Internet memes are rewarded with popularity for their repetition of recognizable ideas. Likewise, meme communities tend to adopt a politics that is conservative – especially when the source material readily lends itself to that very politics. In the case of Star Wars, a tale of heroism is being twisted into a sincere veneration of the villain, and an emulation of his violence and tyranny.

Memes are fun, because they are recognizable. They are a play on something we already know, reflected back to us in surprising ways and contexts. It’s why they spread so virally across the internet. Websites like reddit are tailor-made for memes. Their algorithms reward speed of consumption and engagement in the form of upvotes and comments, which means that superficial, recognizable content beats meatier, more ambivalent fare. While memes mutate constantly, taking on different shapes and subjects, in the end what wins is what we’ve already seen before.
A politics fitting to this recognizability that is rewarded endlessly with attention and ‘internet points’, arises within specific meme communities. Below their playful surface runs an undercurrent of reactionary politics that seeks to maintain the status quo. Playful communities borne of experimentation, self-reflexivity and detached irony become guarded, protecting an affection for a specific pop culture that has become wholly sincerewith increasing hostility.

Subcultures dedicated to pop culture for younger men – oftentimes science fiction, fantasy, and video games – take on these characteristics more than others. Mired in problematic masculine fantasies of underdogs doing righteous battle against forces that seek to either transform or take away their favorite pieces of pop culture for sinister ends, these communities use memes to reaffirm their own identity and to exclude and antagonize others, over and over again.

NOSTALGIA FOR THE FLAWED

A prime example is the subreddit r/prequelmemes, dedicated to the *Star Wars* prequel films, *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). As ‘canonical’ entries in one of the most popular film franchises of all time, their presence in contemporary pop culture is undeniable.

The prequel films tell the story of Anakin Skywalker, a Jedi (the lightsaber-wielding space wizards), who was ostensibly prophesied to restore ‘balance to the Force’ by destroying the innately evil Sith. Anakin has no father. Instead, he’s born to the pure Force (a mythical power between all living things) and a human mother. But Anakin becomes corrupted by Darth Sidious, a Sith lord acting as Supreme Chancellor of the Republic in the disguise of a politician named Shiv Palpatine. Palpatine plays to Anakin’s fears and insecurities, turns him into the famous Darth Vader, and uses him to kill all the Jedi and seize control of space government. The films set up Palpatine’s defeat, and Anakin’s eventual redemption by his son Luke, the hero of the ‘Original Trilogy’ (*A New Hope* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and *Return of the Jedi* (1983)).
Ordinarily, memes have a lifespan of a couple of days, maybe a few weeks. But in the two years since the subreddit r/prequelmemes was founded, it has grown to be one of the most popular and enduring meme communities dedicated to a specific piece of pop culture. With a subscriber count of over 725,000, it ranks only slightly below r/bikinibottomtwitter (just over a million worshippers of *Spongebob Squarepants* memes), and r/thanosdidnothingwrong, before the titular purple giant dispassionately snapped his fingers and halved the subscriber count (https://www.businessinsider.nl/thanos-thanosdidnothingwrong-reddit-ban-snap-2018-7/?international=true&r=US).

The memes’ popularity in part stems from the fact that the Star Wars prequels are generally considered to be ‘bad’ movies. Exactly in being bad movies that are nonetheless embedded firmly within our collective consciousness, they are the perfect mold from which to craft memes to nostalgically relive and celebrate their impact on our lives, while simultaneously allowing us to poke fun at them and at ourselves for liking them in the first place. In an interview in the book *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*, Will Brooker, a writer of multiple books on Star Wars, reflects on the disappointing quality of the prequels, and suggests that prequel memes offer, and encourage, an ‘affectionate, ironic look back at those flawed movies’. Memes offer a form of reconciliation between the lackluster films and the fond (childhood) memories many of us have of them nonetheless. Through memes, fans are able to renegotiate the tension in their relationship with the prequels.

Many of the memes do poke fun at the prequels themselves. They might underscore some of the movies’ more awkward, even cringeworthy aspects, or they adapt pieces of the films to entirely different, everyday situations, either ironically or sincerely.
However, not all prequel memes are equally lighthearted and affectionate as the examples shown above. Just as often they’re defensive, or even outright hostile. They expose the fans’ defensiveness about the prequels’ standing, and their insecurities for sincerely liking them. As new Star Wars movies experiment more and more with diverse representations of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality,
young men gravitate towards the prequels’ traditional white, masculine power fantasies. Thus, through prequelmemes, they redirect their feelings of insecurity outward.

**UNDERDOG AS AXIS**

Today, our sense of who we are becomes more tied up with the media we consume. Before founding Buzzfeed, Jonah Peretti wrote a thesis (https://www.vox.com/2014/5/20/5730762/buzzfeeds-founder-used-to-write-marxist-theory-and-it-explains) on how, in postmodern capitalism, people’s ‘identities are in flux’ from a lack of stable, encompassing truths about very existence. In order to placate these anxieties, we continually latch on to the small, stable ‘senses of self’ that pop culture provides us. We increasingly define ourselves, or let ourselves be defined, by our cultural capital – an implicit societal standing based on your knowledge of, or affinity with, culture. Put simply, you are what you watch. (Buzzfeed is Peretti’s own particular answer to this endless longing – ‘Which Star Wars Character ARE You?’) Any criticisms of those things we enjoy, however impersonal or substantiated, feel more and more personal. Our very identity feels to be at stake.

‘Feminists, social justice warriors, and critics become easy targets for geeks’ own unhappiness with their communities and lives.’

-ANASTASIA SALTER AND BRIDGET BLODGETT, TOXIC GEEK MASCULINITY: SEXISM, TROLLING, AND MINORITY POLICING

With both their masculinity and cultural capital ostensibly under assault, prequel fans resort to familiar methods to assert themselves. According to Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett in their book *Toxic Geek Masculinity: Sexism, Trolling, and Minority Policing*, geek communities can’t abide any
member or group visibly different from the white male norm that defines both the source material and its community. They write: ‘Feminists, social justice warriors, and critics become easy targets for geeks’ own unhappiness with their communities and lives. If uncritical appreciation of the different geek media is retrospectively considered the atmosphere of geekdom, then feminists, social justice warriors, and anyone different become an easy target for painting as the bad guy.’

Both the prequels and the Original Trilogy offer plenty in the way of young white men, gifted with extraordinary power and destined to alter the fate of the universe. Female characters are rare, as are people of color. A character’s worth is measured by their affinity with the Force and their proficiency with a lightsaber. According to Salter and Blodgett, the ‘geek masculine ideal’ not only possesses exceptional strength, but genius-level intelligence as well. It used to be that physical strength was the sole domain of the athletic ‘jocks’, the traditional embodiments of masculinity who bullied and belittled geeks for so long. Geeks and their heroes had their supposed superior intelligence. They may have had a tough time at school, but they’d succeed at life. That changed: now the geek masculine ideal embodies both strength and smarts. Take, for example, the Jedi in the prequel films: even Yoda, the diminutive, old, frail Jedi master from the Original Trilogy, is revealed to be a nimble master swordsman.

Like other predominantly male, ‘geek’ subcultures, r/prequelmemes has fashioned itself the image of the underdog. Their insecurities are rooted in the both critically and politically unfavorable reputation of the prequel films. They see themselves as struggling bravely and heroically for the recognition of their favorite piece of pop culture, even though they are already one of the most popular, if not influential pop culture meme communities. ‘Geekdom’ has increased in both visibility and popularity in mainstream pop culture. Disney’s Star Wars and Marvel superhero media dominate pop culture. Fantasy like Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter top the all-time bestsellers and box office lists.

The underdog narrative, along with a regular sense of elitism inherent to many subcultures (which shows it itself in a division between those most intimately familiar with the films, the jargon, names of planets, ships, supporting
characters, Force powers, and everything in between – and those who aren’t), allows for prequel memers to lash out at those who threaten its hegemony over Star Wars-related meme content on reddit and even the internet as a whole. Ironically, prequel memers are very much aware of their own subreddit’s popularity and the fanaticism of some of its members.
The attacks take the form of aggressive gatekeeping, where a majority decides who are and aren’t part of a community in order to homogenize it. Under the guise of a ‘Great Meme War’, for example, r/prequelmemes attemptsto establish its dominance over sibling subreddit r/sequelmemes, dedicated to the other Star Wars films. While r/prequelmemes has half a million more members than r/sequelmemes, the subreddit nevertheless formed an ‘alliance’ with other popular subreddits like r/trebuchetmemes (dedicated to the siege machines of medieval times) and r/garlicbreadmemes (for, well, you get the idea). Together they branded r/sequelmemes and affiliated subreddits as ‘the Axis’ and overwhelmed r/sequelmemes by raiding and brigading the subreddit, abusing reddit’s popularity system of upvotes and, particularly, downvotes in order to keep sequel memes content from public view. As VICE wrote in a report from the war zone, ‘the memes were good until the war turned ugly.’
Aggressive gatekeeping, toxic masculinity and radical fandom aren’t new to geek culture, nor are they unique to Star Wars and its prequel films. What is new however, is how the prequel memes subreddit has steadily adopted certain problematic politics from its source material and how memes are used specifically to convey and enforce these politics.

The virality of memes depends on their recognizability. In his book *The World Made Meme*, Ryan M. Milner even argues that the ‘memetic’ property of being shared is what makes memes memes in the first place. Reddit’s algorithms favor content that is upvoted quickly after being posted. Memes are not only rewarded for being superficial, regurgitating already popular ideas and images, superficiality is even a prerequisite for success – at least within a community of this size, repeatedly making it to the ‘front page’ – an amalgam of all of reddit’s most popular ‘safe for work’ posts, including r/prequelmemes – of one of the internet’s most visited websites.

Memes are also fragmental by nature. They are made of certain source material, but can never represent their source as a whole. For example, the above meme of the Tusken raider awakening in a hospital bed, oblivious to the extinction of his tribe, quotes and alludes certain parts of Anakin Skywalker’s turn to the Dark Side, but without the intended gravity with which the event unfolds in the films. The meme cannot hope to contain every nuance of the film, but it evokes enough of it to be recognizable and, subsequently, subvert what we recognize to humorous ends.

Context (in this case the overarching themes of the Star Wars prequels) is particularly important to the Star Wars prequels. On their own, the films tell the story of the victory of a fascist dictator over a stagnant democracy and the radicalization of a gifted yet troubled young man. Emperor Palpatine wins, the Jedi lose. Only by Luke Skywalker’s redemption of his father in the original trilogy, are the events of the prequels redeemed in turn. But while the prequels are critical of fascist politics and the violence fascists use to realize them, they effectively indulge the viewer in this very violence and the triumph of evil. This
is why the lightsaber battles are so long and extravagant, why a Jedi’s worth is repeatedly measured and demonstrated by the midichlorian count in their blood, and their proficiency in swordsmanship is pointed out.

It’s hard not to empathize with the villain in the prequels. Some of the more delightful parts can be found in Revenge of the Sith, when Ian McDiarmid is hamming it up as Supreme Chancellor Palpatine moonlighting as the evil, scheming wizard Darth Sidious. It’s no coincidence that Palpatine has served as the subreddit’s de facto mascot from the beginning, and has been hugely influential on its customs and practices. Some of the top posts of all time are ‘upvote posts’ of Palpatine, basically making his face as visible to reddit and Google as possible. His quotes have also been particularly popular, from the rambling, off-topic anecdote about the ‘Tragedy of Darth Plagueis the Wise (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-tragedy-of-darth-plagueis-the-wise)’ and similarly inoffensive memes speculating about his real name (https://www.reddit.com/r/PrequelMemes/comments/6itx7o/why_does_everyone_call_him_sheev_or_the_senate_we/), to more problematic fare.

Especially his line ‘I love democracy’, spoken the very moment the Intergalactic Senate grants him unlimited emergency powers as Supreme Chancellor, in order to fight a war he secretly engineered himself for that very purpose, is used often in order to celebrate the uniformity of the subreddit and the power the members wield when using reddit’s system of upvotes and downvotes in concert to determine what is visible and popular, and what isn’t. Obviously, Palpatine is being ironic and hypocritical, yet despite the villainous undertones the subreddit knowingly applies the sentiment to suppress dissent.
Another one of Palpatine’s popular quotes is his utterance of the word ‘ironic’ during his ‘Darth Plagueis’-speech, regarding the folly of his Sith master Darth Plagueis putting too much faith into his apprentice, who then killed him in his sleep to assume his master’s power. (‘Ironic. He could save others from death,
but not himself.’) It’s now often used whenever critics or perceived opponents of the subreddit underestimate the subreddit’s popularity or the fanaticism of its members’ gatekeeping practices.

Palpatine is also often quoted saying ‘It’s treason then’, in response to unwanted (or particularly silly) opinions gaining traction on the subreddit. Another example is when in case of an action that would otherwise be ethically questionable, Palpatine will legitimize it solely on the basis of his absolute authority, declaring ‘I will *make* it legal.’ Memes referencing ‘Order 66’—Palpatine’s secret military strategy to exterminate all Jedi in the galaxy— are particularly worrying, as they are used to fantasize about or even celebrate both the actual purge of the Jedi and hypothetical purges of all kinds.
Despite the sincere intent behind these quotes, they are nevertheless often used at least somewhat ironically, as memes often are. Still, irony is often used as a smokescreen that should deflect criticisms of the subreddit’s politics (or of memes in general). As Geert Lovink and Marc Tuters write (http://networkcultures.org/geert/2018/04/03/rude-awakening-memes-as-dialectical-images-by-geert-lovink-marc-tuters/), this ‘ironic reason, [...] in distinction to cynicism, allows its spokesperson to purport belief.’ Last year The Guardian wrote how (https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism?CMP=share_btn_tw) irony allows for an affective replication of politics, without explicitly taking stance. That’s how memes can at the same time be both an ironic emulation and enforcement of Palpatine’s fascist politics and a dangerously sincere propagation of fascist politics.

Protagonist Anakin Skywalker serves a purpose similar to Palpatine’s. On the one hand, his character is repeatedly mocked for his awkward dialogue (‘I don’t like sand. It’s coarse and rough and irritating and it gets everywhere.’) and infantile tantrums, on the other hand, he serves to legitimize precisely those basic impulses in prequel memes. His arrogance, temper and naïveté allow for a bluntness of expression that would be inappropriate in polite discourse.
Prequel fans when you make fun of the prequels

Sequel fans when you make fun of the sequels

As the prequelmemes subreddit grew in popularity, Palpatine was gradually replaced as a mascot by Ewan McGregor aka Jedi master Obi-Wan Kenobi. As a secondary protagonist, Kenobi is the most virtuous character. He is sworn to defend democracy and justice. He is the one who defeats Anakin after his fall to the Dark Side (by literally having the high ground (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-have-the-high-ground)). He is handsome and witty.

As a mascot, Kenobi appears to be the exact opposite of the disfigured, evil Palpatine. However, Kenobi fulfills many of the same roles as Palpatine, although more subtly. He embodies the geek masculine ideal of both physical might and high intelligence, while his personality is imperfect. He is at times smug, condescending, and even contemptuous, but McGregor’s portrayal possesses a roguish charm that turns these flaws into an alluring depth. In fact,
the flaws are especially useful for the discursive strategies that prequel memers had already developed. In order for him to properly function as a mascot, certain parts of his personality are routinely magnified (his condescension, the passion with which he fights for what he believes in), while others are conveniently ignored (his compassion, his restraint, and the actual beliefs he so passionately fights for).

So, a scene depicting a heartbroken Kenobi who turns off a security hologram of his pupil Anakin killing children, transforms into an annoyed Kenobi turning off a screening of *The Last Jedi* (2017), the Star Wars film most daring in its condemnation of Star Wars’ own problematic themes, and therefore the most notorious in prequel meme circles. A meme reflecting on the subtext of the ‘high ground’ depicts Kenobi as a super brain, smoking a pipe and smugly pondering his own superiority. Would Kenobi approve of his likeness being used in total opposition of his beliefs? While Palpatine would be indifferent, perhaps even delighted at young men celebrating him *en masse*, Kenobi would certainly feel uneasy at the prospect, at the very least. Most likely, he would applaud the politics of *The Last Jedi*. This particular irony of reversal reached its zenith with a popular meme that superimposed McGregor’s face over Palpatine’s, in order to have Kenobi profess the same tyrannical sentiment. Thus, prequel memes’ Kenobi has become a completely different entity from his cinematic counterpart.
The subreddit will decide your fate.

I am the subreddit!
But that doesn’t matter. The reason these new characterizations – Palpatine as lovable mascot, Kenobi as a self-important asshole – ‘work’, is because they are removed from their original context just enough to take on the desired meaning. This de- and recontextualization is most striking in the case of Kenobi: as a white man who is charming, intelligent, and very proficient with a lightsaber, he is able to ‘physically’ embody the geek masculine ideal that prequel memers like about the films. But he’s a much more respectable face for the subreddit community than the unmistakably evil Palpatine, whose intentions are clear as day and whose worship raises uncomfortable questions for outside spectators.

The adoption of their mascot has gone so far that the subreddit has actively campaigned for Ewan McGregor to reprise the role in a possible stand-alone Obi-Wan Kenobi film—and no-one but McGregor. It is his face that is repeatedly
and constantly visible all over the subreddit. Memes are also reactionary in that way: what is popular becomes recognizable, what is recognizable becomes popular.

Of course, not everyone on r/prequelmemes thinks alike. One of the most popular memes on the subreddit is a criticism channeled through Obi-Wan Kenobi of how the subreddit has transformed from silly and self-aware into sincerely hateful. It’s more fitting for Kenobi’s character, who in the films is equally wary of intergalactic politics turning sour. Yet, in the comments, while many support the sentiment and decry the behavior of some of the other members, those same users often repeat the same problematic (some racist, some misogynistic, some both) criticisms of the new sequel films, and, again, *The Last Jedi* in particular. It seems like the geek masculine belief system is ingrained within the broader reddit community. The only difference, then, being different views on how explicitly it should be acted upon.

Memes have a reputation for being transformative or even radical deconstructions of existing media. But prequel memes reveal a reactionary community, endlessly using minute deviations of the same subject matter, reiterating the same reactionary, even fascist, politics over and over. While prequel memers are elitist in the sense that they separate those acquainted with
the prequel films from those who don’t, their popularity seems to stem not from the fact that specific scenes or sentiments are recognizable only to a specific group of people, but from an underlying ideology that is equally popular and dominant in the outside world, and which attaches value to people according to their gender, color of their skin, sexuality, or politics.
There are plenty of examples of similar geek pop culture subreddits using memes for similar reactionary ends. In line with r/prequelmemes’ Ewan McGregor worship, the *Game of Thrones* subreddit r/freefolk has used the character King Robert Baratheon (lovingly called ‘Bobby B’) as a mascot for such a long time that memes expressing the community’s inability to see anyone else than the original actor Mark Addy embodying the role grow more and more popular. And in the subreddit for the video game *World of Warcraft*, the game’s fictional war is used to frame discontent between the game’s developer and its players. When that very game developer, Blizzard Entertainment, announced a mobile adaptation of one of its popular franchises, the discontent spread to other subreddits, including the 19-million strong r/gaming subreddit. One such meme uses a notification from the game *Fallout 4*, denoting the player did something widely unpopular, to imply a widespread, yet unified bloc of gamers resisting change.

At the time of writing, another Great Meme War has broken out across reddit, with r/prequelmemes firmly at its center. It begs the question: do these geek communities just read into their source material selectively, finding the politics they can agree with and use, or are geek pop culture media as a whole particularly suitable to be made into memes, because of their politics?
Pim van den Berg is a freelance pop culture critic based in Utrecht, the Netherlands. He focuses on (masculine) identity and ideology in contemporary video games, film, and music.

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