

• *Articles* •

**“May the Fourth Be With You”:
Star Wars Day, the Mass Media
and a Vernacular Hybrid Fan-Holiday**

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Abstract: *For many Star Wars fans, May 4th is a holiday. Ideas and concepts derived from the fandom about this unofficial, fan-created holiday, are not only adapted from the institution and transmitted via memes to create a vernacular hybrid, but they can also be re-appropriated by the institution. Through examining a series of YouTube videos posted by a Dallas based television news station in celebration of Star Wars Day, this study argues that the influence of fandom and memes as vernacular expressions can be utilized to exert influence on both fans and institutions through a set of complicated relations.*

On May 4th, 2015, WFAA, a Dallas, Texas based news station, published a series of eleven videos to their YouTube channel parodying a “merger” with the Empire from *Star Wars*. Ranging in length from 30s to 1m07s, each episode of “WFAA Wars” creates a “what-if?” scenario of working with characters from the *Star Wars* universe. How would Stormtroopers fix a news van’s engine? What is it like to work at an office with a Wookiee? Would Jedi make good journalists? What would it be like to have Darth Vader manage a news station? This parody series was created as part of WFAA’s celebration of *Star Wars* Day, also known as, “May the 4th.” *Star Wars* Day, however, is rooted deeply in the vernacular practices of fans utilizing digital technology and web-based communities. As this grass-roots holiday has grown, it has fed the institutions that franchise this much beloved fantasy space opera. *Star Wars* Day, and videos like those produced by WFAA, represent an on-going feedback loop of creative forms between fandom and mass media. These

creative products or forms lead to the idea of vernacular hybridization of digital discursive practices.

Whether extending the warm and geeky greeting, “May the 4th be with you,” in person or through the sharing of online content, *Star Wars* fans engage in the ancient practice of negotiating institutional forms of discourse through the vernacular. According to Robert Glenn Howard, the vernacular “refers to noninstitutional beliefs and practices that exist alongside but apart from institutions” (2011,5). The term vernacular is derived from the Greek *oikogenes* and Latin *verna* in reference to “home-born slaves” who spoke the official language of the Empire. Drawing upon this “home-born” notion of speech, the Roman rhetorician Cicero described what he observed to be an informally learned “vernacular flavor” amongst speakers which set them apart from the language structures established by institutional Latin (Howard 2005(a), 174-175; 2005(b) 2008, 495-496, 2011, 6-7, and 2015, 250-251). It is through this “vernacular flavor” that scholars are able to engage in critical analysis of groups creating and expressing meaning in their everyday lives. Scholars focusing on architecture (Glassie 2000), perceptions of disease (Goldstein 2004), and religious discourse (Howard 2011; Primiano 1995) observe that the “folk” express these values while simultaneously drawing on the resources provided by the institution (Howard 2008). Although the vernacular operates outside institutional bounds, Howard observes that it “needs the institutional to render its distinction meaningful. But, in another way, the vernacular is always at risk of emerging out of its subordination precisely because it is ‘native’ to the institution that it subordinates” (2005, 325). Approaching *Star Wars* Day as a form of vernacular fan expression which, through its vernacularity, is “defined by its opposite” (Howard 2011, 7), one must strongly consider that it is enabled by the hybridization of digital folklore as disseminated by the for-profit mass media.

Folklorists have recognized throughout the 20th and 21st centuries that mass media can play a powerful role in the creation and transmission of folklore. In 1974,

William M. Clements suggested that mass media are not only influenced by folklore and assists in its transmission, but that folk performers utilize it for their own benefit (1974, 318). Linda Dégh, in her oft-referenced work *American Folklore and the Mass Media* argues that folklore “permeates all society assisted by mass media” (1994, 1). This is achieved through the mass media’s capacity to reach wide and diverse audiences (1994, 24). The mass media have utilized folklore across various genres and motifs, from Märchen tales in commercial advertisements (Dégh 1994, 34-53), miracle narratives in evangelical magazines (Baker 2005), to Bigfoot legends among adolescent males (Buhs 2011). WFAA’s *Star Wars* Day videos can be viewed as part of a larger pattern in which the mass media, or mass culture, and folklore not only engage with, but also shape each other as technology and traditions develop (Blank 2009 and 2012, 3; Dégh 1994, 25; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 307). This shaping of folklore among mass media organizations can also be observed through their engaging in holiday traditions. Moira Smith (2009) notes that journalists in the United States have crafted hoax-articles in celebration of April Fool’s Day, taking the opportunity to stretch their creativity and engage the public in the tradition of pranking one-another. The production of *Star Wars* Day videos by an ABC news station, which is owned by the Walt Disney Corporation (Fabrikant 1995; Gara 2017), reinforces Smith’s observation by incorporating fan created traditions and vernacular discursive practices, including those that have at times tested the limits of the institution’s sense of ownership of said franchise.

Film studies scholar Will Brooker (2002, 175) notes that since the premier of *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977), Lucasfilm Ltd. has had mixed relationships with fan usage of characters, from negative and contentious reactions to fan and “slash” fiction¹, to a “far more lenient” approach to fan movies. Lucas initially desired to have his films only shown in cinemas, but as home viewing technologies developed, “conditions thus led to the emergence of a passionate fan base with detailed knowledge of every aspect of the original text” (Fuchs and Phillips 2016, 213). As such, these institutions have, tentatively, grown to not only

accept fan-made creations but to support and incorporate performative forms of vernacular expression into their repertoire, transforming costumed legions of villains (the 501st Legion) and droids (R2-KT) into cannon (Taylor 2015, 31 and 352-353). However welcoming Lucasfilm may have appeared at times, institutional ownership of *Star Wars* officially changed hands in 2012, which in many ways challenged fans' vernacular sense of ownership, as they feared the Death Star would be given a set of mouse-shaped ears.

The Walt Disney Company's *modus operandi* of drawing upon and incorporating the vernacular narratives derived from the "folk" into their storytelling cannon has been long observed by folklorists (Koven 2003). This observation, however, as Mikel J. Koven (2003) notes, has been polarizing, from the optimistic approach of Stith Thompson (1946) to Peggy Russo's (1992) fear that it would disrupt traditional forms of transmission through standardization and mass distribution. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that when Disney purchased Lucasfilm, Ltd. for \$4.05 billion, it began drawing on *Star Wars* lore and fandom as much as other fairy tales. Much like the Marvel Cinematic Universe,² Disney is revitalizing the franchise through large- and small-screen endeavors, heavy marketing, and even theme-park spaces (Taylor 2015, xxi and 385-393). Darth Vader, Iron Man, and Cinderella now dine at the same table in the House of Mouse. Children can take Jedi lessons at Disney theme parks and even posse with a Mickey Mouse dressed as Luke Skywalker (Disney World 2016). An event that began among fans in Toronto, Canada in 2011 with viewings of official and fan made movies complete with costume competitions (*Star Wars* Day Toronto 2016) can now be celebrated aboard Disney Cruise Line, catching sunshine with Stormtroopers during "*Star Wars* Day at Sea" (Disney Cruise Line 2016). If fans should feel lacking on ideas for how to celebrate, fear not! The official *Star Wars* website includes pages of recommendations (starwars.com). Disney as the institution has fully embraced this event encouraging fan participation.

How then does one interpret this relationship of “opposites” between institutions like Disney and the vernacularity of fan expression? As Howard (2008, 203) observes, there is no “authentic” or “pure” version of the vernacular that is completely void of the institution. Rather, there are “only degrees of hybridity.” According to Howard,

The vernacular is necessarily hybrid in the sense that to accept some sort of empowerment by claiming to be vernacular, that cultural form or person making the claim must be distinguished from institutions. In this very abstract way, the vernacular *needs* the institutional from which to define itself as different. Hence, the power of the vernacular is hybrid because that power relies partially on the institutional allowing it to be non-institutional (2015, 251, italics in original).

The result of this hybridization process is that forms of communication may begin to appear in the digital and analog worlds, building off of and “adopting” how a cultural element is expressed (Blank 2013, 20). “Hybridization,” Trevor Blank suggests, “helps people to ‘catch up’ and adapt to the progressing culture by merging the old and familiar with the emergent capabilities of a new medium” (2013, 21). Viewing the vernacular as hybrid provides scholars a lens through which to view how “a mass-media object can be ‘folklorized’” through the participatory culture of Web 2.0, which does not create something ‘new,’ but “containing its own alternate” (Howard 2008, 203-4). Due to its reliance upon the mass media and its development as a vernacular performance of fandom, I suggest that *Star Wars* Day operates on a gradient scale of hybridized positionality in relation to how it is being celebrated. Due to the scope of which a comprehensive ethnographic study of this holiday would require, I focus on the digital folklorization of this holiday and its relationship to memes.

The Memes are Strong with This One

The story of *Star Wars* Day begins not with the blockbuster premier of *Star Wars* in 1977, but with Great Britain's general election in 1979. In 1978-79, Great Britain was enwrapped in a "Winter of Discontent,"³ a period of harsh winter conditions coupled with nationwide strikes. During this economically unstable time, the House of Commons narrowly passed a vote of no confidence on March 28, 1979, with opposition leader of the Conservative Party and staunch anti-unionist, Margaret Thatcher, running for Prime Minister (Beckett 2006,61-63; Campbell 2000, 419-20; Evans 2004, 11-18; Lopez 2014; Veldman 2016, 86-89). On Friday, May 4th, publicist Alan Arnold, in his officially licensed *Once Upon a Galaxy: A Journal of the Making of Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, makes the following entry:

Margaret Thatcher has won the election and become Britain's first woman prime minister. To celebrate their victory her party took a half page of advertising space in the *London Evening News*. Their message, referring to the day of victory, was "May the Fourth Be With You, Maggie. Congratulations," further proof of the extent to which *Star Wars* has influenced us all. (1980, 76)

It appears, through the benefit of hindsight, that Arnold was correct. Sources from user-operated sites like the *Star Wars* Wiki, "Wookieepedia," (2016) and Know Your Meme (2016), to Chris Taylor's (2015:xvii) historical analysis of *Star Wars*, news outlets⁴, and the official *Star Wars* website all cite Britain's "Iron Lady" in the holiday's origin. While a curious and integral part of the narrative, this vernacular expression celebrating the institution remained dormant until the digital propagation of memes.

The term meme is derived from biologist Richard Dawkin's (1976) *The Selfish Gene* (Blank 2012, 8; McNeill 2009, 84-85; Foote 2007, 30-31; Shifman 2014, 9). According to Dawkins, memes function as a form of "replicator...which conveys

the idea of a unit of cultural transmission" (1976, 206). This, he suggests, is how information and ideas are passed between individuals and groups. Furthermore, memes "propagate themselves from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (1976, 206). The elements of transmission and imitation are significant to discursive practices among members of Web 2.0. Online community members have adopted "meme" to refer to user-created content transmitted from individual to individual, often with great speed, largely through the digitized images, phrases, videos, and other forms of communication via the Internet (Blank 2012, 8; Bronner 2009, 64; McNeill 2009, 84-85; 2012, 87-88; 2013(a), 83-85; and 2013(b), 178-179; Shifman 2014, 2).

According to communications scholar Limour Shifman, "we live in an era driven by a *hypermeme logic*, in which almost every major public event sprouts a stream of memes...Ostensibly, they are trivial pieces of pop culture; yet a deeper look reveals that they play an integral part in some of the defining events of the twenty-first century" (2014, 4-6). Internet memes have been created and distributed to comment on a variety of events, from Hurricane Katrina (Howard 2008:193), 9/11 (Blank 2013, 41-56; Frank 2011, 63-95), to excessive force from police officers (Peck 2014). One way this has been achieved is through "photoshops," digitally-manipulated user-created images, often with a bend towards the humorous, with the goal of wide distribution among members of online communities or e-mail chains, or "photoshopping" (Blank 2013, 41; Frank 2009, 109 and 2011; Howard 2008, 193; Peck 2014, 1640). Another popular genre is image "macros," "pictures, typically photographs, captioned with humorous, sometimes nonsensical text" (McNeill 2013, 179). While there are numerous fashions within which to create memes, I focus on these two genres. These forms of communication, as Bill Ellis (2015) demonstrates in his study of "Bronies"—male fans of the television series *My Little Pony*—provides fans opportunities to generate content, engage in community building, and make social commentary using franchise characters. For example, a search on a popular Internet browser for *Star Wars*

memes and the 2016 U.S. Presidential election reveals a wide variety of discourse from all sides of the political aisle. Memes, as Lynne McNeill observes, have become “traditional expressive forms on the Internet” (McNeill 2009, 84).

As “traditional expressive forms,” one would suspect that memes follow a shared set of characteristics guiding their practice. Shifman suggests that memes experience: 1) “Gradual propagation from individuals to society;” 2) “Reproduction via copying and imitation;” and 3) “Diffusion through competition and selection” (2014, 18). In his study on Slenderman, Andrew Peck argues that digital user-created content “creates an ongoing feedback loop” (2015, 335). As audience members engage with and critique downloaded performances, they engage in an asynchronous process of “emphasizing and diminishing aspects based on both the communal negotiation and the individual performer’s experiences and perceptions.” This “feedback loop,” Peck suggests, creates a participatory culture wherein individuals can artistically express themselves amongst largely anonymous peers, transmitting knowledge and degrees of performance acceptance. This process of transmission, Blank notes, “encourages and expects a democratic, *horizontal* diffusion of folk culture in which all participants are capable of forging a unique niche within their respective communities” (2013, 12, *italics in original*). Within the *Star Wars* fan community the Facebook group “Star Wars Day – May the 4th (be with you)” (2017) posts images, articles, and quizzes specific to *Star Wars* and *Star Wars* Day.⁵ This practice is encouraged through a participatory culture enabling individuals to connect across great distances facilitated by the *vernacular web*. Howard notes that, “Because the vernacular web emerges not just through technology but also through people deploying that technology, individual agents can extend its reach by simply shifting their participation from one network location to another” (2008, 505-506). Digital communities like those on Facebook, Reddit, and Imgur become integral to the creation and distribution of “May the Fourth” as a vernacular hybrid.

“May the Fourth” relies on meaningful forms of discourse to succeed in its transmission amongst both fans and the institution. In his study of the Photoshop, “Pepper Spray Cop,” Andrew Peck (2014) observes that memes have the performative potential to function as forms of *vernacular discourse*. According to Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, *vernacular discourse* “refers both to everyday conversations and to mediated communication directed toward specific communities” (2002, 14). In the digital world of the twenty-first century, *Star Wars* fans can create a sense of celebratory community through “combining disparate cultural fragments in novel ways [that] suggests a notable capacity for vernacular reappropriation of institutional images and hegemonic discourses” (Peck 2014, 1642). Enhanced through the digital age and the nature of Web 2.0, which “affords users the freedom to counter [the] hegemonic” (Blank 2013, xvii), fans can draw on and express themselves through the hybridized vernacular and its discourse.

Engaging in critical analysis of a meme submitted to online discussion groups and archives demonstrates its capacity for *vernacular discourse* accompanied by the *vernacular web*. In Figure 1 the meme, “May the force be with you” “and also with you” combines a screen capture from the first *Star Wars: Episode VIII: The Force Awakens* official trailer wherein Kylo Ren ignites his cross-bladed lightsaber and faces off against “Jedi Jesus” photshopped into the forest with His cross-shaped lightsaber. This meme, posted to Imgur by BudGetsMeWeiser (2016 and 2017) on November 29, 2014, and subsequently on Reddit, speaks to its simultaneous spread via the web. Discussions on Reddit and Imgur extend beyond the meme and humorous riffs blending the Force and the Cross to larger societal concerns, from Christianity (especially Catholicism) and cinema, to racial diversity in the franchise. The Reddit discussion thread includes 1,378 individually archived comments. Memes, even those featuring a duel between Kylo Ren and Jesus Christ, can operate as sources of meaningful discourse.



Figure 1. "May the force be with you" "and also with you." Screenshot from Imgur.

Shifman notes that, "Another fundamental attribute of Internet memes is intertextuality: memes often relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways." According to Know Your Meme (2016), a digital community archive, database, and research center for Internet memes (Kaplan 2013, 136-139; McNeill 2012, 88), as of April 2014, "May the Force be with you," or phrases relating to the Force, appears in over 500 different images on MemeGenerator, and more than 46,000 pieces of art on DevianArt. Two Facebook pages are also expressly dedicated to this meme (May the force be with you 2016; May the Force be with You 2016). As Monica Foote (2007) and Lynne McNeill (2013) demonstrate, once a memetic tradition is established, their forms are open to modification by others who may incorporate new elements or new meanings and traditions. It is therefore likely to surmise that, given the popularity and pervasiveness of "May the Force," coupled with Shifman's (2014) and Peck's (2015) respective observations, that the variation, "May the Fourth" arose and spread through the communal, asynchronous nature of memetic practices.

On, appropriately enough, May 4, 2006, the first recorded digital instance of "May the Fourth," was published in an article by The Guardian (Know Your Meme

2016). This article, “Why Go Out?” a guide to television shows airing that night, opens with:

Happy Star Wars Day everyone! May the fourth be with you!

A ha ha ha ha, etc. Yes, Yes, I know. It’s old. It’s not original, and it’s not even that funny – but I say when you only get one chance per year to make a joke, it would be a sin against St Vitus not to. (St Vitus **is** the patron saint of comedy, isn’t he – not some probiotic margarine/yoghurt based drink, right?) (The Guardian 2017, bold in original)

If this joke was “old” by 2006, it has only gained proverbial steam, continuously being highlighted by the mass media. According to “Google Trends,” which provides data based on the search frequency of a term since 2004, inquiries about the phrase has increased. Results for, “May the Force,” “May the 4th,” and “May the 4th Be With You” demonstrates trends of annual connectivity. Peaks in search activity occur each May, the first in 2005, the year “May the Force be with You” was listed at 8th place on the American Film Institute’s “100 Greatest Movie Quotes of All Time” (afi.com 2016). There is also an increase in annual search activity each May beginning in 2011 and 2012—the year Disney purchased Lucasfilm, Ltd. Interestingly, the tallest peaks for “May the Force” occurred in December 2016 in correlation to movie releases (Google Trends 2017(a), (b), and (c); Know Your Meme 2017). It stands to reason that during these peaks, memes were not only transmitted but that variations were created.

Memes relating to both “May the Force” and “May the Fourth” appear to vary widely, but share several components. One trend is to feature a single franchise figure, like Yoda, extending the desire for the Force (Figure 2 knowyourmeme.com 2017), or the Fourth (Figure 3 DeltaBravo15061970 2017), to “be with you.” The font tends to be bold and across the top, bottom, or both portions of the image.

These memes can create an outlet for fans to creatively engage with their favorite character(s), posting or modifying images to meet their needs. The structure of both memes following this pattern also permits for non-*Star Wars* characters, like President Barrack Obama, to be photoshopped and given memetic dialogue. These memes may also come in the form of image macros. This memetic form can be further modified to “troll,” individuals. Common examples include characters from other Sci-fi and Fantasy franchises, like *Star Trek*’s Captain Picard (Figure 4) and Mr. Spock (Figure 5), the incongruity of which satirizes *Star Wars* fans and their holiday.



Figures 2 (top) and 3 (bottom). Memetic variants of Yoda from *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). Figure 3 features the “May the 4th” greeting written in Yoda’s backwards speech.



Figures 4 (top) and 5(bottom). *Star Trek* characters extending “May the 4th” greetings. Images from the website knowyourmeme.com, and a Reddit thread created by DJSlambert (2017).

The juxtaposition of other memetic forms, accompanied by multiple layers of hybridity and intertextuality suggests a digital pervasiveness of *Star Wars* Day. In Figure 6, “Condescending Wonka” (or “Creepy Wonka”), an image macro captioned with “patronizing and sarcastic” statements (Know Your Meme 2017) comments on “bandwagon” fandom. Meanwhile, in Figure 7, “Imminent Ned” (or “Winter is Coming”), features Eddard “Ned” Stark (Sean Bean) who “forewarn[s] or proclaims the impending arrival of a highly anticipated event, a product or an internet meme (Know Your Meme 2017). This practice of including “May the Fourth” into other memetic forms are numerous, ranging from variations of “Keep Calm, and Carry On,” to stock character macros and the advice animal, “Philosoraptor” (Figure 8). The practice of crossing memes operates not only as forms of social commentary about

the upcoming digital bombardment of Star Wars related posts, but the cyclical nature of the holiday's celebration.



Figure 6 (top). “Condescending Wonka” (or “Creepy Wonka”). Screenshot from Pinterest (2017). Figure 7 (bottom). “Imminent Ned” (or “Winter is Coming”). Screenshot from Meme Generator (2017).

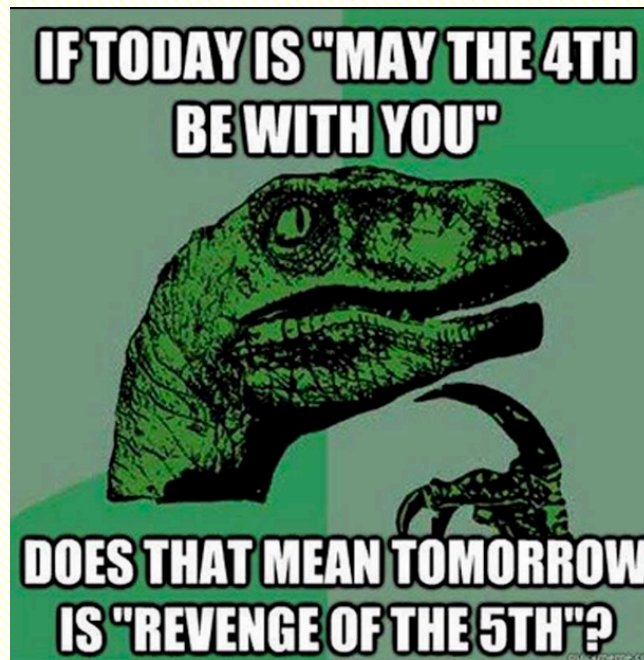


Figure 8. "Philosoraptor" ponders what follows May 4th (DarthVadersBigBluePenguin 2016).

"May the Fourth" memes may also take on a jovial and playful tone, acknowledging the sense of enjoyment experienced in celebrating *Star Wars*. On May 4, 2015, DarthVadersBigBluePenguin posted to Imgur a meme of an AT-AT frolicking puppy-like in a field rather than shooting down Rebels (Figure 9). Figure 10, posted by TheLoveHouse to Imgur on May 4, 2013, features silhouettes of *Star Wars* characters in a theater about to watch one of said films, enacting a tradition held by many fans. A trend with these particular memes is that they are posted to sites on May 4th much the same way as other holiday-related posts. These memes draw attention to the fact that *Star Wars* not only has a holiday, but one worth celebrating. It is this notion of celebration, then, that rests at the heart of not only the pervasiveness of "May the Fourth" as a meme and fan-celebration, but a vernacular hybrid perpetuated by the mass media.



Figure 9. AT-AT in the field. Screenshot from Imgur 2016.



Figure 10. *Star Wars* characters at the theater. Screenshot from Imgur 2016.

The Case of Darth Manager

A YouTube search for the phrases “Star Wars Day” and “May the Fourth” provides pages of content from fans and franchise. Among these results are WFAA’s “WFAA Wars” series. Every episode commences with a parody of the iconic fairytale-esc opening from the films with a black screen and blue letters reading, “A short time ago at a TV station not that far, far away....” This line primes the audience that these videos are not the normal content produced by a news station that has

served the Dallas-Forth Worth Metropolitan Area and North Texas since June 26, 1922 (WFAA 2017). Rather, these videos are more in line with parodies or spoofs. Analyzing how WFAA draws upon not only a perceived sense of fandom among the staff, but the resources, both fiscal and legal, creates an entry point for viewing how “May the Fourth” has become a vernacular hybrid, as well as the potential that the mass media has in transmitting folklore in the digital age.

Each of the eleven videos in the “WFAA Wars” series are comprised of vignettes centered on a particular issue or concern raised by the news’ staff as they work alongside “the Empire.” Following the parodied opening line, the videos introduce a member(s) of the news staff addressing the camera as if being interviewed. The consensus on the success of the merger among the staff is mixed, from concern (“Shared Workspace”), excitement (“Colleen Nerds Out”), to downright disapproval (“Lazy Jedi”). Having established each video’s theme, the following scenes relate specifically to these issues, such as break room behavior (“Break room or Cantina?”) or a Stroomtrooper not refilling the coffee pot after taking the last cup (“Java the Hutt”). The videos conclude by returning to the introductory member(s) of the staff who make a final remark in either frustration (“Security Woes”), humor (“Jedi Mind Scripts”), or, in the words of Anchor John McCaa, feeling “cooler than Han Solo on a cold day” (“McCaa The Force Be With You” 2017). Most of these videos end with an outdoor shot of the studio with a computer generated R2-D2 rolling along the sidewalk while an AT-AT towers over background buildings and an Imperial Shuttle flies off screen, presumably towards the Second Death Star viewed in orbit. These videos all conclude with the phrase, “MAY THE FOURTH BE WITH YOU” in bold yellow font, appearing simultaneously with the ABC logo, reinforcing a sense of institutional authority.

To engage in the memetic traditions and their relationship to the mass media as a vernacular hybrid, I focus on a single video, “WFAA Wars: Darth Manager.” I selected this video for its extensive use of intertextual memes, becoming a Russian nesting-doll of digital vernacularity. Below is a transcript I produced from the video

which includes time stamps, scene changes, camera angles/focus, and stage directions. I then engage in an analysis of the most relevant components demonstrating the hybridization concerning “May the Fourth” as a holiday celebrated by fans and institutions.

00:00 [Opening]

[“Across the Stars” by John Williams, sound clip - 00:57-1:01]

[Blue Caption]: A short time ago at a TV station not that far, far away....

00:04 [Scene 1]

[Jenny Lyon-Krueger (WFAA Producer) standing in hallway center-frame.]

Jenny Lyon-Krueger: The new news director is... [Makes hesitant facial expression] intense.

00:09 [Scene 2]

[John Williams’ “The Imperial March” plays. A man in khakis and button-up dress-shirt, hands outstretched, “levitates” in center-frame, face off-screen. Camera pans frame left to reveal a raised black-gloved outstretched hand. Camera pans up, showing the man struggling for air as the camera turns left revealing Darth Vader Force-choking him.]

Darth Vader: I want to know what happened to the donuts in the break room [Respirator noise].

Man: [Struggling for breath] Oh no...

00:13 [Scene 3]

[Studio parking lot, closed garage door in background. Darth Vader stands center-frame looking at Boba Fett to his left. Armed Stormtroopers flank, staring off-camera. Luke Skywalker,⁶ Mace Windu,⁷ and man in an orange polo walk across the scene in the background, exiting frame left.]

Boba Fett: [Pointing upwards while looking at Darth Vader] So we can repurpose the tower as a death-ray [makes explosion hand gesture]...

[Cellphone rings. Darth Vader signals to Boba Fett with left hand to give him a moment, raising black cellphone tucked in right hand to his helmet.]

Darth Vader: Vader, go. [Respirator noise]

[Vader turns right, heading away from group. Boba Fett and Stormtroopers gesture in confusion.]

00:22 [Scene 4]

[Darth Vader stands center-frame in a conference room. Jango Fett stands behind Darth Vader to his right, while Boba Fett stands behind to the left.]

Darth Vader: [Pointing with his left hand, disapprovingly] You have failed me for the last time. [Camera pans out, revealing Mace Windu and Luke Skywalker sitting at the left side of table] These aren't the ratings we're looking for [Waves hand across table pointing at group. Camera cuts to two seated seemingly disappointed Stormtroopers] I am most displeased with your apparent lack of sales.

00:32 [Scene 5]

[Music stops. Jedi Padawan Peter⁸ sits in his cubicle. Darth Vader enters frame right, right hand holding his belt, left hand holding a paper coffee cup. Darth Vader enters cubicle as Padawan Peter turns left to see him.]

Darth Vader: Hello, Peter, what's happening? Yeah...[Leans against pillar] I'm gonna need you to go ahead and come in tomorrow...so if you could be here around 9? Yeah...that would be great.

00:46 [Scene 6]

[Jenny Lyon-Krueger again, standing in the same hallway center-frame.]

Jenny Lyon-Krueger: [Sighs and shakes head] Who am I kidding? [Looks downwards] He's the living embodiment of evil.

00:48 [Scene 7]

["Imperial March" plays. Office space filled with cubicles. Darth Vader's respirator is heard as he enters frame left and walks across scene, only his helmet visible. As Darth Vader enters center-frame, "MAY THE FOURTH BE WITH YOU." appears in upper right frame consisting of three lines which appear sequentially, followed by the WFAA/ABC logo in the bottom right.]

00:56 [Scene 8]

[Space, with light from a single yellow star in center frame. The WFAA8/ABC logo zooms in towards center frame, slowly fading into distance.]

01:06 [Screen goes Black]

01:07 [End]

As intimidating as Darth Vader's crimson-bladed light saber is, the Dark Lord's signature move is the "Force choke." Using the Force while clenching his prosthetic hand, Darth Vader cuts off a victim's airway without touching them. In 2013, this gesture was turned into a comical "photo fad" by Rob Martinez of Grapevine, Texas, a Dallas suburb. A "photo fad" refers to a meme genre that "includes staged photos of people who imitate specific positions or actions in various settings, usually with the purpose of posting the picture on the Web" (Shifman 2014:102). After posting a successful attempt at re-creating the "Hadokening" photo fad during an Easter gathering at his church, Martinez posted a similar image which he "hashtagged" as "Vadering." The image went viral (kenchitwood 2017; Know Your Meme 2017). This variant based on the popular anime *Dragon Ball-Z* and video game *Street Fighter* features a single individual making the Force-choke gesture towards one or more participants. These participants jump in the air at the time the photo is taken while appearing to struggle for air, sometimes with hands around their throats. Scene 2 appears to harken to this memetic tradition. By appearing to levitate, the victim takes on the role of the individual(s) frozen in frame. Furthermore, this scene has the potential to keep a meme that had by then declined in popularity fresh in the minds of the North Texas communities where it originated.

“A fundamental feature of many memetic photos,” Shifman observes, “is a striking incongruity between two or more elements in the frame. More specifically, what we often see is one person who sticks out as alien to the surrounding situation” (2014, 90). The fourth scene features not just “one person who sticks out as alien,” but a whole room. Seeing these characters together in a conference room is unlike anything seen among any faction in the franchise, including the Senate scenes from the prequels. *Star Wars* based memes can draw from this notion of juxtaposition, placing characters in unlikely scenarios, amongst real life or non-franchise figures, and real-world individuals and places into the settings of the space fantasy. The three lines of modified dialogue utilized by Darth Vader in this scene continue the sense of parody, providing a sense of geek authority based on knowledge of the films. Critically, a search for each line in their original form on a popular web browser reveals a stream of memes. For example, Vader’s line, “I find your lack of faith disturbing,” has been placed onto images of Grumpy Cat and Dos Equis’ original “Most Interesting Man.” Ob-Wan Kenobi’s, “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for,” is particularly pervasive and has entered into popular discourse. Variations can be used in daily conversation as a way to either cover-up a mistake or turn a given situation humorous. This scene is rife with nods to fans and speaks to how lines of dialogue from *Star Wars* have the potential to enter into our own everyday vernacular.

The fourteen-seconds of Scene 5 are perhaps the most mimetically laden sequence in the entire series. When Darth Vader enters Padawan Peter’s cubicle

with the greeting, “Hello, Peter, what’s happening? Yeah...,” the viewer is cued that this is a spoof of *Office Space* (1999). *Office Space* is a cult classic, particularly amongst individuals who have worked in an office. The movie has also inspired its own memes. On September 7, 2011, Reddit user Mekrob created an image macro using a screen capture of the antagonistic boss, Bill Lumbergh (Gary Cole), cup of coffee in hand, standing outside of protagonist Peter Gibbons’ (Ron Livingston) cubicle (Figure 14). Mekrob transformed this scene into an image macro by inserting a parodied line based on Lumbergh’s droning tone reading, “Yeeeah, if you could just, go ahead and read this in my voice, that’d be great.” Known as “Read this in my voice,” the meme quickly inspired variations not only with different forms of dialogue, but with characters in Lumbergh’s place.

A little over a month later, Reddit user AnkenTEM uploaded an image macro featuring an individual dressed as Darth Vader. Instead of wearing a cape and armor, the Dark Lord of the Sith sports a black button-up, gray tie, and red suspenders. Coffee mug in-hand the image is captioned, “Yeah, if you could just, come to the dark side, that’d be great.” (Figure 15). Here, the irritating Lumbergh is replaced with the fallen Jedi, or, in the words of Jenny Lyon-Krueger from scene six, “the living embodiment of evil.” This scene from “Darth Manager” becomes a fascinating window through which to view how memes can layer atop one another and be transformed into unique and distinct forms of discourse. These videos further demonstrate how *Star Wars* Day memes as vernacular hybrids do not rely upon a single form, but can be manipulated by users and the mass media to engage

audiences as they extend wishes of happiness on this fan-made, yet institutionally reliant, holiday.



Yeeeah, if you could just, go ahead and read this in my voice, that'd be great.



Yeah, if you could just, come to the dark side, that'd be great.

Figures 11 (top) and 12 (bottom). Lumbergh becomes Vader. Images from the website knowyourmeme.com.

The Vernacular Will Be With You, Always

Looking out onto the metaphorical horizon, it becomes dramatically apparent that more *Star Wars* projects are heading our way. Each subsequent movie, comic book, or television release marks an opportunity to reignite the fandom and chances for groups and individuals to enact their passion amongst community members. These increases in fan activity can also create opportunities to transmit new and old forms of fan expression traditions. It is highly likely, then, that *Star Wars* Day celebrations and “May the Fourth” memes will be close behind and important components to the success of the franchise among both fans and institutions.

Whether a meme shared on Facebook or part of a video produced by a Dallas-based news station, *Star Wars* Day is rich with opportunities to engage in how meaning is created and disseminated through the vernacular as hybrid. The current essay, due to its scope, only focuses on the digital, memetic forms of vernacular discourse at the heart of this fan holiday. This is but a small part of a larger celebration. As such, it is hoped that this essay will encourage further discussion and analysis, accompanied by ethnographic research, into not only other manners of *Star Wars* Day related festivities, but how fans engage in and celebrate other franchises. The influence of popular culture on the everyday lives of individuals appears to only be increasing as the mass media churns out new and/or nostalgic properties, properties which individuals incorporate into meaningful components of their everyday lives. As such, folklorists should not ignore the

influence of popular culture and deeply cherished stories like *Star Wars* on the performance of individual and group identity.

May the Force, and Fourth, be with you.

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Notes

¹ Slash fiction refers to fan fiction writing wherein same-sex characters are placed in homosexual relationships in contrast to how they are typically portrayed. The “slash” is drawn from the “/” symbol placed between the names of the characters featured in these queering narratives like Han Solo/Luke Skywalker (Booker 2002:129-1132).

² The Walt Disney Corporation purchased Marvel Comics in 2009 for \$4 billion. This purchase did not include the X-Men and Spiderman franchises, which were owned by 20th Century Fox and Sony Pictures respectively (Taylor 2015:385).

³ The name is derived from Richard, Duke of Gloster’s opening monologue in William Shakespeare’s *King Richard III* (1982:552).

⁴ See Forbes (Klain 2016), ABC News (Lesley 2016; Messer 2016), CNN (Hanks 2015), Time (Grossman 2014), and The Washington Post (Steinberg 2015).

⁵ The page is currently “liked” by 21,978 people and followed by 20,959.

⁶ This character is featured in “Lazy Jedi” and sports Skywalker’s second lightsaber in “Break Room or Cantina?”

⁷ This character is referred to as Windu in “Lazy Jedi.”

⁸ In “Lazy Jedi,” Windu refers to him as, “My young Padawan.”

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