

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them, and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

CLIP: THE FORCE AWAKENS TRAILER

It's almost here. We've seen the teaser, another teaser, finally a trailer, but I'm surprised how many people STILL don't know that The Force Awakens is a continuation of the original trilogy – with Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher and Harrison Ford. Seriously, I've talked to a lot of people – civilians, not geeks -- who think it's another prequel or it's set like 100 years later or something.

But we know what's coming. Not just The Force Awaken or Episode 8 or Episode 9, but Rogue One, The Han Solo prequel, the rumored Boba Fett prequel --- the Max Rebo Band Behind the Music rockumentary, the police procedurals set on Tatooine. I know you guys can come up with funnier jokes than that – put them on my Imaginary Worlds Facebook page! I want to read them.

The fans and Lucas and now Disney have worked so hard to place that original film in this epic, sprawling context – fitting what was a simple and charming story of good vs. evil into thousands years of fictional history in the games, comics, novels. Even the Disney TV series Star Wars Rebels tries to make the computer animation look like grainy film stock from the 1970s since their story takes place between episodes III and IV.

But I want to go back – back to when Star Wars didn't exist as far as most people knew -- back to that From Here to Eternity Moment on the eve of Star Wars. What did we think the future was going to look like? What did Star Wars give us that we looking for? What did that world sound like back then – before Star Wars?

CLIP: NEWS MONTAGE

The first thing you'll hear, and this has become a cliché – in the spring of 1977, America was feeling beaten down and demoralized. We had a massive hangover from Vietnam and Watergate. We were craving something uplifting to feel good about ourselves again. And that's true.

CT: Oh my God, 1977 was so depressing.

Chris Taylor is the author of “How Star Wars Conquered The Universe.”

CT: I spent a lot of time reading newspaper that month, May '77, the Nixon Frost interviews on TV.

CLIP: FROST NIXON

CT: There was news of large quantities of Agent Orange being dumped into Pacific, I mean it was just dismal.

The only glimmer of hope was our new president, Jimmy Carter. But his first major speech to the nation was a bummer. We were running out of oil. Be a grown-up and conserve, don't be wasteful.

CARTER CONSERVE ENERGY

But when you look back at the pop culture of 1977, most of it was trying to be uplifting. I think Hollywood was aware that we were yearning to escape, to leap above the ground. The first problem was that we couldn't imagine leaping very far.

SUPER FRIENDS

This was my fantasy world in 1977. Looking at the Super Friends now, they seem more like an urban peace corps. Like the fact that Superman can fly and Wonder Woman has an invisible jet isn't emphasized as gee whiz. It's just exposition as to how they from one place to the other. And they got there at the same time as Batman and Robin, who were driving a car.

CLIP: EVIL KENEVIL

The biggest real life hero at the time was Evil Kenevil – who could leap over cars with his motorcycle.

CLIP: BIONIC MAN

The Six Million Dollar Man also had leaping abilities. In fact an entire episode would build up to the big moment where he would jump over a fence.

CLIP: SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER

John Travolta's super power was moving across a dance floor in a dingy Brooklyn neighborhood.

The real 'star wars' at the time was the battle between rock stars and Disco stars. For the post '60s generation, and the kids who lamented the fact that they were too young to enjoy the '60s -- sex, drugs and rock n' roll were the coolest things in the world and they literally burning Disco albums.

CLIP: KISS

In 1977, science fiction was nowhere near the epicenter of coolness. But it was gaining respect. Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Ursula Le Guin and Philip K. Dick were proving that sci-fi could grapple with the urgent existential fears of the time.

Annalee Newitz is the co-founder of the site io9, and editor of Gizmodo.

AN: The sci-fi popular in books in early 1970s, a lot of it was set on Earth in the near future, a lot of it was political dystopias, even Dr. Who, which is a show where you can travel space and time, the doctor got stuck on Earth in the 1970s and all he got to do was hang around on Earth and do a bunch of boring stuff with Unit.

Again, here's Chris Taylor.

CT: The previous year had Logan's Run, that was big sci fi movie of 1976, and the Logan's Run look at it today on the one hand they're being way too serious about concept behind it and on other hand they're wearing these ridiculous silver jump suits

CLIP LOGAN'S RUN

CT: You had Soylent Green, you had the Omega Man, and also in 1977 expected to be bigger movie was Damnation Alley.

If you've never heard of this movie – you have to watch the trailer, it's amazing. This is a major motion picture about the only survivors of a nuclear war – four guys and one woman. They spend the whole trailer battling giant cockroaches.

CLIP DAMNATION ALLEY

CT: And there it was released in October 1977 from 20th century Fox, and they had much more of their hopes to this movie, that they gave almost exact same budget as Star wars, and it's just depressing stuff.

In the mean time, this trailer shows up.

CLIP STAR WARS

That is not John Williams music. It's the weirdest bait-and-switch ad campaign ever. This simple good-vs-evil movie is masking itself as a weird dystopian thriller.

But the director, George Lucas, knew what he was doing. He had made a weird dystopian thriller in the early '70s that flopped.

AN: SW was in fact the first movie came to Comic Con in San Diego, at the time, smaller, mostly comic books, we're going to take cast, we're going to show the film there, we're going to get a grass roots movement going around this movie, and at the same time kept rights for product tie in right knew he wanted to make toys, and as a result, now when we look at SW look at toys but we don't remember back in late '70s when Lucas was putting this together, all big toy companies passed on it.

The only company that took him up was Kenner.

I remember playing with the toys before I saw the movie – making up my own stories without knowing who the characters were. So I already had a sense back then that the toys were unique -- like nothing else out there.

Finally, I saw Star Wars on my 7th birthday. My parents saw it over the summer. They asked my older brother to see it, to make sure it wasn't too scary for me. He said I might be scared when Darth Vader showed up, but probably not after that. So we all had dinner on top of the Prudential Center, and I saw this panoramic view of Boston and Cambridge. Then we went to the theater across the street. My mind was a blank slate -- ready to be consumed.

CLIP: 20TH CENTURY FOX INTRO

But I wanted to talk with someone who was an adult in 1977, especially someone who was heavily steeped in the culture of the time. I didn't have to look far. This is my boss, Kurt Andersen, host of Studio 360.

KA: I saw it before opened because I had first job being a jack of all trades for movie critic Gene Shallot, it was a great job because I got to go screenings, I saw it before it opened, and everyone applauded and I was blown away by how great was as was my girlfriend wife to be, then entirely aware of young journalists that their was enormous anticipation.

Some critics dismissed Star Wars as a Western in space. I know Star Trek fans that still call it that. But Kurt never felt way.

KA: I think we'd already been softened up, we college educated people who were supposed to like French New Wave and we did we had been softened up not to dismiss and be snobbish about pop culture. That was a thing that has already happened. I wasn't like, I must see new George Truffaut, forget this George Lucas business! There were no movies that kids were supposed to see with great enough special effects that the thing you gave up after Saturday Morning serials, then you grew up and saw dramas and regular movies. This high production value child-like value that had never been done that well and adults weren't supposed to enjoy except taking children to Saturday matinee part of it.

CT: Actually, SW was technically beaten in its first week at the box office by Smokey and the Bandit, that's because it was on about 2000 more screens that SW, SW famously just opened on 32 and then expanded to 40 the next weekend, that's why you see the pictures of long lines, starting as early as that weekend.

AN: I saw it in Newport Beach with my Dad over the summer, my Dad loved cult sci-fi, it was tiny move at that time, nothing in media about it and it so good once we watched it, wanted to stay and watch it again but the theater was too cold with air conditioning – this was Southern California, so the only reason we didn't watch it twice in a row was because of the punishing cold air conditioning.

CT: A lot of theaters instituted new policy kick you out after screening so didn't sit through 3 or 4 times, and they'd never done that before there was no movie people wanted to sit through again and again, GWTW, best selling adjusted for inflation best box office of all time, you don't want to sit through 3 times.

The John Williams music was a refreshing rejection of the modern sound of science fiction, and everything that was trending in the '70s – but '70s were said, I love this Star Wars thing! Let's bring it into our world! There was the Disco remix by Meco.

MECO

And all the Variety Show specials, like Donnie and Marie

CLIP DONNIE AND MARIE

CT: This was before they got a handle on licensing and what media was going to be allowed to do what with SW image and they saw a lot of these versions, a lot of these references and they thought, woah, this is way too tacky.

So George Lucas began an unusually tight legal crackdown to take control of the images and sounds of Star Wars – which were spreading through the culture on their own like nothing else before. He decided then that the culture wouldn't change or even appropriate his work. So the culture would have to bend towards his sensibilities.

And here's where the narrative usually goes, "Star Wars gave birth to the Hollywood blockbuster franchise." But Jaws did that already.

Or how about -- Star Wars finally gave us the feel-good movie we needed where we could identify with the scrappy rebels, not the over burdened empire. But most mainstream movies had happy endings. The "serious films" like Godfather and Taxi Driver were few and far between. There were "serious" films in the '80s and a whole indie movie boon in the '90s.

So it was the special effects, right? There's been a ton of documentaries about the unorthodox ways they created those iconic images and sounds. But that stuff dates quickly. If it were just the special effects, Star Wars would be remembered as a cult classic "ahead of its time."

I mean of course it was going to be popular – even trendsetting – but why did it dig so deeply into people's consciousness?

KA: And I thought this at the time, even, this idea of the force was so appealing at this precise moment when in this post 60s way what was just starting to be called New Age and belief and challenging energy and mystical and ancient, blah, blah, this was the religion that embodied that perfectly.

Kurt's clearly jaded about New Age spirituality, but he's from Omaha – people in Nebraska weren't into stuff like that. Right?

KA: My mother who was rationalist and not religious, in the early mid '70s there was this best selling book talk to plants, and she bought that book and I think she talked to her plants, I mean my mother didn't believe in crystal therapy but as people started to believe that stuff, why not believe in the Force?

AN: It did appeal to a 70s New Age sensibility, but also people skeptical about organized religion.

KA: It was a perfect new ecumenical religion because it is perfectly translatable to every religious culture many billions dollars not Christian nations.

Famously, Lucas was inspired by Joseph Campbell and his book "A Hero With A Thousand Faces" about why so many religions and basically the same set of stories – which is a Jungian idea that people are tapping into the same collective unconscious. Chris Taylor:

CT: The earlier versions of the movie, it's interesting he goes back and forth how much say about the Force, and finally perhaps with help from producer Gary Kurtz who'd done degree in comparative religion, Gary says he helped George boil it down to the basics, just tell us in a very short time what Force is and that's why the description of the Force that Obi Wan gives to Luke is just 28 words long.

Annalee Newitz.

AN: I think it's something that people take seriously and also use as a joke, for example in Australia and UK there was movement in 2000 to get people to declare themselves as Jedi religion on the census and it was so successful, in England 2% of Manchester declared themselves Jedi, so you had a significant minority of Jedi, in fact you had more people in the UK identity as Jedi than you had people identifying as Jewish. And for people in the US if you grew up Jewish like me, if you're surrounded by Christianity all the time and people saying Merry Christmas I'm going to go home and celebrate my thing might as well be Jedi because you don't know! (Laughs)

I'm wondering another reason appealed to me, grew up in very WASPy New England town, where just being Jewish felt like an ethnic minority and Jews not allowed in country club, maybe that's another reason why I felt like yeah, I could totally get into this world.

AN: Yeah, it's interesting for that reason, and I don't think he's given enough credit for that kind of world building. But the Jedi sensibility and people's urge to take on values of SW is going to continue to live on and that's one of the lasting legacies, people are going to pretend to be practicing Jedi, who knows?

Yeah, you could imagine 2,000 years ago no one remembers how this all began but there could be a full-fledged Jedi religion.

AN: That would be amazing!

The legend goes that Star Wars put an end to the era of smart, dystopian science fiction and we got all these dumb battles between good and evil. But that's not true. Those Star Wars rip-offs like Ice Pirates were flops. Sci-fi got more dystopian -- and better with *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, *The Matrix* and on and on. When anyone other than Lucas or Spielberg tried to replicate that sense of optimism in fantasy, they usually failed.

Alyssa Rosenberg is one of my favorite pop culture critics. And she thinks that kind of spirituality was the essential ingredient missing from the Star Wars prequels – along with good acting and writing. Lucas changed the rules of the game and introduced this idea that The Force wasn't something mystical you tap into. People that were “strong with the Force,” were actually born with a high level of “midichlorians” in their blood. The rest of us who aren't noble born are left out of that fantasy.

AR: It makes this concept that felt malleable and applicable to a lot of people in a lot of circumstances too concrete. It saps some of the power away from it. And to me that's a lot of the reason that the prequels felt so frustrating that Lucas was filling in the world in obsessive details but the specific creations that he came up with overpowered the concepts that fueled the story in the first place.

Whether you're spiritual, agnostic or an atheist, it's nice to believe that something binds all of us together. It gives us a sense of purpose – which

may be what people were really yearning for in 1977. Star Wars was an antidote to apathy.

AR: And it's not just a matter of light and dark but between getting people in that apathetic middle to join up with one side with one another and feel a sense of commitment and connection. And I think this is something that transcends decades or cultural moments, it made me feel like someone special, that any of us could be something special, ambition and yearning for something larger.

Alyssa felt that when she saw the movie on VHS in the '90s – very far from the social context of 1977.

AR: I just fell into this world and it was like having a fever, I think my parents thought I was around the bend, I wrote grooves in those VHS tapes constantly, but to me it was an immigrant experience, I had lived outside pop culture and suddenly I found my way in, I got my pop culture English dictionary, and I got to have the experience.

AR: Star Wars just feels alive to people and it feels alive even given the advances in special effects, even clumsiness of the remastering, even given the damage to universe done by prequels, those movies just live. There's something special about them.

That's it for this week. But I'm not done. Not by a long shot – and I'm talking bullseyeing a womp rat with a T-16 in Beggar's Canyon. This is the start of a five part series that will look at all the different ways Star Wars has buried itself into our minds and changed our collective imagination.

Special thanks to Kurt Andersen, Chris Taylor, Alyssa Rosenberg, Annalee Newitz – who you'll be hearing from in later episodes. Also, thanks to Rob the engineer who was taping Annalee in San Francisco -- he chimed in to let us know that he's a full-fledged Jedi, at least on the UK census.

ROB: Well, I mean the reason I guess it happened people said, if enough people do this then it will become an official religion in the UK and I'm not particularly religious person and I thought it would be amusing, so that's why I did it.

You don't practice regularly

ROB: Not so much regularly

But you didn't when you were younger?

ROB: Yeah, I was pretty good at lifting things out of ponds.

(LAUGHS)

May the Force be with you, brother.

You can like the show on Facebook. Seriously, I want to hear your ideas of all the awful ways that Disney could squeeze water from this cactus. I tweet at emolinsky. And if you're psyched about this series – tweet it! Share it. Tumble it. Swipe right. My website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.