

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

I was at WinterCon recently, which is like a miniature ComicCon held at a Casino in Queens. I like going to these mini-ComicCons because they're more casual than the big ones, and you can get to know people. I was talking to this guy named John. He's a member of the 501st Legion. It's a charity organization of people who dress up as Stormtroopers. And their costumes are dead-on perfect. He does it because he loves seeing the faces of kids when he marches into a room.

JOHN: I think if a Stormtrooper walked into your classroom, you're lose your mind before Han Solo.

EM: And with costume you can be Stormtrooper, You can't be Harrison Ford of 1983 all the sudden.

JOHN: And who would want to be? But yes, there's a certain level of autonomy, nobody knows what you look lie you get a lot more attention wearing helmet but all for good cause, raise money for charity our love of SW made that possible.

Being inside the Stormtrooper uniform, do you sympathize for them?

JOHN: Also ways Wilhelm scream, guy who bumped head on DS, look Luke and Han, look Rebel Legion, they have good Han's and Luke's but I don't know maybe the Dark Side appeals to me than the light side. It's a lot more fun.

I've been thinking about Stormtroopers lately for two reasons. First, there's a new Star Wars movie coming out: **Rogue One**. It takes place right before the original film. It's about how the rebels stole the plans for the Death Star, which allowed Luke Skywalker to blow it up.

But I've also been thinking about this other movie, which has one of the most famous scenes about Stars Wars that is not in a Star Wars movie. It's the 1994 film **Clerks**, written and directed by Kevin Smith. And this scene has been debates for decades because it brought up some pretty uncomfortable issues within the Star Wars universe.

It starts out with two guys at a convenient store talking about the fact that the second Death Star was only half completed when it was blown up.

IC: Something just never sat right with me...

OC: They're just trying to scrape out a living.

At this point, an independent contractor comes up to them, and says he is picky about the jobs he takes. He could've made a lot of money working on the house of a Mafia boss, but he said no way.

IC: Any contractor working on that DS knew the risk involved, if they got killed, it's their own fault.

Our friend plays a Stormtrooper at the 501st Legion, agrees.

JOHN: Oh without a doubt, without a doubt. You know your risks the minute you get to the Death Star.

But I think this is more of a legal question. So I turned to Josh Gilliland. He is a lawyer in Silicon Valley who hosts a podcast called Legal Geeks. You might remember him from my episode about the Han Shot First controversy. I asked him who is at fault for the death of all those independent contractors, the rebels or the Empire?

JG: Indie contractor business invitee under the law, the Empire would have to give a general duty to provide reasonably safe work environment or warning of danger. To be fair, the name of the place is the Death Star, that should carry assumption of risk and the first one was blown up you should be on notice this is some risk involved in working here. You have to provide a safe work environment. It's called Death Star, and if you look at either design, there are no hand rails on polished floor! That screams slip and slide and get hurt, so from a certain point of view, the Death Star doesn't look like a safe place to work for employee or an independent contractor.

Case closed? Or not, because you know what trumps a lawyer? A judge.

Judge Matthew Sciarrino sits on the Kings County Supreme Court in Brooklyn. When I met up with him at his chambers, I completely geeked out because he has two bookcases of Star Wars paraphilia, and posters. He's such a Darth Vader fan, he arranged Anakin's entire life cycle in action figures. Imagine that in the background while he's having a conference with lawyers. For legal reasons, I need to state that we were not allowed to record the interview in his chambers. So we walked across the street to the studio here at Panoply.

MS: I always thought about the people that worked on the DS. I brought numbers, a crew of over 265,000,000, 52K gunners, 607K troopers, 50K ship support and 80K pilots so there was a lot of people on that ship when it blew up.

Non-combatant?

MS: Look at air craft carrier, there's everything from barber to candy store operators, those huge ships are cities and the Death Star with sheer size was an immense city they would've not even known where the ship was going, what its mission was, they were servicing support staff and hundreds of thousands of people on ship.

I want to see candy store on Death Star. And barbershop.

MS: one of the interesting things new movie, scene in trailer Death Trooper picks up doll, Stormtroopers, you don't think about it but why there but why wouldn't there been, especially with propaganda machine? Of course posters, toys to get kids indoctrinated into the love of Empire and uniforms, etc. So that candy shop sold little miniature Death Stars so bring them home when on shore leave.

So in his opinion, everyone who worked on the Death Star got a raw deal. And he imagines they all would've been drawn to a well paying government jobs.

MS: In any totalitarian regime in Communist party in Russia best jobs were controlled by Communist party, In Nazi Germany best jobs controlled by Nazi party, had to become part of that regime whether wanted to, you could make arguments that it's not excusable but the average person to getting complete story because the Empire controls the media is going to believe stories the Jedi were evil, that the Jedi tried to overthrow democracy.

In fact, the independent contractors we never saw in Return of the Jedi may not have known there was another Death Star that got blown up.

MS: The imperial propaganda machine really didn't say we blew up planet, you better get in line or else, it was very quiet on the entire episode and rumors trickled out what happened to Alderaan and the rebels said Empire did this but there was no Imperial edict or propaganda war that we did this and do it to you, get in line, it was white washed.

Really in novels?

MS: In the novels, etc. Now what's canon who knows, if the DS had been successful with DS gone we did this and we're going to do it tor your planet didn't have ability to do it, rather than defeat of DS whole incident was covered it.

Except for those Alderaan truthers.

But what should we think about the Stormtroopers? In the original trilogy, they were recruits, not clones, who must have also been lured by steady work and pay.

MS: It does give you pause, when you see the Death Star explode and realize hundreds of thousands on it, more meaning than mindless soldiers that were going for everything that the Empire thought should happen.

I have to admit until I saw Clerks, I never thought about Stormtroopers or Independent Contractors. When were kids playing in the backyard as kids, we would argue over who got to be Luke or who got to be Han Solo. Maybe as we get older, we realize in life we don't all get to be one of the heroes that change history.

MS: I'm a big fan of grey, I balance for a living, and the entire judicial system based on advocacy and you're going to get one arguing white and one black and sometimes the answer is grey. The Sith and Jedi had been fighting each other for thousands of years before any movies happened, if you read EU, and in this Sith, Jedi fight, millions of people care less about Jedi and Sith were killed, and that is common theme in the EU, you do have evil people fighting these incredibly good people a lot of us down in the janitorial staff on Death Star get caught up in fight between the evil and good and we'd be well enough to be left alone to live nice life. and I agree that may be why Kevin Smith line did resonate with all of us.

Josh Gilliland doesn't buy it. He says look at Finn in the Force Awakens – who by the way, did know how to install a toilet main, which may have been a nod to Clerks. Unlike the willing recruits in the original trilogy, his generation of Stormtroopers were brainwashed, but he still managed to defect and join the resistance.

JG: Free will has to take part. You should know on its face when an order is illegal. And Kylo Ren giving order to shoot civilians, it's an illegal order from our POV. It reminds me of Judgment of Nuremberg, one of those amazing lawyer films and when you look at those on trial in that movie, you include former judge and while the judge thought he was trying to help doing duty in Nazi Germany, he violated oath when sentenced first person to death he knew was innocent.

For the record, Josh Gilliland and Judge Sciarinno are friends. They love getting into these kinds of debates.

But after the break, we'll hear from an economist who says the big question shouldn't be whether we should feel bad about the fate of independent contractors. The big question is whether the rebels should've blown up the Death Star in the first place because it would've plunged the galaxy into economic chaos.

➤ **BREAK**

ZF: So I am Zachery Fein-STEEN in dept. electrical engineering.

Zach says when he was a teenager, he and his friends used to get into debates about Star Wars like:

ZF: We were having arguments about why Luke was a moisture farmer on Tatooine in galaxy with interstellar travel, you could've created create irrigation system with simple Kensian economics, Luke happier not join rebellion, the rebels lost battle of Yavin and that would've been the end.

But like a lot of totalitarian regimes, the Empire didn't invest in its people. It poured all of its money into the military.

That made Zach wonder -- how much the Death Star would've cost? And what would be the economic fallout if it were destroyed, along with the Empire's leadership?

So he crunched the numbers and wrote an academic paper on this subject called:

ZF: It's a Trap, Emperor Palpatine's Poison Pill

I love that title.

ZF: In order to come up with cost of DS, I started with results from US government. In 2012 there was petition to WH to build a DS.

(PLAY NEWS CLIP)

ZF: I looked into where this came from, they just gave this number going through citations, group of students at Lehigh cost for steel to build a DS.

That's just the cost of steel. There are so many other factors, which would raise the cost. In the end:

ZF: It would cost 193 quintillion. US GDB is 17 trillions quadrillion so you go trillion, then quintillion. That is first DS. The second DS is actually much larger, first was 140 kilo, the second was 900 kilo in diameter, after doing that got number, it will cost 419 quintillion, we're able to afford these. But in a galaxy they have a much larger economy.

So now he had to figure what was the scale of this project in relation to the GGP, the gross galactic product – which is something he made up, as opposed to the GDP, the gross domestic product we use in real life. The only comparison he could think of was The Manhattan Project, the US government's program to develop an Atomic Bomb, which cost over a four-year period:

ZF: 0.2 % of GDP per year.

He crunched the numbers and found that the first Death Star would cost 4% of the GGP over twenty years. That's much bigger than the Manhattan Project. The money would be guaranteed by the Intergalactic Banking Clan – which does exist in the Star Wars canon.

ZF: It's the federal reserve of the Empire. They back currency, they back the galactic credit, and it is a too big to fail institution.

That's why he called his paper: It's a Trap: Emperor Palpatine's Poison Pill.

ZF: I posit that this is mutually assured destruction due to the pure scale of the DS cost, if they were to be destroyed then it's such a magnitude, it would destroy galactic economy that would make people blame the rebels for doing this, people aren't worried about politics after next meal.

If first DS destroyed, and then everyone's cheering obviously they must have felt economic impact of first DS.

ZF: Not necessary because the first DS was built by the Empire, the Empire will pay of debts it occurred, it's only when you destroy second one and kill off leadership and repudiate debts on DS would this crisis ferment.

But wouldn't the rebels would be smart enough to paid off the Empire's debts if they knew blowing up the second Death Star would cause an economic collapse?

ZF: This is a ragtag group, the rebels took whatever ships they could find, they did not have resources to do this, the one thing agree on is fight empire once it comes to what happens next devolve in infighting, political parties what republic was in prequel trilogies.

To him, the question about independent contractors isn't just moral or legal question – it's economic. In other words, if you're the "good guys" what economic value do you place on the lives of the people you consider "bad guys?" And what about their families back home who were depending on those pay checks?

ZF: They need to have some sort of payment scheme to widows, to children, the construction workers on second DS, we all know from Clerks, the second DS was still under construction, you're going to have contractors, we know Geonosians but just become not humanoid not negligible, they were doing a job?

Wasn't that Jar Jar?

ZF: No, they were end of Episode II they have large start of Clone Wars.

Oh! I didn't realize building DS.

ZF: If you watch the director's commentary this is mentioned. He says in response to Kevin Smith in Clerks, he wanted to bring this in.

CLIP

So that was George Lucas's response to this question of human life and its value the Death Star. The independent contractors weren't human!

ZF: But that doesn't seem like much of a repudiation of this problem, it says it's a different species let's not care.

When Zach Feinstein published his paper, he got a lot of pushback from fans. People were still upset about the U.S. government bailing out the banks on Wall Street. Now they have to imagine bailing out the Death Star?

I think the paper is more about accepting necessary evils in life, which is a hard case to make for a story world that usually pits pure good versus pure evil. But Zach says that doesn't matter. The point is he got people arguing.

ZF: And the point of it was, if I wrote about 2008 or some other financial crisis people know about, the same five people who read any of my other papers would have read it,

instead by writing about SW, by academically studying fiction I'm able to talk to you, I'm able to get the latest research, the latest ideas out there into the real world.

It's funny, back in 1983; people complained that Return of the Jedi was too similar to the original film – ending with the explosion of another Death Star. And people complained last year that the Force Awakens followed the same formula. There are obvious commercial reasons for that, but I actually find it poignant that the “good guys” aren't learning from their mistakes because they think every problem can be solved with a big bang. But if you don't deal with the messy consequences afterwards, you'll find yourself right back where you started.

Well, that's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Zach Feinstein, Josh Gilliland and Judge Matthew Sciarrino. Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky. You can also support the show on Patreon. I'll include a link on my site, imaginary worlds podcast dot org.