

“Your Very Own *Star Wars* Story”: Experiencing Design at *Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge*

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May 18, 2021

## IMMERSION VS REALISM

The first step to creating an immersive environment based on *Star Wars* was making sure that the sets in the new land were designed in the spirit of *Star Wars* “overdesign,” a term used by Derek Johnson to refer to the distinct, recognizable visual style that marks a specific fictional world (114). Some locations, such as the Millennium Falcon interior, are based directly on iconic locations from the films. However, a major goal behind the design of *Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge* was to create a place where new stories can be told within this universe (Trowbridge), so that necessitated creating plenty of new locations that use the same overdesign to make guests feel immersed in the world of the films.

Common elements of *Star Wars* overdesign include:

- repeated geometric elements
- few right angles; angled polygons preferred over rectangles
- symmetrical shapes at large scale with asymmetrical designs at small scale
- lots of directional lines
- set pieces with impressive vertical scale
- multi-level rooms and areas
- small, enclosed hallways and interiors
- displays inspired by early 1980s computer graphics (simple lit geometric vector lines)
- high levels of mechanical detail; exposed parts
- frequent lit elements (especially embedded in walls)
- matte grays (as opposed to reflective metals), especially on most vehicles

-colors and design elements telegraph good/evil predictably: black/white, red, clean smooth surfaces and curves, red lit elements, cold light temperature all associated with Empire/First Order; gray, brown, orange, blue, grunge, exposed mechanical parts, green/blue lit elements, warm light temperature all generally associated with Rebels/Resistance

All of these design elements are also present in *Galaxy's Edge* in some capacity. Part of the appeal of *Star Wars* is the intentional imperfection and grungy realism in its design. The original creators of the films sought to create a sci-fi universe that felt lived-in rather than clean and futuristic. In a 1977 interview with *American Cinematographer* magazine about the first film, George Lucas said:

The trouble with the future in most futurist movies is that it always looks new and clean and shiny. What is required for true credibility is a used future....And although *Star Wars* has no points of reference to Earth time or space,...it is a decidedly inhabited and used place where the hardware is taken for granted....I wanted the seeming contradiction of strange graphics of fantasy combined with the feel of a documentary. (700)

Even as the franchise has moved into the digital age, it has retained its philosophy of practical, gritty design. For example, the filmmakers of *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* sought to recapture in the 2016 film the original aesthetic of the first *Star Wars* from forty years earlier, using older techniques such as designing spaceships out of vintage model kit parts to achieve a handmade, detailed, and intentionally unpolished look. (Wucher 90-91)

Realism is, in itself, not the most essential component of immersion. However, when creating an immersive world on the scale of Galaxy's Edge, it does help the goal of immersion to build locations that feel "real," because having elements that they recognize as an expected part of a functional world will help sell the illusion that they are, indeed, in a functional world. This makes the overdesign of *Star Wars* well-suited for immersion. The scattered crates, weathered metal, and exposed cables that are part of the films' aesthetic also make Galaxy's Edge feel like a place that has been lived in and used since long before the first guests arrived. An article from the official *Star Wars* website about the land identifies *Star Wars*'s storytelling as "grounded in reality." (Baver)

But on another level, *Star Wars* is not realism. It's a mythic struggle with strange aliens, implausibly built spacecraft, laser blasters, and a thinly veiled magic system. As the popularity of the films have proven, it is not difficult to make viewers suspend their disbelief about such a world; which means that there are other factors that distinguish an immersive environment from a realistic world. More important for creating immersion are thematic consistency and interaction.

In truth, Galaxy's Edge walks the line between realism and heightened reality. Any theme park space that wants to be immersive has to incorporate some measure of "heightened reality" theming in order to be accommodating to guests. Imagineer John Hench explains of this theming style, "What we create here is a storybook realism, an essence of realism and authenticity more utopian in nature, more romanticized, more like what guests imagined it would be." (quoted in Younger 68)

The principles guiding guests through Galaxy's Edge are much the same as the ones in action when they visit the "Disney-fied" versions of different countries in Epcot's World Showcase. In each country, guests are surrounded with merchandise, food, architecture, and staff from the original nation. But elements that might normally be spread across a whole country are compressed into a small space, with all of its icons from different locations and even time periods accessible in one place. Despite the realism that marks its design, Black Spire Outpost (the in-universe name of the land's setting), too, is a compressed, romanticized location, where legendary conflicts are continuously taking place on a grand scale. Two iconic ships from opposite sides of a conflict are permanently parked just around the corner from each other, but Kylo Ren and the stormtroopers can never seem to find the people responsible for the Millennium Falcon's presence. A First Order outpost, a Resistance encampment, black markets, regular markets, the hottest cantina on the planet of Batuu, and a place where budding Force-sensitives build lightsabers are all packed into a space you can walk across in a matter of minutes.

Despite its use of "storybook realism" techniques that have existed in Disney's parks since their inception, Galaxy's Edge is noteworthy for experimenting with new methods of creating more immersion. However, sometimes there is a question of whether Imagineers' use of these techniques are in the pursuit of immersion or realism.

For example, the designers have chosen not to place non-diegetic music throughout the land—a surprising choice, given the volume of music that is used in other sections of the parks. The two exceptions to this are at the west entrance to the land, in the transition between *Toy Story* Land and Galaxy's Edge, where a solo brass instrument

can be heard playing one of John Williams' melodic themes that was written for the land; and the rides, which are fully scored. There is also some diegetic music—largely from droid DJ R-3X, whose songs can be heard inside Oga's Cantina and on a faux radio broadcast that plays in the land's bathrooms.

John Williams' music is an iconic part of the *Star Wars* films; the scenes would feel empty without it. It intensifies the epic feel of the character journeys. Would it really break the immersion so easily if some of that same musical atmosphere were there to underscore the journey of the guests, who are situated as the new protagonists of this story? Without it, moments like first seeing the Millennium Falcon as you turn the corner into the spaceport seem oddly silent and sudden. The decision to use so little music seems even stranger given that John Williams wrote a Grammy-winning original orchestral suite for Galaxy's Edge—which is heard only briefly in the land itself. The extensive Galaxy's Edge feature in the Summer 2019 issue of *Disney twenty-three* (the official publication of the Disney-run "fan club" D23) even includes several paragraphs waxing poetic about Williams' original score, the themes it includes for different locations, and the many innovative ways it will be incorporated into the land, including both diegetic and non-diegetic arrangements. Yet, in actual practice, most of the land still remains silent.

As mentioned before, the rides do have non-diegetic music, and it does not detract from the immersive experience (especially on *Rise of the Resistance*, arguably the most immersive part of the whole land, which benefits greatly from its epic score). Does the lack of music help guests feel that they are exploring an unfamiliar place? Yes. But does it help them feel that they are part of this epic and familiar story? No. I think that,

in the end, a balance would have been best. They could keep some silence to allow guests to be immersed in the soundscape and the feeling of real exploration. But perhaps placing some non-diegetic music at targeted points (for example, some theme that evokes wonder under the archway leading into the spaceport; or perhaps First Order themes near their outpost), even subtly, would help emphasize important moments the same way it does in the films.

Another reason that has been given for the lack of music is to allow guests to decide how to feel about certain moments and characters themselves; this is consistent with the “choose your path” philosophy embraced by the Datapad app, which lets guests take on missions for the Resistance, the First Order, or the scoundrel underworld and allows them to earn reputation points with any of these factions.

*Star Wars* gives its characters difficult choices; but it has never been uncertain about which side is the right side. That’s part of the comfort of the franchise—despite all of its lovable rogues and scoundrels, it’s a battle of good versus evil. But creating obvious villains hasn’t reduced the appeal of those characters to fans—the best example of all being Darth Vader, whose musical theme is considered not only one of the best in the franchise but also one of the most recognizable movie themes of all time. Including, for example, the musical themes for the First Order in their area of the land might create a villainous atmosphere, but that would not necessarily detract from the sway of those characters, especially since it’s already so heavily telegraphed that these are the bad guys (between the paranoid patrols, the color palette, and the propaganda banners.) Why use visual and interactive storytelling techniques to their fullest but ignore musical techniques?

Another factor that affects immersion is the necessary balance of story and guest service. While they can be powerful storytelling tools and provide boundless entertainment, theme parks are also a part of the hospitality industry; so when designing an immersive experience such as Galaxy's Edge, designers must take into account the needs of their guests while simultaneously creating a cohesive atmosphere.

Returning to the example of World Showcase, while the different countries do their best to immerse guests in the atmosphere and culture of their home nations, many immediate cultural and linguistic differences are discarded in favor of guest service—for example, the menus in the restaurants are written in English.

Batuu has its own language, too—Aurebesh, *Star Wars'* unique alphabet. Aurebesh (named, much like the English alphabet, for its first two characters, *aurek* and *besk*) is a simple pictorial code with each symbol representing a letter of the English alphabet.

Visitors to Galaxy's Edge are subtly encouraged to learn something about the language, by its volume of use and by provided resources. Sometimes it appears side-by-side with the English translation on signage, making it easy for guests to make the connection. The "Datapad" app also includes an Aurebesh keyboard that can be used to decode the alphabet. But chances are that the majority of visitors won't care to spend their time learning to translate Aurebesh, and the designers have accounted for that. While some of the text appearing in the land is in true Aurebesh, there is also text printed in a regular English font that has been designed to appear as visually similar to Aurebesh as possible.

Looking around Galaxy's Edge for uses of Aurebesh, I found that some of the most common words that appeared were "Danger" and "Warning" (for example, in the queue for *Millennium Falcon: Smuggler's Run*, a ride that presents itself as an unpredictable experience run through with intriguingly shady dealings and lovably unreliable characters)—but these words only appeared on places *themed* to have some measure of danger or unreliability to them, not those that guests were actually meant to avoid. For those in the know, it adds an extra layer of authenticity and fun; for those not, it doesn't confuse or get in the way. An Aurebesh sign above a water fountain warns that the water may not be safe to drink for all life forms—but in reality, the water is perfectly normal. Had it been unsafe to drink, the warning would have appeared in English, so that all guests would actually be able to read it. The same goes for important amenities. We can only imagine what kind of chaos might have ensued if the restroom signs were written in true Aurebesh.

One of the most effective techniques for building immersion is also one of the simplest: human interaction. Even when surrounded by impeccable sensory cues, it's hard to believe you have been transported to another planet if the people around you continue to interact with you as they would in a regular tourism setting. So in order to have a truly interactive experience, the world must interact back with the visitor. So much of the way we experience and learn about the world is through interacting with other people; so being spoken to as if they too are part of the fictional environment gives a sense of belonging to the guest and helps validate the illusion.

Galaxy's Edge tries very hard to give the guests that validation through interaction with Cast Members. Employees working in the land are trained in the history and culture of their fictional planet, encouraged to develop their own character backstories, and taught to use local Batuu slang (such as greeting guests with "Bright suns.") (Russon) Even during the COVID-19 crisis, when interaction with characters has been greatly scaled down in the parks, Galaxy's Edge still sees frequent appearances of characters on platforms and balconies to interact with guests from a safe distance. But *Rise of the Resistance* uses its interpersonal interactivity to the greatest effect. The multi-part experience, where guests are frequently transitioning between different areas and vehicles, necessitates a large number of staff to guide them through the ride's complicated layout; however, all of the Cast Members have been seamlessly integrated into the experience by being cast in different roles in the world of the ride, allowing their direction of the guests to become part of the ride's diegesis. For example, Cast Members dressed as First Order officers board the Resistance "transport" that is intercepted by a Star Destroyer and then order guests into their holding positions along the halls of the ship. The combination of the movie-accurate set and the role-playing by the Cast Members (sometimes even including dramatic villainous speeches) makes guests feel that they are both within this world and being acknowledged by it as part of its story.

Before the opening of Galaxy's Edge, the one existing *Star Wars* ride in the American Disney parks was *Star Tours: The Adventures Continue*, a motion simulator ride which allows guests to fly through different planets from the films. In each cycle of the ride, one rider is selected and photographed as the "Rebel spy" which the ship is charged

with carrying to safety. Rebecca Williams points to this moment as an opportunity for greater personalized immersion in that ride, granting the selected guest a moment of special status among fellow riders and fans. (141) The interactive moments in *Rise of the Resistance* feel like a natural evolution of this. The choice of Rebel spy on *Star Tours* is delivered via the ride's pre-recorded dialogue, which places a layer of separation between the guests and the world of the story. But turning over some of the immersive narrative work to real, live people removes that barrier. It engenders a higher level of trust in guests as well as allowing for greater flexibility and personalization in the experience, which brings the feeling of personal immersion to a new height.

## COMFORT, TACTILITY, FUTURISM, TECHNOLOGY

It's fitting that a land whose story is built around a fantastical vision of space travel uses the most advanced technology of its time to create cutting-edge futuristic effects. But the true pleasure of the land comes from skillful application of these new technologies in conjunction with basic, tangible techniques for giving guests a satisfying experience.

Scott Trowbridge, a senior Imagineer and the land's creative lead, talks about how, when designing Galaxy's Edge, things not only had to be movie-accurate but had to *feel* right—not just in terms of atmosphere, but actual tactile sensations. The land's sound designers stood in the land while it was still under construction to get a feel for how the sounds interacted with the physical space. Imagineers taste-tested many different potential recipes for the signature blue and green milks before finding one that both tasted good and felt right for the concept of this fantasy drink.

As travelers looking for excitement, or as *Star Wars* fans looking to experience the movies for ourselves, we look for story, and we look for design. But on a more basic level, we come to theme parks looking for comfort, for the type of sensory pleasure that makes us feel content and at home in this “happy place.” This has been a key philosophy in the design of the Disney theme parks since their initial conception. Karal Ann Marling describes Disneyland's Main Street USA in her book, aptly titled *The Architecture of Reassurance*:

You are emboldened and soothed by clean streets, smiling faces, happy colors, and the implicit promise that here, at least, everything will be OK. It will be fun, you won't get lost, and there are plenty of benches in case

your feet get tired. But they won't. Indecision and anxiety make for tiredness....Main Street makes no such demands on the pedestrian. Look at anything. Wander everywhere. It's better than any real street in any turn-of-the-century town had ever been....

[Walt Disney] did not believe for a moment that art—his art, the picture-postcard kind—was obliged to be disturbing, challenging, unsettling. He believed instead that it ought to provide comfort and refuge from that world of woes he knew at first hand. (83)

This vision of bright colors and old-fashioned happiness may at first seem at odds with the adventurous, alien atmosphere of Galaxy's Edge, but closer analysis will reveal that many of the same design philosophies are at work. Even if a satisfying theme park experience sometimes means thrills for visitors, a theme park is still a safe place where guests know they're not truly in danger. As Galaxy's Edge demonstrates, new technologies can provide comfort in the form of streamlining our experiences and making it easier for us to suspend our disbelief in the face of the new. However, they must be balanced with catering to those basic psychological whims—tactile sensations and interactions.

A personal favorite example of tactile design in Galaxy's Edge happens in *Smuggler's Run*, an interactive ride in which guests are seated in the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon and can use buttons and levers to control the ship in real time. For guests less experienced than Han Solo himself, piloting the Falcon can at times be difficult and frustrating; however, one moment that is always fun is making the jump to light speed. When given the instruction, the pilot grasps the hyperdrive lever and pulls it towards

herself in a full arc. It's a simple action, but somehow incredibly satisfying. There are several parts to this: It's a direct imitation of the way the ship's hyperdrive is activated in the *Star Wars* movies, creating a perfect instance of what Rebecca Williams calls "haptic fandom," in which fans are able to engage with a narrative world through physical and sensory experience. (143) Compared to the small adjustments of moving the control stick to turn the ship, it's a big, dramatic gesture with no holds barred. The lever itself is perfectly weighted, giving just enough physical resistance to make the movement feel satisfying. And the ride reacts immediately, with a simulated gravitational push and an onscreen image of the transition into hyperspace. All of these factors mesh together to create a memorable moment that gives riders both an iconic *Star Wars* experience and a gratifying tactile experience.

There are other kinds of tactile experience beyond the physical that Galaxy's Edge does well. *Rise of the Resistance* is an incredible showcase for almost every kind of cutting-edge theme park technology there is—trackless self-piloted ride vehicles, extremely lifelike animatronics, many different types of projections, and lighting effects that make you feel like your ride vehicle is really dodging blaster bolts, among many others. And yet, among all of the technological marvels and how-did-they-do-that moments, the moment that stuck out in my mind the most from my first ride was when the First Order Cast Member ordering us to our places on the Star Destroyer delivered an evil monologue directly to my face. That feeling of being treated as the hero in this story by another human being was almost as exciting as the daring escape that was to follow. The fact that Galaxy's Edge is still providing this level of interaction even

in a time of pandemic, when everyone is concerned about human contact, speaks to how important this element is to the ride experience.

The impact of human interaction on ride experience isn't limited to interactions with staff, either. After riding *Smuggler's Run* multiple times, sometimes on my own and sometimes with other people, I concluded that the best rides were the ones with a full cockpit—sharing the experience and being able to team up with the rest of your flight crew intensified the fun and excitement of the ride, and reduced the feeling that I was simply playing a video game.

We can introduce new, futuristic technology into the experience as much we want, but there are still basic human needs and preoccupations that feel psychologically good to us. The reason *Galaxy's Edge* has levers to pull and live characters to play with is the same reason that we haven't switched over to taking nutrition pills in place of food like old science fiction used to predict. Even if that would fulfill our physical need for nutrition, it would not fulfill the psychological ones associated with food and the eating experience.

Using *Star Wars*, in particular, as a vehicle for this type of immersive experience also gives the designers an advantage in psychological comfort. Nostalgia is a hot commodity in today's entertainment world; and it certainly plays a role here. For fans of *Star Wars*, one of the world's biggest and most recognizable entertainment franchises, the recognition of familiar objects, locations, and characters from the films provides an automatic level of comfort. However, the power of *Star Wars* goes beyond basic recognition. George Lucas's original *Star Wars* was created with such works as Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* in mind, drawing on classic story archetypes

such as the Hero's Journey arc to create a modern mythos that felt timeless. *Star Wars* is, at its heart, about the struggle between good and evil, heroes coming of age, and other such essential concepts that resonate naturally with the human mind; and it wears this allegiance to this type of storytelling on its sleeve. Leah Deyneka writes of the series: "There are countless themes and subthemes within the Lucas narrative that both reinforce and illustrate lessons that have been handed down to us across the ages....*Star Wars* seamlessly fulfills the function of myth: opening our hearts and minds to the mystery in our lives." (31) So creating an immersive experience that both excites and reassures is a task that is naturally suited to this particular franchise.

*Star Wars* is a battle of good and evil where we know that the good guys are going to get in trouble, but they're going to win in the end because they are in the right. As participants in this story on rides like *Rise of the Resistance*, the reassurance of that belief in our own rightness is transferred to us. The reason why it's fun to be fake-captured by the First Order is not only because of the impressive film set or the adrenaline rush of peril, but because of the certainty of eventual triumph: "This guy may think he's got us cornered, but we'll have the last laugh in the end!"

In theory, an original intellectual property could still provide some of these same feelings. However, an established property like *Star Wars* is an easy shorthand to reassure guests that they are about to experience these archetypes, and that no matter what new, strange, or frightening things they encounter, they will be comfortable.

## STORY

In any theme park land based on a pre-existing franchise with its own story, the main goal is always to make guests feel like they are part of the narrative. Of course, there's a problem inherent in this goal: Theme parks are not a linear storytelling medium.

Audiences partaking in a book, film, TV series, or other standard form of fiction have the expectation of sitting down for a certain length of time and experiencing a story from start to end. Even less standard story forms such as video games, which sometimes choose to have their plots unfold in a less linear or more open-ended fashion, have the advantage of time and forward progression, as well as their audience's assumed attention. However, the way stories are experienced in theme parks has some fundamental differences from other media, which makes it necessary for designers to adapt the kind and scope of stories they can tell.

First, for most guests, a visit to a theme park is a special and infrequent event.

Therefore, in order to give each visitor a satisfying experience, a park must have a story that can be clearly and fully experienced in one trip. Of course, it is always in a designer's best interest to create an experience that is versatile enough that it will invite repeated visits; however, to create a land that will leave guests frustrated and unsatisfied at the things they could not see could be considered an unwise decision.

Second, guests' time is their own while visiting a theme park. Though the architects of a land can attempt to move guests through the space in a specific way through good planning, there is nothing actually stopping them from navigating the land in any order they choose according to their individual priorities, as well as taking time to eat, shop,

rest, etc. This means that telling a completely linear arc is next to impossible, with the exceptions of small stories within specific rides (which are usually linear by nature). Thus, most story-focused theme park lands choose to tell a story which has no real sense of time, or repeats itself frequently, in order to give each guest a similar experience. Some theme park experiences have broken the mold of these limitations, one of the most prominent being Knott's Berry Farm's annual *Ghost Town Alive!* event, which allows guests to participate in an evolving Western storyline involving a range of characters and locations over the course of the summer. However, despite its various innovations, Galaxy's Edge chooses the traditional approach of choosing a story that works outside the bounds of linear time progression.

On the one hand, this kind of "static" storyline can work for Star Wars because there's a lot about it that's clear and works in isolation. There's a reason that Disney's *Star Wars* sequel trilogy (starting with *The Force Awakens* in 2015) returned to the original trilogy's paradigm of a small group of rebels fighting back against an all-consuming, tyrannical order. It's a perennially popular scenario that makes it easy to root for the main characters (after all, everyone loves an underdog.) And this is the point in time at which Galaxy's Edge takes place—Resistance and First Order eternally locked in conflict, each side trying to figure out how to overcome the other, with guests caught in the middle of it. Conflict is, after all, at the heart of all stories—so placing Black Spire Outpost in this state of perpetual (but not active military) conflict is a simple way to provide satisfying narrative tension while not requiring significant story movements to be occurring.

Then again, the *Star Wars* films also lean heavily on changing status quo. The characters rarely stay in one place for a long time, and Rebels and Resistance alike frequently undergo blows that put them on the ropes as well as victories and periods of recovery that allow them to build their influence in important ways. (Galaxy's Edge is set during one such recovery period, identified in other media as after *The Last Jedi*, although this is never specified within the land itself.)

Additionally, its story depends on its characters evolving between archetypes. For example, Luke Skywalker in *A New Hope* is a straightforward example of a Hero's Journey arc; but years later, in *The Last Jedi*, he undergoes what novelist and story theorist K. M. Weiland names as the "Crone Arc" (archetypally centered on a hermit nearing the end of their life story, who is stirred from a period of isolation by an emerging threat and finally chooses to embrace the fullness of their agency in the time they have left.) This constant evolution doesn't fit with the way the characters are presented in Galaxy's Edge, which relies on a mostly static audience perception of each *Star Wars* character who appears in the land. For instance, Kylo Ren's character growth is one of the major arcs in the film trilogy—an arc that sees him in constant inner conflict about his motivations, forming a bond with protagonist Rey, and eventually redeemed to the Light Side of the Force. However, he appears in Galaxy's Edge as a one-dimensional villain, whose goals are to stamp out the Resistance and corrupt new recruits to the Dark Side. Despite how frequently he can be seen in the land (both as the main antagonist of *Rise of the Resistance* and out on patrol with his troopers), guests are never given a chance to experience the full depth of his story and

character. The theme park version of Kylo Ren is a predefined, flattened version of the humanized, multifaceted villain who appears in other *Star Wars* media.

Perhaps one reason that the characters' arcs take a back seat is that the guest is intended to be the hero. Scott Trowbridge describes wanting to give each guest the chance to undertake their own Hero's Journey. That was part of their reason for creating a new planet to explore rather than recreating an old one: they wanted guests to feel like the story is their own. Sometimes this guest-as-hero arc works spectacularly, especially in the rides—the interactivity of *Rise of the Resistance* and the ability to fail in *Smuggler's Run* put the guests in the front row of a real story—and at Savi's Workshop, where guests can build their own lightsabers in a secret ceremony. But sometimes it feels more like the guest is simply a traveler passing through—after a few times watching Kylo Ren fruitlessly interrogating guests for information about the Resistance, it starts to feel like you are simply observing events that will never really play out. No matter what you do, Black Spire Outpost will stay largely the same. The sense of agency that is expected for the protagonist of a story is absent.

The *Star Wars: Datapad* app is one attempt to remedy this issue and give guests a greater feeling of agency. This experience, accessed through the Play Disney Parks app and location-locked to only be accessible to guests currently in the park, allows guests to interact with the land based on real time and place. Guests can use the app to complete “jobs” for different parties, which allow them to gain points of favor with the different factions active in the land (Resistance, First Order, and Scoundrels).

Accepting a job will put the user into a faux text messaging exchange with a *Star Wars* character, asking them to complete certain objectives (usually requiring them to go to a

certain location within the land and scan a specially marked panel or intercept data from a “transmission”) in exchange for credits and other rewards. Guests can also “hack” into specially indicated panels and pieces of scenery to produce light and sound effects, similar to the interactive wand system at Universal’s Wizarding World of Harry Potter.

In theory, the idea is appealing; however, in practice, it still does little to improve guest agency in the story. The jobs and side-quests have little variation and quickly become tedious. While the illusion of having text conversations with Finn or Hondo Ohnaka starts out exciting, the limited dialogue options make it difficult to feel like you are really interacting with the characters. The laundry list of technical issues with the app adds to the frustration experienced by users, drawing them even further out of the story. And, perhaps most critically, none of the actions you take in the app or the rewards you collect have any actual effect on your park experience. There is no larger story that interacting with the Datapad will help you advance through—just more small self-contained jobs that give you valueless rewards. The most fun part of the Datapad for me was being able to trigger scenery effects with the hacking tool, since that function actually allows extra interaction with the physical land through the app. However, that, too, loses its novelty after making the lights flash on a panel a few times.

Before Galaxy’s Edge’s opening, there was talk of Cast Members having access to guests’ Datapad profile data and being able to interact with them based on that information (for example, if the guest has garnered a reputation with a certain faction, or if they had a particularly disastrous flight on *Smuggler’s Run*, a Cast Member would be able to bring this up in conversation). However, this idea seems to since have been

dropped, leaving the Datapad without much of the rich interactivity it promises. In an early announcement panel for the land at the D23 convention, the Imagineers describe a land where “your choices matter”—however, with much of the organic character interaction removed from the final product (whether due to COVID-19 or simply from budget cuts along the way), this aspiration has largely gone unfulfilled.

That said, Galaxy’s Edge does an admirable job of adding onto *Star Wars* lore in a believable way. It brings to the forefront new characters such as antiquities dealer Dok Ondar and Resistance spy Vi Moradi, the *Datapad* app does include some new aspects of the land’s lore that guests might not otherwise discover, and the different types of unusual food sold and the various curiosities in the *Smuggler’s Run* queue (as well as the planet Batuu itself) are well-developed and fit the character of the franchise. However, the land does not significantly expand upon the *story* of *Star Wars*. The new characters and elements are largely an optional part of the land that you might or might not come across on your trip; when it comes to the flagship attractions and experiences, the main characters and stories from the recent installments of the franchise take center stage. Even *Smuggler’s Run*, which focuses on the smuggler underground rather than the central good-vs-evil struggle, is dependent on elements from the 2018 film *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (for example, the precious substance Coaxium), and its main narrator Hondo Ohnaka is a long-standing member of the *Star Wars* animated TV universe, most recently appearing in *Star Wars: Rebels*. There are few new stories to be told here.

Galaxy's Edge seems to be walking the line between being a true franchise spin-off and providing a classic *Star Wars* experience for visitors who may not be familiar with the lesser known corners of the franchise. This means that its story wants to stick close to that of the main series, but is also stuck with the problem of being unable to introduce anything truly important that might affect the main series (a theme park which a relatively small percentage of fans will ever visit is not a practical way to progress a story viewed by millions.) So in the end, although the land's immersion into the *Star Wars* story is well-done and fun to experience, in the long run, it's just spinning its wheels.

Disney is not done with creating immersive *Star Wars* experiences. A new resort hotel called "Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser" is set to open later in 2021, and promises levels of immersion never before seen in a theme park hotel, with guest rooms, dining, and activities all themed to make guests believe they are staying on a luxury starliner traveling through space. The official website prominently displays the tagline of "Come Live Your Very Own Epic *Star Wars* Story," but it remains to be seen whether or not this new guest experience, despite its immersion, will actually introduce any significant innovations in terms of story. The prospect of a time-limited stay (the website advertises a two-night experience) does raise the question of whether they might use this specific timespan to create a larger progression of story, or instead take the same route as the land and simply provide various themed options with a story happening around them.

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