

Similarities between *Dune* and *Star Wars*

by Tim Weber

“I know nothing comparable to it except *Lord of the Rings*.”

– Arthur C. Clarke, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, about *Dune*

This quotation may be correct concerning the complexity of the world created by the author, but not regarding the story line. Actually there are several sources of inspiration for Frank Herbert, for example Greek and Muslim mythology and, of course, other science fiction novels by authors like Isaac Asimov and E.E. Smith. Some characters and story elements in *Dune* were also borrowed from Frank Herbert's life (e.g. the Bene Gesserit refer to his mother and his ten matriarchal aunts, all being Jesuits; hear how close Gesserit comes to Jesuit?) or the real world. Herbert got inspired for Paul Muad'Dib by T.E. Lawrence (also known as Lawrence of Arabia) who led the Bedouins against the German-backed Turks (depicted by the Harkonnens) in World War One. There are hundreds of other references which are described on the web sites you can find in the appendix.

But not everyone is as creative as Herbert, who at least diversified his sources. Since years there are ongoing discussions between fans of *Dune* and George Lucas' *Star Wars* about to what extent the latter is a “rip-off” of Herbert's work. I must admit that I am *Dune* fan and for that reason the position of the *Star Wars* fans will be not really well represented in this text. To be honest, I think that every person who thought at least *a bit* about the subject has to agree that *Star Wars*, at least the trilogy without the recent movies, is nothing but a thinly disguised carbon copy of *Dune*.

The novel *Dune* was first published in 1965, *Star Wars* (the movie featuring Mark Hamill and Harrison Ford) came out in 1977. This fact is important, since it disarms people arguing that *Dune* actually was the copy.

In this text I will prove that without the excellent work of Frank Herbert there would be no multi-million dollar *Star Wars* merchandise empire, starting with Yoda mugs and ending with eBay “original lightsaber from Episode I” auctions having closing bids of over a thousand dollars. In fact everything George Lucas did was to take *Dune*, modify it slightly and selling it as his own creation.

The easiest thing would be to list the differences in a two-column table and let it take effect, because the analogy is in most cases quite astonishing and obvious. But I am supposed to write a text, therefore I am going to write a text. Let us start by comparing the main characters in the two opuses.

Luke Skywalker and Paul Atreides are the most similar characters. Both are quite young and the sons of powerful men, have biblical names and are linked biologically to the “bad guy” (Baron Harkonnen is Paul’s grandfather, Darth Vader alias Anakin Skywalker is Luke’s father). While Paul’s father dies on the desert planet Arrakis, Luke’s adoptive parents die on the desert planet Tatooine, both being murdered by the enemy. Paul and Luke discover the special powers they have as the “chosen ones” on their respective planets and fall in love with a mystery girl they never met. Both rebel against the current rulers of the universe and both win.

Then there are the things Han Solo and Duncan Idaho, both ladies’ men and best friends of the hero, have in common. They are fighting for the “good side”, but are “bad boys” in a way (e.g. Han’s dubious deals and Duncan’s “drunken scene” at the beginning of *Dune*).

Gurney Halleck is Paul’s mentor and first teacher, Obi-Wan Kenobi is Luke’s. Although Obi-Wan dies in the movie, he continues to help and advise Luke through visions. Gurney, thought to be dead, returns to do the same with Paul after he learned that he is still alive. Both are known to the parents of their charges, are expert fighters and would do anything for their follower, even die for them.

Yoda and Thufir Hawat were both the best fighters around in their prime and have great mental abilities. They are major influences for the heroes and taught the heroes’ teachers (Halleck and Obi-Wan) as well.

Princess Leia Organa and Chani/Irulan/Alia: Both Leia and Chani are strong women and have excellent fighting skills. All except Alia are related to the hero in some romantic way, all are powerful or at least close relatives to a powerful person (Chani is the daughter of Liet and the niece of Stilgar, Irulan is a princess and Alia is the sister of Paul Muad’Dib). Leia and Alia both fall in love with the “good bad guys” (Han Solo and Duncan Idaho) and are both captured and tortured by their grandfather (Leia by Darth Vader, Alia by the Baron¹).

The Emperors Palpatine and Shaddam are both evil and rose through manipulation and murder. They try (and fail) to kill the heroes, have relatives of them as followers and, as mentioned above, both of their empires fall.

¹ Alia’s affair with Duncan and possession by the Baron happen in “Dune Messiah”.

Interesting analogies are also the “sand people”. Remember the small guys called “Jawas” vending the androids in the desert in *Star Wars* (by the way there is a sandworm skeleton in the background of one of their scenes), having glowing yellow eyes and the rest of their faces hidden by a hood? And then there are the Tuskan Raiders who attack Luke Skywalker, also in the desert of Tatooine, known to defend their territories from every stranger, even kill him if needed. The last group are the Jedi, great fighters and philosophers, but threatened by genocide from the Empire. Add these three peoples up and what you get is the Fremen.

The Storm Troopers and the Sardaukar have also some things in common. Both are elite soldiers of the Emperor and their main tool in the stories. But in the end, they meet the forces of the hero and get beaten.

The Jedi were already mentioned above, and maybe you would rather compare them with the Bene Gesserit. Why not? Both are ancient societies which at least claim to exist only to serve mankind, are expert fighters and affiliate only very well chosen people. They also have special supernatural abilities: To detect truth and to control minds. Do you remember that scene in *Star Wars* where Obi-Wan uses the Force to convince some storm troopers: “These are not the droids you want.” That looks a lot like the Voice, doesn't it?

Then take a look at the home planets of the heroes. Both are desert planets. Tatooine has got two suns, Arrakis two moons. And while *Dune* has its sandworms, on Tatooine there is a pit where a sandworm-like creature called the Sarlacc lives.

The best weapons in their respective universe are the lightsaber and the Crysknife. Both are for elite persons only (Jedi in *Star Wars*, Fremen in *Dune*), mystical, incredibly effective and symbols of status.

When we talk about weapons, we also have to talk about shields. In *Dune*, the shields have one weakness: Slowly moving objects can pass through them. In *Star Wars*, small objects can pass through them.

One of the major differences between the two stories is that in *Dune* it is forbidden to create “thinking machines”, while *Star Wars* has computers and androids just like every other science fiction movie. In my opinion, this is mainly because of the popularity of computers in sci-fi movies and possibly also because George Lucas had to change the script (see below).

If you are not satisfied by this evidence yet, I have some interesting quotations from people involved both in *Star Wars* and *Dune*. For example Frank Herbert himself

points out that David Lynch, director of the first *Dune* movie from 1984, “had trouble with the fact that *Star Wars* used up so much of *Dune*. We found sixteen points of identity between my novel and *Star Wars*.” Rick Austin, vice president of on-air for the Sci-Fi Channel said: “It really was, because Lucas realized you couldn’t really make a movie of *Dune*.”

And if this still is not enough for you to believe that without *Dune*, there would actually be no *Star Wars*, I recommend this last piece of information to you: The original script for *Star Wars* was rejected by the studio because it was almost exactly the same story as *Dune*. George Lucas had to hire Gary Kurtz to help him re-write the script. Many drafts later they convinced the studio, that with this version they would not be sued for plagiarism by the Herbert Partnership.

The fact that *Star Wars* is a copy of *Dune*, however, does not mean that not both opuses are great works of science fiction. *Star Wars* is more popular, more “main stream” (what I really dislike), while *Dune* is more creative and more intellectual. Everyone has to choose for his- or herself what he or she likes more. Bi-La Kaifa.

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Sources:

<http://www.dune2k.com/?page=community-articles&show=swanddune>

<http://www.jitterbug.com/origins/dune.html>

Even more websites:

<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Omega/3444/ripoff.html>

<http://www.dahoudek.com/pages/starwarsdune.htm>