforts to reunite Mandalore. The pair manage to recruit the Children of the Watch to their cause, before encountering Bo-Katan's former army (now a mercenary group spearheaded by her ally Axe Woves). Woves and the other Mandalorians have come to doubt Bo-Katan's ability to lead, prompting her to challenge Woves to a fight for leadership. Woves tells her: "*you'll never be the true leader of our people. You won't even take the Darksaber from [Djarin]. He's the one you should be challenging"* (S3 E6, Guns for Hire)[55].

Bo-Katan defeats Woves in combat, but it is apparent the Darksaber's symbolism still holds a great deal of weight among the mercenary group. The Darksaber is so tied to Mandalorian self-identity[56] that it is one of the strongest symbols of Mandalorian culture and leadership. In order to bolster Bo-Katan's authority with the Mandalorians they have assembled, Djarin tells the Mandalorians how Bo-Katan rescued him from the android creature in the mines of Mandalore and took the Darksaber while he was held captive– a creature that Bo-Katan defeated, thereby winning the Darksaber through combat. This explanation pacifies the Mandalorians and Bo-Katan becomes the rightful wielder of the Darksaber once again. Seeing their acceptance, Bo-Katan seems reinvigorated, her sense of self-efficacy and self-identity restored[57]. With her Darksaber back within her locus of control[58], she is empowered with the sense that she can retake Mandalore as well.

Shortly thereafter, we, as an audience, learn how the Darksaber came to be in Gideon's possession in the first place. Gideon was part of the Purge of Mandalore, helping to massacre Mandalorians throughout the galaxy. When it became apparent that Mandalore could not win the fight against the Empire, she negotiated a cease-fire with Gideon, giving him the Darksaber in exchange for allowing her to surrender to the Empire. However, Gideon betrayed Bo-Katan, losing the Darksaber along with Mandalore[59]. Perhaps under the Mandalorian rules of Darksaber ownership, Gideon was never the rightful owner of the Darksaber, either. However, since Bo-Katan had not revealed this to anyone, it was assumed he had bested her in combat. Regardless, Bo-Katan lived the years following the Purge in shame. This shame may have been another reason why she refused the Darksaber from Djarin initially. She felt she had failed her people and needed to prove to them (and perhaps more so, herself[60]) that she could take the Darksaber, and Mandalore, back from Gideon.

Conclusion

Through the examples of Boba Fett's armor and the Darksaber, *The Mandalorian* showcases fascinating examples of psychological ownership in practice. Both objects are entrenched in deep history, have ties to long-standing lineages and traditions, and have their ownership contested by multiple parties throughout the show. They embody the values, traditions, and aspirations of the Mandalorian people, showcasing their resilience, honor, leadership, and collective identity. These symbols resonate with fans and add layers of meaning and depth to the stories and characters within the Star Wars universe.

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IS THIS THE WAY?

The Mandalorian's Moral Journey

Rowan Daneels, PhD

> The Armorer: *When one chooses to walk the Way of the Mandalore, you are both hunter and prey. […] Have you ever removed your helmet?*
> The Mandalorian: *No.*
> The Armorer: *Has it ever been removed by others?*
> The Mandalorian: *Never.*
> The Armorer: *This is the Way*. (S1 E3, The Sin)[1]

When the Mandalorian bounty hunter Din Djarin returns to his secluded community, or covert, after collecting the bounty for the Force-sensitive child known as Grogu, he is questioned about the removal of his ever-present helmet. His covert, the Children of the Watch, is a religious faction of Mandalorians who follow a strict code or creed, which they refer to as the Way of the Mandalore. The Armorer, the *de facto* leader of Djarin's covert, explains a few rules of their creed, including the rule to never remove their helmets and reveal their faces to others. Other moral values such as honor in combat and community loyalty (e.g., helping other Mandalorians, taking care of orphans) are also part of this Mandalorian code.

Perhaps due to the Mandalorian emphasis on caring for orphans (or foundlings as Mandalorians call them[2]), Djarin feels remorse and rescues Grogu from the villainous Imperial forces. After rescuing Grogu, they embark on a quest to find surviving Jedi, with Mando protecting the child from bounty hunters and the Empire alike. However, through his increased interactions and growing father-son relationship with Grogu, Djarin starts to break with some of the Mandalorians' beliefs he once followed to the letter. For instance, he takes off his helmet on a few occasions, which eventually leads to his temporary exile.

This chapter discusses how Djarin's strict adherence to the Mandalorian creed gradually weakens due to his evolving relationship with Grogu. His sense of morality seemingly shifts from a strong loyalty to the Mandalorian community to loyalty, caring for, and bonding with Grogu. This dynamic is interpreted mainly from a moral psychology approach, which is used to examine which moral values are included in the Mandalorian creed and how Djarin's moral disposition changes throughout the series. Additionally, a positive psychology perspective addresses how Djarin's character development throughout the series can be defined as *eudaimonic* (i.e., focusing on worthwhile aspects of life[3],[4]), improving his well-being mainly due to his growing connection with Grogu as well as his shifting identification as a Mandalorian. This chapter addresses whether and how Djarin's journey influences his moral values, decision-making, and his adherence of the Mandalorian moral code. The next section includes a brief overview of this moral psychology perspective. All of this is then discussed in the context of the first three seasons of *The Mandalorian* and the three final episodes of *The Book of Boba Fett* that featured a reunited Djarin and Grogu.

Exploring Moral Foundations and Its Impact on a Person's Well-Being

Moral foundations theory (MFT[5]) is a psychological framework that argues that people have natural-born moral foundations, or intuitions, that guide their judgments and decision-making. According to MFT, there are five sets of moral foundations:

- Care/harm: physical and emotional harm of others, including virtues of kindness, gentleness, nurturance, compassion, and empathy.
- Fairness/reciprocity: notions of justice, honesty, reciprocal altruism, equity, and proportionality.
- In-group/loyalty: forming community bonding, coalitions, and self-sacrifice for the group.
- Authority/respect: ideas of leadership, followers, social hierarchies, and respect for traditions.
- Purity/sanctity: notions of living a noble life, but also feelings of disgust or contamination.

These morals are thought to be present in every human being, but their importance to an individual as well as how they shape people's judgments and decision-making differ from person to person, as they are formed through learning experiences or the specific culture an individual belongs to[6].

While MFT focuses on individuals' intuitive gut reactions, rather than on more complex moral reasoning[7], a dual-process model of moral judgment may exist: a quick, automatic, intuitive system based on mostly emotional decisions (i.e., people's gut reactions) and a slow, rational, deliberate system. This second component, the slow, rational system, is sometimes referred to as moral reasoning[8]. This is our controllable process that we deliberately engage after obtaining more information about a certain

situation. While moral reasoning can override our initial gut reactions, these intuitive reactions tend to be the driving force in people's moral judgments[9]. For instance, this may explain why Djarin is initially so hesitant to trust droids (based on his intuitions), but eventually lowers his guard around IG-11, who proves himself to be trustworthy through his (recently reprogrammed) actions (based on Djarin's more elaborate moral reasoning).

When we discuss moral foundations, we also need to include moral disengagement[10]. When people do something that violates social conventions or their own personal moral values, they tend to morally distance themselves from their own behavior to cope with feelings such as shame or guilt. This process is called moral disengagement. To distance themselves from their transgressions, people can, for example, make advantageous comparisons (i.e., comparing one's transgression to even worse behavior, arguing that their behavior is less harmful), not take responsibility, or ignore the consequences of the moral transgression[11]. For example, when Djarin hands over Grogu to the Imperial forces fully aware that they do not have good intentions with the innocent orphan, this could be seen as moral disengagement because he ignores the consequences and does not take responsibility for his immoral actions.

Finally, a tenant of moral foundations is that holding true to one's beliefs contributes to positive feelings about one's self. When someone is true to their moral foundations, they experience an increased sense of well-being. This sense of well-being is sometimes referred to as *eudaimonic well-being*, which refers to achieving one's best potential through a sense of autonomy and relatedness to others, personal growth, purpose in life, being able to express your own identity, and self acceptance[12],[13],[14].

What Does It Mean to Be a Mandalorian? The Mandalorian

Code and Moral Foundations

The Mandalorian provides viewers with a clear introduction to Mandalorian culture, specifically regarding the moral values they adhere to. There are several instances where Djarin upholds important moral foundations and follows the Way of the Mandalore closely. Before Grogu, Djarin never removed his iconic Mandalorian helmet, as this is against the creed. Even when severely injured and in need of treatment from the IG-11 droid[15], Djarin refuses to take off his helmet and insists on being left behind, rather than having his companions see his face. However, Djarin eventually gives in to the droid's medical assistance and removes his helmet to receive treatment. As a droid is not alive, this act only *bends* and not breaks his adherence to the creed.

There are additional moral beliefs that Mandalorians share beyond maintaining anonymity. First, they emphasize honor in battle, such as Djarin wanting to die a warrior's death after being injured[16] and his avoidance of shooting unarmed men[17]. Second, loyalty towards the Mandalorian community is essential. For instance, other Mandalorians from Djarin's covert help him and Grogu escape from the bounty hunter's guild and Imperial forces[18]. Third, the creed dictates that Mandalorians should take care of and train foundlings, ensuring the future of the community.

The Mandalorian creed, including the above values, can be connected to the five moral foundations identified by the MFT[19]. Looking after the foundlings and ensuring their well-being relates to the foundation of care/harm, while acting honorable and living a noble, honest life is associated with both the moral notions of purity/sanctity and fairness/reciprocity. The Mandalorians' awe and respect for the Armorer (their *de facto* leader) signifies the moral foundation of authority/respect, and the Mandalorians' strong sense of loyalty towards other members of their clan is an

example of making decisions based on the moral foundation of in-group/loyalty.

Interestingly, Djarin's profession as a bounty hunter contradicts some of these moral values included in the Mandalorian creed, including care/harm (for example, showing no compassion for the bounties he collects) and purity/sanctity (hunting down other individuals, even if they are wanted for a crime, is not a particularly noble way of living). His very first words in the series emphasize this contradiction: "*I can bring you in warm, or I can bring you in cold"* (S1 E1, The Mandalorian)[20]. This begins to change when Grogu comes into his life.

A Burgeoning Bond: Early Signs of Djarin's Relationship With Grogu

When Grogu enters Djarin's life, there is no real bond, at least from Djarin's side. Initially, he hands over Grogu to the Imperial forces, who want to experiment on Grogu, with seemingly little hesitation. Djarin makes this decision based on his quick, moral intuition, led by the moral foundation of in-group/loyalty[21], to get the reward (rare and valuable Mandalorian beskar) back into Mandalorian hands. To overlook this moral transgression against the care/harm foundation, he takes on another bounty as a form of moral disengagement to cope with the accompanying guilt[22] and forget about Grogu. Later, however, Djarin regrets this transgression and saves Grogu.

From this point forward, they start to develop a close relationship. Djarin acts like a parent, even reprimanding Grogu for pressing random buttons inside his ship on several occasions. He is also very protective when fellow gun for hire Mayfeld threatens Grogu[23], acting concerned about leaving him alone on the ship during a prison break job. This relationship goes both ways. During an arm-wrestling match between Djarin and their

ally Cara Dune[24], Grogu shows protective behavior when he uses his Force powers to stop Cara as he believes she is actually harming Djarin.

Straying From The Way, But Gaining a Close Relationship

In the search for a Jedi to train Grogu, Djarin comes across others outside his covert that aid him. When Djarin encounters Mandalorians who stray from the creed or meets individuals wearing Mandalorian armor he does not deem authentically Mandalorian, Djarin quickly defends his own code. For example, when meeting marshal Cobb Vanth[25], who is not Mandalorian himself but wore Boba Fett's iconic Mandalorian armor, Djarin demands the armor from him because Vanth is decisively not Mandalorian. Perhaps the most notable encounter with outsiders occurs when Djarin and Grogu are ambushed and saved by three Mandalorians in blue armor, including Bo-Katan Kryze[26]. When they remove their helmets, Djarin immediately goes on the defensive and calls them out for not covering their faces in accordance with his creed, as he believes this should be followed by all Mandalorians. Bo-Katan explains, to the benefit of audiences *and* Djarin, that Djarin is part of a splinter group of Mandalorians, the Children of the Watch. This is an important moment for Djarin, as he realizes there are other Mandalorian communities that do not follow the same strict moral code.

Encountering different perspectives on what it means to be a Mandalorian and wear Mandalorian armor bolsters Djarin's determination to follow his creed. Meeting others with different values provides a divide between him and them, enhancing his own beliefs and strengthening his personal identity. Indeed, Djarin doubling down on his own beliefs, even when confronted with the knowledge that other Mandalorians believe and behave differently, may be a way for Djarin to improve his own well-being. Self-acceptance[27] is relevant here. Djarin follows through

on his strict Mandalorian beliefs when claiming Boba Fett's armor from Cobb Vanth and defending his choice to conceal his face to Bo-Katan. These interactions help him express and validate his identity.

Djarin and Grogu's Relationship Transcends the Mandalorian Creed

Djarin and Grogu start to develop their father-son relationship in small and subtle moments, and we see this relationship grow over time. Djarin reprimands Grogu on several occasions like a parent; for instance, when he eats the eggs of the so-called Frog Lady[28] or when he tells Grogu not to play with his chowder at the inn[29]. Their developing father-son connection is also recognized by the Jedi Ahsoka Tano, who mentions that Grogu has a strong attachment to Djarin, something Jedi are not allowed to have. However, this nurturing relationship likely leads to an improved well-being for both Djarin and Grogu, as it fulfills a fundamental human need to experience relatedness or the need to connect to others[30],[31]. As such, their close personal relationship leads to more purpose and satisfaction in both of their lives.

After their visit to Ahsoka and using the seer stone to find other Jedi, Grogu is captured by Imperial warlord Moff Gideon[32], leaving Djarin alone and lost. To find Grogu, Djarin confronts a big moral dilemma. He must either stick to his Mandalorian creed – never remove his helmet and lose his only lead that would help him find Grogu – or give up his strict moral code to save him. In the end, Djarin alters his moral code for Grogu and removes his helmet so he can use an Imperial computer with facial scanning to find his location. This marks the first time Djarin reveals his face to sentient others since he was a child. Notably, Djarin may be prompted to remove his helmet and save Grogu by the moral foundations of care and loyalty he feels towards Grogu[33]. He does not necessarily forsake his original moral values, but rather holds

them differently: shifting from a sense of loyalty and care for his Mandalorian covert to a more personal sense of care and loyalty towards Grogu. Indeed, the quickness with which Djarin decides to take off his helmet in the Imperial base suggests his decision was based on the rapid, intuitive moral system (i.e., a moral gut response) following his entrenched moral foundations of care and loyalty, rather than a more rational, slower system of moral reasoning.

This shift would suggest that choosing Grogu over the creed fulfills his need for companionship and relatedness in ways that his Mandalorian covert cannot provide. Indeed, after telling Gideon that Grogu means more to him than he will ever know, Djarin begins the rescue mission. He is singularly focused on Grogu's safety: "*The child is my only priority"* (S2 E16, The Rescue)[34]. After rescuing Grogu and defeating Gideon, Jedi Luke Skywalker arrives to train Grogu in the ways of the Force. Although visibly conflicted between continuing his Jedi training and staying with Djarin, Grogu decides to go with Luke. During their heartbreaking goodbye, Djarin removes his helmet without much hesitation, demonstrating their meaningful relationship and its importance. At this point in the series, his relationship with Grogu is more valuable than upholding the Mandalorian creed.

Djarin Loses the Way: Losing Grogu and His Identity

Rescuing Grogu and building a meaningful, close relationship with him provides Djarin with additional purpose next to serving his covert, which improves his well-being. By satisfying his basic human need for relatedness, Djarin grows on an emotional level, becoming a better, more complete individual. However, we see a rupture in Djarin's well-being following Grogu's departure with Luke to train as a Jedi. Djarin slips back into his old, harsh bounty hunter lifestyle, threatening his quarry with a quip used before

his time with Grogu: "*I can bring you in warm, or I can bring you in cold"* (*The Book of Boba Fett*, S1 E5, The Return of the Mandalorian)[35]. Reunited with members of his covert, Djarin confesses he removed his helmet in the presence of others. As a result, the Armorer banishes Djarin from the clan for his moral transgressions. In this moment, a core aspect of his identity as a Mandalorian is taken from him. This leads to Djarin immediately seeking a way to redeem himself. The Armorer mentions that this can only be done by locating the living waters of Mandalore and bathing in them.

Before going on his path towards redemption, Djarin attempts to reconnect with Grogu by gifting him a piece of Mandalorian armor[36]. Luke, however, presents Grogu with an important moral dilemma: either he commits to his Jedi training and becomes Luke's first student (but is unlikely to see Djarin again), or he accepts Djarin's gift and forsake the ways of the Jedi for good. Grogu is forced to choose between a strong personal relationship with Djarin or a life without strong attachment that can be purposeful in a more abstract manner (i.e., protecting the galaxy as a Jedi). Both choices lead down a path that can increase an individual's well-being as either may bring about a purposeful life, albeit in different ways (one more personal, the other more abstract). In the end, Grogu chooses his personal relationship with Djarin[37].

Finding His Way Back: Redemption and Reconciliation

Djarin's quest for redemption builds off previous conflict between Mandalorian subgroups by focusing on the broader Mandalorian cultural identity. For instance, upon learning that Djarin has never been to the planet of Mandalore, Bo-Katan mocks Djarin for believing that he is a real Mandalorian as he was raised on the Mandalorian moon of Concordia[38]. She also calls his redemption mission and his creed a fairytale. Djarin, however, defends his

Mandalorian identity even after his exile: "w*ithout the creed, what are we? What do we stand for?*" (S3 E2, The Mines of Mandalore)[39]. By holding on to his strict Mandalorian creed and expressing himself as a Mandalorian instead of an exiled member of the group, Djarin maintains his sense of self and self-acceptance by standing firm to his identity, which fulfills his need for autonomy.

Later, Djarin succeeds in reaching the living waters of Mandalore, with help from Grogu and Bo-Katan[40]. Completing this redemptive act, Djarin does not take off his helmet again as he holds firmly onto his values and begins teaching them to Grogu. In the end, Djarin's adherence to the Mandalorian creed remains fairly level across the series, only shifting in accordance with Grogu's needs in dire times (i.e., removing his helmet when saying goodbye to Grogu). Taking care of Grogu, who does not by birth belong to his covert, includes a certain adherence to the creed itself. Not only is taking care of a foundling part of the creed, but introducing Grogu into the Mandalorian covert demonstrates the Mandalorian tenet that Mandalorian is not a *race*, but rather an adherence to the creed and its moral values.

Eventually, Djarin's strict moral code and his close personal relationship to Grogu are reconciled by training him in the Mandalorian creed. Djarin, for instance, teaches him how to navigate in space on several occasions, as a Mandalorian needs to be able to read star charts[41]. At the same time, Grogu's Jedi training (or lack thereof) fails to save Djarin from a robotic beast after his capture, but his instructions on flight navigation pay off when Grogu pilots a ship on his own to reach Bo-Katan, who ultimately comes to Djarin's aid[42].

Grogu's training as a Mandalorian goes hand in hand with the further evolving connection between him and Djarin, as well as his improved well-being. Through the sharing of experiences, support, mutual respect and care, Grogu and Djarin's relationship

grows closer. These aspects of their close relationship are often subtle. When Grogu is scared during hyperspace travel or when he is afraid of the dark in the Mandalorian mines, he stays very close to his father figure. These displays of affection, finding support with each other, and taking care of each other are demonstrated to improve Djarin's and Grogu's well-being[43]. In another instance, Djarin is proud of Grogu when he wins his fight against another Mandalorian foundling and he acts like a protective parent when he feels that Grogu is too young to operate his own IG-12 droid. Perhaps the most relevant example of how their relationship affects their well-being is when Djarin decides to adopt Grogu as his son. Grogu grows from a foundling to a Mandalorian apprentice and adopts Djarin's family name as Din Grogu. They explore the galaxy as mentor and apprentice, becoming independent contractors for the New Republic. The father-son duo finally settles down in a home on Navarro, their reward for all the struggles and hardship they endured together[44].

Conclusion

An important aspect within *The Mandalorian* is the moral values that Djarin upholds, established in the creed he was sworn to behold as a child, as well as within his broader connection to Mandalorian culture. While the Children of the Watch follow a strict code that prohibits members from removing their helmets in front of others, Mandalorians collectively adhere to broader moral values such as honor, loyalty to community, and caring for younger members or foundlings. When interpreted through moral psychology, the Mandalorian creed is built around several moral foundations (e.g., loyalty, care, sanctity). Djarin's adherence to the strict creed does not falter much, only when prioritizing Grogu's needs. While Djarin's journey leads to a few moral transgressions against the creed, overall, his father-son relationship with Grogu does not stop him from standing by his beliefs and passing them on to Grogu. Thus, Djarin's progressive

personal development and eudaimonic well-being (i.e., environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance) is understood in two ways: (1) through accepting himself and expressing his identity as a Mandalorian belonging to the Children of the Watch and (2) through his close, personal relationship with Grogu.

Ultimately, by raising Grogu as a Mandalorian, Djarin reconciles both worlds, that is, parenting Grogu and his Mandalorian beliefs. Throughout their adventures, Djarin's experiences lead to a more purposeful and meaningful life, including the fulfillment of autonomy and relatedness, having multiple positive relationships (not just with Grogu, but also with Cara Dune, Bo-Katan, the Armorer, even Greef Karga), having a purpose in life (training Grogu and raising him as his son), and being able to accept and express himself as a true Mandalorian.

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HE'S ONE OF THEM

Social Identity and The Mandalorian

James D. Ivory, PhD & Michael Senters

The distinctive armor and mysterious presence of bounty hunter Boba Fett fascinated audiences in *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi* despite only minutes of screen time, a few spoken lines, and an ignominious defeat. Ever since, we've wanted to know more about the bounty hunter and his ilk. Although fewer Star Wars enthusiasts saw the first vague mentions of the term "Mandalorian" in the novelization of the *Empire Strikes Back* and issues of Star Wars comic books published in the 1980s, excitement around the fictional warriors has long been prominent among Star Wars fans. It's no wonder, then, that the characteristics and criteria of the Mandalorian identity are prominent themes in any tale that features them.

Like many science fiction and fantasy narratives, the Star Wars media franchise boasts a deep roster of fantastic sentient beings. In the archetypal world of screen fiction, the populations of entire planets can be reduced to a few personality traits, mannerisms, and motivations, as uniform as their physical appearance and sometimes unforgivingly negative in the interest of providing a steady supply of unsympathetic antagonists. As a consequence,

science fiction and fantasy tales risk portraying fictional groups in a manner reminiscent of—or even in direct facsimile of—the flawed stereotypical thinking that fuels bigotry and intolerance in our own real world. Given the cultural salience of Star Wars, the way groups in its faraway galaxy are viewed can exemplify patterns in terms of how we think about real social groups–including our own–and the way they influence our conceptions of identity. This chapter explores how *The Mandalorian* can be viewed as illustrating the power of social identities, a psychological approach that explores how individuals conceptualize their own identities *vís-a-vís t*he social groups and categories that include them and others. *The Mandalorian* provides clear examples we can use to understand social identity and ways we can apply the perspective to understanding how we see and interact with the world around us.

The Perspective

The social identity perspective[1,2] refers to our understanding of how we see ourselves (i.e., our self-concept), how we see ourselves in relation to others[3], and how and why we love to categorize ourselves and others into different social groups[4]. A key premise of social identity theory is that a core component of our identity is our sense of belonging to different social groups. Specifically, the way we view the groups we belong to (our "in groups") tends to be more favorable than the groups we do not belong to (the "out-groups"), and this differentiation contributes to a more positive self-image. Relevant group identities might be based in any of a broad and varied range of social contexts such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, favorite sports teams, and occupations. Self-categorization theory is a similar idea but places more emphasis on the presence of multiple co-existing levels of one's self-identity (e.g., individual vs. social groups vs. shared humanity) informing a host of potential categories which

one might place oneself rather than any single group membership.

These psychological theories, both under the umbrella of the social identity perspective, share the claim that how we view ourselves (i.e., our self-perception) informs our own group membership as well as how we're perceived within these groups and categories. Given the conceptual diversity of the theories making up the social identity approach, it is also a dynamic tool for understanding stereotyping[5], xenophobia[6], political polarization[7], and perceptions of health risk[8].

The Mandalorian is a television series brimming with themes and events relevant to the social identity perspective. After all, the very title of the program is the name of a social group in the Star Wars universe, and there are countless instances where the group memberships and identity categories of Djarin are key aspects of *The Mandalorian*'s story over its first three seasons. The same is true of other characters, from those who also consider themselves Mandalorians to those who do not. In many ways, *The Mandalorian* is very much a show about groups, their identities and dispositions towards each other, and the characters' navigation of that landscape as their own social identities evolve.

The Examples

In the following sections, we will explore a few examples of how the characters, storylines, and symbolism of *The Mandalorian* can help us better understand the social identity perspective and what it looks like in our day to day lives and interactions.

The Membership (Mandalorian as Group Identity)

Djarin and a growing cast of Mandalorian companions (sometimes of disputed status, as with Boba Fett) place momentous importance on the defining characteristics of a

Mandalorian, who can consider themselves Mandalorians and who cannot, and the disposition of Mandalorians toward other groups in the Star Wars universe (ranging from the Empire to Jedi). Among the prominent themes throughout the series are several that are particularly relevant to social identity theory. Djarin is devoted to his small and clandestine Mandalorian community and the norms of that small group: "*This is the way*," they constantly remind each other, perhaps as often to discourage nonconformity as to instruct. His group's defining traits are fundamental to his self-concept: not once, but twice in the series, he insists weapons are part of his religion as a Mandalorian. Characters' perceptions of groups' defining characteristics and boundaries are also central: the taboo on removing helmets seems to divide Mandalorian sects (perhaps more than adherence to different points of Calvinism divide Protestant groups in our world). Djarin can even be seen to traverse an evolving number of levels of self-concept. Over time, he transforms from a member of a small cultish clique largely traveling alone into a member of a close "clan of two" family within a much larger and more broadly-defined group of Mandalorians. The general applicability of the social identity perspective to *The Mandalorian*'s core tale is perhaps a bit on the nose.

This is not an unusual occurrence in the Star Wars saga, nor in epic fantasy stories in general. Just as group identity and social categorization are important signifiers of identity in people's self-concept, defining clear social groups and their disposition toward each other is an easy way for stories on the screen to assign traits and backgrounds to large swaths of characters and establish plot elements such as conflict. In a universe where scores of fantastic anthropomorphic creatures are introduced rapidly and war is an overtly promised constant, describing groups and their interactions in similar terms is an easy way to achieve exposition. If anything, the mental shortcuts that individuals apply to define and evaluate themselves and others by group identity and social

categorization in our real world can be thought of as perhaps similar to film tropes. Indeed, real-world individuals who cast sweeping criticisms on entire demographic groups and simultaneously present their own identities based on their affiliation with a social group in a self-serving manner may be reminiscent of fictional characters themselves.

But again, the contribution of the social identity perspective is not only its broad recognition that group identities and social categories are important to self-concept and self-evaluation, but also to offer relevant explanations of specific social phenomena–including phenomena that are socially problematic. Given that social identity is deeply imbued in the fundamental characters and plot of *The Mandalorian*, our goal here is not only to summarize the most obvious or typical ways in which the social identity perspective and related concepts and findings are relevant to the series. Instead, we focus in this essay on some specific examples where anecdotes from the show can be used to understand specific relevant phenomena informed by social identity and relevant concepts and research–particularly phenomena that we believe should be better understood for social benefit.

The Respect: Characters' Practice and Rejection of Deindividuation

One socially important phenomenon that can be understood through the lens of social identity is the notion of deindividuation. Deindividuation is the process of deemphasizing the individual characteristics of a person (e.g., they are kind, they are young, etc.) and their individual behavior (e.g., they participate in an activity, they attend school to study a given subject) in preference for more broad associations of identity (e.g., they are a member of a specific community, gender, or ethnic group). This recasting can downplay the unique

individuality of a person by defining them as merely a member of groups, and in extreme cases can discount a person's humanity altogether. While deindividuation has been long explored in the field of psychology[9], the social identity model of deindividuation effects[10] applies a social identity perspective to more fully explain mechanisms of deindividuation. Think of it this way: deindividuation is the mechanism that underlies the idea of "us" versus "them." It is why we see our groups as more preferable to groups we are not a part of.

Deindividuation is a component of how we understand many antisocial actions, such as antipathy toward fans of opposing sports teams to bigotry to anonymous bullying online. Just as dimensions of group membership of a character's identity represent a commonplace theme in *The Mandalorian*, deindividuation is also apparent. The most prominent example of such in *The Mandalorian*, as with most fictional epics, is the reduction of minor characters to their role as members of a partisan group in the narrative's conflict. This is particularly true in the case of minor antagonists, such as stormtroopers, who are subjected to violence from heroic protagonists. This is not by accident: deindividuation is often used in both real life (e.g., war propaganda) and fiction to reduce negative associations with violence toward a deindividuated victim[11].

Just as in real life, though, deindividuation in *The Mandalorian* is not limited to victims of overt physical violence; characters' offhand comments and jokes also exhibit the types of more subtle dehumanization and annihilation of individuality that characterize behavior associated with deindividuation. For example, when former Imperial sharpshooter Migs Mayfield retorts "*I wasn't a stormtrooper, wise ass!*" (S1 E6, The Prisoner)[12] in response to Djarin's jibe about the legendary lack of marksmanship among the Imperial rank and file soldiers, both characters paint the stormtroopers with a fairly broad and

derogatory brush. That particular critique might be justified by the convenient inaccuracy of such characters in service of Star Wars plots, but this is not the only such example of the deindividuation that such throwaway comments can carry. Consider Migs Mayfield's derisive speculation that Djarin might be a Gungan hiding his protrusive features under his helmet in a display of galactic bigotry, or Tatooine repair shop proprietor Peli Motto's claim that "*I dated a Jawa for a while*" (*The Book of Boba Fett*, S1 E5, Return of the Mandalorian)[13] and accompanying suggestive generalizations about Jawas' physical traits.

More interesting examples, perhaps, of the portrayal of deindividuation in *The Mandalorian* are instances where characters are notable for *not* exhibiting deindividuation behavior toward characters from other social groups. The Tuskens of Tatooine are described in homogenous, and often even subhuman, terms throughout most of their appearances over decades of Star Wars offerings. They are even labeled "Sand People" by no less than the benevolent aged Jedi knight Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars: A New Hope*, the film that launched the franchise. Djarin provides a clear contrast in his interactions with Tatooine's indigenous people. Even as his temporary bounty-hunting companion mocks the native tribespeople, Djarin exhibits a respect for their territorial claims and their customs and policies and speaks their language in what amounts to the first respectful interaction of a Star Wars character with a Tusken Raider ever to be released on screen[14]. Djarin's respect for autonomy and individual agency in this scene might be taken as a signal of his respect for the Tuskens, and for persons in general. As a character who spends a lot of time in a group that is subject to broad generalizations about identity (after all, even some acquaintances call him "Mando" rather than his name, and at least one character does do so even in the presence of other Mandalorians), perhaps Djarin is deliberately portrayed as

resistant to tendencies toward deindividuation in a universe where it is widespread.

Another example of how *The Mandalorian*'s treatment of deindividuation might be most notable in its absence is Bo-Katan Kryze's character arc and her evolving relationship with the Children of the Watch. Upon her initial appearance in the series, the former ruler of Mandalore views the Children of the Watch as a kind of cult or splinter group that gave up on Mandalore by fleeing to the moon Concordia before the purge of the Mandalorians by the Empire occurred[15].

Both Bo-Katan Kryze's rejection of the Children of the Watch and the Children's rejection of all who remove their helmets as apostate Mandalorians speaks to a form of deindividuation and out-group identification. Each group rejects the other for some arbitrary reason even though they still use the same symbols and share a common history to define themselves. This othering is even more surprising given the fact that the purge of Mandalore nearly destroyed all trace of the Mandalorians as a people and culture, yet here remain two groups bickering about what it really means to be a Mandalorian. It may be that both subgroups are trying to process the trauma of the purge through group comparison, blaming the other as the reason why the Great Purge occurred. Bo-Katan Kryze certainly feels that way about the Children of the Watch in her early encounters with Djarin, as she blames his sect and other Mandalorian splinter groups for weakening the Mandalorians' ranks[16]. The Armorer, meanwhile, claims the destruction of Mandalore occurred because Bo-Katan Kryze did not win the Mandalorians' prized Darksaber heirloom weapon properly in combat according to traditional protocols[17]. Each group seeks to blame the other and not themselves for the destruction of their homeland, displacing responsibility while also comparing their own social group to the other in a way that presents themselves more favorably than the other.

As the series' plot progresses, both factions in this dispute come to respect each other and set aside their differences over what it means to be a Mandalorian in their shared quest to reclaim their homeland. Bo-Katan Kryze comes to accept the Children of the Watch not as a cult, but as fellow Mandalorians who take particular pride in their past and customs, while the Armorer and the Children of the Watch accept Bo-Katan Kryze as their leader and unifier, allowing her to walk among them with her helmet off in ostensible violation of tradition. The result, in the finale of the program's third season, is that the united group reclaims Mandalore and achieves a milestone toward rekindling their culture by literally relighting the Great Forge on their ancestral home planet[18]. The mutual respect and acceptance indicates that Bo-Katan Kryze and the Children of the Watch have overcome the tendency toward deindividuation of out-groups and antagonistic comparison to bolster self-concept. Their respect for one another represents new conceptualizations of their shared identity and respect for the diverse perspectives between Mandalorians' different social subgroups.

The Symbols (Armor and Group Identity)

While group identity is deeply woven into the fabric of *The Mandalorian* and its characters in a manner often seen in other stories' epic and archetypal struggles, one unique symbol of the Mandalorians' group identity is the prominence and centrality of Mandalorian armor to the self-concepts of Mandalorians. Mandalorian opinion leader Alrich Wren has strong words in the *Star Wars: Rebels* animated series in response to the suggestion that the Mandalorians change how they craft their armor to negate the Arc Pulse Generator (an Imperial superweapon that exploits the unique makeup of the normally near-impervious fictional Beskar alloy the armor was made of): "*This armor is part of our identity. It makes us Mandalorians who we are*." (*Star Wars: Rebels*, S4 E1, Heroes of Mandalore[19]. In *The Mandalorian*, the

Children of the Watch place such importance on the armor they wear that they are forbidden from removing their helmets while around other sentient beings; they believe that to remove one's helmet results in no longer being a Mandalorian. It is an object of great cultural and personal significance for each individual Mandalorian, and to wear that armor is a defining symbol of what it means to be Mandalorian.

Symbols have served to identify groups and bring people together throughout history, from the symbols of myths and religions to the heraldry of noble clans and houses to the flags of modern nation-states[20]. It is common for a group to have some sort of symbol that serves as an image, icon or object that represents the group's values, attributes, and history[21]. Symbols like these that invoke a person's most basic values, have been called condensation symbols[22], as such symbols can condense an array of emotions, values, and other associations into a single signifier[23]. Mandalorian scion Sabine Wren speaks of her armor in a manner consistent with condensation symbols when potential Jedi Ezra Bridger asks why the Mandalorians simply cannot reforge their armor to counter the Arc Pulse Generator: "*The armor I wear is five hundred years old. I reforged it to my liking, but the battles, the history, the blood all live within it. And the same goes for every Mandalorian*" (*Star Wars: Rebels*, S4 E1, Heroes of Mandalore)[24].

The armor serves as a condensation symbol of the Mandalorians, reminding them of all their past struggles and conflicts. It invokes a sense of pride and history and it can be fitted and forged to fit anyone. This practice allows adopted foundlings, such as Djarin, to be brought into the group via incremental armor ownership and lets them become Mandalorians in a symbolic sense. Being a Mandalorian is not about one's blood, language, or even any personal connection to the planet of Mandalore; to be a Mandalorian is to embrace a creed, including its condensation

symbols. By adopting those symbols, a Mandalorian accepts all the emotions they invoke within them as well.

This defining connection to the armor became even more important to Mandalorians after the Great Purge of Mandalore. In *The Mandalorian*, Bo-Katan Kryze says the Empire purged Mandalore specifically to wipe away its memory. Mandalore was already barely habitable prior to the Great Purge, as seen in the animated series *The Clone Wars* and *Star Wars: Rebels*, but the Great Purge's intent was to make the planet completely uninhabitable. Further, the Imperials carted away large amounts of Beskar after the planet's annihilation. For the surviving Mandalorians, their armor was the only symbol they had left to their home via the increasingly rare Beskar alloy the armor was forged from. This is a connection that all Mandalorians, even adopted foundlings, have to the planet. As Djarin tells his adopted son Grogu upon sighting his people's ancestral home: "*It's Mandalore. The homeland of our people. Every Mandalorian can trace their roots back to this planet, and the Beskar mines deep within*"(S3 E2, The Mines of Mandalore)[25].

We again see how the armor acts as a condensation symbol, allowing Djarin to feel a connection to a planet on which he had never previously set foot and to feel nostalgic for the Mandalore of old, the Mandalore of the songs and stories he had heard. The armor thus serves as the central symbol of group identity for the Mandalorians, acting as a condensation symbol through which their connection to their identity and to others is chiefly defined. To be a Mandalorian is to wear Mandalorian armor, forged of Beskar from the mines in the heart of Mandalore itself. A Mandalorian without their armor is no Mandalorian, for it is truly the armor that makes the Mandalorian.

For some, the Mandalorian armor is also host to even more specific condensation symbols clarifying members' identity in

social groups or attributing them to specific categorizations. For example, deserving Mandalorians bear a logo of their smaller family clan on a shoulder pauldron, including Djarin and his earned symbol for his "clan of two" with Grogu. Further, politically-aligned factions within Mandalore are symbolized on armor, such as Bo-Katan Kryze's Nite Owls group and their distinctive helmet paint. Variations in the armor's design and aesthetic can also signify intersectionality between the Mandalorian social group identity and other demographic social identities. For example, some other heavily-clad Star Wars groups, such as Tuskens and stormtroopers, lack much hint as to the gender of the person under their garb, but some ostensibly female Mandalorians' armor includes shape and design characteristics coded for female gender, much like that of Bo-Katan Kryze (e.g., subtle bust contour, distinctive helmet). Thus, the armor not only makes a Mandalorian a Mandalorian, but also expresses membership in subgroups within that identity as well as intersections with other identities beyond being Mandalorian. Despite such symbolic denotations of Mandalorian subgroups, though, the degree of similarity across the design of all Mandalorian armor remains uniform enough to present Mandalorians as a shared group identity. The armor also presents an air of individual anonymity, which is associated with reduced inhibitions about inflicting harm on others[26], fitting for a culture steeped in values tied to war and combat.

The Fear: Anthropomorphizing and Social Interaction with Computer Agents

While Djarin's respect for the individual personhood of the Tuskens distinguishes him, he is not without tendency to characterize entire social groups unfavorably. In a perhaps innocent example, he leaves the moon of Trask voicing a vague negative sentiment toward the amphibious Mon Calamari: "*Mon Calimari; unbelievable*" (S2 E3, The Heiress)[27]. Given that his

frustration is a response to a ramshackle and heavily nautical-influenced repair job on his beloved *Razor Crest* spacecraft, though, Djarin's momentary generalization might not be unwarranted. That said, another social group in *The Mandalorian* is a much more consistent target of Djarin's distrust and disdain, and it is a group commonly subject to discrimination in the Star Wars universe: droids.

Despite his enlightenment with regard to the personhood of Tatooine's Tusken denizens, as well as a seemingly egalitarian view toward the myriad other beings of the galaxy, Djarin has an uncharacteristically vivid distaste for droids. Psychologically, there is plenty going on behind this: Djarin is haunted by the memory of his family's annihilation by combat droids, and it can be presumed much of his hostility toward them is based in this trauma. In any case, Djarin is initially very committed to his bigotry towards droids. He does not allow their use in his oft-needed repairs to his spacecraft, exhibits a ruthless lack of hesitance in eliminating them (even for a gunslinging bounty hunter), and he is unwaveringly dubious of their claims and assistance in general. Importantly, Djarin's antipathy is not only based in fear of what a malevolently programmed droid is capable of: he fundamentally distrusts droids as a class of bad actors.

Droids are not living creatures, though in the Star Wars environment some are capable of achieving a degree of sentience. From the moment we meet the famed pair of C-3PO and R2-D2 at the beginning of *Star Wars: A New Hope*[28], we are aware that they can exhibit no shortage of personality. Thus, it is no major stretch to anthropomorphize, or attribute human traits to, droids. Not long after we are first treated to the rich personalities of droids in *A New Hope*, we find that they are discriminated against so heavily they are banned from a cantina–and one that tolerates scum and villainy up to and including lethal confrontations, no less! While it is therefore not always much of a leap of the

imagination to anthropomorphize droids, it should be noted that many of the droids Djarin holds in such visceral contempt are far from sentient. Among droids he avoids are mute repair droids whose movements and interactions are perhaps more reminiscent of rodents than people and a droid whose sole purpose is to operate a taxi vehicle. Even when the assassin droid IG-11 is reprogrammed to provide assistance and protection for Djarin's charge, Grogu, Djarin regards the reprogrammed guardian with unmerited suspicion. To Djarin, droids are malevolent and malicious–even droids that have no social traits and droids specifically re-programmed to be incapable of ill intent.

Here, we have an example analogous to people's real-world tendencies to not only determine disposition toward living things based on group identity, but to assign social groupings and categories to nonliving things. The "computers are social actors paradigm"[29] maintains that we behave socially toward computerized agents even in the absence of vivid anthropomorphic cues. Along with the social identity perspective, the paradigm maintains that people attribute perceived traits and stereotypes related to gender, personality type, ethnicity, and other human characteristics when interacting with computer agents lacking a high degree of human traits. A highly anthropomorphized agent, like Apple's Siri, can evoke social responses, but a simple cue such as a gendered name, voice, or even a brand aesthetic can also be sufficient to evoke the attribution of human traits to them (for more on anthropomorphism, see Koban in this volume).

Granted, in a world of droids with wildly varying personalities, such attribution is no great stretch, but Djarin's assignment of prejudicial stereotypes to thinking machines is illustrative as our real world becomes more and more filled with computerized voices, generative artificial intelligence, and interactive robots. Of course, Djarin mostly overcomes his prejudice at the end of

The Mandalorian's first season as the reprogrammed IG-11 droid sacrifices itself stoically to save the group of protagonists, but even then his emotional goodbye to the droid expresses a warmer anthropomorphizing toward a robot that has simply seen its assassin programming replaced by altruistic firmware. IG-11's reassurance that "*I have never been alive*" (S1 E8, Redemption)[30] does nothing to water down Djarin's anthropomorphizing of the droid's evolved programming, so much so that he endeavors two seasons later to reanimate the remnants of the destroyed automaton despite awareness that nothing remains of its previous personae. Djarin begins to regard droids more favorably after his interactions with IG-11 change from antagonistic to cooperative, showing that not only does he assign favorable and unfavorable character traits to all the robots of the Star Wars world, but that he does so in a sweeping fashion based on their shared group identity as droids.

The Lesson

The Mandalorian's deeply ingrained themes of group identity no doubt lend themselves to many more illustrations of the social identity perspective than the examples we have highlighted. Hopefully, though, we have shown how the program, and fantastic narratives in general, can be used to exemplify the perspective's applicability to understanding aspects of identity construction in our own world. Given that many of the phenomena to which the social identity perspective applies are issues of social concern, perhaps analogies from tales of a galaxy far, far away can aid us as we learn how to explore and solve problems right here and now. As we watch Djarin's character overcome biases and presumptions associated with group identity, his examples can encourage us as viewers to be mindful of how we view ourselves and others and our social identities.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to thank Adaia Ivory for her advice regarding examples from the Star Wars animated series described in this chapter.

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"A CLAN OF TWO"

Attachment and Connection

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In *The Mandalorian*[1], bounty hunter Din Djarin develops a bond with Grogu, a Force-sensitive being affectionately known as Baby Yoda to millions around the world. The pairing is an unlikely one. Initially, Djarin is portrayed as a stoic, solitary character who is always on a mission. He figuratively and literally keeps himself in defensive armor. In contrast, Grogu sees the world as a lost child who is open, curious, confused, and in need of connection and answers. Djarin and Grogu are from opposing groups: Mandalorian and Jedi. Yet, the pull for connection is powerful[2]; Djarin comes to first protect and eventually parent Grogu. But how did they get there? How did Grogu form a secure attachment relationship with Djarin despite the improbable odds stacked against them?

In this chapter, we explore the relationship between Djarin and Grogu through the lens of attachment theory[3],[4],[5]. Specifically, we highlight instances in which Djarin attends to Grogu's attachment needs and speculate on how he is able to do so. We also identify moments in which other characters in *The*

Mandalorian universe support Djarin and his healthy parenting, and more importantly, *how* they express their support.

Attachment Theory

The story of Djarin and Grogu is a new one in the Star Wars universe; the story of attachment is an old one in our own. British psychoanalyst John Bowlby is generally credited as the father of attachment theory. Influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution[6], he applied Darwin's ideas to his understanding of how caregiver-child relationships form. A human infant is born completely vulnerable, needing considerable support if it is to survive and develop. A primary caregiver must commit themselves fully to caring for this helpless being. Very few baby animals require as much attention and extended support as the human baby. Many animals, including large mammals, have evolved so that their babies are born nearly ready for immediate survival in a dangerous world. For example, giraffes typically stand within thirty minutes of being born and can run just hours after their birth[7]. Human babies are not born with any such obvious advantage. In fact, they are born so fragile that they cannot even raise their head without the help of another person.

This is where attachment theory comes in to play. Attachment theory states that human babies come into this world biologically programmed to form attachments with others because this is what helps them survive. There is an innate need to attach to a primary caregiver. Bowlby, and later Mary Ainsworth, further proposed that a caregiver meets a child's attachment needs by serving as both a safe haven and a secure base[8,9]. That is, they care for their child in a way that the child knows they will be available to support exploration and to comfort them when needed. When a caregiver performs both roles in a consistent, balanced way, the child develops a secure attachment to them. A secure attachment lays the groundwork for a child to explore

the world, gain confidence and self-worth along with a sense of safety and security, develop positive representations of close relationships, and build other healthy ones[10].

It is important to understand that an attachment relationship does not develop quickly. According to attachment theory, an initial pre-attachment stage occurs in which newborn babies orient toward people in their environment and engage in signaling behaviors to get the attention of others and keep them nearby, supporting their survival and development[11,12]. Early on, infants non-discriminately use these behaviors with all people, not just their caregivers. For example, crying (starting at birth) and smiling (starting at several weeks of age) are considered pre-attachment behaviors that are intended to keep other people physically close. Over time, these behaviors become more directed toward their primary caregiver(s), typically parents[13]. In *The Mandalorian*, we witness this transition happen between Grogu and Djarin.

Grogu & Djarin: An Attachment is Formed

In the first episode of the series Djarin accepts the job of tracking a new bounty, which unbeknownst to him is Grogu[14]. Though called The Child throughout most of the first two seasons, Grogu is initially introduced as a very young infant. "Is that a *baby* Yoda?!?" is the question that Star Wars fans asked at his reveal after the first episode of *The Mandalorian*[15]. This is likely based on Grogu's infant-like physical features (see Koban's chapter in this volume), and the fact that he debuts lying on his back in a pram. The episode memorably ends with Grogu reaching up toward Djarin as Djarin reaches toward him. For young human babies, the motor skills needed to signal by reaching comes later (around four months), but here Grogu is indiscriminately reaching toward a stranger to garner proximity and thus safety.

It is quickly made clear that Grogu is developmentally older (by human standards) than initially portrayed. While he does not talk, Grogu uses some vocalizations socially (another pre-attachment signaling behavior) and his receptive language skills are more developed than portrayed in the first episode. Also, in the very next episode, Djarin (and the audience) discover that Grogu can walk[16].

It is likely that rapidly presenting Grogu's true developmental skill level helps the show move quickly toward Djarin and Grogu forming a clear-cut attachment at a pace that is not jarring – as mentioned before, attachment between caregiver and child does not happen in a matter of days[17].

Towards the end of season one, we begin to see that Grogu has formed an attachment relationship with Djarin. Specifically, Djarin's conversation with Cara Dune and Greef Karga is interrupted by Grogu when Grogu walks toward Djarin and very clearly reaches to be picked up and held[18]. While any one of these three characters could (and would) hold him, Grogu clearly wants his primary caregiver. Djarin correctly identifies his need and obliges.

Meeting Attachment Needs

Young children are not passive recipients of care, but rather active participants who learn over time the best ways to get attachment needs met. When a caregiver meets those needs, they foster attachment security and, in turn, their child's healthy representations of self and others. Circle of Security[19] is one model that effectively describes ways in which caregivers meet children's attachment needs. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, children need their caregivers to be available to support them when they want to go out and explore (depicted on the top of the figure) and when they come in to seek comfort (depicted on the

bottom of the figure). Children also need their parents to be in charge, but in a kind way (depicted by the hands on the figure and by the phrase "always be bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind"). The caregiver balances supporting the child's exploration needs (termed "going out on the circle") and supporting the child when they need to be closer (termed "coming in on the circle"). The caregiver keeps their hands on the circle by simultaneously being bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind with the child, including during stressful situations. Caregivers who are mean, weak, or absent are unable to support attachment needs.

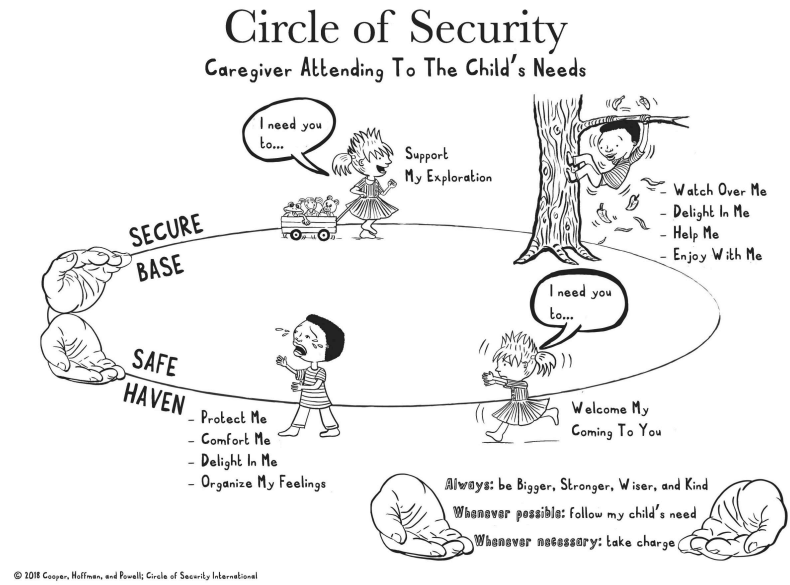

Figure 1: Caregiver Attending to the Child's Needs (reprinted with permission from Circle of Security International, Inc.)

All caregivers can miss seeing attachment needs and, in fact, they regularly do. Fortunately, research has shown that if a caregiver can correctly identify and meet an attachment need just half of the time, their child can still have a secure relationship with them[20]. Further, when caregivers do get it wrong (sometimes

referred to as a rupture), it is often not horribly wrong, and they can repair it[21],[22]. Research indicates that about half of children have a secure relationship with their caregiver[23]. This suggests about half of caregivers can support the needs on the top and the bottom of the circle as well as be the hands holding the circle. But what about the other half? The other half of caregivers struggle to meet some of the needs on the circle or to keep their hands on the circle altogether. The good news for children of the latter group is that when needs are chronically missed (resulting in insecure attachment patterns or disorganized attachment early on), it is not the sole factor determining developmental outcomes. Further, as these individuals later experience close relationships that are healthier, their thinking about relationships can shift toward security[24].

As Grogu's primary caregiver, Djarin is his attachment figure. Below are examples of how Djarin acts as both the secure base from which Grogu can explore and the safe haven to which Grogu can return. We also describe some of his ruptures and repairs and how he parents in ways that balance being bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind.

Meeting Grogu's Attachment Needs

Djarin meets Grogu's need for exploration by encouraging him to safely "go out on the circle." For example, during Grogu's interactions with Ahsoka, he is initially afraid to try out his Force powers in her presence[25]. Djarin could have responded in a number of ways, ranging from supportive to punitive. Attachment in practice does not require specific behaviors to be memorized and performed at specific times. Rather, it is that the caregiver recognizes the need and responds appropriately. The same behavior can be security-promoting or not; it is based on the underlying need of the child. Grogu hesitates to explore the Force; Djarin reacts sensitively as a secure base by introducing a

preferred object (Grogu's ball), gently verbally encouraging him, and by being calmly present and patient. As a result, Grogu feels comfortable to start experimenting with his Force powers. There are other ways that Djarin could have supported exploration. The goal is not to have the best or perfect strategy, but rather to do what works or what is "good enough"[26].

Djarin also meets Grogu's safe haven needs. Djarin welcomes Grogu when he comes to him in small ways, such as described above[27] and at the beginning of season three when Grogu snuggles in Djarin's arms after seeing something spooky while traveling through hyperspace[28]. "Coming in" also happens at more memorable moments. In the spinoff series *The Book of Boba Fett,* Grogu returns to Djarin after deciding against Jedi training with Luke Skywalker[29]. The setting for that reunion is not ideal (Djarin is being chased through the streets by an annihilator droid). He is surprised to see Grogu in that moment and responds in a somewhat harsh manner. Not expecting that response, Grogu briefly reacts with a sad expression and a high-pitched vocalization. However, Grogu tries again to get his needs met, leaping into Djarin's arms. Djarin responds much more securely, holding Grogu and patting his back while gently telling Grogu that he has missed him and is glad he is back. This response quickly repairs the brief rupture. Grogu has a history of Djarin meeting his needs in good enough ways; their relational history is what allows Grogu to try and try again in this situation. In contrast, a child whose safe haven needs have not been adequately met in the past might resolve to make the best of it in Jedi training with Luke. Or, upon reunion with their primary caregiver, they might hide their needs to be welcomed and delighted upon. Their miscuing would serve as a strategy for maintaining proximity to a caregiver who is less comfortable with responding to their safe haven needs.

What about the hands? How does Djarin balance "bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind"? To look at this, we examine how Djarin disciplines Grogu. Child discipline is a challenging aspect of parenting. Caregivers become unbalanced or take their hands off the circle altogether in these moments because of their own feelings of frustration or other intense emotions. Right before Din and Grogu meet Ahsoka, the dyad exits Djarin's spaceship and Djarin sees that Grogu has his ball, which is a shifter knob that Grogu has repeatedly taken off one of the ship's cockpit levers[30]. Using a calm, but firm voice, Djarin reminds Grogu of the rule (the ball stays on the ship) while taking it away from Grogu. This scene resonated with caregivers as it exemplifies a young child changing from full dependence on the caregiver to realizing their own autonomy and being ready to push the boundaries for what they want. The viewer sees Grogu's desire for this "toy" and knows he is going to try to get it despite the rule. Developmentally, this shift is healthy – it is a sign that the child is realizing they do have some control and they do have their own power as separate beings.

Attachment researchers sometimes refer to the caregiver-child relationship as a goal-corrected partnership at this stage[31], and it can catch caregivers off-guard. All caregivers struggle in this stage, but to varying degrees. Caregivers who struggle the most may also repeatedly respond in ways that are disorganizing to the child. For example, when a four-year-old child grabs a toy that is not his from a younger sibling and says, "Mine!" that could activate all sorts of feelings in a caregiver. Some caregivers might snap, acting mean (e.g., saying "That's not yours! You stole it! You need to be a better big sibling and not a jerk!"). Other caregivers in the same situation might be prone to acting weak (e.g., showing fear that they may get hit or otherwise physically hurt if they try to rectify the situation or allow their child to engage in such behaviors and consequently keep the ball). In contrast, Djarin responds in a calm manner, reminding Grogu

of the rule and holding the limit. He is stronger, bigger, wiser, and kind, even when Grogu is pushing boundaries. This may feel like such a small moment but is poignant because of the delicate attachment dance in which Djarin and Grogu are engaged.

The most emotional trip around the circle is in the last moments of the season two finale[32]. In a brief period, Grogu displays multiple attachment needs and Djarin meets all of them, despite his own strong emotions. He follows Grogu's lead on the top and the bottom of the circle, and even when it is hardest, Djarin keeps his hands on the circle for Grogu. When it becomes apparent that Grogu will leave with Luke Skywalker, Djarin picks Grogu up and provides comfort, meeting a need on the bottom of the circle. He takes off his helmet to show Grogu his face, which helps to organize Grogu's feelings. Then, Djarin encourages Grogu to go with Luke, promoting exploration. However, this is a momentary rupture as Grogu needs more comfort from Djarin. Grogu comes back to Djarin, showing that his needs are still on the bottom of the circle and Djarin understands, letting Grogu hug his leg without pushing him away.

This is something that happens with all relationships. Even an attentive caregiver can misread a need and may try to prematurely push the child to the top or the bottom of the circle. However, relationships can stay strong and even get stronger with such ruptures when there are also repairs. Grogu does not give up getting his needs met and Djarin is able to notice and repair. In this same scene, Djarin keeps his hands on the circle. He is stronger by staying in the moment and not running away from it. He is bigger and wiser because, even though a part of him wants Grogu to stay with him, he acts on his belief that going with Luke is the better option for Grogu. Finally, Djarin is kind, showing his face to Grogu, and thus allowing Grogu to know more about him and his feelings.

This scene brought many viewers to tears[33]. The audience had been slowly watching secure attachment develop for two seasons. The final five minutes of season two inundates viewers with what secure attachment looks like, overriding psychological defenses and tapping into something deeply biological. *The Mandalorian* stands out in the Star Wars universe; its thoughtful portrayal of secure attachment is what we believe makes this story uniquely powerful and different from the Skywalker saga.

Meeting Djarin's Attachment Needs

Decades of research findings strongly support the importance of attachment with caregivers, and now, both attachment theory and research extend to close relationships across the lifespan[34]. Of specific note to Djarin and Grogu, there is considerable evidence that what an adult caregiver thinks and says about their own close relationships is associated with their child's attachment pattern[35]. Djarin's relationship history is important not only for his own outcome, but also Grogu's.

Which brings us to more questions: How can a loner like Djarin respond to Grogu's attachment needs so well? How can he himself seek help from others when needed? It certainly makes for compelling television, but also makes sense with respect to Djarin's attachment history. Djarin has a significant history of trauma and loss, but in the brief flashbacks of Djarin's childhood, his parents are depicted as loving through their expressions and the way they hold young Djarin (e.g., cradling his head as they attempt to escape the Separatist's attack). Even without dialogue, it takes the viewer only a second to understand these individuals are Djarin's parents because of how they are portrayed. Djarin is characterized as a child who expects his parents to care for him; when his parents place Djarin in hiding moments before they are killed, he physically reaches out for them as the door of his hiding space closes. Based on this limited information, Djarin was likely

securely attached to his parents. To date, Djarin's attachment to the Mandalorian who adopted and primarily cared for him after his parents died is not portrayed in the series. It is not even clear which Mandalorian was his primary caregiver. However, as a group, the Mandalorians are clan-based and fulfilled the beliefs of their Mandalorian creed to raise him. Further, the Mandalorians of his covert help him in adulthood when he needs it. This seemingly leans in the direction of attachment security with his non-biological caregiver(s) as well.

Even though Djarin has a traumatic history, we propose he also has a huge protective factor in the form of attachment security[36]. Consistent with what is known about other caregivers who are resilient despite adverse events in childhood[37], Djarin provides good enough parenting to Grogu to promote attachment security. The Star Wars universe is harsh, lacks stability, and undoubtedly contributes to ongoing traumatization for both Djarin and Grogu (see Pellman's chapter in this volume). However, against this backdrop, there are clear examples of Djarin meeting Grogu's attachment needs, which is consistent with him having a secure attachment history.

It Takes a Village (Even in the Outer Rim of the Galaxy)

Djarin's history of attachment security allows him to form healthy relationships with others. These relationships, in turn, enhance his capacity to provide appropriate care for Grogu. Sometimes parallel process is at play. Parallel process is the idea that the dynamic in one relationship can play out in another relationship[38],[39]. At its best, this phenomenon is captured by the platinum rule: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto others"[40],[41]. For example, the Armorer speaks without reservation in her view that Djarin can foster Grogu. The Armorer is direct with Djarin (as she is with everyone else) and, by telling him what to do at the end of season one, she encourages him

to take charge as a caregiver in a moment that is dangerous and likely retraumatizing for Djarin. As he and Grogu escape Imperial forces, the Armorer states that the "*helpless looking being*" is in Djarin's care and that he must "*reunite it with its own kind*" (S1 E8, Redemption). The Armorer's comments are typically terse, but she repeats herself, pulling these two initial thoughts together: "*by creed, until it is of age or reunited with its own kind, you are as its father*" and proclaims them "*a clan of two*" (S1 E8, Redemption)[42]. This is both the role and the emotional work of a foster parent: fully committing to and caring for a child that is in their care for an indeterminate amount of time[43]. Upon hearing her proclamation, Djarin seems to emotionally regroup enough to safely escape with Grogu. When season two begins, Djarin has fully committed to caring for Grogu, stating "*wherever I go, he goes*" (S2 E2, The Marshall)[44].

Ahsoka, Djarin's Jedi ally and friend, is also directive with Djarin, echoing the Armorer's sentiment that he is a father figure to Grogu. She provides Djarin with valuable information about Grogu, discloses his name, and his early history of trauma and loss. Ahsoka assesses Grogu's abilities and his relationship to Djarin, concluding "*he's formed a strong attachment*" (S2 E5, The Jedi)[45] to Djarin, which makes training him in the ways of the Force unadvised. Despite Djarin wanting Ashoka to take Grogu, she tells him what to do next instead. He is ultimately agreeable to her plan.

In contrast to the Armorer and Ahsoka Tano, Peli Motto and Greef Karga tend to follow Djarin's lead in parenting, keeping in mind his needs with Grogu's. Peli is initially critical of Djarin's parenting abilities, pointing out the audiences' concerns about leaving Grogu alone on the ship[46]. However, her approach with Djarin changes later when Peli models interest in and delight for Grogu while at the same time voicing awareness of Djarin's anxieties and needs[47]. She reminds her droids that Djarin does

not like them. Then, following his lead, softens the message when he assures her it is okay. Peli then multi-tasks, attending to Grogu while giving Djarin a lesson on the geography of Tatooine. She offers to care for Grogu while Djarin looks for someone, but then again follows his lead when it is clear he is not seeking that type of assistance from her during this visit. In this brief scene, she reinforces his competency as a parent by following him, not by leading. Additionally, during *The Book of Boba Fett*, Peli employs security priming when she rebuilds a N-1 Starfighter for Djarin[48]. Security priming is using stimuli that helps activate or reinforce a desire to provide care and comfort to others[49]. The N-1 is not the ship of a lone bounty hunter, but a bicycle built for two. While not explicitly stated, the ship's configuration is clearly meant for Djarin *and* Grogu and this registers with Djarin (and the viewing audience) on at least a subconscious level.

Like Peli, Greef gently reinforces Djarin's good parenting skills with Grogu rather than offering unsolicited parenting advice. One way he does this is by using a technique known as "speaking for the baby." Therapists oftentimes use this technique to help a caregiver take the perspective of a young child and understand their influence on the child's development and wellbeing[50,51]. Speaking for the baby helps parents recognize and label their infant's emotional experiences. This may allow the caregiver to gently access their own repressed affect while simultaneously promoting identification with the infant[52]. Perhaps Greef intuitively knows this when he asks Grogu, "*has Mando been taking good care of you?*" Grogu responds by cooing. Greef answers the coo back with "*Yeah*?" and then exclaims "*Yeah!*" and tells Djarin "*He said, 'Yeah!'*"(S2 E4, The Siege)[53].

Taken together, these interactions with supporting characters bolster Djarin's balanced parenting of Grogu. It is not just what is communicated to him, but how it is being communicated (more directive or less directive depending on the situation). The

Armorer and Ahsoka take charge with Djarin when he needs to step up with Grogu. Peli and Greef follow Djarin's lead, which is what Grogu needs in less dangerous moments.

Conclusion

A child's relationship with their primary caregiver is a special one. Each "clan of two" is unique in how it works toward attachment security. While there are many ways in which a caregiver can meet the attachment needs of a young child like Grogu, it is developmentally advantageous when they are met consistently enough that a child develops healthy models of relationships and sees themselves as worthy of a caregiver's love and attention – both when they are going out into the world and coming back in. Djarin's role as a caregiver comes as a surprise to him, and his success in this role may come as a surprise to the viewer. He is a kind parent and is able to meet Grogu's secure base and safe haven needs, resulting in a secure attachment. Djarin does all this despite a history of trauma and initially appearing very guarded. The beskar steel Djarin wears is quite real, but his relational armor is a façade; Djarin's own early history of healthy relationships with his caregivers facilitates parenting Grogu and allows him to form relationships with others who support him and his healthy parenting.

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WHEREVER I GO, HE GOES

Fatherhood and Male Emotion

Keely Diebold & Meghan Sanders, PhD

It is no secret that fatherhood plays an invaluable role in the Star Wars universe, with the famous reveal of Darth Vader (formerly Anakin Skywalker) as Luke Skywalker's father in *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*[1] often ranking as one of the most iconic movie scenes of all time. Father figures like Senator Bail Organa and Han Solo have a central presence in the lives of Star Wars heroes. However, that presence is often an implied one that largely occurs off-screen (i.e., Owen Lars) or one that ends in death (i.e., Qui-Gon Jinn), leaving the franchise without regular portrayals of father-child relationships.

When *The Mandalorian* debuted on Disney+ in 2019, it introduced the Star Wars universe to a father figure who veered from the franchise's usual portrayals of fatherhood. The Mandalorian Din Djarin's attachment to his eventually adopted-child Grogu does not occur offscreen. Rather, it is the show's primary plot point. Djarin transitions from a lonely bounty hunter to an emotional father willing to break the strictly adhered to Mandalorian Creed to protect and care for Grogu. Even more so, Djarin's prominent fatherly presence in Grogu's life is portrayed in an emotionally

vulnerable, healthy way that shows a clear influence on Grogu's emotional and social development. This presence acts as a sharp contrast from Anakin's emotionally unhealthy responses of threats toward his loved ones' safety.

This chapter analyzes the portrayal of fatherhood identity and male emotions in *The Mandalorian* by contrasting Djarin's parenting styles with that of Anakin. Ultimately it explores how each character's parenting style (through the lens of attachment and emotion regulation) change once they take on fatherly roles, how the Jedi and Mandalorian codes informed their parenting approaches and how this impacted their emotional connections to their children in their fatherhood journeys. By showing this contrast, this chapter argues that *The Mandalorian* is the Star Wars franchise's first consistent and prominent portrayal of a stable and emotionally healthy father-child relationship.

Attachment Styles

To understand the difference in parenting approaches, we first need to understand the key concepts and how Anakin and Djarin exhibit them. While attachment theory has already been discussed in this volume (see Pelzel and Johnson), in this chapter we explore attachment specifically in the context of how individuals perceive themselves, how they perceive the *attachment figures* in their lives (primarily parents), and how this, in turn, influences how they interact with the environment around them[2]. These three contexts– the perception of oneself, the perception of others, and how oneself acts in the context of others– are rooted in the process of *emotional regulation*, or the ways that we, as individuals, respond to negative emotions[3]. Specifically, people's attachment systems begin to develop from early experiences and later translate into the attachment styles they display toward relationships in their adulthood[4]. These *attachment styles* are outlined in literature as *secure, avoidant*, and

anxious-ambivalent[5]. The avoidant and anxious-ambivalent styles are by nature *insecure* attachment styles[6].

Patterns emerge that reveal how Anakin and Djarin's behaviors may align with psychological attachment styles based on their childhood experiences and adherence to codes within their respective orders. Specifically, their attachment styles become most evident when each reaches an emotional crux in their fatherhood journeys: Anakin when he fully surrenders to the Dark Side to protect Padmé, the mother of his unborn children, and Djarin when he sends Grogu away with Luke Skywalker to be properly trained in the ways of the Force.

For a start, despite being raised as a slave through childhood, Anakin displays a secure attachment toward his mother, Shmi. Individuals who maintain a secure attachment style have increased self-worth, as well as confidence in others' ability to provide support when they encounter distressing situations[7],[8]. Secure persons also share feelings and emotions with their attachment figures in healthy ways, regulate stress out of confidence in their coping mechanisms, and engage in problem-solving techniques, such as finding common ground to resolve social conflicts[9]. Notably, relationship security in adults often takes root in secure tendencies learned from experiences with their parents or other caregivers[10].

Anakin seeks emotional support from Shmi and displays a protectiveness toward her throughout their time under the captivity of slavery. It is clear they have a trustworthy bond formed from the pair only having each other in captivity. Without a biological father in his life, Anakin's only constant male presence comes from his slaveowner, Watto, until Qui-Gon Jinn frees him from slavery in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, thus assuming a fatherly role in Anakin's life. Qui-Gonn views Anakin as the Jedi's prophesied *chosen one* and displays

concern for Anakin's safety amidst danger associated with battles ("*you find a safe place to hide and stay there*")[11]. Anakin reciprocates his attachment by his willingness to leave with Qui-Gon to begin his Jedi training, trusting that he will see his mother again.

In contrast, emotional repression (i.e., the lack of expressing emotion) and rejection from a person's caregivers often foster avoidant attachment styles[12]. Avoidant individuals tend to repress both positive and negative emotions and behaviors when placed in stressful environments[13]. Individuals with the anxious-ambivalent attachment style, on the other hand, navigate emotions by hyper-focusing on negative affect and experience heightened emotional distress when placed in stressful environments[14].

In *The Mandalorian*, viewers are explicitly introduced to Djarin's avoidant tendencies and regular emotional suppression through his interpersonal interactions and tragic backstory. For example, it is revealed that he was orphaned at a young age when his parents were killed after sheltering him from a siege on his home planet of Aq Vetina. Djarin was rescued by a Mandalorian and kept under the care of the order, thereby being raised according to the Creed. Based on the order's demand for emotional suppression by keeping one's helmet on in front of others and emotional suppression by avoiding feelings towards bounty hunting targets, Djarin likely learned avoidant attachment from the authority figures in his life. Even in his adult life, Djarin is regularly encouraged to suppress his emotions. For example, Djarin approaches Greef Karga to ask for a new assignment to escape his guilt over giving up Grogu. When he questions the Client's intentions with Grogu, Karga suggests he utilize drugs to suppress that guilt ("*buy a camtono of spice. By the time you come out of hyperdrive, you will have forgotten all about it"* (S1 E3, The Sin)[15]. Djarin's remorse and the suggestion to suppress it is akin

to real-life evidence that men experience greater guilt when separated from an attachment figure but are also subject to more stereotypes regarding the acceptability of male displays of emotion[16,17].

Anakin vs. Djarin: Star Wars and Attachment Styles

The consequences of Anakin and Djarin's varying attachment styles as they interact with their respective orders' demands for emotional suppression ultimately manifest in highly contrasting emotional breaking points for the characters when they are faced with the loss of their attachment figures. Their responses ultimately give insight into how each father figure chooses to embrace their own fatherhood.

While *attachment theory* originally explained how parents' behaviors and responses toward their children affected infants' responses to both their parents and environmental triggers, research on adult attachment has proven a more nuanced concept. Most notably, an adult may have a singular attachment style developed from their childhood experiences but demonstrate varying patterns of attachment security toward each relationship they have[18]. Specifically, evidence supports the notion that adult attachment exists on a current, interpersonal level and not solely from *internal* processes formed from learned relational experiences[19,20,21]. For example, people can have a consistent attachment style they apply to relationships across the board, but the strength of that style can shift based on different nuances of their relationship with each individual attachment figure in their lives[22].

Variations among attachment styles can also explain why individuals respond differently to an event, including stressful situations[23], social conflict[24], and romantic relationships[25]. Attachment-based differences also exist in the way that

individuals experience and express emotions. People with secure and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles also report more potent emotional experiences, though secure individuals experience more positive emotions (such as happiness and contentment) while anxious-ambivalent individuals experience more negative emotions (such as fear and disappointment)[26]. Avoidant individuals, on the other hand, report less intense emotional experiences overall and are less likely to express them[27].

For Anakin, it is likely that the losses of both his first father figure in *The Phantom Menace*[28] and his mother in *Attack of the Clones*[29] were strong contributing factors toward the increasing intensity of Anakin's overall anxious-ambivalent (or insecure) attachment style. This shift begins to manifest through Shmi's description of Anakin as one who "*knows nothing of greed*" in *The Phantom Menace* to Anakin's willingness to murder Tusken women and children as revenge against them for his mother's death[30]. At this moment, viewers can see the primary signs of Anakin's inability to suppress or control his emotions and the dangerous consequences that can arise from his unchecked emotions. He commits to becoming the most powerful Jedi and accuses Obi-Wan of holding him back from such powers that could be used to save his loved ones. He promises his dying mother that "*I wasn't strong enough to save you, mom… But I promise I won't fail again*"[31]. Thus, Anakin's insecure attachment likely stems from a fear of losing formative and important figures in his life.

As Anakin becomes more deeply rooted in his Jedi training, the new focus of his insecure attachment and fear of losing loved ones becomes his pregnant wife, Padmé. This attachment throughout *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* is enhanced by authority figures reminding Anakin of the importance of letting go of his emotions per the Jedi Code[32]. As he begins to experience similar

dreams about Padmé dying during childbirth that he experienced of his mother before her death, he is met with caution from Yoda to let go of things in his life that he fears losing[33]. Coupled with Dark Side influence from Chancellor Palpatine to learn how to save people from death using the Force, Anakin's fears are easily manipulated[34].

It is no surprise that Anakin would turn toward whatever authority figure offered solutions to soothe his emotional distress, namely Palpatine. Anakin's internal conflict is furthered by experiences with hypocrisy from the Jedi order regarding displays of emotions. For example, in *Attack of the Clones*, Obi-Wan tells Anakin to not let his personal feelings get in the way of his Jedi duty when Padmé falls out of their ship, threatening him with expulsion from the Jedi order[35]. Later, however, he asks Anakin to go against the Jedi Code in *Revenge of the Sith* by reporting on Palpatine's actions[36]. Thus, Anakin sees his emotions suppressed in the name of upholding the Jedi Code but is later asked to break the code for someone else's needs.

For Anakin, the combination of an insecure attachment and continued emotional suppression from Jedi leaders under the Jedi Code results in a dangerous breaking point in which Anakin completely submits to the Dark Side. Palpatine manipulates Anakin's anxious tendencies to make him believe he needs Palpatine's instruction to be able to protect his family. This results in Anakin choosing to save Palpatine on the brink of death ("*He must live… I need him*") and killing Mace Windu[37]. Later, Anakin is faced with the realization that the plans he set forth to protect Padmé in his anxiety failed him when she expresses that he is "*going down a path I cannot follow*"[38]. At this emotional crux, both Padmé and Obi-Wan express their love and care for Anakin, whose heightened distress prevents him from accepting such notions. He begins to accuse both Padmé and Obi-Wan of turning against him, eventually causing Padmé's death. Thus,

Anakin's emotional suppression regarding his love for Padmé causes him to seek prevention of her death from a dark source, ending in fatal consequences.

As he approaches fatherhood, Anakin's emotional release ultimately manifests in an unhealthy manner consistent with male emotional norms. His emotions are consistently suppressed by the Jedi Code and fellow Jedi, leading to more detrimental symptoms of mental anguish, heightened aggression, and increased anger[39],[40],[41]. This negative affect is represented through the Dark Side and Anakin's submission to its control. Thus, Anakin is a prominent Star Wars character, but his portrayal as a father figure is limited. Additionally, the closer he gets to fatherhood, the more negative and stereotyped his emotions become, resulting in a representation of fatherhood that is not healthy or progressive within the franchise.

In contrast, Djarin sees a shift from an avoidant attachment style to a secure attachment style. His pseudo-adoption of Grogu is what ultimately begins to evoke secure and emotionally vulnerable tendencies in him. This manifests through the fatherly nuances he begins to express toward Grogu. In season one, Djarin allows Grogu to play with the knob from a control stick in his ship that he previously prevented Grogu from handling – an act that becomes a regular symbol of the bond between the pair throughout the series[42]. When his ship is later under attack, Djarin's immediate reaction is to grab Grogu and get him to safety in Cara Dune's arms. Shortly after, he becomes defensive when Kuill's reprogrammed IG-11 droid that previously tried to kill Grogu enters Kuill's hut[43].

Throughout the first season, viewers see parenting styles, and by extension relationship styles, emerge. Djarin, for example, frequently prevents Grogu from placing things in his mouth and often finds caretakers for him when he goes on particularly

dangerous missions. By the end of the season, Mando is told "y*ou are as a father… you are a clan of two"* (S1 E8, Redemption)[44]. By the second season, the pair's bond has become even stronger, with Djarin demanding that "*wherever I go, he goes*" (S2 E1, The Marshall)[45] when someone tells him that the fighting ring is not a place where a child should be. Perhaps the most poignant moment, though, is when Jedi Ahsoka Tano informs Djarin that she cannot train Grogu in the ways of the Force, as his attachment to Djarin is dangerously strong, given the mandates of the Jedi Code. She also tells Djarin that he is "*like a father*" (S2 E5, The Jedi)[46] to Grogu.

Djarin's attachment style also shifts as his fatherhood identity is affirmed by other characters. In his search for other Mandalorians and Jedi, Djarin begins to help others with more secure attachment styles. The strongest exemplar of this is the Frog Lady. Prior to becoming Grogu's caretaker, transporting a woman and her unborn children to a safer planet for her species would not have ranked as a priority, as such a task would not yield a high enough payday[47]. Yet, the protection he provides (even from Grogu who has an affinity for eating the eggs) illustrates the evolution of his priorities and the value he sees in secure, familial attachments.

Additionally, Djarin's progression from insecure to secure attachment is revealed through shifts in his initial interactions with other characters in the series who would later become his closest partners in protecting Grogu. For example, Karga is introduced exclusively at the beginning of the series as a business relation for Djarin, assigning him bounty jobs. By seasons two and three, however, Karga becomes one of Djarin's closest confidants in his efforts to protect Grogu. A similar pattern is seen through additional characters with whom Djarin forms trusting relationships, such as Cara Dune, Peli Motto, and Kuill. Throughout the series, Djarin is more willing to leave Grogu in

the care of these companions and to recruit them into rescue efforts when Grogu's life is at risk.

Djarin's emotional crux in *The Mandalorian*, as opposed to Anakin's, shows the character's clear emotional development as he transitions from insecure to secure attachment upon accepting his newfound identity as a father. After consistently refusing to remove his helmet in front of others per the Mandalorian Creed, Djarin makes a willing decision at the close of season two to remove it so that Grogu can see and touch his face for the first time[48]. This character development is clear through Djarin's responses to stress in situations that would benefit from the removal of his helmet and his commitment to the Mandalorian Creed. In season one, for example, Djarin risks his safety by keeping his helmet on when being attacked by Burg, who wants to remove it[49]. Later, when his life is at risk, he threatens IG-11 with violence for asking him to remove the helmet to treat his injuries[50]. Djarin later removes the helmet in a public space for the first time by choice, but it is still done with reluctance. His choice, however, is motivated by a desire to bring Grogu back to safety, making it evident that his attachment to Grogu is the catalyst for his acceptance of displays of emotion that violate his Mandalorian principles. By the end of the episode, even Djarin's threats against Moff Gideon are laced with outwardly emotional expressions of his attachment to Grogu: "*soon, he will be back with me. He means more to me than you will ever know"* (S2 E7, The Believer)[51].

Thus, Djarin's action marks the first time in the series that he removes his helmet in front of others without any reluctance. This results in a rejection of the Creed's emotional suppression so that the pair can share a tender father-son moment. Djarin's willingness to remove his helmet in front of his other companions, such as Cara and Fennec Shand, suggests a budding secure attachment that is built on trust. In contrast to Anakin's

unhealthy emotional crux, Djarin's climactic emotional display manifests in a way that breaks the mold of what psychology scholarship posits as a normative male emotional response. In embracing his new identity as a father, Djarin can freely and unashamedly cry and reject emotional suppression in front of both his adopted child and his companions. This change is ultimately propelled by his secure attachment to Grogu and leads him to formally adopt Grogu as his child[52].

Male Emotional Suppression: Jedi and Mandalorian Codes

Emotional regulation involves the process of maintaining one's experience of emotions and expression of emotions, whether intentionally or subconsciously[53]. Standards for emotional regulation may differ based on social or cultural norms, such as differences between men and women regarding emotional expression, despite a lack of real difference in how each gender experiences emotions[54]. In general, the social norm for men is to suppress and conceal emotions because of emotions' perceived incompatibility with masculinity[55],[56]. Men are more likely to suppress emotions, including depressive symptoms compared to women[57],[58],[59]. That is, they do not feel fewer emotions than women they are just less likely to express those emotions freely[60].

It is evident throughout the Star Wars franchise that both the Jedi Code and Mandalorian Creed promote the suppression of emotions in their own way. In their respective franchises, both Anakin Skywalker and Djarin are subject to *codes of conduct* that contain propositions that likely contribute to their respective attachment styles, relationship security, and tendency toward emotional suppression. While only two propositions of the Mandalorian Creed are confirmed as canon in the *Mandalorian* (dueling opponents when challenged and upholding promises made as part of deals), interactions between Djarin and other

Mandalorians throughout the series offer context for how the code forces its followers to operate[61].

Displays of emotions from male figures in Star Wars also lend themselves to discussions about portrayals of masculinity in media. Fictional portrayals of masculinity have often reflected societal trends of the time in which the content was created, prominently adopting "heroic virtues of strength, physical superiority and courage" as the normative representation of masculinity[62]. Eras in American history, for example, marked by fear or governmental and economic instability saw a prevalence of hyper-masculine heroes on screen, likely to compensate for the weaknesses that plagued society[63]. We're sure we can all think of a few – Superman, Batman, Captain America. In addition, masculine norms have remained consistent throughout history[64]. Qualities heavily associated with stereotypical masculinity have remained psychologically and societally consistent over time, which may in turn be reflected in media portrayals of masculinity such as the Star Wars franchise.

The Jedi Code is explicit in its call for emotional suppression, stating that "*there is no emotion, there is peace*"[65]. The code posits that only the Force is capable of objectivity; thus, a person must act without emotion and with the will of the Force in mind to act in the best interest of the people: "*if a Jedi can act emotionlessly, knowledgeably, and serenely, then he is acting in accordance with the will of the Force*"[66]. Throughout Anakin's Jedi training, it is evident that his mentors continuously reinforce the Jedi Code's proponents to him. For example, in *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones,* Obi-Wan reminds Anakin of his commitment to the Jedi and their way of life when Anakin begins to experience concern for his mother's safety because of nightmares he has about her death[67]. Anakin, in return, begins to rebel against the Jedi Code's call for emotional suppression and shows signs of distrust in Jedi leaders like Obi-Wan. In *Attack of the Clones,* he

offers his own interpretation of the code to Padmé after she questions whether he is allowed to love others since it is forbidden for Jedi. He states that *"compassion, which I would define as unconditional love, is central to a Jedi's life. So you might say that we are encouraged to love"*[68]. Later, he begins to blame Obi-Wan for holding him back from becoming the most powerful Jedi ever, capable of protecting his loved ones[69]. Thus, Anakin begins to display signs of choosing his own feelings and emotions over the requirements of the Jedi Code – a trait that ultimately plants seeds for his growing distrust of the Jedi Council that leads to his surrender to the Dark Side once he cannot suppress his feelings anymore.

The Mandalorian Creed, on the other hand, is less explicit in its call for the suppression of emotions. First, members of Djarin's specific Mandalorian subset, the Children of the Watch, are not allowed to remove their helmets, thus preventing physical displays of emotion toward others[70]. Djarin has not removed his helmet in front of another person since he was a child[71]. Djarin, thus, consistently refuses to remove his helmet, even when doing so could mitigate a threat to his life or safety.

Another implied tenant of the Mandalorian code is discouragement from developing concern or consideration for any individuals involved in a deal to which a Mandalorian agrees. This tenant reveals itself when Djarin's reputation is questioned as he begins to ponder the Client's intentions with Grogu[72]. It is possible that part of committing to the Way of the Mandalore is agreeing to refrain from asking questions about the intended purpose of an action they are undertaking as part of a deal. These questions would most likely arise from fear of a client's intentions. Thus, expected behavior from Mandalorians when carrying out a mission could be likened to a form of emotional suppression.

Conclusion

Djarin's trajectory throughout *The Mandalorian* shows him possessing an overall insecure attachment style, but a secure attachment to Grogu specifically. This secure attachment manifests as he grows more comfortable in his fatherly relationship with Grogu, ultimately breaking the Mandalorian Creed in an overt display of emotion as he removes his helmet to say goodbye to Grogu when selflessly sending him with Luke for Jedi training. In turn, Grogu begins to model secure attachment toward Djarin as *The Mandalorian* progresses. In contrast, Anakin shows secure attachment throughout his childhood with his mother and Obi-Wan, despite his tragic upbringing under the control of a slave owner. As he trains under the Jedi way, however, he regularly displays an anxious-ambivalent attachment that is easily manipulated to make him skeptical of the Jedi order when faced with the potential loss of Padmé and his children. Thus, it is likely that Anakin experiences anxious-ambivalent attachment overall, but experiences variable security in his attachment to his mother.

Analyzing the differences between Anakin Skywalker's and Djarin's emotional cruxes in Star Wars makes a clear argument for Djarin's presence as the first prominent father figure in the franchise who displays emotions in a healthy way. The characters' journeys to fatherhood also show how shifts in their attachment styles, coupled with their adherence to emotionally-stifling codes, also likely led to the directions of their respective emotional breaking points. Anakin's shift from secure attachment toward his mother and first father figure Qui-Gonn, to anxious-ambivalent attachment toward Padmé, sees fatal consequences when he can no longer adhere to the emotional suppression he is asked to follow. Conversely, Djarin's progression from avoidant attachment to secure attachment toward Grogu allows him to break the Mandalorian Creed and

express his emotions in a tender, healthy way that strengthens his bond with his eventually adopted child. Thus, Djarin's portrayal in *Star Wars* breaks both the franchise's stereotypical mold for fathers, as well as stereotypes surrounding male emotions. Given that there is a general psychological trend toward men being more encouraged to suppress overt emotions and societal trends toward stereotypes regarding displays of male emotions, Djarin's new role as a father figure changes him in an especially poignant way for mainstream entertainment. It ultimately portrays a male character reaching an emotional crux in a healthy and tender way, as opposed to the angry, forceful emotional crux that Anakin reaches.

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WE'RE ALL EQUAL HERE

Women of the Mandalorian

Gina Marcello, PhD

"*None will be free until the old ways are gone forever.*"

– Kuiil (S1 E7, The Reckoning)[1]

Fans are drawn to the Star Wars universe partly because it approaches complex topics like moral decision-making in ways that are easy to relate to and understand. For example, characters within the franchise are typically called upon to make difficult choices that require their own free-will, or agency[2] (i.e., the ability to choose a course of action[3,4]). Such patterns are a cornerstone of the Star Wars franchise and continue within *The Mandalorian*.

In the first two seasons of *The Mandalorian*, we see our protagonist, Din Djarin, embark on a quest deeply infused with traditional masculine ethics— emphasizing isolation, competition, and individualistic moral codes. He is introduced to us as a lone warrior, operating under a stringent bounty-hunting code, a framework that initially defines his moral universe. However, his ethical underpinnings undergo significant

transformation, a shift that includes a broader cultural and ethical discourse around gender and moral development[5,6]. As the story progresses, we see Djarin exhibit greater control (or agency) over his decisions based on his internally driven set of morals rather than external set of rules (for more, see Daneels in this volume). For example, he shows compassion by choosing to rescue Grogu, risking his freedom and life, rather than returning him for the bounty as he was hired to do. He choses to teach the villagers on Sorgan how to fight the raiders while fighting with them, rather than leaving them to fend for themselves. Over time, we also see Djarin make decisions that prioritize relationships and community well-being (e.g., forming alliances with Bo-Katan and Ashoka Tano; rescuing Ragnar, Paz Vizsla's son, from flying creatures). These decisions suggest an ethic of care rather than an ethic of individualism, defying conventional masculine tropes in the Star Wars universe. Unlike Anakin Skywalker's journey to Darth Vader, or Kylo Ren's complex struggle for power, Djarin combines justice and compassion.

The Mandalorian offers a rich tapestry to examine how gendered perspectives on moral agency play out. While Djarin's transformation aligns well with the broader narratives in Western society about a hero who will make sacrifices because it is the right thing to do, the portrayal of women in the series echo a disconcerting trend: the embodiment of masculine traits in female characters *without* corresponding moral agency. Feminist ethics, a field of study which aims to understand and critique how gender intersects with our moral beliefs and decision-making[7,8], provides a crucial framework to understand this lack of agency, making the often-invisible dynamics at play visible[9].

Women's Agency in *The Mandalorian*

The Mandalorian, a significant and popular story with widespread appeal and fandom[10], reflects a culture where women are

expected to behave as men. Contemporary American society places a greater premium on masculinity than femininity[11]. The conservative men's movement[12] has adopted the warrior archetype into their definition of manhood: "the warrior archetype is thought to help men practice perseverance, courage, fearlessness, and mastery over their minds and bodies"[13]. Not unlike Djarin's own disposition at the beginning of *The Mandalorian*, a tenant of this movement is that men must overcome emotional numbness and acknowledge feelings of emptiness and loneliness. This is seen as a redemptive act that provides room for growth and moral transformation. Thus, with a premium on masculinity and masculine values in society, it is unsurprising a media franchise like Star Wars would tap into these conventions in its storytelling to the detriment of its women characters.

Contemporary feminist research continues to explore the differences and overlaps between care ethics (i.e., emphasizing relational responsibilities in moral decision-making), often linked with women, and justice ethics (i.e., emphasizing legal rights and equality in decision-making), commonly associated with men[14,15]. Although it's argued that care and justice ethics cannot be perfectly integrated, it is plausible to create male and female characters who more authentically represent a balanced moral voice. Characters such as Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* or Leia Organa in Star Wars signify the possibility of strong female characters who make complex moral choices and stand up for those without a voice. *The Mandalorian* showcases an interesting blend of moral voices in its male protagonist, while it neglects to offer the same moral depth to its female characters for most of the first two seasons.

Jon Favreau, the producer and executive director of the series, describes *The Mandalorian* as a space western leaning heavily on Wild West influences[16]. In traditional Westerns, women typically

portray two tropes of female identity: women are either represented as a damsel in distress or the *femme fatale*[17]. In the first example, women need to be saved by the male protagonist. In the second, women use their appearance to wield power over men. *The Mandalorian* is significant because it provides a third alternative: hyper-masculine women with restricted moral agency.

Significant Women in the Mandalorian

Joining Djarin on his journey in *The Mandalorian* are several female characters who are equally strong, violent, driven, and dedicated to a specific code of universal justice. These women are bounty hunters, assassins, and super commandos. In this world, gender seemingly does not matter. However, these portrayals are not as egalitarian as they might first appear. Taking a closer look at four notable women from *The Mandalorian* (Bo-Katan, the Armorer, Fennec Shand, and Cara Dune) in contrast to Djarin, we will explore the moral agency (and lack thereof) of these characters.

In the first two seasons of the series, substantive female character development is lacking — typical to the Western genre that *The Mandalorian* is firmly inspired by[18] (see Bowman and Yoshimura in this volume for more on these influences). The female characters are helpers (e.g., Pelli Motto babysitting Grogu), mentors, protectors, and guides for Djarin on his quest to protect Grogu and keep him safe. Although the women mostly have supporting roles for the first two seasons, Djarin would not be able to navigate the universe without their interventions. Each play an integral part in the unfolding of his story, although we typically see Djarin or other masculine characters making the important decisions.

In line with early feminist approaches, in which masculine qualities were deemed superior to feminine ones[19], I argue the women in *The Mandalorian* embody an idealized version of masculinity originating from the Western film genre. They portray physical strength and vitality as tough, hyper-masculine warriors. Cara Dune, the Armorer, Bo-Katan, and Fennec Shand represent women who have achieved *physical equality* in the Star Wars universe. Because women and femininity are traditionally associated as physically limited (or weak)[20],[21], they have seemingly transcended the perceived limitation of their physical embodiment. In what follows, I illustrate how while these women embody physical strength and capability, they lack clearly defined moral agency in relation to the male hero, Djarin. Although these characters are not overtly sexualized or diminished, they are confined by a narrative that echoes the early feminist dilemma: to gain agency and respect, women must adopt traditionally masculine characteristics[22]. While some portrayals are more agentic than others (for instance, Cara Dune and Bo-Katan in season three), there is still room for greater equity among these women and our male hero Djarin.

Fennec Shand

Fennec Shand is a skilled freelance mercenary, assassin, and bounty hunter who works for the criminal underworld. We meet her in season one[23] , where she is hired to track down and kill Djarin. We quickly learn Fennec is a physically strong, willful, and manipulative character. Although she is ultimately defeated and left for dead in the desert on Tatooine (until she is aided by Boba Fett), she embodies a fiercely independent, pragmatic female warrior.

When we meet her again in season two[24], she is allied with Boba Fett and motivated by her allegiance to him. She fully embodies the masculine warrior archetype and masculine voice. Boba and

Fennec share a bond as bounty hunters and adhere to a justice orientation, and her embodiment as a hyper-masculine female character reinforces first-wave feminist arguments of women needing to act like men to be considered moral agents. We also see this play out in *The Book of Boba Fett,* where Fennec acts as Boba's right-hand 'man.' On several occasions, she suggests that Boba make displays of power (e.g., be paraded around Mos Espa, carried by servants) and aggression ("*In difficult times, fear is a surer bet*"[25]), in order to assert his status as the Crime Lord of Mos Espa. Here, it is Boba who is more civil and diplomatic, until he has no choice but to retaliate with violent means. Thus, while Fennec uses her voice to make suggestions to her partner, she is not in the position to make the final call as Boba's ally. Ultimately, it is Boba, not Fennec, who employs moral agency to do the right thing to protect the citizens of Mos Espa.

The Armorer

The Armorer is the stoic matriarch of the Children of the Watch, the Mandalorian covert Djarin belongs to, and is firmly committed to the ancient ways of Mandalore. Throughout the series, she serves as Djarin's justice mentor, offering him feedback and guidance in response to his actions. For instance, the Armorer quests him to return Grogu to the Jedi only *after* he decides to save him, indicating that Djarin paves the way with moral agency.

While Djarin applies his moral agency to care for and rescue the child, the Armorer is a significant voice throughout the series as the moral authority of the Way, the code of ethics practiced by the Children of the Watch. While we can see a care ethic in some of her decisions in the first two seasons, the choices are not necessarily agentic to her. For example, when she decides to stay in hiding in the covert's old bunker to melt down the Beskar armor of fallen Mandalorians, she does this because that decision

reflects her values and priorities, which are embedded in the ethic of the Way. It is not that she could not choose differently; it is that she is set up to make that decision as a representative of the Way.

It is not until the third season that we see the Armorer enact her moral agency more firmly[26], applying a relational, feminine voice when encouraging Bo-Katan to remove her helmet in the presence of the Children of the Watch. For them, removing their helmet in the presence of others is a violation of the Way – a belief that Bo-Katan herself does not hold. The Armorer's decision to encourage Bo-Katan to remove her helmet signifies stepping away from rigid traditions and thinking about the greater good of the Mandalorian community, not just of her own clan. By doing so, she employs a feminine voice in moral decision-making by valuing relationships and community well-being rather than sticking strictly to the rules of her covert. This decision signifies a shift in moral focus, one that considers the situation's emotional and communal aspects. This is a moment of growth and change for the Armorer and sets Bo-Katan on a new path. In other words, it's not just about what's right according to tradition; it's about what's good for everyone involved.

Bo-Katan

Bo-Katan is driven by a strong justice ethic (i.e., a masculine voice) in the first two seasons. By birth, she is the leader of the Mandalorian people and is single-minded in her purpose: to acquire the Darksaber. She needs the ancient blade to unite all the people of Mandalore. While Bo-Katan does aid Djarin in his quest, her reasons for helping him are not motivated by a sense of mercy, compassion, or community. She is detached from him, as well as his Mandalorian covert the Children of the Watch, hyper-focused on achieving her goal. When Djarin asks for her help to find Grogu's Jedi tribe, she agrees on the condition that he must help her obtain the Darksaber[27]. Her transactional approach

to this decision, among many more to follow, is motivated by a narrow justice orientation. Her detachment is problematic because detachment has the potential to breed moral blindness or indifference[28], which could explain audiences' polarizing views of the character[29].

While physically as competent as her male counterpart, Djarin, Bo-Katan is noticeably lacking in the ethical depth and complexity afforded to him. This could be seen as a reflection of a broader societal issue: the marginalization of the feminine voice in matters of moral agency. Initially, Bo-Katan wants to rule and needs the Darksaber to do so. She is not interested in developing friendships or alliances with other clans within Mandalorian society. After Djarin wins the Darksaber from Moff Gideon, he tries to give it to Bo-Katan because he does not want it or the power that comes with it; he wants to help Grogu. Here, we see the complications arising from two moral constructs. Djarin's decision to relinquish the Darksaber signifies his willingness to abdicate his power. However, Bo-Katan cannot accept the Darksaber as a gift. According to Mandalorian tradition, it must be won in battle for the wielder to be seen as the legitimate leader. Accepting the Darksaber without winning it in battle would be dishonorable and doom the Mandalorian people. Applying a feminine moral voice, Djarin refuses to battle, leaving Bo-Katan unable to fulfill her destiny to rule.

At the beginning of season three, Bo-Katan is utterly alone and defeated[30]. It is only when Grogu calls upon her to help Djarin that we see her take steps toward developing her moral agency and her own voice. Season three presents an interesting turn in the narrative because we no longer follow the moral development of Djarin but Bo-Katan. After Bo-Katan glimpses the Mythosaur in the depths of Mandalore's living waters (a mythological creature of great significance to Mandalorians, that Bo-Katan initially believes does not exist), she initially chooses to keep

this revelation to herself. This event, however, challenges her to reconcile her long-standing assumptions about the Children of the Watch. Her dismissive attitude toward them is initially imperious and arrogant, and even though she sees the Mythosaur with her own eyes, she is unable to admit to Djarin she was wrong about her lack of faith. This crucial moment serves as an initiation into developing her feminine voice, pushing her toward a more nuanced and relational understanding of morality and belonging.

Because Bo-Katan enters the living waters to save Djarin, the Armorer tells her she has been redeemed and welcomes her into the Children of the Watch's covert, returning Bo-Katan to a communal environment. Although Bo-Katan does not fully commit to the moral framework of the Way, she continues to keep her helmet on in their presence. When the Armorer invites her to remove her helmet, she is reluctant. But the Armorer tells her, "*Our people have strayed from the Way, and it is not enough for a few to walk it. We must walk it together. All Mandalorians… Mandalore must all come together. You have walked both worlds. You are the one who can unite us*" (S1 E5, The Pirate)[31]. As Bo-Katan listens and accepts the Armorer's invitation, she realizes a balanced moral perspective is needed to unite the clans, demonstrating both the masculine and feminine voice.

Cara Dune

Cara Dune is a unique female character within *The Mandalorian* because of her moral orientation; she is presented as a tough female character with a balanced moral voice from first meeting. We learn she is a former shock trooper for the Rebel Alliance, a mercenary, and a bounty hunter. She is a physically strong, skilled fighter, and marksman. She plays a vital role in Djarin's mission to protect Grogu. When we first met her on the quiet agricultural planet of Sorgan, Cara is both tough and self-sacrificing. She

acts with a strong justice orientation and in the best interest of the community. Her moral decisions are nuanced, and do not simply reflect her self-interests. For example, she teaches the villagers how to protect themselves and organizes them against the Raiders. During the showdown, she runs toward the AT-ST Raider, without a concern for her own wellbeing, to bait it into the pond. She takes heroic actions, highlighting a sense of connection to others.

By the end of season two, Cara Dune appears in seven episodes. In each one, she is confronted with different ethical and moral decisions. As a strong, empowered female character, she enacts an agentic masculine and feminine moral voice[32]. For example, Djarin asks her for assistance in a dangerous mission to protect Grogu from Imperial forces[33]. Her choice to join him is a complex moral decision made from a position of agency. Her loyalty and strong sense of community is demonstrated later when she refuses to leave Djarin behind when he is injured. She isn't simply following orders or tagging along; she's actively deciding to put herself at risk for a cause she believes in. This choice is rooted in her own history, values, and objectives, showcasing her as a morally complex and agentic character. Cara chooses to join Djarin on multiple occasions to protect Grogu. Each choice reflects her commitment to a greater cause and highlights her protective instincts, especially toward those who are vulnerable. For these reasons, Cara Dune is perhaps one of the most morally and ethically well-rounded female characters in the entire Star Wars universe.

The Right to Choose

Djarin navigates both masculine and feminine ethical frameworks and demonstrates the autonomy to exercise both moral voices. He uses an ethic of care to counterbalance the justice-oriented rules of the Bounty Hunters' Guild (e.g., choosing Grogu over his

own safety and security). On the other hand, significant female characters in the series embody a hypermasculine morality and a strict justice orientation, appearing morally one-dimensional. Despite their combat prowess, these women lack the complexity afforded to Djarin, who chooses to incorporate a more deliberate feminine ethic of care into his moral compass.

The only significant female character presented as a balanced moral agent from the first introduction is Cara Dune. Due to controversy over statements made by actress Gina Carrano (who plays Cara Dune), she was fired[34] and Cara Dune was absent in season three. The series then abruptly changes narrative direction. The moral transformation of Djarin is no longer the primary story. The series begins another hero's journey – that of Bo-Katan. This turn in the narrative is somewhat unexpected. Perhaps it can be explained by the absence of Cara Dune. After Carano's firing, the writers and directors faced an important narrative decision. Without Cara Dune, *The Mandalorian* lacked a lead female character with strong moral agency. This gap might be one of the reasons we see dramatic changes in the narrative direction in season three.

Although the third season provides space for female characters like Bo-Katan to use a more balanced moral voice, it is interesting to note the transformation begins from a patriarchal starting point. While the moral ethic enacted by Djarin compared to his female companions could easily be dismissed as an artifact of narrative story structure, it also highlights a more deeply rooted construction of how strong women are presently represented in popular culture. The series, like other genre franchises, perhaps struggles with incorporating fully-developed female characters because their depiction does not fit easily within a culture that places enormous value on masculinity and privileges masculine values over feminine ones. Thus, for producers, it may be easier to sell a masculine character who adopts an ethic of feminine care

than to tell a story about a woman in the same role. The irony is that what is deemed to come "naturally" to women in society is not prioritized in these stories we tell. Indeed, narratives about middle-aged men adopting a surrogate child, raising them as their own, and becoming more fully realized individuals are common in popular media (i.e., *The Last of Us, Logan, The Mandalorian*).

Throughout most of the series, the feminine voice – an ethic of care – is absent or limited in the women characters. At the same time, the story empowers Djarin to develop an ethic of care and responsibility to temper his justice orientation. Djarin represents the possibility of moral transformation and evolution as we see in the season three finale, where he settles down in a home for him and Grogu, his adopted son. And while this is an important story to tell, it does so at the expense of women's stories where they own their feminine voice. While Djarin evolves and grows, embodying a complex blend of traditionally masculine and feminine moral values, the women remain in their assigned lanes, restricted from the power derived from having an agentic moral voice: the right to choose.

Conclusion

Many aspects of *The Mandalorian's* female characters are admirable or even aspirational. These women warriors are often strong-willed, single-minded, and assertive. For some, this could be perceived as another step toward equality. However, this representation of hypermasculine, single-minded female characters may not be liberating for all. As a cis-woman and a single parent, I was happy to see the physicality of the female characters in *The Mandalorian*. They are tough and self-reliant–characteristics that I, too, would like to embody. Yet, as an avid fan, I found myself rooting for Djarin, the male protagonist, whilst I grew weary of Bo-Katan, his female foil. By

the end of season two, all female characters, except Cara Dune, appear to make decisions predominately from the masculine voice.

The Mandalorian empowers the female characters by making them act more like men while providing a nuance framework for masculinity as embodied by Djarin. Through Djarin, we see how an ethic of justice can be tempered by a moral ethic of care. However, the growth of characters like Fennec and Bo-Katan are lacking compared to the development and trajectory of their male counterparts, Boba Fett and Djarin. A subtle but profound message is embedded within the female characters' moral decision-making: physically strong women struggle to balance their masculine and feminine voices. A balance is needed, much like a balance of the Force. The Star Wars franchise has a unique opportunity to provide this balance by shaping the cultural dialogue on the intersection of gender, power, and morality by incorporating more characters like Cara Dune and season three's depiction of Bo-Katan.

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SCARS ON THE INSIDE

Trauma and Recovery

Blake Pellman, PhD

When we first see Din Djarin, he is a solitary individual whose only priority is his own survival. However, throughout *The Mandalorian*, he transforms into a parental figure who would give up everything for Grogu, an orphaned child being hunted for his Force powers[1]. Due to the trauma of losing his own parents, Djarin sees himself and his childhood in Grogu, and by rescuing and protecting Grogu, Djarin rescues himself from his own trauma. That is certainly a poetic analysis, but perhaps it is more poetic than it is based in a scientific understanding of trauma and relationships. What does science tell us about how relationships and psychological trauma impact each other?

In this chapter, I draw from the characters, relationships, and events from *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett* to provide an overview of the nature of trauma as understood by science: what it is, its psychological mechanisms, and its neurobiological underpinnings. Then, we will explore how trauma interacts with social relationships and discuss the ways in which trauma's impact on relationships can heal, harm, and even persist across generations.

It is important to note that this chapter includes descriptions of and references to political violence, war, genocide, and bodily injury – many of which also involve children. Reading about or discussing trauma and its effects forces us to think about horrific things that can and do happen to people all over the world, and, naturally, this may provoke distressing emotions, thoughts, and/or physical reactions in many people, particularly those that have experienced traumatic events before. Please be mindful of how you are feeling as you read and care for yourself as needed. While thinking about trauma can be unpleasant and distressing, it can also help us understand how to cope with living in a world we often cannot predict or control.

Key Concepts

Before we begin, it is important that we have a shared understanding of what we mean by psychological trauma. This is a complicated concept even without considering its myriad consequences on individuals, communities, and their inter-relationships. *Trauma* is exposure to an event that causes or threatens a person or loved one with death, serious injury, or sexual violence[2]. Traumatic stressors include a wide variety of events, such as natural disasters, physical and emotional abuse, violations of consent, political violence and war, falling into a sarlacc pit, etc.

There are many factors that influence how trauma impacts a person and their relationships. For example, trauma does not have to be experienced first-hand to be traumatic[3]. Humans (among other animals) are remarkable observational learners, and witnessing someone else experience a threat or harm to their life may be traumatic. Thus, e*xposure* is broadly defined and includes not only directly experiencing a traumatic event, but also witnessing a traumatic event occur to others (including learning that trauma occurred to a close family member or

friend), or repeatedly experiencing aversive details about traumatic events[4].

Trauma is frequently associated with the development of trauma or stressor-related disorders, such as acute stress disorder (short-term anxiety/dissociation in response to trauma, e.g., "shock") or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; long-term anxiety/dissociation in response to trauma)[5]. Trauma is something that most people will experience at least once – and likely multiple times – throughout their lives[6]. While traumatic experiences are prevalent throughout the world, most people do not develop a trauma- or stressor-related disorder after experiencing a traumatic stressor. Overall, roughly 4% of people exposed to trauma will experience persistent stress related to the event for longer than one month and meet criteria for a PTSD diagnosis. Different types of traumatic experiences, however, are associated with different rates of PTSD following exposure, ranging from about 2% to 17% incidence, with sexual violence leading to the highest incidence of PTSD[7].

Following a traumatic experience, most people find healthy ways to cope and recover, which may involve (re-)contextualization of the trauma, grieving and acceptance, and/or comfort and support from family or friends[8]. However, trauma- or stressor-related disorders can develop and persist, which may be characterized by symptoms of hypervigilance, avoidance of places or things that remind one of their trauma, intrusive thoughts or chronic re-experiencing of the trauma (e.g., flashbacks), inappropriate interpersonal behaviors (e.g., minimal or excessive social responsiveness to others), persistent negative mood, sleep disturbances, or recurrent dissociation from oneself and/or one's surroundings[9]. Additionally, traumatic experiences may generate feelings of guilt and/or shame around the traumatic event (e.g., survivor's guilt), which often present a significant barrier to seeking treatment and recovering from trauma[10].

Traumatic Experiences in *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett*

In season one of *The Mandalorian,* Din Djarin receives a bounty contract from an individual called the Client – a former agent of the tyrannical Galactic Empire – to bring back a target alive[11]. As down payment, the Client gives Djarin a bar of beskar – a rare metal mined on the planet Mandalore and forged into the iconic armor worn by Mandalorians (until the Galactic Empire destroyed the planet and its people and stole the beskar in an event known to Mandalorians as the Great Purge). Djarin takes the bar of beskar to the Armorer, the leader of the secretive Mandalorian tribe to which Djarin belongs, to be forged into a new armor piece for himself. The Armorer says she will forge a pauldron for Djarin and that the excess will sponsor future Foundlings – orphaned children adopted by Mandalorians. Djarin agrees and reveals that he, too, was a Foundling.

With each strike of the Armorer's hammer, Djarin remembers moments from a childhood traumatic experience: blaster fire; explosions; a young Djarin being carried by his father as he runs away from the violence; Djarin's mother running alongside trying to comfort and protect him; someone getting hit by a laser blast and falling; Djarin being placed inside an underground shelter by his parents; and finally, Djarin reaching out and yelling for his parents as they slam the shelter doors closed and leave him there, alone[12]. These brief glimpses into Djarin's past reveal several sources of significant trauma for him: being violently forced out of his home and community, witnessing his neighbors die, having his parents sacrificing themselves so he could live, and being abandoned and alone.

While it is not clear whether Djarin would meet criteria for a trauma- or stressor-related disorder, the way these *narrative* flashbacks cut from Djarin's present moment with each *clank* of

the Armorer's hammer to Djarin's traumatic experience – the flames of the forge transforming into violent explosions from his past – create a conceivable depiction of how he might experience a *traumatic flashback*. Reminders of past trauma, such as similar sounds (e.g., loud *clanks* and explosions), smells (e.g., smoke), visual stimuli (e.g., fire), and/or ideas that connect to the trauma (e.g., talking about being a Foundling) can re-activate traumatic memories and potentially cause one to re-experience the traumatic event and behave as if that event were presently happening[13].

Clearly, memories are very powerful things. They help us organize our behavior around a given stimulus or situation so we can be better prepared to act when encountering similar situations in the future[14]. The process of forming memories normally helps us learn to survive and thrive in our environments[15]. However, when traumatic memories lead to feelings and behaviors that are not appropriate for the present situation or negatively impact our daily lives, this is when they may be considered a mental disorder such as PTSD. While the neurobiological and psychological processes that underlie the development of traumatic memories and trauma-related disorders may be natural and evolutionarily adaptive at some level[16], we also have natural and effective ways to learn how to cope with our stressors so we can continue living happy, healthy lives[17].

Perhaps the most iconic shot in *The Mandalorian* comes at the end of season one's first episode, when Djarin stands in front of a floating egg-shaped cradle, reaching with one finger toward Grogu within[18]. The shot conveys the show's overarching themes, most clearly the parent-child relationship that develops between Djarin and Grogu. Less outwardly, the shot may also symbolize how this relationship – over the course of the series – helps Djarin overcome the fear and trauma he harbors: lying on the floor at Djarin's feet is IG-11, the bounty hunter droid Djarin

shot and disabled just before it could kill Grogu. While preventing IG-11 from killing Grogu could have been motivated by financial self-interest and/or compassion for an innocent child, there is possibly another, more instinctive motivation for Djarin in this moment: fear arising from his childhood trauma[19].

Throughout the first season of the series, Djarin displays a strong phobia (fear reactions that are irrational or inappropriate in context) of droids. For example, Djarin refuses to ride in a droid-piloted landspeeder, and again says "*no droids*" (S1 E5, The Gunslinger) to Peti Motto's ship repair droids[20]. Later, Djarin nearly shoots Kuiil's re-programmed IG-11 when it offers him tea. While he says his fear is that IG-11 is still programmed to kill Grogu, it is clear Djarin harbors a deeper prejudice against droids: in the same scene, Cara Dune remarks: "*You got a real thing for droids, don't you*?" (S1 E7, The Reckoning)[21].

The root of this prejudice is revealed when Djarin brings the Armorer the beskar paid to him for delivering Grogu to the Client [22], and we again see flashbacks to Djarin's childhood trauma. This time, however, we see the Separatist battle droids that were used to besiege Djarin's childhood home. The final flashback in this sequence shows us that, right after Djarin's parents closed the shelter doors, an explosion blasts them ajar, implying that Djarin's parents are killed. The flashback ends with a droid reopening the shelter doors and aiming its blaster at the young Djarin[23].

Thus, when we get to the point in time when Djarin sees an orphaned, helpless Grogu about to be killed by a droid – blaster aimed and ready – he is reminded of, if not re-experiencing, his childhood trauma. In this case, rather than making a conscious choice to protect a sympathetic child, shooting IG-11 may have been a defensive behavior reflexively activated by Djarin's sympathetic nervous system.

From a scientific view, it is understandable how Djarin's phobia of droids could be rooted in this childhood traumatic experience. Research has revealed much about how our bodies respond to traumatic experiences, how memories of these experiences can take hold in our brains, and how these memories can overwhelm us with fear and anxiety years later. With this understanding, we may better support ourselves and our loved ones with processing trauma, overcome our fears, and stop them from leading us to anger, hate, and suffering.

The Neurobiology of Stress, Memory, and Fear

When we talk about responses to traumatic events, it is important to discuss the biological basis of these responses. For nearly a century, scientists have studied the biological (specifically, neurobiological) systems that govern how animals (including humans) respond to stressors and the ways they learn to ease their impact[24]. One of the most important systems involved in animals' stress responses is the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis[25]. This is a coordinated system of bodily organs involved in many functions (like digestion, immune responses, and reproductive behavior) and includes the hypothalamus (located near the center of the brain), the pituitary gland (which protrudes from the hypothalamus), and the adrenal gland (located just above the kidneys). When an animal encounters a stressor, the HPA-axis releases hormones (e.g., cortisol) that prepare it to escape or defend itself. These hormones serve to increase heart rate and blood flow to muscles to facilitate rapid movement, regulate the immune system, and reduce inflammation. They also directly interact with various brain areas, particularly the hippocampus and the amygdala[26].

The hippocampus is critical for the formation and maintenance of memories about things and events (i.e., declarative and episodic memories), their spatial relationships (i.e., mental maps), and

their emotional contexts. The hippocampus is densely populated with neurons that can be activated by adrenal hormones, and this is thought to be the primary way stress impacts memory function[27]. Stress can disrupt the way our brains function, changing the way we create memories and even connect with other people[28]. For example, people diagnosed with PTSD have been found to have greater difficulty remembering information, and the severity of this memory dysfunction is correlated with the severity of the PTSD symptoms[29]. Furthermore, longer exposure to trauma and/or more experiences with trauma are associated with stronger memory deficits and more severe PTSD symptoms[30].

However, stress does not impair all kinds of learning and memory[31]. Stress can also enhance the strength of certain memories, particularly those related to traumatic experience(s)[32]. Most notably, stress enhances how quickly we associate certain contexts with harmful outcomes and strengthens fear responses to those contexts and stimuli[33]. Case in point, Djarin and droids.

When we perceive something to be a threat, information about it (e.g., its shape, color, odor, texture, etc.) and the context (via the hippocampus) is relayed to the amygdala, which effectively bonds those neural networks together that coordinate our defensive "fight or flight" behaviors[34]. The amygdala can create very strong and stable associations between threatening stimuli and defensive behaviors with a single exposure, particularly when one is unable to avoid the threat or otherwise maintain a sense of physical and psychological safety[35]. Such fearful memories are clearly critical for survival, and vertebrate animals are remarkably similar in how their brains and bodies react to stressors they encounter[36].

Fearful memories can be exceedingly difficult to overcome. There is no clear way to undo the physical changes in the brain that

traumatic experiences can cause, but we *can* learn to override and inhibit its attempts to activate fear behavior[37]. This is an additional learning process called *extinction learning* that involves strengthening the ability of the prefrontal cortex – a more thoughtful area of the brain – to calm neural activity that otherwise drive fear reactions. Extinction learning can happen naturally with repeated exposure to contexts or stimuli that were previously associated with negative outcomes but are no longer dangerous. However, the prefrontal cortex may also be impaired by stress and, thus, become less capable of regulating the impact of stress on the hippocampus and amygdala[38].

While the specific biological mechanisms underlying trauma- and stressor-related disorders remains an active area of research, we know that many areas of the brain work together to facilitate the effects of stress on memory, causing both impairments and enhancements, and potentially give rise to persistent and harmful traumatic memories like those we see Djarin experience through his flashbacks and droid-phobia[39]. When our ability to appropriately contextualize and process our trauma and fears is impaired, we may also adopt harmful, limiting beliefs and develop prejudices stemming from those fears. In such cases, extinction learning may need to be cultivated intentionally to cope with traumatic memories and overcome our fears, as is often practiced in clinical treatment for phobias and trauma-related disorders. Nonetheless, the hardest part of recovery is often recognizing when we need help.

In the season one finale of *The Mandalorian*, Djarin's physical wounds are healed by the re-programmed IG-11 and he witnesses it sacrifice itself to save Grogu. These acts prove for Djarin that droids are, like other species in the galaxy, capable of overcoming their programming and need not always be feared[40]. In witnessing IG-11's sacrifice, Djarin reassesses his own trauma-driven, phobic programming (i.e., extinction learning), sheds his

avoidant relationship with droids, and begins to open himself to creating secure relationships with others. As Peli Motto remarks later in season two, when Djarin finally allows her repair droids to work on his ship, "*he likes droids now*!" (S2 E1, The Marshall)[41].

The Social Impact of Trauma

Traumatic experiences can influence the development of childhood attachment styles and cause individuals to perpetuate avoidant or anxious relationship dynamics[42], and throughout the first season of *The Mandalorian*, Djarin's behavior reflects a dismissive-avoidant attachment style[43]. He has developed an independent and self-reliant disposition, avoids forming strong attachments to others, communicates with as little expression as possible, and literally hides his face. While this is mandated by the laws of his covert, perhaps this also symbolizes the generational transmission of trauma as a result of the Great Purge.

Even so, Djarin's dismissive-avoidant relationship style likely developed as a means of coping with the sudden loss of his parents – his closest relationships – as a child[44]. By avoiding strong attachments to others, Djarin eliminates any risk of further trauma related to those he cares about. This relationship style may indeed serve a protective function against the development of stressor, or trauma-related disorders, among other mental disorders[45]. This can be viewed as a strategy for maintaining control over one's environment. By reducing one's responsibility to only themselves, one can eliminate the potential for feeling guilt or shame surrounding a traumatic experience, which can double or even triple the odds of developing PTSD after an unexpected death of a loved one[46].

While dismissive-avoidant attachment styles may be protective against the development of trauma-related disorders, so are

secure attachment styles. Secure attachment styles are relationships that maintain intimate, interdependent relationships with others and balance self-interest with the needs of others[47]. However, unlike dismissive-avoidant attachments, secure attachments are associated with helping individuals effectively cope through a traumatic experience[48]. Secure relationships can provide a sense of comfort, safety, reliability, and solidarity to those who experience trauma[49], and studies show that securely attached children cope with stress more effectively than insecurely attached children[50].

Furthermore, people can experience positive changes following a traumatic event. This is known as "post-traumatic growth", and it is related to the concept of resiliency – the ability for one to cope and/or grow following exposure to traumatic stressors[51]. Keep in mind that one may experience negative changes (e.g., post-traumatic stress) as well as resiliency or post-traumatic growth following trauma – these are not mutually-exclusive outcomes nor does trauma define one's life[52]. Naturally, secure attachments, a sense of belonging, and community membership promote resiliency and the likelihood of experiencing post-traumatic growth[53]. People may experience positive changes arising from trauma in three main areas: their self-concept, their relationships with others, and their beliefs[54].

Djarin's own journey exemplifies the multiple facets of traumatic stress and growth. We see that he not only suffers from intrusive memories about his traumatic childhood, but we also see him shift his beliefs and self-concept in ways that allow him to grow into a parental figure for Grogu. Djarin's transformation into this role comes to a climax in the season two finale, as Grogu seeks Djarin's permission to train with Luke Skywalker[55]. Djarin realizes that best way to care for Grogu is to trust him and let him go. In this moment, Djarin removes his helmet for Grogu – deviating from his orthodox Mandalorian beliefs – and allows

himself to be vulnerable. He lets Grogu feel his face, his usual stoic appearance breaks for a brief smile, and tears begin to well in his eyes as he says goodbye[56].

Where Djarin demonstrates substantial recovery and growth from trauma through his relationship with Grogu, Grogu displays great resilience. Their traumas are very similar, a point that is literally hammered in when the Armorer forges a piece of armor for him, and Grogu experiences flashbacks of Imperial Stormtroopers destroying the Jedi Temple. This moment is a clear parallel to Djarin's flashbacks in the first season[57]. Thus, the difference between their responses to trauma appears to be rooted in the kind of relationships that were available to them after their traumatic experiences. For Djarin, he was adopted into a tribe of Mandalorians whose practices emphasized hiding, denying the expression of emotions, and being self-sufficient – this could provide all the ingredients for a dismissive-avoidant attachment style.

Grogu, however, has a choice, which Luke Skywalker plainly lays out in *The Book of Boba Fett*. Grogu may return to Djarin, "*giving in to attachment … and forsaking the way of the Jedi*" (S1 E6, From the Desert Comes a Stranger)[58] or train with Luke Skywalker to become a Jedi, avoiding attachments and becoming self-sufficient. Symbolically, these choices are represented by Mandalorian armor on the one hand, an item used for passive protection from harm, and, on the other hand, a lightsaber – a weapon used for aggressive negotiations. In the finale, Grogu chooses secure attachment with Djarin over becoming a dismissive-avoidant Jedi[59]. Djarin's and Grogu's secure attachment not only helps them grow and become more resilient, but it also opens Djarin to developing trusting relationships with others. After affirming their attachment, Djarin and Grogu play significant roles in helping Boba Fett, Greef Karga, and Bo-Katan Kryze rebuild their communities and own sense of belonging.

In keeping with the themes of *The Mandalorian,* the main story and characters of *The Book of Boba Fett* further exemplify the healing properties of secure attachments and community, particularly through the relationship that Boba Fett develops with master assassin Fennec Shand[60]. Like Djarin and Grogu, Boba and Fennec share similar traumatic experiences, and this influences Boba's decision to help Fennec following her near-fatal encounter with a certain bounty hunter (Din Djarin)[61]. Boba rescues Fennec and replaces her injuries with cybernetic parts that allow her to live[62].

As we see throughout *The Book of Boba Fett,* Boba suffers from several of his own traumas. We learn that, after Boba fell into the sarlacc pit during the events on Tatooine in *Return of the Jedi*[63], he escapes and collapses in the desert[64]. Boba only lives because a tribe of Tuskens find and take him prisoner. After saving a young Tusken's life, Boba is freed and becomes part of the Tusken's tribe. The secure relationships he develops with the Tuskens help him recover from the trauma of the sarlacc pit (and arguably that of witnessing his father die as a child[65]). However, the Tusken tribe is massacred, and Boba blames himself – an example of the guilt that can often haunt trauma survivors. It is shortly after this traumatic experience that Boba finds Fennec near-death, left for dead in the desert. Boba saves Fennec's life, and they begin to form a trusting relationship[66].

The Book of Boba Fett is perhaps the most explicit of the two series in communicating the healing power of relationships and community. Fennec helps Boba recover his ship from Jabba's Palace in Mos Espa, eliminate the gang thought to be responsible for slaughtering his Tusken tribe, and together they attempt to find Boba's armor in the sarlacc pit that previously trapped him, destroying the creature in the process (to be sure, these examples may not necessarily be the healthiest ways to cope with past traumas)[67]. In the next scene, Boba asks Fennec to join him in

partnership – offering her loyalty and protection – to establish their own ruling crime syndicate in Mos Espa. After the two companions take over Jabba's Palace, we see Boba emerge from a bacta tank, finally healed of his physical wounds from the sarlacc. Fennec unceremoniously asks, "*What about the scars on the inside*?" Boba earnestly replies, "*Those take longer*" (S1 E4, The Gathering Storm)[68].

Concluding Thoughts

Indeed, the psychological wounds of trauma can persist like scars throughout one's entire life. *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett* are beloved stories about how the suffering we share binds us together, how these bonds can heal our traumas and allow us to grow, and how love makes us resilient in the fight for survival. We can recover, cope, and even experience personal growth through traumatic experiences, and these are easier when we have secure relationships and communities to rely on. As with all stressors, anxieties, and fears, talking about them with loved ones or trusted professionals and building safe communities are among the best paths to restoration and recovery known to science. Nonetheless, these scars take time to heal – and literal restructuring of the brain – as one learns new ways of living to overcome the natural, protective consequences of trauma.

Notes

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"THESE PEOPLE LAY ANCESTRAL CLAIM TO THE DUNE SEA"

Racialization and the Problematic Portrayal of the Tusken Peoples

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The expansion of the Star Wars universe, particularly after Disney acquired Lucasfilm, introduced new canon (i.e., textual sources of truth) and storylines to the massive franchise. With the addition of several new live action series on Disney+, the culture and practices of long-established denizens, tribes, and social groups within the Star Wars universe were expanded upon. Prior to the Disney acquisition of the Star Wars franchise, some fans were familiar with the Star Wars *Expanded Universe*, or the collective of licensed background stories belonging to the franchise, as told across books, comics, video games and more. While Disney ultimately de-canonized most of the former Expanded Universe content (rebranded as Star Wars Legends in 2014), new stories about familiar and novel characters were introduced on Disney+ [1]. For many characters and groups belonging to the Star Wars

universe, this introduced the possibility of more robust cultural stories that fans could consume and enjoy.

This includes stories and cultural expansions about the Tuskens, who received their first comprehensive on-screen cultural exploration in both *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett*. Viewers learned more about the social and cultural complexities of the Tuskens, originally dismissively referred to as "*Sand People*" by Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*[2]. However, the implication of reducing the Tuskens to mere "Sand People" in *A New Hope* points to a larger, historical issue with representation in the multimedia franchise. These initial depictions in the films are problematic when understood through an anthropological framework of culture. When indigenous groups, like the Tuskens (as portrayed in the Star Wars franchise), are *racialized*, or racially constructed as cultures using outdated stereotypes, this feeds into the already existing negative stereotypes about indigenous peoples broadly held within our society.

This chapter explores this idea by examining Tusken culture and traditions from an anthropological perspective, arguing that they are portrayed in the Star Wars universe as a stigmatized and marginalized indigenous group discriminated against by the settlers and colonists on Tatooine and the broader Star Wars universe. Themes of stereotyped indigeneity amongst the Tuskens are also discussed and critiqued to illustrate the problematic portrayal of the Tuskens in the broader franchise.

What is Culture? An Anthropological Perspective

As an anthropologist, my comprehension and enjoyment of the Star Wars universe occurs through an anthropological lens. Anthropology is the study of humankind through time, including the origins of human biology, culture, and language, as well as

how we interact with our environment, which comprises not only the physical environment, but our social systems, politics, and other cultural minutiae[3]. Anthropology, and its subdiscipline cultural anthropology, seeks to understand how we construct culture and how culture creates societal norms and practices.

If we are going to explore culture, we first must understand what it is. The Cambridge Dictionary defines culture as "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time"[4]. It also defines it as the "the attitudes, behavior, opinions, etc. of a particular group of people within society"[5]. However, culture is far more complex than these definitions; culture is the adhesive that binds a group of people together. Culture, which is ingrained in us from birth, encompasses the belief systems, language, social behaviors, political and economic systems, definitions of identity and most constructions of a society. This means that how a society envisions and defines itself and its morals, its laws, its very order, is deeply tied to culture. Culture is also notable because it is critical for understanding the human condition and psyche; we define the world around us based on our cultural beliefs about society, the environment, and even different cultures[6].

For example, in Western-based culture, the consumption of certain foods, like insects, is considered unpalatable or taboo. However, in other parts of the world, such as the East, the consumption of certain insects is acceptable[7]. In parts of South America, *cuy* (guinea pig) is a delicacy and in the Philippines eating *balut* (the egg with the baby chicken partially developed) is part of the traditional cuisine[8],[9],[10]. In American culture, these foods are typically considered unpalatable, not because Americans have eaten them, but because they are not a part of our diet or cultural food practices. Like, Star Wars' own blue milk, they were not inculcated in our minds from birth as delicious, healthy foods that we were exposed to as part of our normal

cuisine. Our cultural beliefs inform us from a very early age that these items either carry pathogens, are harmful (insects), or make adorable pets (guinea pigs). Our cultural beliefs also make us frown upon other cultural groups that consume these foods. This in itself may be a subconscious process, but it is instilled on the conscious and subconscious level by the culture we are raised in.

Race as Culture?

At its heart, this chapter seeks to understand the relationship between culture and racialization (i.e., the act of ascribing racial identities to a group), and how this process is tied to character development in *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett* for the Tusken people. Unfortunately, when the Star Wars franchise created the Tuskens they adhered to harmful stereotypes deeply rooted in Western culture about indigenous people. Indigenous stereotypes make assumptions about culture based on one's race. Culture governs how we behave, what we eat, how we view the world and others in it. It also informs how we construct social identities, including racial identities within a society. Race, racial categories, and the process of racialization (that is, how persons or groups are defined and differentiated based on shared characteristics such as looks, nationality, language, and religion) are *defined by* culture[11]. Racialization is deeply tied to cultural beliefs and perceptions of these characteristics, resulting in the creation and maintenance of racial categories, which leads to differential treatment and/or marginalization of individuals ascribed to certain racial categories. For example, in American society, the color of a person's skin often results in that individual, or group, being ascribed to a certain category of race by others in that society. Some individuals may have certain perceptions of persons belonging to a "race" with respect to how they speak, act, behave, and even to their biology. These biases, in turn, can impact how individuals of this "race" are perceived by society[12].

Thus, race is a *social* category, despite it being commonly misunderstood as a biological one[13]. To be explicit, race is not biological; there are no specific genes associated with the complex variability associated with any one particular race[14]. Yet race is a strong, culturally constructed category defined by similarities (i.e., skin tone, facial features, etc.)[15]. Through the process of racialization, people are categorized (and often marginalized) into distinct groups based on the way they look. This not only impacts how we view/perceive them in society, but how we see ourselves and others in society, and how we feel society perceives us[16]. Unfortunately, stereotypes about racial groups as biologically distinct groups have persisted for centuries. Such misconceptions have their origins in white, Western, Colonial, European-based cultures around the Enlightenment Period (1615-1820)[17],[18]. During this era, scientists began creating racial categories of human groups based on their physical characteristics, skin color, location, local climate, and even the measurement of their skulls. Scientific racism was born out this practice in the mid-19th-century and these race categories became associated with intelligence levels (which white scientists attempted to quantify based on skull measurements of estimated brain size), as well as other aspects of stereotyped behavior[19],[20].

Indeed, taken to the extreme, non-white groups were even believed to have separate origins from the white race altogether. Samuel Morton, one such scientist that is also considered one of the fathers of scientific racism in the United States, exemplified these unfounded beliefs. Upon measuring the unethically obtained skulls of deceased individuals of European, Native American, East Asian, Central Asian, and African ancestry in his seminal book *Crania Americana*, he declared that European-descended groups had the largest cranial capacity (which he erroneously equated with intelligence) and Africans the smallest, leading him to proclaim that European-descended groups were "distinguished" by attaining "the highest intellectual

endowments"[21]. Native Americans were placed in the middle but described as: "averse to cultivation, and slow in acquiring knowledge; restless, revengeful, and fond of war, and wholly destitute of maritime adventure"[22]. Morton blatantly stated in regard to African-descended groups that, "in disposition the Negro is joyous, flexible, and indolent; while the many nations which compose this race present a singular diversity of intellectual character, of which the far extreme is the lowest grade of humanity"[23].

Morton's words would "scientifically" reinforce and explain pre-existing American indigenous stereotypes that dated back to the 16th century, including that of the dangerous and violent "barbarous savage" that attacked white settlers without mercy. The broken English, vengeful, war-like stereotype of attacking "innocent" white folks without provocation as they traveled through or settled in the American west would persist into the 20th century with film, television, and written depictions of the "savage other" pitted against the pioneering and resilient spirit of white heroic pioneers and cowboys[24]. Within the Star Wars universe, this stereotype, as discussed below, resonates in the creation and characterization of the Tusken peoples.

Racialization of Tusken Peoples

This chapter refers to the Tusken Raiders as the *Tusken peoples* or *Tuskens*. This deliberate terminology serves two purposes, first to humanize the Tusken population and, second, to decolonize the stereotyped construct of Tusken peoples that seems to be tied to white settler/colonial concepts of the "primitive" native. In this section, I discuss how the narrow European-based, Western white construct (bordering on racialized stereotyping) of the Tusken peoples is rampant in the Star Wars canon and expanded universe.

Tusken Peoples

The Tusken peoples first appeared in the second draft of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* as imperial spies[25]. However, by the third draft they were labeled as a native people of Tatooine[26]. To date, only Tuskens and Jawas comprise the last remaining groups indigenous to Tatooine. The first onscreen introduction to the Tusken peoples occurs in *A New Hope*[27]. They are not referred to by a cultural name or identity, rather Luke Skywalker refers to them as the "*Sand People*." When we first see the Tusken peoples they appear to have large, masculine-framed bodies, are masked, covered in clothing from head to toe with no aspect of their physical bodies exposed, and armed with a rifle or gaderffii (or gaffi) sticks. Lacking any reference to perceivable facial features, we always see Tuksen peoples wearing their head gear, eye protection lenses, a breath filter and a moisture trap[28]. Behaviorally, they are portrayed as lacking complex language (or, at least unwilling or unable to speak Galactic Basic) communicating in grunts, guffaws, hoots, and howls when coordinating their attack on Luke Skywalker.

After the Tusken peoples successfully render young Skywalker unconscious, we meet Obi-wan Kenobi, who scares them off with a series of sounds whilst waving his robed hands in the air. Kenobi states to young Skywalker, after he regains consciousness, that *"The **Sand People** are easily startled, but they'll soon be back, and in greater numbers"*[29]. This introduction establishes the Tusken peoples as wild, violent, untamed desert nomads at the boundaries of savagery, incapable of coherent language. We later learn that despite this savage, seemingly inept characterization, that the Tusken peoples are smart enough to travel single file so as not to reveal their true numbers. This indicates that, despite the protagonists' perceptions, the Tusken peoples have the foresight and intellect to adopt survival strategies that protect their tribes, meaning they have developed an organized culture,

complete with systems, and modes of behavior that allow them to traverse Tatooine, without settlers knowing their true numbers.

Notably, in contrast to the Star Wars film franchise, *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett* revealed that the Tuskens do have a spoken language and a complex sign language that was used as the main form of communication with non-Tusken groups[30],[31],[32]. Why Obi-Wan nor Luke never bothered to learn this form of communication to increase the odds of non-hostile interactions remains unknown. The film, being an artifact of its time, and a literal "Space Western" inspired by traditional Western films, paints the Tusken peoples as hostile natives, providing little commentary on their oppression until the more recent depictions in *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett*. This is especially highlighted in the conversation Din Djarin has with Oro Calican about the Tuskens[33]. Calican indicates, "*I heard the locals talking about this filth*"[34]. To which Darjin responds, "*Tuskens think they're the locals. Everyone else is just trespassing*"[35]. Again, we see the Star Wars franchise adhering to the violent indigenous stereotype perpetuated by colonists, in this case the colonists of Tatooine. Djarin's response, however, is the first disruption of this narrative in the franchise that subtly points to the fact that they are the true indigenous and rightful inhabitants of the planet.

As the Star Wars franchise expanded from films to comic books, novels, games, and streaming series, so did our knowledge of Tusken culture and beliefs, as each form of media contributed something new (or not so new) about the Tusken peoples. They are a nomadic, clan-based, indigenous culture, comprised of different groups native to Tatooine[36],[37]. Whilst described in films, Star Wars encyclopedias, and the *Star Wars Visual Dictionary* as xenophobic, territorial, "fierce nomads" with "savage and violent ways", in reality some groups were hostile towards Tatooine settlers, whilst others were more peaceful,

forming alliances, as demonstrated in *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett*[38],[39],[40]. Other stories also expanded on this notion, adding more layers to the initially one-dimensional portrayal of the Tusken peoples. The *Star Wars: Republic* series of comics revealed that Tusken groups adopt some individuals into their clans, as was the case of former Jedi Knight Sharad Hett and his wife K'Sheek[41],[42]. This also happens to Boba Fett after his capture by a group of Tuskens when he escapes the sarlacc and has his armor looted by Jawas[43].

Notably, Tusken peoples believe they are Tatooine's indigenous and rightful inhabitants; they consider other non-native species and colonists/settlers on Tatooine as trespassers[44]. Their ethos emphasizes that water is sacred and promised to them, explaining why they attack settlers and moisture farms[45]. This is also highlighted in *The Book of Boba Fett*. After Boba and the Tusken tribe halt the Pyke Syndicate hovertrain that is smuggling spice through their lands (and firing upon them with reckless abandon, an event that almost draws parallels with the settling of the American West), the Pyke captain confesses that it was believed the Tuskens were *uncivilized* and were fired upon as a protective measure[46]. Boba responds, stating: "*These sands are no longer free for you to pass. These people lay ancestral claim to the Dune Sea, and if you are to pass, a toll is to be paid to them. Any death dealt from the passing freighters will be returned ten-fold*" (S1 E2, The Tribes of Tatooine)[47]. To emphasize this, a Tusken tribe member damages the hovertrain's water car, allowing water to flow from it, which the Tuskens collect[48]. Again, another Mandalorian, this time Boba, disrupts the settler-colonist narrative that stereotypes the Tusken peoples as uncivilized primitives. Boba also recognizes this, and in turn forces the Tatooine colonists to recognize that the Tusken peoples are the rightful first and indigenous inhabitants of Tatooine.

The Mandalorian and *The Book of Boba Fett* are not the first entries in the Star Wars universe to attempt to provide some backstory for the Tusken peoples. *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* holds this distinction[49]. It was the first film in the franchise that provided new insights into a less stereotyped Tusken culture. However, this is overshadowed by the kidnapping and death of Shmi Skywalker[50]. Anakin Skywalker, upon learning that his mother was kidnapped by a clan of Tuskens, locates their camp and finds his mother, who dies in his arms. In pain and seeking revenge for her death, he slaughters the entire village, including women and children. When he confesses to Padmé what he did, Anakin states, "*They're like animals and I slaughtered them like animals*[51]." Anakin may have viewed the Tuskens as animals for what they did to his mother, but he may have also harbored these sentiments before they kidnapped her. After all, he was the child of an enslaved settler raised on Tatooine. The cultural prejudices and contempt settlers/colonists had toward Tuskens peoples may have been culturally inculcated in Anakin from his birth.

Given the predominant beliefs amongst most colonists on Tatooine (see Obi-Wan's and Luke's introduction to the Tusken peoples) that the "Sand People" were comparable to violent savages, it is likely that this was the cultural narrative Anakin was raised with. Perhaps the Tuskens comprised the backbone of the wild boogeymen tales of his childhood. That he refers to them as animals and slaughtered an entire village of men, women, and innocent children without a modicum of respect for their lives, let alone the lives of the children in the encampment, suggests a deeper-rooted hate that extended beyond his mother's kidnapping and torture. It implies an inculcated spite and a pre-existing view of the Tuskens as marginalized, subhuman others. Anakin did not blink or have any remorse over the act of genocide he committed. Acts of genocide, such as the one Anakin committed, come from deep-rooted sentiments of hate toward other groups that have been racialized and marginalized by

society as deviant others that are deemed "different," "subhuman", and not worthy of basic human rights. The Star Wars universe certainly shared Anakin's sentiments, as the Tusken villagers, including the women and children Anakin murdered in cold blood, received no mention or justice[52].

Prior to their slaughter, the film provides an almost idyllic glimpse into Tusken life and culture. This brief moment represented the first time on film that the Tuskens were not portrayed as violent, degraded adversaries. We are shown a Tusken encampment with guards sitting quietly outside watching two domesticated massifs. Meanwhile, women and children are also present in the camp. It remains unknown why the Tuskens kidnapped Skywalker's mother from her former owner's (and eventual husband's) moisture farm. Tuskens have been characterized as targeting moisture farms, due to their association with water, which, as mentioned above, was considered sacred[53]. Thus, they may have kidnapped Skywalker's mother for invading their indigenous lands and defiling their sacred beliefs about water. However, this kidnapping is once again another indigenous stereotype reminiscent of early captive narratives from American pioneer women abducted by Native American tribes.

From the start of the Star Wars franchise, the Tuskens were racialized and marginalized in a manner that parallels early settler/colonist views of Native Americans and other indigenous groups. According to scholar Paul Charbel, Tatooine colonists are ignorant and indifferent about how their presence offends and endangers Tusken society; they remain ignorant about why the Tuskens attack them and apathetic about Tusken culture and society as a whole[54]. For example, the blanket-term of calling Tuskens "Sand People" by the settlers of Tattoine demonstrates they have been reduced to an othered status, with no attempt to respect or reconcile the customs and beliefs of the Tuskens with

that of their own (e.g., avoiding lands inhabited or considered sacred by the Tusken peoples).

In contrast to these earlier depictions, *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett* provide a more humanized and nuanced view of the Tusken peoples. We see them through the eyes of Djarin and Boba, who did not view the Tuskens as primitive or violent. Both recognized them as Tatooine's indigenous peoples that rightfully laid claim to their natal lands and assisted Tusken tribes in asserting their indigenous rights to their lands. We also see in both series that the Tusken peoples have a diverse and complex culture, belief system, and language. They are not uncivilized, nor should they be disregarded or ignored by Tatooine colonists.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, biologically race does not exist; it is a strong sociocultural construct that a society adheres to[55]. This also applies to the Tusken peoples. Within Tatooine settler culture, these indigenous peoples have been constructed as restless, revengeful, "uncivilized savages" (similar to the ways in which white settlers described Native Americans), marginalized by Obi-wan to mere "Sand People", and dehumanized by Anakin Skywalker as "animals". Despite humanizing the Tuskens, even *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett* continue to perpetuate indigenous stereotypes that contribute to the racializing of the Tusken peoples. For example, the stereotypical indigenous kidnapping, or taking of captives trope, was used as a plot device to bring Boba in contact with the Tuskens. Throughout the series, the Tuskens remain relatively ignorant of technology and require the assistance of outsiders to educate and empower them on how to overcome their problems or injustices.

In the case of *The Book of Boba Fett*, whilst it is not entirely a white savior story as Temeura Morrison is Maouri (the indigenous peoples of New Zealand), the Tuskens from his tribe notably

lacked the patience, knowledge, and agency to figure out how to solve the problem of the Pyke Syndicate hovertrain for themselves[56]. They required assistance, falling into the stereotypical indigenous trope of relying on a Westernized savior figure for help and protection. Furthermore, the Westernized savior teaches the tribe how to survive, excel, or achieve a goal that it would not have accomplished had the Westerner not been present. Once this is complete, the savior is adopted into their society and undergoes a stereotypical vision quest, that Boba himself experiences as part of his formal initiation into the Tusken tribe that rescued him[57]. Lastly, the cold slaughtering of Boba's entire adoptive family was yet again another frustrating trope, reducing his indigenous adoptive family and their sacrifice to a mere plot device to drive Boba's character[58],[59].

Conclusion: There is Good in Finding Humanity and Family

As unpacked above, there have been strides to depict the Tuskens as a more-nuanced group of denizens in the Star Wars universe. In some ways, this has been successful. Through interactions with characters like Din Djarin and Boba Fett we see a rich and complex Tusken culture emerge for the first time in the history of the franchise. Although this portrayal is far more humanizing than what we have seen previously in the Star Wars universe it is still not without problems as it perpetuates harmful stereotypes. Other depictions, such as being reduced to a plot device to further Boba's character growth, are less progressive. However, the most problematic issue that exists within the Star Wars universe in regard to the Tusken peoples is the negative racialization and stereotyped indigeneity of their culture. Earlier, this chapter discussed how the Tusken peoples were initially introduced to audiences as savage primitives with little language and no elaborate culture. Historically, this racialized stereotype as indigenous, barbaric savages is reiterated throughout the Star Wars universe, canon, and history by the use stigmatizing

language and adjectives to describe the Tuskens. In *The Making of Star Wars,* they are referred to as "aggressive desert nomads" and "savage desert nomads who ride Banthas"[60]. The terms, "Sand People" desert "savages", and "primitives" invokes settler colonial imagery of indigenous groups in the American West, who were described as "savage", "restless", and "vengeful" by whites, as well as Eurocentric notions of the nomadic Bedouin desert groups in the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, and North Africa. The stereotype of the subhuman brute is further reinforced by the language given to the Tuskens in the original films, comprised of incoherent grunts, huffs, and growls (derived from barking and braying mules)[61]. Even the decision of not translating their speech onscreen further denies them agency as an indigenous culture[62]. By referring to the Tusken peoples as savages and Sand People throughout the franchise and denying them language and culture, the Tuskens are effectively racialized and marginalized in the Star Wars canon. White colonized settler beliefs are forced upon them. Tuskens are denied agency, rights, and citizenship as a valid culture in the Star Wars canon, which ultimately erases their own identity[63].

Whilst problematic stereotypes of indigenous groups and indigeneity still exist in the Star Wars franchise, *The Book of Boba Fett* and *The Mandalorian* should be acknowledged for improving upon the initially subhuman and savage stereotypes that have plagued the Tusken peoples since their creation. Furthermore, not only did they give the Tusken peoples humanity, but they were portrayed with empathy and sympathy. Gone were the irrationally barking and vocalizing Tuskens. A more fluid language, as well as a form of sign language, comprised their speech. They were also given subtitles, which demonstrates their restored humanity and agency. We learn more about their cultural practices, way of life, and belief systems from how they were portrayed. Notably, it is suggested that Boba Fett's adoptive Tusken family are not like other Tusken groups that kill

colonists[64]. Indeed, perhaps as gratitude for saving him from the harsh desert of Tatooine, Boba offers to help the Tuskens, and most importantly, allows the tribal elders to *choose* whether or not they want his assistance. Ultimately, they band together in solidarity to stop the Pyke's smuggler train[65]. For his actions, Boba is adopted into the tribe, but his time with his new family would be short-lived. In the end, he likely needed the Tuskens more than we will know. Between the loss of his father, and the hundreds of bounties he claimed, maybe Boba lost his way. Maybe for the first time in a long time he had a sense of peace and family with the Tuskens, one he had not felt since his father. Maybe in finding this family he rediscovered himself and the man he wanted to be (for more, see Tompkins in this volume). Ultimately, it is through Boba's eyes and his journey that we see the Star Wars franchise provide us with a more nuanced take on the Tusken peoples that humanizes them and allows us to understand them as more than mere racialized caricature, but perhaps part of ourselves.

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MEMORIES OF MANDALORE

Memory and Recollection

Michael J. Serra

A young couple runs through the streets of a town on the planet Aq Vetina, the man carrying a small boy in his arms. Blaster fire from swooping Separatist gunships destroys the environment around them. Hulking B2 super battle droids gun down fleeing civilians, the couple barely able to stay ahead of the slaughter. The scenes alternate between standard-speed and slow-motion shots, the sound effects muffled to near silence. The score is somber. The couple hides the boy in a small bunker, but we are never to see them again. Seconds later, a super battle droid opens the hatch, readying its arm-mounted blaster. The boy braces. Suddenly, blaster fire erupts from off camera, disabling the droid. Through the smoke, we see the familiar silhouette of Mandalorian armor lit from behind, an armored guardian angel arriving to save the day. This warrior extends his hand to the boy, who takes it. As the boy exits his hiding spot, the music swells optimistically. The camera pans, and we see other Mandalorian fighters finishing off the battle droids. With an unspoken agreement, the boy is taken up by his rescuer. The rescuer's jet pack ignites, and the pair lift

off the ground, the boy taking one last look at the destruction below as he is carried to safety as a new Mandalorian foundling.

This scene appears during the season one finale of *The Mandalorian*[1], as Cara Dune, Greef Karga, and the titular Mandalorian, Din Djarin, are holed up in a building on the planet Nevarro, with Moff Gideon and a platoon of stormtroopers and death troopers outside demanding their surrender. However, the rescue scene described above does not involve the same characters, and the setting is a different town on a different planet than Nevarro. The antagonists in the rescue scene are Separatist droids, long defeated and deactivated by the time the events of the series take place. Mandalorian warriors are familiar to viewers of most Star Wars media and exist across time periods, but the viewer has not previously encountered these specific fighters before. The juxtaposition of the events on Nevarro with Cara, Greef, and Djarin are distinct from the events with the child, the battle droids, and the Mandalorian rescuers. How then, as an audience, do we readily understand them as temporally separate—yet related—events?

Just before the rescue scene appears, Moff Gideon calls the titular Mandalorian by his birth name: Din Djarin (the first time that the audience learns this name). Noting that he has "*not heard that name spoken since [he] was a child*" (S1 E8, Redemption)[2], Djarin quickly explains to his compatriots—and therefore the viewer—that he was *not* born on the planet Mandalore. The camera zooms in on Djarin's visor, there is a brief, white-masked dissolve, and the shot becomes a closeup of the face of the boy in the scene described above. Combining the contextual clue (Djarin has just mentioned his childhood), the lining up of Djarin's helmeted face and that of the boy's face in the next shot, and the camera effects (the zoom in and dissolve), the viewer recognizes that the scene is in fact a *flashback:* a scene that took place before the present narrative that has been placed within the current

scenes[3],[4]. The viewer infers that the boy is the titular adult Mandalorian when he was a child and might also assume that they are seeing this scene *because the character is recollecting that past event*[5].

In this chapter, we explore the use of flashback and character memory as a storytelling device in *The Mandalorian*[6] and *The Book of Boba Fett*[7], and how the Force can create unique versions of flashback and memory in Star Wars media. By taking advantage of flashback and character memory as storytelling devices, the creators of Star Wars content have created greater opportunities for character development and have made it possible to tell more complex, interrelated stories across film, television, books, and video games.

Flashback in Film and Television

Flashbacks are common in modern film and television narratives[8]. Simply put, a flashback occurs whenever the audience views a scene of a past event (e.g., Djarin's rescue as a boy) within or between scenes of current events of the story (i.e., Djarin and his allies facing off with Moff Gideon)[9]. Mixing scenes of the past and present is a storytelling tool; the viewer learns of past events in the story's world or in the characters' lives (or the characters' memories of those events), and it produces a deeper level of meaning and understanding for the viewer than either scene could have produced on its own[10],[11],[12].

Flashbacks support the present action by showing events that have preceded—and likely caused—the present situation. Although they can and do appear at various points in a film or television series, they are particularly common in the first (or "pilot") episode of many modern television series[13], perhaps because they are an efficient way to introduce characters and explain the present situation to the audience (a shorter version of

the flashback above also appears in the very first episode of *The Mandalorian*). Flashbacks help viewers to understand a character by linking experiences in their past to their present personalities and motivations[14].

Flashback and Memory

It is nearly impossible to think about flashbacks in film and television without also thinking about human memory, which is composed of several separate, but interworking, systems of memory[15]. Most important for the present purposes is the *episodic memory system,* which focuses on our memory for past events (or episodes) and allows us to play back or relive those memories as conscious recollections. Most people can purposely retrieve past episodic memories to think about them, but sometimes these memories are unintentionally triggered by other thoughts or by stimuli in our environments. The episodic memory system also allows us to imagine future events or alternative past events.

The episodic memory system is necessary for us to understand any film or television series that we watch because we need to remember past events in the story and relate them to new events we are seeing now[16],[17],[18]. We especially need this system to understand complex and interwoven stories that span interconnected films and television shows or tell a larger story out of sequence, such as the modern Star Wars continuity and Marvel Cinematic Universe. Much like the human memory system, flashbacks on screen bring past information to the fore so we can understand a present situation better[19],[20]. Viewers could rely on memory alone to remember past pieces of a story and relate them to new ones, but this would be mentally challenging, and viewers might have forgotten some important past events; flashbacks lessen this mental burden[21],[22].

Types of Flashback

Just as our episodic memory system requires something to trigger it (e.g., the plastic smell of a new action figure might cause you to remember the very first time you ever opened a Star Wars action figure's packaging) or purposeful recollection to think about past events (e.g., purposely trying to recall which was the first Star Wars action figure you ever received or bought), different "triggers" in the events of a television series or film might cause a flashback to be shown[23]. For example, many flashbacks are caused by a specific stimulus in the present narrative such as a sound or setting causing a character to remember a past event (e.g., both Grogu and Djarin experience flashbacks while watching or hearing the Armorer forge new armor pieces for them). Some flashbacks are explicitly recounted by a character to another character via dialogue or to the audience via voiceover (e.g., Cobb Vanth describing how he obtained Boba Fett's armor). Still others are past events shown because a character is dreaming about the event (e.g., Boba Fett dreaming about his time with the Tuskens while healing in his bacta tank). While such flashbacks occur in different ways, they typically reflect or emulate a memory or a character's subjective experience of a past event.

Clearly, many characters in the Star Wars universe have episodic memories, and they can access and talk about these memories just as we do. Sheev Palpatine (Darth Sidious) relays the tragic story of his own former mentor, Darth Plagueis, to his potential new pupil, Anakin Skywalker[24]. Obi-Wan tells Luke that he does not remember owning a droid[25]. Leia talks about memories of her mother[26]. Bail Organa orders C-3PO's memory to be wiped[27]. But although these characters have such memories, their onscreen recollection or description of past events is not accompanied by an explanatory flashback (i.e., one character simply tells another character about a past event, but that past event is not shown to

the audience during the telling). In fact, flashbacks of any kind were not a major part of Star Wars until recently.

Flashback in Star Wars

Although *Star Wars: A New Hope*[28] premiered in 1977, the filmmakers styled it in the vein of pre-WWII film serials such as *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*[29] (from which the Star Wars opening text crawl is adapted). Typically, each installment of such serials presented the next part of the story; there was no need to backtrack or show earlier action or events[30]. The short summary at the start of each installment served to set the stage and to remind or inform viewers of what happened in prior installments. Accordingly, the six Star Wars films helmed by George Lucas (i.e., Episodes I through VI) feature no flashbacks of any kind; all action and scenes proceed in the order in which they are happening in real-time. Several years pass in the story between each entry in the series, but that missing action is largely summarized in the opening text crawl of each film or described by characters via dialogue; past events are never intermixed with current events onscreen. For example, when *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*[31] begins, the audience must infer that Luke has continued his Jedi training since the prior film from contextual clues such as his new green lightsaber and his ability to wield the Force more confidently; no flashbacks depict him training between episodes.

In this regard, the style of the Star Wars theatrical releases (and later, television series) saw a marked change after the acquisition of Lucasfilm and the Star Wars franchise by The Walt Disney Company in 2012: the apparent removal of the requirement for sequential storytelling. Except for *Solo*[32], all live-action Star Wars releases to date since Disney's acquisition of the franchise (i.e., *Episodes VII-IX*[33],[34],[35], *Rogue One*[36], *The Mandalorian*[37], *The Book of Boba Fett*[38], *Obi-Wan Kenobi*[39], and *Andor*[40]) have included flashback scenes[41]. With the first Disney release, *Star Wars: The*

Force Awakens[42], the audience for the first time saw a form of flashback for themselves in a Star Wars film. As Rey touches Luke's long-lost lightsaber, she (and the viewer) sees a Force-based flashback of Luke's Jedi Temple being destroyed, Kylo Ren and his Knights of Ren killing an unidentified person, and Rey's abandonment as a child by her parents on the plant Jakku. She also sees a Force-based "flashforward" of her upcoming duel with Kylo Ren. Disney's second Star Wars release, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*[43] featured more traditional flashbacks: the film opens with a flashback to protagonist Jyn Erso's childhood, and later includes a related, dream-based flashback involving memories of her father. The subsequent episodic theatrical releases also featured more traditional, non-Force flashbacks, including different explanatory versions of Ben Solo's turn to the dark side and a flashback to Luke and Leia practicing with their lightsabers[44],[45].

Flashback in *The Mandalorian*

With Disney's first Star Wars television series, *The Mandalorian*[46], the audience has repeatedly encountered flashbacks of past or missed events. Most important to the core story of season one, the viewer sees several very brief versions of the flashback scene of Djarin's childhood rescue by the Mandalorians across earlier episodes before the scene appears in full[47]. The flashback provides an obvious explanation for his dislike of droids (noted repeatedly via dialogue in earlier episodes but never explained in a causal way). But more importantly, this flashback helps to explain why Djarin took pity on Grogu and chose to save him rather than adhering to bounty hunter doctrine and leaving him with his Imperial-remnant captors: because he, too, was once a child who needed saving by a Mandalorian.

Some explanatory flashbacks have accompanied characters' descriptions of past events missed by the protagonist—and the

viewer—such as Kuiil explaining to Djarin how he repaired and reprogrammed IG-11[48] and Cobb Vanth explaining to Djarin how he acquired Boba Fett's armor and used it to take back the town of Mos Pelgo[49]. Presumably, this information could have been conveyed with dialogue alone, but showing these events in flashback might have enhanced the audience's confidence in the truth of the information conveyed: having *watched* these scenes, we can better trust that IG-11 has indeed been reprogrammed to protect Grogu and that Cobb Vanth obtained the armor from Jawas (and not, perhaps, off Boba Fett's corpse[50]). It also might have simply been more interesting to depict these scenes rather than having a character tell Djarin about a past event that the viewer then must imagine. In contrast, *The Mandalorian* has relied on dialogue rather than flashback to provide background for Bo-Katan Kryze, whose character was established in previous animated series. Pragmatically, showing flashbacks of her earlier life would essentially require filming scenes with live actors that were already established in those animated series and that at least some viewers have already seen.

Flashbacks are increasingly necessary as the audience learns more about Djarin's adopted foundling, Grogu. Appropriately, the origins of flashback can be traced to the silent film era when text-based frames were the only alternative to visual scenes: it was often easier to show the past via flashback than to write a long screen of text to explain it[51]. Similarly, as Grogu cannot yet speak (as of this writing), the only way to convey information about his past is to either have others describe it via dialogue, or to show his past via flashback. For example, in season three the audience experiences a detailed flashback to Grogu's rescue from the Jedi Temple on Coruscant during Order 66 by Jedi Master Kelleran Beq[52]. This flashback is caused by the Armorer working to forge a small chest plate for Grogu in the present time. This chain of events mirrors a scene in the first season, in which we see a very brief flashback to Djarin as a child during the attack

by Separatist droids that led to his parents' deaths and his rescue by Mandalorians[53]. As with Grogu's flashback, Djarin's flashback occurs as he watches the Armorer forging him a new piece of armor. The parallel serves to further align the two characters' stories but might also hint at the metaphorical function of "armor" in this series. Armor might not only provide these characters with protection from physical threats, but to also provide strength and protection from past traumas that still haunt them.

Related, flashbacks in film and television—especially dream-based flashbacks—often depict past traumatic events that have happened to the characters[54]. When people experience traumatic events in real life, they are often troubled by their memories of those events later in time, both in their waking hours and even in their dreams. When the recollection of these traumatic events is uncontrollable and extremely distressing, people might qualify for a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD[55]. In fact, the use of the term "flashback" to describe the unintentional recollection of past trauma was adopted *into psychology* after its origination in filmmaking[56]. I do not suggest that any of the characters in *The Mandalorian* or *The Book of Boba Fett* meet the clinical criteria for PTSD nor do I want to misrepresent the realities of that condition[57]. But it is clear in both series that Grogu, Boba Fett, and perhaps also Djarin, are bothered in the present by memories of trauma from their pasts (see Pellman in this volume for more), as these events are frequently depicted as recollection-based flashbacks in which the character is thinking or dreaming about those past events rather than as flashbacks that simply fill in missing pieces of the story for the audience (i.e., simply showing events out of temporal order for the audience's comprehension). Depicting traumatic events in film or television can have effects on the viewer that are comparable to viewing actual traumatic events in real life[58],[59] but those effects on the viewer likely occur whether the character's trauma is presented

as occurring in the character's present or past (via flashback). More likely, presenting the trauma as a flashback is a device to depict the character's current concern about those past events or trauma and to justify their present actions because of that prior experience. This tactic is perhaps more apparent in *The Book of Boba Fett*[60].

We might wonder whether we will see more flashbacks in future seasons of *The Mandalorian*. As of the conclusion of the third season, the series has set up future installments to be more focused on Djarin's new role as a hired gun for the New Republic. That said, the full story of how Grogu escaped Order 66 and what he did between that time and the start of *The Mandalorian* has not been fully explained and could be shown in future flashbacks. It is also apparent that more time passed between the second and third seasons of the show than the audience might have assumed, with Grogu apparently spending more time with Luke Skywalker and Djarin presumably spending more time without Grogu than the audience has yet seen depicted[61]. We might expect any of these events to be shown in flashback in future installments of the series, or even earlier events in Djarin's life (for example, contrasting his training of Grogu in the present with flashback scenes of his own training as a foundling).

Flashback in *The Book of Boba Fett*

Flashbacks play an even more prominent and obvious role in *The Book of Boba Fett*[62], which was spun off from the second season of *The Mandalorian*[63]. Boba Fett's very brief initial appearance in *The Mandalorian*[64] marked the first appearance of the character after he seemingly died in the Great Pit of Carkoon in *Return of the Jedi*[65]. This brief appearance, however, offered no explanation for how he survived, why he was not wearing his armor, or what he did in the intervening time. The audience can guess some of the missing pieces from season two of *The Mandalorian*, as Cobb

Vanth explains that he obtained Boba Fett's armor from Jawas[66], and Boba Fett—now carrying weapons typical of the Tusken Raiders—notes that he was "*left to die*" (S2 E6, The Tragedy)[67] on Tatooine.

The full story, however, is not portrayed in detail until *The Book of Boba Fett*. Whereas the primary action of this series occurs just after the second season of *The Mandalorian* and involves Boba and Fennec Shand rising to power in Mos Espa, most episodes feature flashbacks to Boba's time between *Return of the Jedi* and *The Mandalorian,* including his escape from the Pit of Carkoon, taking back his ship, and—most importantly—a significant period of time that he spent living with a tribe of Tuskens. In the first episode, Boba notes to Fennec as he exits his bacta tank that "*the dreams are back*" (*The Book of Boba Fett,* S1 E1, Stranger in a Strange Land)[68], explicating to the audience that these scenes do not simply fill in missing pieces of the story for the viewer, but also depict Boba's memories of past events that are troubling him in the present.

In his brief appearances as an adult in the original Star Wars films, Boba was a largely unidimensional antagonist: a bounty hunter who's only depicted goal was to claim Jabba the Hutt's bounty on Han Solo. When he appears in *The Mandalorian,* however, he seems to have put aside his self-serving bounty hunter ways in favor of helping others, such as assisting with Grogu's rescue from Moff Gideon. Some viewers and critics found Boba's sudden turn to good to be a wasted opportunity to tell a true anti-hero story[69]. But, besides showing the audience what has happened to Boba in between *Return of the Jedi* and *The Mandalorian,* these flashback scenes and Boba's present-day conversations with Fennec help to explain why the character has undergone such a major shift in tone and sensibilities in this time period (for more, see Tompkins in this volume).

The Force as a Flashback Mechanism

The Star Wars universe includes the Force, which according to Obi-Wan Kenobi, is "*an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together*"[70]. The Force provides some individuals with abilities that would seem to us—and even to others in that universe—to be extraordinary. These abilities include using the Force to physically manipulate objects, to communicate telepathically, to perform acrobatic feats, to heal others, and even to exist as energy after death. A few Force abilities involve seeing past and future events. As such, the Force allows for specialized flashbacks that would not make sense outside of the Star Wars universe.

For example, sometimes the Force itself shows people the past or potential futures, as happened to Rey when she first finds Luke's lightsaber in *The Force Awakens*[71]. Some Jedi, including Quinlan Vos and Cal Kestis, demonstrate a related Force ability known as psychometry which allows them to purposely experience the past or memory of a place or object[72],[73]. When depicted onscreen in Star Wars media, these item-based flashbacks can show important past events and provide character background to the audience just as other flashbacks do (e.g., the flashback to Rey's parents leaving her on Jakku), but they also often serve unique purposes in their stories and media beyond that of traditional flashbacks: they allow Quinlan Vos to be an extraordinary tracker and show Cal Kestis (and the video game player controlling him) which route to take in the game's world.

The Force plays a major role in producing one flashback in *The Book of Boba Fett*. Specifically, Luke Skywalker uses the Force to help Grogu remember his time in the Jedi Order, which he has seemingly forgotten. The only scene that the audience (and perhaps Grogu) sees involves clone troopers during Order 66 killing Jedi[74]. Afterwards, Luke provides some comfort to Grogu

by promising to train him so he can protect himself in a dangerous galaxy, a promise that mirrors the Armorer's later promise to Grogu after a longer version of this event is shown in flashback in season three of *The Mandalorian*[75]. In both cases, Grogu's memories of Order 66—and the fear that he still has for that event—provide character motivation: Grogu needs to choose a path that will help him to become powerful and overcome his fears, such as becoming a Jedi or becoming a Mandalorian.

Conversely, prior to the events of the video game *Knights of the Old Republic*[76], the Jedi Council used the Force to *erase* the memories (and identity) of Darth Revan, who the player unknowingly controls in the game. Late in the game, the amnesiac Revan—and the player—learn of their prior identity, which sparks a montage of flashbacks revealing clues that supported this truth all along, followed by a true, yet-unseen flashback scene to the character as a Sith Lord. Much like *The Sixth Sense*[77], these flashbacks retroactively change the player's experience of the game[78].

Whereas flashbacks were quickly introduced into films shortly after their invention and are still common in both film and television series, *flashforwards*—scenes that take place *after* the continuity of the primary story—are far less common in film and television[79],[80]. Many Force users, however, can see future events. Both Emperor Palpatine (Darth Sidious) and Darth Vader frequently note Palpatine's ability to see future events, and Luke Skywalker sees his friends suffering in "*a city in the clouds*" while training with Yoda on Dagobah[81],[82]. That said, visions of the future produced by the Force are not guaranteed and only represent *possible* futures. As Yoda noted, "*difficult to see. Always in motion is the future*" [83]. For these reasons, Star Wars creators might need to be careful if they ever depict Force-based visions of the future onscreen: depicting possible futures without clearly signaling their tentative state might confuse the audience into

thinking those events have occurred or are certain to occur[84]. That said, under the right circumstances, creators could purposely leverage such confusion to tell more puzzling stories if desired[85],[86],[87].

Does Star Wars Need Flashbacks?

The creators of Star Wars film and television series have clearly embraced the use of flashback since Disney's purchase of Lucasfilm. Flashback has allowed for deeper characters and stories, although these creators might not yet have utilized such techniques to their fullest artistic and storytelling potential[88]. Whereas some critics have praised the recent addition of flashbacks to Star Wars films and television series both for telling new stories and for bringing new meaning to previous content, others have criticized their use as lazy storytelling and as removing a stylistic choice that set the Star Wars films apart from other media like it[89],[90]. An argument could perhaps be made that Star Wars should incorporate flashbacks and other devices to seem more modern and to better compare to other more complex films and television series[91]. But I suggest a more pressing reason: Star Wars needs flashbacks to help viewers understand an increasingly complex and interwoven story.

As the sheer amount of Star Wars content grows, pressure will build either requiring viewers to have consumed most of the previous content—and to remember it—in order to understand the new content or requiring creators to continuously explain via dialogue what might have been missed by new or less-entrenched viewers. Critics have raised similar concerns about the long-term viability of the interconnected Marvel Cinematic Universe[92]. Many television series, including the Star Wars series, offer optional summaries of previous episodes before each new episode to assist with this process, but presumably not all viewers watch those summaries, and recaps can ruin surprises in new episodes

(which is one reason that some viewers skip them)[93]. As well, consider that the current Star Wars continuity includes a greater variety of media—films, television, books, comic books, and video games—than does the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which only includes live-action films and television series. It is unlikely that Star Wars would ever include cross-modal scenes in recaps, let alone as flashbacks during a live-action film or television series. Whereas the first episode of *Obi-Wan Kenobi*[94] featured a recap using footage from the Episodes I-III films, the third season of *The Mandalorian* made no attempt to address Grogu's decision to cease his training with Luke Skywalker or Djarin's acquisition of his new N-1 Starfighter in *The Book of Boba Fett,* not even in the "previously on" montage. For viewers of *The Mandalorian* who did not watch *The Book of Boba Fett,* it must have seemed—rightfully so—that they had missed a major part of the story[95]. The creators of *Solo* made a similarly risky choice by reintroducing a living Darth Maul to live-action media: many viewers were unaware that Maul had been revived in the *Clone Wars* animated series and were confused by his inclusion in the film[96].

More recently, as of this writing, the first four episodes of the series *Ahsoka*[97] have aired. These episodes featured prominent roles for several characters from the *Rebels*[98] animated series (i.e., Ahsoka Tano, Sabine Wren, Ezra Bridger, Hera Syndulla, Grand Admiral Thrawn, etc.), with little to no information given to the naïve audience member as to who the characters are or of their prior relationships to each other or past events in their lives. In this case, the creators have seemingly taken a note from the original Star Wars films, choosing to let (some of) the audience fill in the blanks for themselves, such as when viewers first heard of the Clone Wars in *A New Hope,* with no explanation given[99],[100]. Of course, trying to explain four seasons of *Rebels* via flashback might have been too onerous a task and have left little room for new content, when arguably viewers could instead just watch *Rebels* for themselves[101]. Regardless, as Star Wars media marches

forward, the creators will need to decide whether to work to keep all viewers up to speed, or risk losing viewers as the web of interconnected content continues to grow in complexity. Alternatively, they could also choose to tell some stories that do not require a strong connection to prior content.

Conclusion

The use of flashback in Star Wars, including in *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett,* enriches storytelling by enhancing character development, bridging narrative gaps, and accommodating new fans. The unique capabilities of the Force can add further depth to such flashbacks, revealing hidden truths and connecting characters and eras. While some critics have questioned the recent stylistic shift, flashbacks have become essential in navigating the increasingly complex and interconnected Star Wars narrative. As the franchise continues to expand, these flashbacks ensure that all fans, old and new, can fully engage with the captivating galaxy far, far away.

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Photography Credit: Mike Penny

Jessica E. Tompkins (Team Boba Fett), is a user experience research director in the video games industry. She holds a PhD in media arts and sciences from Indiana University, where in her (mostly) former life as an academic, she researched the intersections of video games, representation, gender, identity, and fandom. She has published her research in top-tier academic journals and has spoken at various industry events, such as MAGFest, PAX South, and the annual Game Developers Conference (GDC) about her academic research and professional expertise. At her day job, she leverages research methods and player data to aid game developers in making informed decisions about executing the creative vision and enhancing the player experience.

For her contributions towards creating a more inclusive games industry, Jess was inducted into the 2023 Future Class sponsored by The Game Awards. She has had a (somewhat unusual but

powerful) fascination with Boba Fett and Mandalorians since she was a teenager, and one of her pride and joys is her custom set of Mandalorian armor, forged with help and guidance from the Talon Clan (North Carolina) chapter of the Mandalorian Mercs Costume Club. Notably, she is evidence that no matter how many degrees you obtain, or professional titles you earn, you can still be an unapologetic fangirl.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nick Bowman (Team Droids) is an Associate Professor in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. He holds a PhD in communication from Michigan State University, and his research focuses on the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social demands of interactive media, such as video games and virtual environments. He research and teaches courses in media psychology, research methods, statistical analyses, and pop culture at the undergraduate and graduate level, and his recent research has explored the social and psychological functions of media-based nostalgia. He has published more than 150 peer-reviewed manuscripts and presented more than 200 studies at regional, national, and international conferences and symposia. He is the Chief Editor of Journal of Media Psychology and has affiliate faculty positions with National Chengchi University in Taiwan, The Games Institute at the University of Waterloo in Canada, and Universidad Panamericana Guadalajara in Mexico.

Carlina de la Cova (Team Tusken) is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina. Her research examines the biological impact of inequality, marginalization, institutionalization, and the Great Migration in early 20th-century America. de la Cova's current work focuses on ethics in biological anthropology and the relationship between social race, class, dissection, and the social origins of anatomical

collections in 19th- and early 20th-century America. She has been active in ethics reform in the discipline. Dr. de la Cova has published numerous book chapters and peer-reviewed articles in American Anthropologist, the American Journal of Biological Anthropology, and the International Journal of Paleopathology. Her work has also been featured in Science and Discover magazines. In addition to this, she is on the editorial boards of the American Journal of Biological Anthropology and American Anthropologist. She is also an Associate Editor for Bioarchaeology International.

Rowan Daneels (Team Jedi) is a postdoc researcher and guest professor at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. He holds a PhD in communication studies, in which he studied eudaimonic entertainment—personally meaningful, emotional and thought-provoking entertainment—in the context of digital games. He has applied this positive psychology, or eudaimonic perspective, to superhero narratives and, now, to the world of Star Wars. His work has been published in top-tier academic journals and has been awarded with several prizes at the International Communication Association conference. Since eudaimonia is related to virtue, excellence, self-realization and other values that are part of the Jedi teachings, his allegiance lies with them. Although he recently joined the Jedi council, Rowan was not granted the rank of master…

Keely Diebold (Team Jedi) is a communication consultant who holds a Master of Mass Communication with a concentration in Strategic Communication from Louisiana State University. There, she conducted various pop culture and fandom-centric studies, including the psychological impacts of a person's perceived prototypically within a fandom. She is a long time Star Wars fan with a passion for the relationship between fandom membership and psychology.

James D. Ivory (Team whichever Star Wars product his kids are into at the time) is a professor of media studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (a.k.a. Virginia Tech), where he was worked since 2005. He received a Ph.D. in mass communication from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His primary research and teaching interests deal with social and behavioral dimensions of media, particularly interactive media such as video games, simulations, and virtual environments. Born the year after the release of Star Wars: A New Hope, he was an avid devotee of the original movies and prodigious array of action figures they spawned as a young child. Decades later, he has relished having his joy in the universe rekindled by his three children's discovery of the ever-expanding media (and toy) franchise.

Burgundy Johnson (Team Rebels) has dual board certifications in both general psychiatry as well as child and adolescent psychiatry from the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. She is the physician lead of child and adolescent psychiatry in behavioral health at the Carle BroMenn outpatient center in Bloomington, IL. In her role at Carle, she provides virtual evaluation and treatment of patients in addition to her leadership role of shaping and promoting the growth of programs to support pediatric mental health. She serves as an Adjunct Clinical Assistant Professor in Psychiatry at the University of Iowa and the University of Illinois. She has clinical interests in attachment theory and family mental health and feels strongly that the Jedi need to redefine their views and approaches to attachment. She hopes for a future where healthy relationships are valued as much as rugged individual heroism and where the Jedi see relationships that are loving and nurturing as sources of strength as opposed to weakness.

Kevin Koban (Team Rex) is a postdoctoral researcher at the Advertising and Media Psychology Research (AdMe) Group at the

University of Vienna, Austria. He holds a PhD in Media Psychology and Communication Science from Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany, worked previously as a postdoctoral research associate at Texas Tech University, and is currently engaged in the project "Digital Hate: Perpetrators, Audiences, and (Dis)Empowered Targets" funded by the European Research Council (ERC). He studies and publishes on interactive media, including video games, social robots, and social media, where he chooses to walk the way between optimistic and fatalistic perspectives. He is a lifelong Star Wars fan who adores the Original Trilogy, enjoys most of the Prequels and, admittedly, little of the Sequels, and loves particularly The Mandalorian and The Clone Wars animated TV series.

Gina Marcello (Team Jedi), is an Associate Professor and chair of the Department of Communication at Saint Elizabeth University in Morristown, New Jersey. She is an interdisciplinary media literacy scholar, a three-time alumna of the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers University, and former President of the New Jersey Communication Association. Dr. Marcello's research combines her expertise in media literacy and digital production to examine the influence of popular culture on cognitive processing and moral decision-making. As a practitioner, she's produced two short documentaries and several podcasts. Her passion for the expansive Star Wars universe has been a long-standing source of both personal joy and professional inspiration. Each fall, she looks forward to attending New York Comic Con with her son, Scott, where they enjoy immersing themselves in their favorite fandom, sometimes while dressed as their favored characters.

Steph Orme (Team Thrawn) is a user experience researcher for Key Lime Interactive, a UX consulting agency serving clients across multiple industries including gaming, technology, and media and entertainment. She holds a PhD in mass

communications from Penn State, with a specialization in the intersections of diversity and inclusion in the video game industry and gaming culture. She is a frequent speaker at academic and industry conventions such as PAXEast and the Collegiate Esports Expo, a regularly featured guest on podcasts, and assists with the Boston Festival of Indie Games and Indie Cade Horizons. Her love of Star Wars runs deep, with a particular love for Thrawn (the character that made her a big Star Wars fan). Her most prized possession is the complete set of Dark Horse's Thrawn trilogy comics — specifically Issue #1 of Heir to the Empire, which she had signed by Timothy Zahn when she met him in 2022.

Blake Pellman (Team Droid Rights) holds a PhD in behavioral neuroscience from the University of Washington and has published research on the neurobiological basis of learning and memory, the behavioral consequences of psychological stress, the impact of fear on circadian rhythms (internal clocks that govern sleep-wake cycles), and how to frighten lab rats with robotic cats made from LEGO® blocks. Blake currently helps create accessible and engaging applications and video games as a user experience researcher in the technology industry and has worked with companies like Google and Xbox. At seven years old, Blake was introduced to Star Wars with a VHS copy of The Empire Strikes Back and has dreamed of retiring to a jungle swamp like Dagobah ever since.

Kelly Pelzel (Team Rebels) is a child psychologist with interest in early childhood mental health and autism. She completed her doctoral work in child clinical and developmental psychology at the University of Utah and then returned home to Iowa. In addition to her clinical work, she has published on parent-mediated intervention and served as president of the Iowa Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health. She has presented at the Popular Culture Association national

conference and the Popular Culture Association of the South regional conference. As a young child, she wanted to be a Mon Mothma-type when she grew up. As an adult, she accepted the reality that she is an Admiral Ackbar-type (at best) after impulsively blurting out "It's a trap!" when a university administrator was proposing something during a staff meeting.

Dr. Meghan S. Sanders (Team Jedi) is a professor and the associate dean for graduate studies in the Manship School of Mass Communication. She specializes in media psychology, exploring the underlying cognitive and affective processing and mechanisms associated with using mediated communication. Her research focuses on popular culture and entertainment, morality, narrative engagement, and positive media psychology. Her work has been published in Communication Theory, the Journal of Communication, Mass Communication & Society, and in several edited volumes.She earned her undergraduate degree in mass communication at Dillard University, her master's degree in media studies from The Pennsylvania State University and her doctorate in mass communication from The Pennsylvania State University.

Michael Senters (Team Republic) is a PhD student in the interdisciplinary ASPECT program at Virginia Tech University. He researches far-right language games and rhetoric online and how language, symbols and shared hobbies shape group identities. Michael has been a nerd for most of his life and has been involved in many different fandoms ranging from Star Wars to anime, video games and LARPing. He believes fandom can act as a way to bring people together and overcome social and political differences to help make a better world possible and throughout his life has attended many fandom conventions suchs as DragonCon, AnimeNYC and Otakon. He dreams to one day attend the biggest conventions in nerdom: ComicCon and Anime Expo.

Michael J. Serra (Team Revan) is a cognitive psychologist and a faculty member at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center. His research examines memory, learning, and metacognition (our ability to think about, monitor, and control our mental processes). He completed his PhD at Kent State University and then conducted postdoctoral research at Columbia University. Dr. Serra frequently uses film clips to promote discussion in his college courses, especially from films where memory is a key component of the plot (e.g., *Memento; Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*). He has also spoken about the depiction of memory in film and other media for popular audiences. He loves *The Mandalorian*, in part, because the characters remind him of his father, who instilled in him a love of all things Star Wars from a very early age.

Koji Yoshimura (Team Jedi) is lecturer of communication science at the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands) and associate member of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR). He holds a PhD in media and communication from Texas Tech University and conducts research on the psychological effects of entertainment media. His current work integrates perspectives from communication, psychology, and film studies to understand how individuals engage with complex and ambiguous narratives. He also conducts research on media and morality, genre in audiovisual and interactive media, and video game effects.

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The ETC Press was founded in 2005 by Dr. Drew Davidson, a Teaching Professor at Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center (ETC), as an open-access, digital-first publishing house.

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