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## Digging Through Space: Archaeology in the Star Wars Franchise

Karissa R. Annis

*University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee*

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Field Notes: A Journal of Collegiate Anthropology  
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee  
Department of Anthropology  
3413 N Downer Ave  
390 Sabin Hall  
Milwaukee WI 53211 USA  
414.229.4175  
[fldnotes@uwm.edu](mailto:fldnotes@uwm.edu)  
<https://dc.uwm.edu/fieldnotes/>

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## About the Contributors

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*Christopher Allen* is an Anthropology Master's student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His research is focused on gender and status expressions in Iron Age European iconography. He is also involved in museum studies and experimental archaeology research. His overall interest is in religious/cosmological ideologies, power structures, gender studies, and iconography.

*Karissa Annis* is pursuing her Master's degree in Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, in addition to a graduate certificate in museum studies. She received her BA in Classics and Anthropology from the University of Alabama in 2018. Her research interests include European archaeology, mortuary archaeology, historic cemeteries, and media studies. She is currently writing her thesis, which is focused on the intersection of past and present found in archaeological themes in popular culture.

*Samantha A. Bomkamp* finished her MS in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in May 2020 with certificates in Museum Studies and Nonprofit Management. She has done archaeology and museum work in the Midwest and Southwest. Her thesis research and interests are focused in the Southwest region, especially in museum collections management. She currently works at the Blackwater Draw Museum at Eastern New Mexico University.

*Katrina N Schmitz* received her Master of Science in Anthropology and a Graduate Certificate in Museum Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2020. Her master's thesis was an analysis of the Milwaukee Public Museum's Hopewell site collection from Ross County, Ohio. She is pursuing a career in the museum field .

*Emily R. Stanton* is an Anthropology PhD candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is currently writing her dissertation on gendered grave goods and elite burials in Iron Age Central Europe. Emily is also involved in an experimental archaeology project focused on re-creating a set of Iron Age grave goods. More about this project can be found here: <https://experiarchaeuwm.wixsite.com/deathmetal>.

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# Digging Through Space: Archaeology in the *Star Wars* Franchise

Karissa Annis

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, USA

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*Abstract:* Archaeology is a slippery topic when it comes to its public presentation in various media, especially in fictional representations in books, film, TV, and video games. Archaeologists have historically been at odds with some of these productions, and various articles have analyzed these representations before. This article analyzes archaeological representations within the genre of speculative fiction, which includes the subgenera of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. One particular case study, *Star Wars*, will be examined in depth to see how this representation could be perceived and what that means for archaeologists. There have been various references to archaeology within *Star Wars* throughout its history, both before and after the Disney purchase, and all references that could be examined were. First, there is an examination of the archaeologist, and what stereotypes are present in characters recognized and named as such within the franchise. Second, the analysis turns to archaeology itself and what positive and negative factors can be drawn from the representations that are present. Last, this article will look more broadly at archaeological problems such as colonial and imperial ideals within the franchise.

**Keywords:** Archaeology, fiction, *Star Wars*, representation, colonialism.

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## Introduction

The representation of archaeology in fiction is varied and often stereotyped. Archaeologists have found themselves at odds both with each other and the public as some of these fictional roles are critiqued. This article will analyze the representation of archaeology in the *Star Wars* franchise and discuss the background of archaeology in fiction. In addition, it will explain the reasons that *Star Wars* was chosen as a case study and analyze the idea of the “archaeologist” through the character of the *Star Wars* comic series *Doctor Aphra*. Finally, this article will examine themes relating to the ownership of the past and the way archaeology is presented to the public.

## Background

Archaeology has been present in modern popular fiction since at least 1845, the classic example being Edgar Allen Poe's (1845) *Some Words with a Mummy* (Adams 2011, 1). Archaeology has also consistently proven to be highly marketable and profitable for Hollywood (Rakestraw and Reynolds 2001, 25). With the popularity of such franchises as *The Mummy* and *Indiana Jones*, it is not surprising that archaeology continues to be at the center of adventures in fiction.

The goal for this research was to look into the speculative fiction genre, as I myself have been both a consumer of and a contributor within it. While there are debates about the exact meaning of "speculative fiction," in this article it will be defined as, "A super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience" (Oxford Research Encyclopedias 2017). The most famous sub-genres of speculative fiction include fantasy, science fiction, and horror.

The use of archaeology in any fictional context tends to be a subject of contention. The presentation of archaeology in a more earth-bound format like *Indiana Jones* splits archaeologists into camps: one viewing the representation of archaeology to the benefit of the field, and one viewing it to the detriment of the field (McGeough 2007, 174). There is abundant research on archaeologists within science-fiction tropes of alien encounters with earth (Hall 2004; Hiscock 2012). There are also many well-acknowledged tropes that place archaeologists in the horror genre, where they often uncover something that should have been left alone (McGeough 2007), arguably starting with Lovecraft's (1924) *Under the Pyramid*.

Lyons defines archaeological fiction as, "the fabrication and documentation of an imaginary culture" (1985, 81). Although Lyons is talking about the actual construction of a physical exhibit on a fake culture, this is also a hallmark of speculative fiction. Speculative fiction relies heavily on the art of worldbuilding, as exemplified by J.R.R. Tolkien's worldbuilding masterpieces (Daly and Lyons 1991, 265). Worldbuilding is often described as developing an ecosystem for the fictional characters to live in and creating a model of the world (Vandemeer 2013, 212-13). The differences between worldbuilding and archaeological fiction as defined by Lyons, then, are small. This prompted a search for an example of archaeology presented to the public in a fictional universe that displays this level of worldbuilding. The rest of this paper will examine the archaeological narrative in the *Star Wars* franchise.

## The Star Wars Franchise

*Star Wars* is an ever-growing popular franchise that constantly refills and renews itself (Hiscock 2012, 173). This was true prior to the purchase of LucasArts by Disney in 2014, after which the franchise has grown exponentially in terms of the amount of content produced. Moreover, *Star Wars* had and continues to have a global consumer population. This popularity is important because it can show how archaeology is presented to the general population. It is also worth stating that it was originally conceived by George Lucas, who also produced the *Indiana Jones* franchise. However, the vast majority of this discussion is from material written after the Disney purchase and therefore removed from Lucas' direct influence. It should also be noted that anything made beyond the first six films and the *Clone Wars* movie and TV series is no longer considered canon. Disney has built their own canon since, labeling everything prior to the purchase as "Legends" (Star Wars 2014). The following discussion includes examples of both but is largely focused on what is considered canon.

In the research for this article, all instances of archaeology in the *Star Wars* franchise were examined. I discarded instances that were too insignificant to make any statement about, such as video games including *Knights of the Old Republic* (Hudson 2003) and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (Ohlen 2011). These games each have archaeology directly named or used in them, but are brief and contain very little information. They were also both released before the Disney purchase and are now considered Legends. Each of these mentions are fleeting, with one field site in the former and the use of archaeology as a term for collecting items in the latter. The remaining representations have much broader implications about the views of archaeology and the archaeologist.

The first part of this article will examine the character of Doctor Aphra and the ways that she does or does not meet the stereotypes of archaeologists which are often presented in other media presentations to the public. Doctor Aphra was chosen for several reasons. First, she is the star of her own comic series, *Doctor Aphra*, which ended in 2020 at 40 volumes (Marvel 2020). Second, she is one of the few characters specifically described as an official "archaeologist" within the *Star Wars* franchise (Gillen 2015, *Vader* #3). Third, she has continued to gain popularity within the *Star Wars* fanbase, such that her story will be continued in a second comic series of her own (Marvel 2020) and she is rumored to have her own *Disney+* series as well (Britt 2019). These developments make her a good candidate to demonstrate how the public perceives the archaeologist from within the *Star Wars* universe. An examination of her character following McGeough's (2007) approach to

the analysis of archaeology as represented in film will form the first part of this article. His approach provides a structure by which to analyze an archaeologist in fiction, as he discusses the pros and cons that this portrayal might have in terms of the public's perception.

The second part of this article will examine archaeological themes that are not named as such. The most striking example of this occurs surrounding the Empire and imperial archaeology. This example has strong correlations with problems in historic archaeology and the continued ramifications of that history. This is seen most clearly in the character of Grand Admiral Thrawn. Thrawn himself could be considered an antiquarian and his role strengthens the correlation with imperialism and is a means to discuss related issues such as repatriation. The bulk of this section will be discussed through the character of Thrawn himself, but other examples will be drawn from *Jedi: Fallen Order* (Asmussen 2019) and other parts of the *Star Wars: Rebels* (Filoni 2014-2018) television show.

Lastly, there is an instance of named archaeology within the franchise in a more obscure Marvel comic, *Age of Republic - Obi-Wan Kenobi 1* (Houser 2019). While this reference is not very long, it is full of substance and is one of the best representations of archaeology that was found. For that reason, it is important to look at what it does and how it presents archaeology to the public through its narrative.

## The Archaeologist

Doctor Aphra is presented to the public as a "rogue archaeologist" in *Star Wars* (Gillen 2015, *Vader* #3). This paper examines the comic in which she is introduced, *Vader* #3, and the first volume of her own series, *Doctor Aphra*, which combines issues #1-6. These issues are important because they set up Doctor Aphra's characterization and depend on the public's preconception of what an archaeologist should be.

### *Aphra's Plotline*

It is important to first summarize Doctor Aphra's plotline as it exists within the issues selected. When the reader meets her, she is in the process of stealing a data chip to fix a droid. It is at this time that Darth Vader confronts her and enlists her aid. She helps him as he goes on his own personal quest to identify the Rebel who blew up the Death Star. He continues to use her in an investigative manner until she is captured. Eventually, Darth Vader tracks her down, and she successfully tricks him into thinking he has killed her. At the beginning of her own series, she is back to looting artifacts and selling them

for profit. Around this time, her doctorate is thrown into question by her father, who uses it as blackmail to help him search for the lost Ordu Aspectu culture. Aphra and her father find the Ordu Aspectu, closely pursued by Imperials, and they are forced to destroy the site to keep an ancient being they awakened from killing them. At the end, she and her father part ways cordially, he restores her doctorate, and it is revealed that she kept the crystal that powered the being.

### *Hero and Villain*

Doctor Aphra is an interesting case study in that she's both protagonist and antagonist. Her introduction happens in the midst of a comic series about one of the franchise's main villains, Darth Vader (Gillen 2015). They are each the protagonists of their own series, even if the reader is not necessarily supposed to side with them at all times. This analysis will start by examining her as the protagonist, before moving on to what she means as an antagonist.

Indiana Jones is one of the earliest fictional portrayals of the archaeologist as a heroic figure (McGeough 2007, 176). This is important for Aphra, because Gillen, the author, has stated that, "The core idea for Aphra came to me when walking around the Lucasfilm offices. We passed a large Indiana Jones display and I just thought, *gender- and ethically- switched Indiana Jones*" (Gillen 2017, Writer's Notes). It is not just that she corresponds to the stereotype, the core of her character was formed from Indiana Jones himself. This is particularly evident in the first scene in which she is introduced [See Figure 1]. It is a near copy of the opening scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Lucas 1981), as Aphra crawls through a laser field, takes an object from a vault, triggers the security system, and is chased by a rolling droid before being confronted by a competitor and his minion army (Gillen 2015, *Vader* #3).

Another trope that is shared by Indiana Jones and Aphra is one of a fraught relationship with a parent (McGeough 2007, 176). For instance, the reader learns early on that Aphra has a tenuous relationship with her father when she states, "Mom's dead in a ditch on that alien world where she took us when she left you for being obsessed by old dumb stuff!" (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #2). The rest of the issues in the first volume deal with Aphra and her father going on a quest for his long-standing obsession: to find an ancient culture called the Ordu Aspectu. She and her father eventually find themselves on better terms. This relationship parallels Indiana Jones in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Lucas 1989), where his fraught relationship with his father, Henry Jones Sr. is introduced.

Aphra also exhibits the same physical prowess and intellectual abilities that the heroic archaeologist is known for, and even her clothing is reminiscent of the "myth of the cowboy" (McGeough 2007, 176) represented by



Figure 1. An example of the similarities between Aphra's introduction (top) and Indiana Jones (bottom). Image credits Gillen (2015) and Lucas(1981).

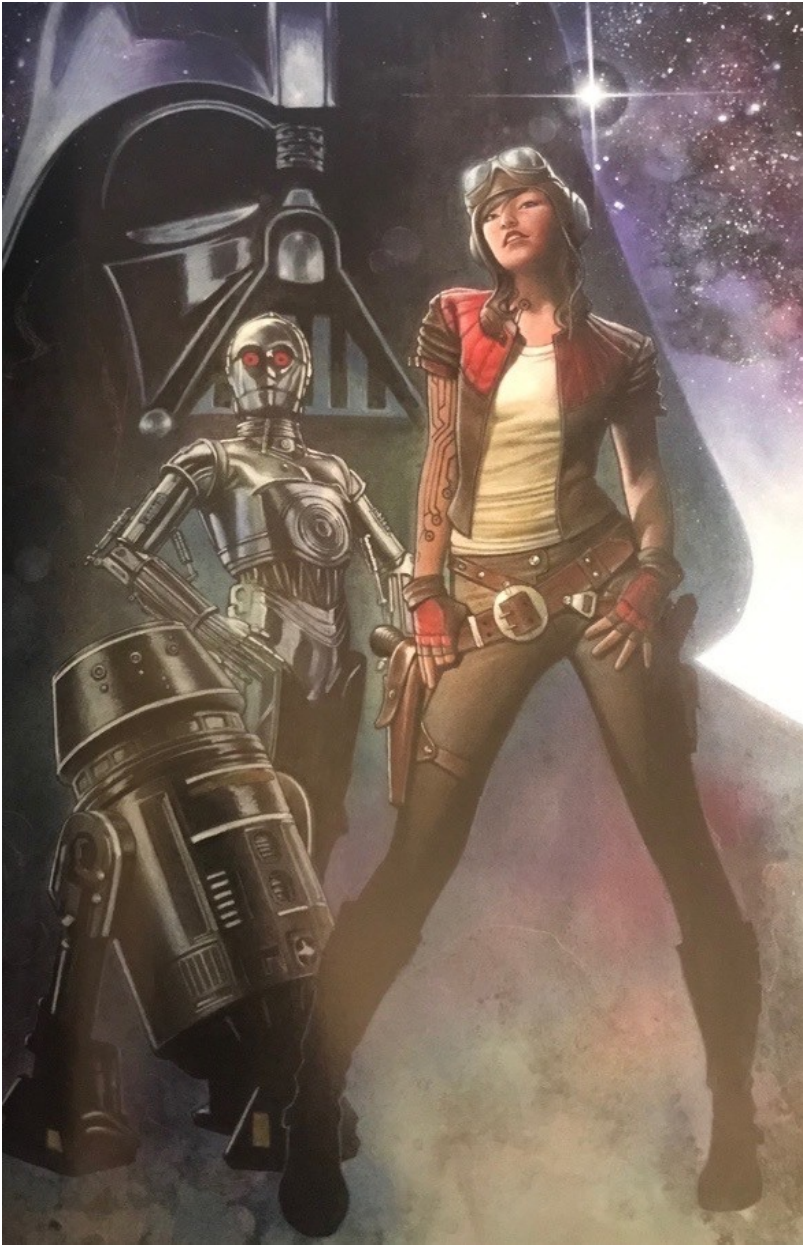


Figure 2. Doctor Aphra on the cover of Vader #3 with her droids 000 and BT-1 (Gillen 2015)  
Cover artist Adi Granov.

Indiana Jones. She wears brown pants, a complicated belt with a holster, boots, a leather jacket, and an aviator hat complete with goggles [See Figure 2].

As in the movies discussed by McGeough (2007), artifacts move Aphra's plot forward as well, mostly by looting or selling them. This, however, is not necessarily an "antagonist" trait, as most typical archaeology-themed movies allow their heroes to loot items of significant value, even if the activity is described as "collecting" (Hall 2004, 164). Aphra herself comments on this when she says, "It feels strange to actually be dealing in artifacts again. This is an object of genuine cultural importance. Stealing - I mean, *recovering* - something that can't be used to kill people is kinda novel" (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #1).

This comment demonstrates one of the biggest problems with the representation of archaeology in the series and is perhaps the most dangerous to public perceptions of the discipline. This danger stems from the idea that the public is already confused as to the difference between looting and legal collecting of artifacts (Rakestraw and Reynolds 2001, 26), and this looting is seen as condoned even by the "Archaeological Association" in the series (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #1; *Doctor Aphra* #6).

Aphra is, however, still an antagonist. In the statement about Indiana Jones earlier, it is revealed that she is not just opposite in gender, but in ethics as well. Gillen goes on to describe "Aphra as a proxy of the Empire" when he is talking about how the Empire and the Rebellion play out among regular people (Gillen 2017, Writer's Notes). This places Aphra on the antagonists' side of the war, at least during the *Vader* series. Aphra also collects artifacts for her own gain, hoping to sell them for profit to pay off her debts (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #1). This puts her on the side of "evil archaeologists" in most movies as described by McGeough (2007, 177). However, because she is introduced as a "rogue archaeologist" even within the series itself (Gillen 2015, *Vader* #3), she clearly is not meant to be affiliated with mainstream archaeology as described in the *Star Wars* universe.

Within the categories of "evil archaeologists" described by McGeough (2007), she is not merely nonselective about who she works for (178). In fact, she works indiscriminately with whoever will help her achieve her ends. She is also morally ambiguous at best when working on her own. She owns two droids that are programmed nearly exclusively for murder (Gillen 2015, *Vader* #3). She also frequently steals, kills, tortures, cheats, tricks, and double deals in the pursuit of her goals. Her own father says, "I know you're... ethically troubled, but even you wouldn't hurt me" (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #2). This puts her more in line with McGeough's second type of villain, the private collector (McGeough 2007, 178). Aphra's public appeal and her role as



the protagonist of her own story puts her at odd with her archetype as an “archaeological villain.” She also can be seen as antagonistic in some cases toward the franchise’s heroes and this might negatively inform the public’s perception of archaeologists even more. This makes her more “villainous” if Pyburn’s (2008, 203) concerns about the presentation of archaeology promoting dishonesty are valid.

The duality of her character also makes her an interesting representation of an archaeologist. There are multiple moments within the story where she’s not just a rogue, but a direct threat to the franchise’s main heroes. While she follows both the tropes of the typical protagonists and antagonists, she is also set up as someone who the reader simultaneously wants to survive and yet cannot always stand behind. The reader is expected to find some of her acts morally questionable or dubious, and they have to form their own opinion of Aphra in those situations. Overall, this could be beneficial in that it challenges the reader to make these decisions for themselves, but it might be dangerous if the reader associates these same tropes with real archaeologists.

Aphra is also unique in that she is a female archaeologist as the lead of her own series. There are few examples of this, with a notable exception being Lara Croft (Hall 2004, 169). It is also important to note that unlike other female archaeologists in fiction, she has been given characteristics normally reserved for male heroes due to her creation as a mirror of Indiana Jones. This allowed her to have more independence than most female archaeologists in fiction. Moreover, while the pose on the cover of *Vader #3* is sexualized similarly to figures like Lara Croft [See Figure 2], in the cover on her solo series she strikes a neutral pose [See Figure 3]. It has also been confirmed by the writer that he wrote Aphra as lesbian (LaVorgna 2018), which is a unique representation both in the *Star Wars* franchise and within the greater representations of archaeologists in fiction (Hall 2004, 167). This is a positive aspect of the archaeologist in fiction as it is also a representation of the diversity that exists among archaeologists in the field.

### **The Supernatural and the Fraught Past**

The past, particularly in the horror genre, is associated with mystery and the possibility of supernatural encounters or danger. McGeough (2007), Hall (2004), and Hiscock (2012) all deal with this idea in some form. Archaeology and horror have been joined at least since Lovecraft (1924) and this alliance has been the subject of entire film series such as *The Mummy* (McGeough 2007, 178). In the world of *Indiana Jones*, there is a strong emphasis on the supernatural as exemplified by powerful objects such as the Ark and the Holy Grail (Holtorf 2007, 87-9). This idea of the supernatural might be the dominant

representation of archaeology in modern narratives (Hiscock 2012, 157) and Aphra is no exception. *Star Wars* in and of itself is a supernatural world



Figure 3. Cover for Doctor Aphra #1 (Gillen 2017). Cover artist Kamome Shirahama.

and depends on the existence of a supernatural “Force” throughout the galaxy. Aphra’s adventure in the first volume of her series ends with her awakening the Immortal Rur with a specialized crystal, and thereafter destroying the monster’s power source (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #5-6). It is very reminiscent of Lovecraftian themes where the action of digging up the past threatens everyone else’s well-being (Hiscock 2012, 158).

It is worth noting that while *Star Wars* is set in an alien galaxy, Earth is not present in the *Star Wars* universe. This makes Aphra and the archaeology within *Star Wars* notably different than in other supernatural narratives. *Star Wars*, unlike movies set on Earth, takes place in a galaxy with different rules where the supernatural is considered normal by the consumer. This is at the very least a different presentation of archaeology. In a place where the consumer accepts that the supernatural exists, it is not actually very “exotic” for the archaeologist to be any different. In this world, the archaeologist is operating on the same principles as everyone else with respect to the supernatural, unlike the elitism that has been criticized in other films (Adams 2011, 7; Marwick 2010, 396; Pyburn 2008, 204).

### **An Archaeologist’s Job**

Rakestraw and Reynolds (2001) demonstrated the public’s misunderstanding of archaeology, and this is no different in Aphra’s narrative. “Films confuse the general public about what archaeologists do, who they do it for, and how archaeologists are able to make a living” (McGeough 2007, 175). Like in many movies, Aphra is a “freelance archaeologist” (McGeough 2007, 175) who works on commissions and bounties (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #1). Modern archaeologists often work for academic institutions or for the government, and often deal in preservation and conservation rather than looting and destruction.

On the other hand, in her series, we are introduced to the University of Bar’leth, where students train under a Sava (or teacher) to earn their degree (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #1). Like real archaeologists, Aphra has to earn her doctorate through years of study with limited funding. Her doctorate also means that she is accredited through what is called the “Archaeological Association” but unlike a real association, this one’s purpose is to auction off items that are “approved” by a real archaeologist (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #1). Aphra states, “If you don’t have archaeologist accreditation, you’d get 0.2% of its value, tops” (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #1).

This associates archaeology with private auctions, much like in film (McGeough 2007, 175). However, in this case, Aphra is a self-described

“rogue archaeologist,” which pushes the reader to consider that there must be normal archaeologists who do something else. In fact, her supervisor says, “You are flash. Archaeology isn’t about flash. This is the work of decades. Archaeology is about determination” (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #1). Another student at Aphra’s university states that she is going to devote her whole career to researching what Aphra uncovered to get her doctorate. These seem to be depictions of more normal archaeologists. However, Aphra cheats and lies to get her doctorate, something her father blackmails her with to get her to help him. Her supervisor is not much better, as it is implied that he murdered the previous Sava and is hiding a very ethically dubious stockpile of artifacts for study (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #1). A “false” doctorate and an ethically troubled advisor both present problems for archaeology’s own credentials. However, the reader would likely realize that cheating is not normally acceptable in academic fields.

Aphra’s father also appears to be more of an average scholar, though he’s never stated to specifically be an archaeologist in this volume. Instead, he is shown as very obsessive, always searching for a lost culture, constructing a narrative he has no evidence for, and willing to leave his wife and daughter behind to continue his research (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #2-6). Not only that, but he has his own moral dilemmas. For example, in his reaction to finding out that the Death Star had almost destroyed Yavin 4 he states: “I can’t believe the rebels set up base here. It’s such an important historical site. Imagine if the Death Star had destroyed the moon. It’d be such an incredible loss” (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #3). The loss he was balking at was the historical site and not the people. This moral quandary occurs as a stereotype, which may well be a reality for some scholars. It brings to mind similar responses to disasters where there is more concern about the loss of “history” as opposed to the living population that was harmed by the event.

One of the instances where normal archaeologists are mentioned is during a conversation Aphra has with her father. They are discussing her falsified evidence and he says, “You know there’s still *hundreds* of academics working there trying to find an explanation?” to which she responds, “And they’re making extremely impressive finds about ancient cattle-herding methodology” (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #2). This is both a statement on something real archaeologists might actually study, and a jab at the idea that archaeologists might blindly search for answers for something that never existed or is very dull.

This comic also shows the difficulties presented in interpreting the past. For example, Aphra and her father give two very different interpretations of what happened to the Ordu Aspectu (Gillen 2017, *Doctor Aphra* #2). Her father’s interpretation presents the Ordu as a positive force, a special branch of

Jedi seeking answers and peace. Aphra's interpretation of the Ordu defines it as a violent force that the Jedi were forced to destroy. Both of them are working on the same evidence, and both versions are entirely plausible at this point in the story. This shows how hard it is to interpret the past based on small amounts of evidence, and how biases can affect an archaeologist's interpretation.

Altogether, Aphra demonstrates both negative and positive aspects of archaeology. The comic lands more negatively regarding the perception of archaeology as a whole, but provides a diverse set of perspectives with different characters fulfilling different roles. Aphra's "rogue" status separates her from the mainstream archaeological ideas in the *Star Wars* universe. The biggest problem in this series is that we do not see enough traditional archaeology to balance the perspective of the reader. As a positive, Aphra does show the reader how interpreting the past can be a serious and tricky business that should be approached with caution. This is an example of the reasons that archaeologists are often reluctant to make definitive interpretations of what did or did not happen, and why after years of study many archaeologists still cannot provide definitive answers to questions in their respective subfields.

### **Imperial Archaeology**

While the public may not perceive unnamed instances of archaeology as archaeological in nature, it is important to discuss behaviors that can be seen as archaeological or that are associated with archaeological problems. Archaeology has a lengthy history of supporting colonial and imperialist ideals, partially because it was formed in the time period dominated by those same powers. There are multiple examples throughout the *Star Wars* canon in which the Empire uses Stormtroopers to excavate things that might give them some sort of power. Examples of this include anything from video games, such as *Star Wars Battlefront II* and *Jedi: Fallen Order*, to TV shows, such as *Star Wars Rebels*. These excavations often involve seeking an ancient civilization, much like Aphra does in her own aforementioned series. In the course of these excavations, the local population is often displaced or enslaved by the Empire (Asmussen 2019). This reflects what imperial powers did in the past when they conducted excavations on lands that they controlled (Trigger 1984). However, in this instance, the Empire has more in common with what Trigger describes as "colonialist archaeology" (Trigger 1984, 620). In colonialist archaeology, Trigger states that the local population was often displaced or entirely overwhelmed by European powers, and that archaeologists were extensions of that power (1984, 620). Oftentimes, this led to artifacts being taken by archaeologists and not returned, or only returned later (Nwakanma 2018).

A specific example of colonialist archaeology in *Star Wars Rebels* happens after the Empire has excavated a Jedi Temple. The Empire is studying a mural portraying the Father, Son, and Daughter to figure out what it can reveal about the Force. As in most examples, this is being carried out by Imperial Troopers. When the rebel Ezra Bridger confronts the Emperor about it, he says, “I see a part of the Jedi Temple which you stole from Lothal” (Filoni 2018 “Family Reunion and Farewell”). Nwakanma (2018) quotes a local in Benin speaking about the return of the bronzes taken by England the same way, “But they stole them. Those items are works of our forefathers and they are very unique to us.” The Emperor responds that he moved the temple for Ezra, and that he thought Ezra would be grateful for it. Ezra responds, “Thank you? Thank you for destroying the Temple?” (Filoni 2018 “Family Reunion and Farewell”). After which, the Emperor says that it was not him, but Ezra and his fellow rebels who destroyed the Temple. This situation however unfortunately, is also very familiar. Many museums today are using some of the same language to state why they should have and continue to hold onto artifacts from the past. An example of this occurs in a case where Ethiopia has asked for the return of 350 manuscripts from Maqdala currently residing in the British Library (Jeffrey 2018). This is countered by those at the British Library who state that, “We have both a growing opportunity and growing responsibility to use the potential of digital [formats] to increase access for people across the world to the intellectual heritage that we safeguard” (Jeffrey 2018). The Emperor could easily stand in for the British Library in this case, as he took the temple for his personal study and then said that he did it *for* Ezra. Another excuse commonly used is that the local governments are too unstable to ensure a safe return for the artifacts (Cuno 2014, 127), the same thing the Emperor states as being the reason he had the Temple removed.

In *Jedi: Fallen Order* (Asmussen 2019), Cal Kestis, the game’s protagonist, visits the Zeffo home world, in order to find clues about the ancient Zeffo civilization that used to live there. The local population has either been wiped out completely or moved by the Empire at the time of Cal’s arrival while the Empire is in the process of excavating the tombs of the Zeffo to learn about their power in order to use it themselves. This mirrors real-life archaeological processes such as those carried out by forces like the Nazis who often pursued “objects of power” to use for their own political gain (Arnold 2006, 158).

Grand Admiral Thrawn is a character who exists in both *Star Wars Legends* and canon. In both storylines, he is a master general who recognizes patterns and who is often a formidable advisory for the protagonists involved. He can also be considered a collector or antiquarian in both contexts. In *Legends*, Thrawn is the only Grand Admiral to escape the destruction of the Em-

pire in the Battle of Endor. He is a main antagonist for Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa, and Han Solo as they work to build a New Republic. In canon, Thrawn is the antagonist for the last two seasons of *Star Wars Rebels*. He often uses the same strategies as his first incarnation, but here he is merely a part of the Empire instead of heading a new incarnation of it.

Thrawn often uses art against his enemies. He bluntly states, ““Learn about art, captain. When you understand a species’ art, you understand that species” (Baron 2018, *Heir to the Empire* #1). Similarly, in an episode of *Rebels*, he states, “To defeat an enemy you must know them. Not simply their battle tactics, but their history, philosophy, and art” (Filoni 2016 “Hera’s Heroes”). He comes across as an art historian, while holding the high military rank of Grand Admiral in both versions. This, again, is much like Nazi archaeology, in which many of the leading archaeologists were also SS officers (Arnold 2006).

A primary example of Thrawn leveraging his military power to take the objects and art from a civilization in the television show occurred in the same episode of “Hera’s Heroes” (Filoni 2016). In it, the Empire has taken the city that the protagonist Hera is from, and where the military took control of the population and their property. Hera attempted to steal back an object belonging to her family called a Kalikori. While a captain believed it to be, “Some primitive native trinket” (Filoni 2016 “Hera’s Heroes”), Thrawn corrects him by saying that it is worthless to outsiders but priceless to the indigenous people. The Kalikori is strongly reminiscent of a totem pole in the way it is used, and this demonstrates the perspective of the local population in a way that most Westerners are not cognizant of. Hera’s response to Thrawn keeping her Kalikori is that she would have rather it been destroyed, and she states, “My family legacy belongs to us alone. It is not for some collector’s curiosity” (Filoni 2016 “Hera’s Heroes”).

Thrawn and Hera have another conversation in the next season about the Kalikori and he tells her that he likes to understand the deeper meanings of the pieces he collects, to which she responds, “You aren’t worthy of holding that, let alone understanding it” (Filoni 2018 “Jedi Night”). Hera’s reaction is very similar to sentiments expressed by some Native American individuals, such as Bronco Lebeau’s statement that scientists do not have a right to tell his people who he is related to and what is significant to him (BBC 2009). While this is not representative of the entirety of the Native American population, it does provide the audience with a sympathetic view of what it is like to have a sacred object taken by a collector. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) was passed to push federally funded institutions to look at their collections and inform relevant Native American tribes about objects in their possession. Since then, the topic of repatriation has

been contentious in the field of archaeology. Thrawn gives frighteningly similar answers about his purpose in keeping the Kalikori to those that some archaeologists give to the Native populations that they encounter. Like the situation described by Nwakanma (2018), Thrawn believed that the Kalikori was better in his hands than destroyed, because, “You should take heart knowing that this work of art is at least appreciated by its new owner” (Filoni 2018 “Jedi Night”). There was a period in archaeology’s past where many archaeologists were working to gather all they could from Native American sites as part of salvage ethnography (Trigger 1984, 623). This was in effort to “save” what was being destroyed by colonial powers to preserve it for the future. What both the fictional show and the real-life examples present is that archaeologists cared much more about saving objects than about the living population’s perspective.

Later, Thrawn and Ezra Bridger have a conversation about the aforementioned excavation he has led on Lothal and the art he acquired there. Ezra states, “You think you can take whatever you want, things you didn’t make, didn’t earn, things you don’t even understand! You don’t deserve to have this art or Lothal,” to which Thrawn responds, “Who deserves what is irrelevant. What matters is who has power. But that is something the Jedi won’t teach you” (Filoni 2018 “Family Reunion and Farewell”). There is a saying that history is told by the victor, and this is true in many instances in which Western powers conducted excavations in colonial lands. Post-conquest, these powers interpreted the past in their voice. What Thrawn says is true, even if an archaeologist may not like to admit. However, it can also be said that through archaeology we can uncover history previously overlooked in the written record. At the same time, it still matters who is doing the interpreting and who is given the power to speak for the dead.

The above examples show real-life situations that are presented to the public very bluntly through the lens of a fictional franchise. In both cases, the audience is meant to sympathize with the protagonist and root *against* the Empire and its imperial agenda. The is the same audience that is primarily descended from colonial or imperial Western powers and are not being presented with the opportunity to view the same situation from the opposite point of view.

In this case, it is important to point out that if the audience does correlate these examples with the field of archaeology, they are likely to not view the field positively. Here archaeologists have another reason to talk about their field’s past to the public, present the reasons why they are working to undo the damage it has done, and work with the public to show them why archaeology matters. This conversation could be aided by the use of these fictional examples. By comparing and contrasting what was presented to the public in a way



that the audience can sympathize with, it could facilitate conversations about the way that real-life populations interact with and have been impacted by archaeology.

### Presentation of the Past

One interesting question to ask when looking at archaeology, particularly in speculative fiction, is whether realism matters. Ironically, in an article about archaeology in the *Indiana Jones* series, Gowlett (1990) states that, “I cannot think of anything worse than pontificating upon whether any archaeology in this fails to meet reality. That would be about as worthwhile as spotting the impossibilities of physics in *Star Wars*” (157). While this may be true to a degree, there are people who do wonder about the physics in *Star Wars*, suggesting that not as unimportant as Gowlett seems to suggest. While the fiction may not matter, the subtext is important. Gale’s (2002) position suggests the exact opposite of Gowlett, saying that if the public learns the most about archaeology from outside media, their understanding of the field will be based on that experience and not connected to reality (6). Archaeologists should consider what this means for the field and its future.

My analysis of the above works and how they are presented to the public has demonstrated that each incorporate portrayals of archaeology that have elements of realistic archaeological issues and could be incorporated into conversations about the field with the public. However, there is a third representation of archaeology within *Star Wars* that includes a realistic depiction of an archaeologist and a field site and manages to show the kinds of problems archaeologists face. The following piece was chosen because of this quality, and as an example of how, when done right, the public can see what archaeologists do even in a fictional setting.

This representation involves the *Age of Republic* comic series. It occurs in *Obi-Wan Kenobi 1*, which takes place shortly after *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999). The basic plot of this comic is that Obi-Wan is learning how to train Anakin Skywalker and realizing that Anakin is not a typical Jedi due to his upbringing. While realizing this, the Jedi are informed of a holocron found on Dallenor and they need the Jedi to verify the artifact. A holocron is an artifact that only Jedi or light side Force users can interact with and are often used to store confidential information. Obi-Wan and Anakin are sent to Dallenor, where they verify the artifact, have a brief run-in with local pirates, and return to the Jedi Temple.

Once they arrive, Obi-Wan and the archaeologist, Clatriffe, discuss the excavation and Clatriffe is relieved when Obi-Wan says he will take the holocron with him. When Obi-Wan expresses surprise at this, Clatriffe states

that they have had, “Some issues with local pirates” (Houser 2019). The pirates stopped bothering them when they realized that all they were finding was “Broken bits of century-old droids... of little interest to anyone beyond academics” (Houser 2019). Problems with looting are fairly frequent in archaeology and as such, this feels very much like a real-life example. Many Archaeological artifacts lack value in mainstream society, although in this case they are broken bits of droids as opposed to pottery sherds. It is very common to hear that these things garner little interest beyond academia. Pyburn (2008) would also find this phrase troubling as it is another example of professional archaeologists’ lack of concern with local perceptions and their belief that they are absolved from trying to help them understand (201). This also begs the question: if the public is not interested, “What are we doing and why?” (Pyburn 2008, 202).

The situation with the local pirates also mirrors discussions of archaeology and looting in real-world places like Guatemala and Egypt. In *Star Wars*, when the local pirates later make an appearance, they claim that off-worlders, “Would only have come here if there was something of value found” (Houser 2019). This is the same sentiment expressed by el Dorry (2011) when he states that locals see fenced off sites and wonder, “Why is the antiquities authority fencing off this pile of stones if they do not contain something more valuable?” After Obi-Wan states that they only came out of historical interest, the leader of the pirates declares, “Hudso Shaku, leader of the Krypder Riders. We will happily retrieve *our world’s* property from your *dead bodies*” (Houser 2019). This sentiment is frequently seen in real-world places. For instance, in Guatemala pirates loot their ancestral cultural material, taking objects as a way to make a living (Matsuda 1998, 88). The difference is that the fictional pirates are more of a mix between looters and gang members as seen when Obi-Wan ignites his lightsaber to chase them away, and Shaku declares, “Forget whatever they dug out of the ground. The Laser Sword... *that’s* what I want” (Houser 2019). In this case, the pirates are only interested in what has money-making potential, which is closer to the type of looting seen in Egypt (el Dorry 2011).

The fact that this particular comic shows a very real-world situation for archaeologists is impressive. It shows that archaeologists often are not intent on finding that one piece of treasure, as in *Indiana Jones*, and it demonstrates the ethical problems that actual archaeologists might run into on foreign soil. This is a good starting point for a more realistic presentation of archaeology in fiction, although perhaps on a broader scale. This encounter lasted for about a page, as opposed to continuing through 40 issues as in *Doctor Aphra*. However, it shows that a more accurate portrayal of archaeology in fiction can, in fact, be achieved, that there are storylines that people are interested in, in which a real archaeologist is doing real work, and that the issues archaeologists

find themselves dealing with can be presented. It is concerning that in this case the local population is an antagonistic force and that an envoy of the off-world government is sent to police the situation, but that could be balanced with instances where it is the other way around such as in the case of Thrawn and Hera. Beyond that, this situation is another example of things that occur in archaeological contexts on a regular basis and is indicative of the way that media often presents these problems. It is also another way to begin a difficult conversation, but it would be more dangerous if that conversation never takes place at all.

## Conclusion

The past, the presentation of the past, and perceptions of how archaeologists study the past are all key aspects of what archaeologists should consider. These aspects can all be seen in various places in the *Star Wars* franchise, and in many other fictional works. The character of Doctor Aphra presents several new perspectives to the public while also falling into the same dangerous tropes. This analysis shows that there are both positives and negatives to having her placed in a completely different universe than our own. This is an idea that Hall (2004, 171) finds healthy because it reflects reality as something made up of diverse people and ideas. This paper also analyzed only Aphra's character's introduction. There are thirty-four other volumes in her completed series and more to come in her current series many of which showcase the diverse ideas about archaeology in the *Star Wars* universe. These additional volumes both build upon the diversity already introduced and lead to more pitfalls and tropes.

Accurate depictions of archaeology can exist and capture public interest, as seen in *Age of Republic-Obi-Wan Kenobi 1*, which was important but much more obscure than the more popular *Doctor Aphra*. Archaeological themes and problems can be seen throughout the *Star Wars* franchise, and these instances can be used to facilitate conversations with the public and make different aspects of the field more accessible. Holtorf (2007) emphasizes the idea that archaeologists are storytellers more than anything, and this is important because archaeology does have a story to tell, and creative fiction can be part of that as we approach the public. Archaeology has a long way to go if it is to shed many of the stereotypes analyzed in this paper. At the same time, there is hope for the future of archaeology as the crowd of fictional archaeologists grows more diverse, even if their story arcs do depend on the occasional trope to get by.

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