

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them any why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky. Today's episode will be full of spoilers for the Star Wars Holiday Special – not that the show actually had a plot you wouldn't want spoiled.

CLIP: DISCO STAR WARS

It was the fall of 1978 – a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

Disney did not own Star Wars. There weren't multiple trilogies. There was a movie called Star Wars, a Star Wars novel, comics, and a disco remix you could buy on vinyl or 8-track.

I was in kindergarten, already a Star War fanatic. I could count how many times I'd seen the movie in theaters – which was the only place you could see it.

Bonnie Burton is an entertainment journalist who writes for CNET and other sites. She was in the same place as me back then with Star Wars.

BONNIE: I mean everyone at that time was just dying for any more Star Wars. Like we were kids starving for more. So like we would watch anything that Star Wars in it. Like if the Star Wars characters showed up on the Muppet show or the Osman show or the Richard Pryor show, which the Richard Pryor was not for kids or if SNL did a Star Wars anything, you know, we would beg our parents to let us stay up late to just watch that one sequence.

CLIP: BILL MURRAY SINGING STAR WARS ON SNL

BONNIE: We were starving for Star Wars and then the holiday special got announced in TV Guide and everybody's like, Oh God. Cause it's like the real actors are supposed to be in it.

The Star Wars Holiday Special aired on Friday November 17th – the week before Thanksgiving of 1978.

CLIP: OPENING CREDITS

BONNIE: So you're just, you think it's going to be the continuation of the movies.

At first it seemed to be. When the show began, there was Han Solo and Chewbacca in the Millennium Falcon in new footage filmed for network television. It was like a dream come true.

That's it, I'm turning back. I know your family is waiting! I know it's an important day!

The premise is that Chewbacca wants to go home for Life Day, which is like a pagan version of Christmas. And he's bringing his buddy Han Solo with him, but they are on the run from The Empire.

MUSIC OPENING CHEWBACCA FAMILY

So Han and Chewy are barely in the show. Most of the special revolves around Chewbacca's family. They live in a giant tree house on a forest planet. They're waiting for Chewbacca to return.

And that's the whole show – Chewbacca's family is literally killing time for two hours until he gets there. Chewy's wife Malla — yes, apparently he had a wife — tries to kill time by watching a cooking show which featured by a robot version of Julia Childs named Gormonda, played by Harvey Kormann.

Today we are preparing a dish called Bantha Surprise!...

BONNIE: I mean there's so many different opportunities for quality pee breaks during the Star Wars holiday special where you can go pee and get a snack and come back and that cooking video with Gourmanda is still going. You haven't missed anything. That cooking video is literally just a very long Carol Burnett sketch. Like it's just very, very long.

All the segments are very, very long. Chewbacca's son Lumpy watches a technical manual on how to put a computer together. The demonstrator in the video is also Harvey Kormann.

CLIP: This is the first thing you'll need, please don't hurt yourself on the sharp edges.

And just in case you are starting to lose your suspension of disbelief, it's about to be shattered when Lumpy watches a music video of Jefferson Starship – a real band from our real world.

JEFFERSON STARSHIP

Meanwhile Chewbacca's father Itchy kills time by putting his head into a virtual reality cone, and watching what I could describe as PG-rated erotica featuring a very sparkly Dihann Carroll.

DIHANN CARROLL

I remember as a kid really confused by this section, but now I find it weirdly riveting, thinking of poor Itchy, Chewbacca's father – I don't know, maybe he's a lonely, maybe he's a widow, we don't know -- finding a few moments of pleasure in this Wookiee version of an Oculus Rift.

DIHANN CARROLL

The family does tear themselves away from home entertainment devices to check in with Luke and Leia through the Star Wars equivalent of Skype calls. But much more screen time is given to new characters, like Art Carney, who played a local repair shop owner who comes over with gifts.

I brought you something special short stuff! You got it, Happy Life Day! I love to make a Wookiee happy! And now for the lovely lady of the house!

We cut away to Bea Arthur, who apparently runs the Cantina on Tatooine, where she sings and dances with the creatures there.

BEA ARTHUR SINGS

Who knew the Cantina song had lyrics?

BEA ARTHUR SINGS

There is some drama. Stormtroopers show up to search the house – and the family calms their anxieties by watching more videos until Chewbacca and Han Solo arrive in person and save the day.

And believe or not, that's when things get weirder. The Wookies put on ceremonial robes, hold these glowing orbs and walk single file into outer space, where they enter an inter-dimensional void to meet up with Wookiees from across the planet, and celebrate Life Day.

WOOKIES IN VOID

The cast from the movies is there too. And Princess Leia sings about the meaning of Life Day to the tune of the Star Wars theme.

LEIA SINGS

Now if you're still watching by 10pm on November 17th, 1978 and you haven't flipped channels to the Love Boat or Fantasy Island, you might be wondering how did this thing go so wrong?

From what I've read, CBS pitched the idea of a holiday special to George Lucas. He approved because he thought this could be a way to explore Chewbacca's planet, which is something that fascinated him.

In their defense, the writers said they did the best they could with Lucas's direction. In fact the only input he gave was that the show had revolve around Chewbacca's family speaking the Wookie language, with no subtitles. And the cast from the movie had only agreed to cameos.

So the writers filled out the rest what they knew – the musical variety show. You couldn't turn on a TV in the '70s in primetime without seeing a variety show with skits and musical numbers. It could be Sonny and Cher, Donny and Marie Osmond, Carol Burnett. The Muppets – just to name a few.

When Bonnie Burton was a kid, she used to love those shows.

BONNIE: So when the holiday special came out and did pretty much the same thing, except it had a storyline, but there was a couple of musical things, there was comedy, there was drama. You know, it wasn't a typical variety show kind of thing, but it was that pattern that kids were familiar with at that time. So if you saw it during the '70s, it was like, oh yeah, this is like variety show stuff. You see it now and you're like, what the hell is this?

Lucas hated the Holiday Special. He tried to bury it. For a long time, you couldn't see it anywhere, unless you bought a DVD of a VHS copy at a Star Wars convention. But now it's on YouTube.

Alex Schmidt is a writer and comedian who's fascinated by the Star Wars Holiday Special. He thinks the most common excuse for the show is also its biggest problem: it was of its time — down to the decor in Chewbacca's home.

ALEX: Like it's, it's shag carpeting everywhere. You know what I mean? Like not just the people, uh, it's a really dated environment.

But Star Wars isn't supposed to be of its time. Its designed to be timeless.

ALEX: The music is classical music that feels timeless instead of '70s synth that would have fit the time. Uh, and all the elements are trying to be very, uh, Joseph Campbell hero and very, very operatic. Uh, so I think they just don't bother to do comedy most of the time because comedy, uh, as we see from this special age is really fast. So it's something they don't choose to do, but they totally could do. Uh, and if they tried it for a second time, uh, I think it would maybe work.

You heard him right. He doesn't think combining Star Wars with musical comedy was a terrible idea. In fact, he kind of dug it.

ALEX: And they went out and got what was then a murderer's row of TV comedy entertainers. They got almost all of the entire Star Wars cast. And they spent a lot of money by what was TV standards at the time. They got relatively huge people to jump into this really weird universe.

Bonnie also thinks the Holiday Special is underappreciated. And that opinion became a problem for her at work because for ten years she worked at Lucasfilm, doing fan outreach.

BONNIE: I'm not going to lie. I was shocked when people would come up to me, especially when I started at Lucasfilm. They'd come up to me and go, yeah, we don't really talk about the holiday special here cause it's kind of considered not contraband, but it's like one of those black spots on Star Wars history. I'm like, what are you talking about? It's awesome. Even when I, when I started working at Lucas film, I had an annual screening of the holiday special. It was like a secret screening I would have for, I would like get one of the conference rooms

and play it and say anyone who's never seen it, who wants to see it, I'm playing it today. I was trying real hard to get people to come to my way of thinking. That never happened.

It's conventional wisdom among Star Wars fans that this thing was a disaster – it's only worth watching it to laugh at it. So when I came across an article Bonnie had written for CNET in defense of the holiday special – I was intrigued.

Alex also tried to see at it positive qualities in a video he did for the comedy website Cracked.

And they both think The Holiday Special was important because it was the first attempt at world building in live action. This was the first time we saw more of the Star Wars universe beyond the original film that kids like me had watched over and over again.

ALEX: Now we're very used to getting to have a lot of a universe. Like as soon as you watch a thing you like, you can go read the Wiki about more details of the characters. You can go look at fan art, you can go, uh, dial up old movies or TV shows or other things of it if that exists. Uh, and so this was the second ever time they were able to like concretely provide stuff from this universe to anyone who didn't have like access to George Lucas's desk, you know, like who couldn't go through his drawers, uh, and that's, that's amazing.

And they got Ralph McQuarrie, who did the concept art for the original trilogy, to design the exterior of Chewbacca's house.

BONNIE: And seeing a cool tree house where Chewbacca's family lived, that was awesome. Because that's awesome, when do you see that house for the first time from Ralph McQuarrie's art and then you see it in a live action situation. That was really cool. I think we learned a lot as fans from that show.

And it's remarkable how much time is given to the Wookie language, with no subtitles. The show is a culturally immersive experience, not just for us but other characters too.

LEIA: This holiday is yours, where we all share with you the hope that this day brings us closer to freedom and to harmony and to peace. No matter how

different we appear, we're all the same in our struggle against the powers of evil and darkness, and our love for one another. This is the tree of life.

And Life Day is the first example of a religious tradition in the Star Wars universe. It's a holiday with specific rituals, objects and clothes.

ALEX: Cause it's also a world where canonically the Force is real. Like you see evidence and proof of it often all the time. Uh, and so then what keys are also allowed to have a kind of separate belief system that is just fine too. It's really cool. Like it's, it's a very specific, uh, almost nondenominational kind of thing. It's very friendly, very welcoming. I'm into it.

Well initially I think too about the holiday special is that it's, it's mostly, I mean you have a kind of like, and he always weirdly reminded me of like World War II movies on the home front. You know, of like what, you know, like what's it like when your loved ones are overseas in battle and everyone's just worried at home about them.

ALEX: Yeah. And that's a great point that even in this light comedy special that is supposed to be pretty casually enjoyed on 1970s TV. It's still like kind of a refugee story because what they're waiting for is for Han and Chewy to show up after, after I think of aiding the Imperials the entire way.

The Holiday Special may be goofy but it's not tongue-in-cheek. It's totally sincere.

BONNIE: Whenever the Imperial characters show up in the holidays special, if there's drama. And they're always harassing everyone on that planet and it's, you know, it's not fun to be have your country or your planet taken over by aggressive forces that don't care about your civil liberties or your happiness. But you also you have these dramatic moments, you could tell, you know, Chewbacca's wife Mala is really worried, you know, about what's going on and what's happening to her husband and what's going to happen to them as a family.

Come on don't look so worried, Chewy doesn't ant to come home to a lot of long faces. Cheer up, Mala. Give me a smile. That's better.

And the best part of the Special – in fact the only part that is universally praised – is the introduction Boba Fett. We actually meet him in a series of animated segments, which allows them to get around the issue of a TV budget. Like when he meets Luke Skywalker, Boba Fett is riding what looks like a pink dinosaur.

*You saved my life, thank you
 You are alone?
 I have two droids, I come in search of ship.
 Maybe I can help, I'm Boba Fett. The ship you seek is nearby.
 Are the Imperial troops nearby?
 They are nearby friend, and growing more powerful.*

Fans have complained that Boba Fett doesn't do much in the movies. But in this cartoon, he has a lot of screen time and dialogue. He even has interesting character moments, like tricking the heroes into thinking he's one of them.

*Boba you're a hero and a faithful friend, you must come back with us. What's the matter with R2?
 I'm afraid it's because you said Boba is friend and faithful ally. That simply doesn't feed into R2's information bank.
 What are you talking about?
 We intercepted a transmission between Boba and Darth Vader, I'm afraid this whole adventure is an Imperial plot!
 We'll meet again, friend!*

And you know the weapon The Mandalorian uses on the Disney Plus show – where one end looks like a tuning fork that can electrocute people or creatures? That weapon was not in the movies. It was introduced in the holiday special cartoon. And in the first episode of The Mandalorian, one of the characters mentions Life Day. That character is not a Wookiee but either way, Life Day is now officially in canon.

*Yeah, I was hoping to be free for Life Day, maybe even get home to the family but I guess that's not going to happen this year.
 Probably Not.*

With the success of Mandalorian, the show runner Jon Favreau is getting more chances to expand the Star Wars universe on Disney Plus. You know what he wants to do next? A Star Wars Holiday Special. For real.

Looking back at the Holiday Special, Bonnie thinks there's something to value in a version of Star Wars that was meant for kids who hadn't seen the darker Empire Strikes Back yet, who hadn't grown up and asked for more

serious Star Wars stories, that they could argue about with each other on devices that would've seemed like science fiction in 1978.

I think what makes The Holiday Special truly of its time is that it's a version of Star Wars that is still full of childhood innocence – for better and for worse.

BONNIE: I'm not going to lie. There's some moments there where I'm like, okay, I'm going to go take a pee break. Like I don't stand riveted to it. But when I was a kid I did, and as an adult I just appreciate the campiness and I'm a big fan of Star Wars humor. This is one of its kind and I think we should be proud of it as Star Wars fans instead of trashing it.

Happy Life Day everyone.

ALEX: Eric. Happy life day and, and thank you for celebrating it with me.

I'll see you in the void. I'll see you in that when we put on our robes. I'll see you in the void that we all we all go to.

ALEX: Yeah, a lot of orbs and robes in this show. People should know. It's very exciting. (Laughs)

CLIP: Wonder Woman starring Linda Carter and Incredible Hulk starring Bill Bixby will return at their regular times on most of these stations.

That's it for this week, thanks for listening. Special thanks to Alex Schmidt and Bonnie Burton. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.