

THE ORIGIN OF CHEWBACCA

A long time in ago in a decade far, far away (the 1970s), Star Wars took the galaxy by storm. One of the biggest reasons stood about eight feet tall and had a whole lot of fur. Here's the inside story behind a beloved pop-culture icon.

A PILLAR OF SOCIETY

"I don't think there's another *Star Wars* character that's able to spread happiness quite like Chewie," said Peter Mayhew, who played the Wookiee for nearly 40 years. "He's quite unique in that way." He may be right: According to *Guinness Book of World Records*, the most popular Facebook live video of all time—topping 160 million views—is 2016's "Chewbacca Mom," a clip of a woman who puts on a growling Chewie mask and can't stop laughing. Even a YouTube video of a can sliding across a table that sounds like Chewie went viral. And *Entertainment Weekly* named the Wookiee copilot the fourth-greatest sidekick of all time (behind George Costanza, Robin, and *The Tonight Show's* Ed McMahon).

The reasons for the character's success are as varied as the people who brought him to life—from the writer who created him, to the team that designed and built him and gave him a voice, to the actor who became him. Here's how the Wookiee was put together.

THE BORROWER

After directing the 1973 sleeper hit *American Graffiti*, George Lucas wanted to make a film that re-created for modern audiences the thrill he'd had as a kid watching science-fiction films like *Flash Gordon* and *The Forbidden Planet*. To create *Star Wars*, Lucas borrowed elements not just from space movies but from Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. He was also inspired by real life—the Imperial troopers were Nazis, the Jedi were samurai, and Chewbacca was his dog. "I had a large dog named Indiana, an Alaskan malamute," Lucas recalled. "When he sat in the car, he was bigger than I was. That's where I said, 'That would be a fun character for *Star Wars*.'" (Lucas would use the name "Indiana" for his archaeologist in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.)

But Lucas's original concept for the Wookiees was quite different from what ended up on-screen. The first incarnation was closer to what eventually became the Ewoks in 1983's *Return of the Jedi*. "[Wookiees] weren't technical at all, they were primitive," Lucas

Why do farmers in Botswana paint eyes on their cows' rear ends? To discourage lions from attacking.

explained. His shooting script ended up way too long, “so I realized I had to cut the Wookiees out of the end of the [first] movie; I decided to save one and make him the copilot. That’s really how Chewbacca ended up with his starring role.”

NAMING THE ALIEN

Chewbacca wasn’t the only character to undergo major changes during the writing process. In early drafts of *Star Wars* (which Lucas originally called *Journal of the Whills*), Luke “Starkiller” was a 60-year-old general, and Han Solo was a green-skinned alien. There was a narrator character named Chuiiee that Lucas scrapped...but he kept the name, respelled as “Chewie.” Chewbacca’s full name was inspired by the Russian word for “dog”—*собака*—pronounced “sobaka.”

“I think I just ran over a Wookey.”

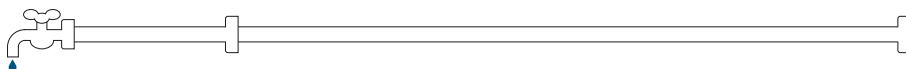
Lucas already had the word “Wookiee” in his arsenal; he was just looking for the right way to use it. Back in 1970, while recording additional dialogue for Lucas’s dystopian sci-fi film *THX-1138*, a radio DJ named Terry McGovern was dubbing in the voice from a police band radio, and ad-libbed the line “I think I just ran over a Wookey.” (The movie featured furry, dwarflike creatures running amok.) McGovern explained to Lucas that the ad-lib was a way to “stick it” to a friend of his named Ralph Wookey: “I thought he’d get a kick out of hearing his name in a film,” said McGovern.

SOOTHING THE SAVAGE BEAST

Finding the character’s look and personality wasn’t as simple. In 1975, about two years into writing *Star Wars*, Lucas described Chewbacca as a “barbarian prince from the jungle planet of Yavin.” (His home planet was later changed to Kashyyyk, but Yavin stayed in the film as the location of the secret Rebel Base.) And this incarnation of Chewie was not intended to “spread happiness.” Here’s a description from an early draft of the script:

Ben is standing next to Chewbacca, an eight-foot-tall savage-looking creature resembling a huge grey bushbaby monkey with fierce baboon-like fangs. His large blue eyes dominate a fur-covered face and soften his otherwise awesome appearance. Over his matted, furry body he wears two chrome bandoliers, and little else. He is a two-hundred-year-old Wookiee and a sight to behold.

Star Wars conceptual artist Ralph McQuarrie—who came up with such iconic imagery as Darth Vader’s helmet and the two droids—was having trouble with Chewbacca’s look. Drawing on the words “savage” and “bushbaby monkey,” he painted a menacing gray beast with short fur, huge teeth, buggy eyes, and pointy ears. Meanwhile, Lucas was rewriting the character as more of a friendly protector for Han Solo, so he needed a creature that was a lot less scary.



Q: Can you name the 1) northernmost, 2) westernmost, and 3) easternmost states in the U.S.?...

THE UNCREDITED COLLABORATOR

Then, sometime in early 1976, Lucas showed McQuarrie an image of a furry beast that looked very similar to what Chewbacca would eventually become. McQuarrie used *that* image to create the look that ended up getting approved, and is very close to the Chewbacca we know today. For years afterward, McQuarrie said in interviews that the painting Lucas had shown him was “from the 1930s,” but it was actually the July 1975 cover illustration of the sci-fi magazine *Analog* for a novelette called “And Seven Times Never Kill Man” by George R. R. Martin (later of *Game of Thrones* fame). That cover was painted by legendary sci-fi artist John Schoenherr, best known for his cover of Frank Herbert’s *Dune*. (One difference: Schoenherr’s furry beast had six breasts.)

According to author Michael Heilemann in *Kitbashed: The Origins of Star Wars*, “It’s interesting to note that Lucas rarely talks about bushbaby Chewie, perhaps because he knows that if he starts down that road, he might have to try and bridge the gap from that to the post-Schoenherr Chewie, which he can’t do without admitting that it was essentially borrowed wholesale.” In 2010, the year Schoenherr died, his son Ian wrote on his blog, “What troubles me—and has troubled my family and many of my father’s friends in the Science Fiction world since 1977—is that [John Schoenherr] was the unwitting, uncredited, and uncompensated ‘collaborator’ in this creative endeavor.”

SEEKING ONE GIANT

“Borrowed” or not, they’d found Chewie’s look. Now Lucas had to find an actor who could play an eight-foot-tall Wookiee. According to co-star Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker), the first actor they considered was 6’ 9” Ted Cassidy, best known as Lurch on *The Addams Family*. There was a problem with Cassidy, though: He was American, and the movie was being filmed in England. As Hamill tells it, “The British government said, ‘If you’ve got a mask on, you have to cast an English person.’” That’s why every masked character in *Star Wars*—including Chewbacca, Darth Vader, C-3PO, and R2-D2—was played by an Englishman. With Cassidy out, Lucas approached British bodybuilder David Prowse, who recalled:

*When we were introduced, Lucas, who remembered me from Stanley Kubrick’s seminal 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*, offered me two roles. The first was a character called Chewbacca. I said: “What the hell is Chewbacca?” and he told me it was a hairy gorilla on the side of the good guys. Well, all I could think about was three months in a gorilla suit, so I said, “What’s the other part?” And he said it was the big villain of the film, so I chose that because people always remember the bad guy.*

Now they had a Darth Vader, but they still needed a Chewbacca.

...A: 1) Alaska, 2) Alaska, 3) Alaska—because the Aleutian Islands cross the International Date Line. Hawaii is the southernmost state.

A STAND-UP GUY

Born in London in 1944, Peter Mayhew was diagnosed with gigantism when he was eight years old, but he actually suffered from Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder that can cause sufferers to have disproportionately long arms and legs. Fearing the boy's height could eventually exceed eight feet, doctors blasted his pituitary gland with X-rays. It worked...kind of. Mayhew topped out at about 7' 3".

The soft-spoken giant studied engineering in school, but he was working as an orderly at King's College Hospital in 1975 when a reporter profiled him for a story about people with really big feet. Mayhew's photo was seen by the producers of Ray Harryhausen's *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger*, who hired him to play the Minotaur, an 8½-foot-tall metallic minotaur. Afterward, Fox executives asked Mayhew if he'd be interested in more acting work, to which he replied, "Yes, please." But he went back to work at the hospital and didn't hear anything for nine months. Then he received a call from Fox that they were looking for "somebody big" for a new science-fiction movie being filmed near London.

Mayhew recalled that he was sitting on a couch when George Lucas and producer Gary Kurtz walked into the room to meet him: "So naturally, what do I do? I was raised in England, so as soon as someone comes in through the door, I stand up. George literally turned to Gary and said, 'I think we found him.'"

With the actor and the look in place, they had to figure out how to build a Wookiee from the ground up. Easy, right? Wrong. Part II is on page 236.

* * *

VOTE VERMIN!

A Massachusetts man who goes by the name Vermin Supreme has run in several state and national elections since the 1980s, most recently for president in 2020. If you think the world's weird now, imagine what it could be like if President Supreme (he always wears a boot on his head) ever got to deliver on these actual campaign promises:

- Give every American a free pony.
- Convert to a "pony-based economy."
- Legalize human meat.
- Make crime against the law.
- Harness zombie power using the latest in hamster-wheel technology.
- Mandatory dental hygiene.
- Travel back in time and kill Adolf Hitler.
- Give all sick people a bus ticket to Canada.
- Gradually dismantle the government.



During the 30 years NASA's space shuttle program was operational, it averaged about one mission every 11 weeks.

THE ORIGIN OF CHEWBACCA: BODY BUILDING

Taking the Wookiee from page to screen turned out to be one of the most difficult parts of making Star Wars...but also one of the most successful. (Part I is on page 111.)

Special Effects

Determined to utilize the best filmmakers in the business, George Lucas hired renowned creature designer Stuart Freeborn to oversee Chewbacca's creation. Freeborn's greatest achievement (until *Star Wars*) was the "Dawn of Man" sequence in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969) that features prehistoric apes freaking out about a mysterious black monolith. According to Hollywood lore, Freeborn wasn't nominated for a Costume Design Oscar because Academy voters thought the apes were real. They weren't—they were actors inside very convincing ape suits, and Lucas wanted that same level of realism for the look of *Star Wars*. Freeborn ended up designing many of the saga's most memorable aliens. In fact, you've already seen his face—part of it, anyway: Freeborn combined his own mouth and nose with Albert Einstein's eyes to create Yoda.

Coming to Life

"Chewbacca was a fascinating one," said Freeborn, "because he had to look nice, though he could be very ferocious when he wanted to be. I kept pulling the nose out and pushing it back. It was difficult, because we were trying to do a combination of a monkey, a dog, and a cat. I really wanted it to be cat-like more than anything else, but we were trying to conform to that combination."

The hardest part was getting the mouth to work. To achieve that, Freeborn combined puppetry and animatronics to devise a simple system of cables and toggles that connected the actor's lips to the mask's lips. Whenever Peter Mayhew opened his mouth, it activated cables that opened Chewbacca's mouth. One side had slightly shorter cables, giving Chewie his trademark snarl. (One of Lucas's biggest regrets with *Star Wars* was that he wasn't able to put that same level of sophistication into any of the other alien masks.) Freeborn's simple mechanism worked so well that later Chewbacca technicians couldn't improve upon it. "Complicated is great, but simple is genius," said creature designer Tom Spina, who was hired to create a working Chewbacca costume in 2017. "Stuart devised simple ways to achieve amazingly lifelike results."



What do you call a grandfather clock that's shorter than 6'?
A grandmother clock. If it's shorter than 5'2", it's a granddaughter clock.

Hair and Makeup

In *Star Wars*, Princess Leia dismisses Chewbacca as a “walking carpet,” but the costume was actually made more like a wig than a carpet. The team tasked with building Chewbacca—which included Freeborn’s wife Kay—tested several different kinds of fur, wool, and hair, before finally settling on knotted yak hair and rabbit fur over a mohair base (mohair is the silk of the Angora goat). The fur was originally intended to be gray, but Lucas decided on alternating layers of red and brown fur to help Chewie stand out from the black-and-white spaceship interiors. Using a fiberglass mold of Mayhew’s head, they created a snug-fitting mask that had padding on top, bringing Chewbacca’s height to a full eight feet.

Meanwhile, the art department crafted sets of Chewie’s canine teeth, his bandolier, and his signature bowcaster weapon. According to Wookieepedia, the official *Star Wars* wiki page, this half-rifle, half-crossbow is “more powerful and accurate than blasters, firing a metal quarrel encased in plasma energy.” In real life, Chewie’s bandolier and bowcaster were the work of John Mollo, a military historian who had no knowledge of science fiction when Lucas hired him to design the costumes for the Rebels, the Jedi Knights, Darth Vader, and the Empire. (Mollo won an Oscar for the costumes in *Star Wars* and, later, one for his work on *Gandhi*.)

I, Chewbacca

Within an hour of being hired for the role, 32-year-old Peter Mayhew was getting fitted for his Chewbacca costume, which was still being designed. With nothing to base his character on except some rough notes and drawings, Mayhew realized he had to do some independent research...so he went to the zoo. He spent long hours studying bears, lions, and gorillas—as he described it, “the growling variety.” He tried to mimic how they move, how they use their eyes, and how they vocalize. He worked with mime performers to come up with Chewbacca’s distinctive gait.

But Mayhew didn’t really inhabit the Wookiee until he was inside the full costume for the first time. “I put that mask on, and Chewie transformed me. I transformed. The attitude was different. The walk was different. Chewie ‘turned on.’ Do the scenes, come back, take the mask off, and Peter was back.”

The Wookiee Has No Pants

Filming *Star Wars* almost gave George Lucas a nervous breakdown. The 32-year-old director had never worked on a movie this big, and the older British crew, believing

IN THE KNOW

Few *Star Wars* actors boast more “geek cred” than 4’4” Deep Roy: He was a stand-in for Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*, played flute player Droopy McCool in *Return of the Jedi*, played every Oompa-Loompa in the 2005 remake of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, played a guard in *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, and played Scotty’s alien sidekick Keenser in the *Star Trek* reboot movies.



it to be a “rubbish children’s film,” fought Lucas at every turn. Many of the older actors, especially Alec Guinness (Obi-Wan Kenobi), were embarrassed to be in it. The younger actors were treating it like a vacation. And nervous 20th Century Fox executives started sending what every director dreads: notes. Mark Hamill remembered looking over Lucas’s shoulder at one note that requested, “Can’t they put pants on the Wookiee?” To placate the execs, Hamill said the prop department made a pair of “Wookiee lederhosen,” which Lucas refused to use. (Lucas actually had to take a few days off from filming to recover from stress and exhaustion.)

All of Mayhew’s filming for *Star Wars* took place at Elstree Studios near London. The completed Chewbacca costume looked convincing, but it was very hot and heavy. It’s unknown how many were made for the film; if you ask Mayhew’s costars, not enough. (Rumor had it that the Chewie costume was at its stinkiest while they were shooting the trash compactor scene on the Death Star.) Although he wore a leotard underneath to absorb the sweat, it could only do so much. When Mayhew sweated profusely, his eyes would detach from the mask, which stopped everything while Chewie’s face was put back together.

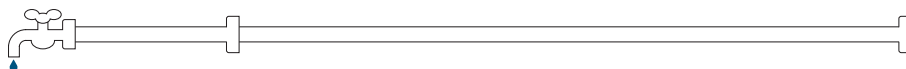
Interestingly, Chewbacca has actual lines in the script, which Mayhew said from behind the mask (only to be overdubbed with animal noises). For example, in one scene, after Obi-Wan Kenobi leaves the room, the Wookiee lets out a growl. However, as is shown in a rare behind-the-scenes clip (on YouTube), Mayhew said in his proper British accent, “That old man’s mad,” to which Han Solo replies, “You said it, Chewie.”

We’ll Fix It in Post

“Most of the crew thought that the film was a bit odd,” said John Mollo. “We doubted that it would ever be shown.” Mayhew wasn’t sure, either. Once filming was completed, he returned to his hospital job, not really expecting to play the Wookiee ever again. Unbeknownst to him, there was some bona fide movie magic taking place in California. The technical wizards at Industrial Light and Magic, which Lucas had created specifically for *Star Wars*, were constructing and filming the groundbreaking space-battle sequences. Composer John Williams was writing what would become one of the best-known scores in movie history. And sound designer Ben Burtt was working with Lucas to figure out what all these alien worlds sounded like. Still in film school when he was hired for *Star Wars*, Burtt came up with the lightsaber’s distinctive hum, Darth Vader’s menacing breathing, and R2-D2’s beeps and whistles. But Chewbacca’s voice was his first assignment, and it turned out to be the toughest, taking more than a year to get right.

GRRWWWARGG RRAWWAWGGR HERRNNGGHHH!

(Translation: Part III is on page 304.)



Breast milk contains a fungus that strengthens a baby’s immune system.

THE ORIGIN OF CHEWBACCA: FINDING HIS VOICE

In the final episode of our Wookiee trilogy, we learn how Chewie learned to roar...and then what happened when that roar hit the big screen. (Part II is on page 236.)

THE FINAL PIECE

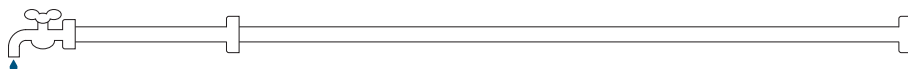
Sound designer Ben Burtt's challenge with finding the voice of Chewbacca: how do you invent and record a language that an intelligent animal would speak, if he could only speak in grunts, whines, and growls? Making matters worse, recalled Burtt: "Chewie didn't have articulated lips. He could basically open and close his mouth." They'd decided that the alien's entire vocal range would be made up of various earthly animal sounds that Burtt would record and then splice together. It was Lucas who suggested starting with bears, because they make their noises from the backs of their throats—just like Chewbacca. So Burtt spent a lot of time at the Happy Hollow Zoo in San Jose with a black bear named Tarik. He also recorded lions, camels, rabbits, tigers, badgers...and walrus. "One time I went to Marineland down in Long Beach to record a walrus," he said. "Its pool had been drained for cleaning—the walrus was stranded at the bottom, moaning—and that was the sound!"

Without any actual words for Chewie to speak, Burtt sorted the utterances by the emotion they conveyed—agreeable, affectionate, sad, angry, etc.—and then he "cut those together to get a sense of speech out of Chewie." After much trial and error, and many long conversations with Lucas, Burtt finally had a library of Chewbacca vocalizations they could add during postproduction. (For the record, the language Chewie speaks is called Shyriiwook.)

Lucas was so adamant that this effect and the hundreds of others had to blend together seamlessly that the movie's release date had to be pushed back six months. Fox executives were very concerned, but as it turned out, all that attention to detail was worth it. *Star Wars* broke box-office records after it opened in the summer of 1977, and it's still going strong today.

BEHIND BLUE EYES

One detail that most viewers may not have noticed: Mayhew's blue eyes—they're the only part of the actor you can see. Unlike similar monster masks, there were no



Astronauts say the Moon smells like "spent gunpowder."

contact lenses or other effects added in postproduction, only dark makeup around each eye to hide his skin. That barely noticeable detail went a long way to showing Chewie’s “humanity.” And, according to Richard Newby in *The Hollywood Reporter*, it’s this relatability that audiences are drawn to:

Chewbacca, largely through the expression of Mayhew’s eyes and body language, became our emotional lens. Regardless of language barriers, age or familiarity with Lucas’ sci-fi saga, Chewbacca showed us what to feel across these films, with larger-than-life gestures harkening back to film’s silent era, and a subtle expressiveness that gave him the same range as *Star Wars*’ human characters.

PETER AND THE WOOKIEE

After the original trilogy ended with 1983’s *Return of the Jedi*, Mayhew went back to England to live a quiet life—always willing to don the Chewie mask if asked. Over the next 20 years, he had a handful of acting parts outside of *Star Wars*, but very few chances to play the part he cherished most. No longer physically able to perform his duties as an orderly, he started selling furniture. A big boost came at the 1997 MTV Music Video Awards show, when Chewbacca was given a Lifetime Achievement Award. The backstory: ever since *Star Wars* came out, fans had complained that when Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) gave a medal to each of the heroes, she left out Chewbacca. So it was fitting that Fisher was on hand to finally give the Wookiee his award. It was the first time Mayhew had put on the costume in 13 years. “I got the only standing ovation of the night,” he boasted.

When the prequel trilogy was announced, Mayhew wondered if Chewbacca would be a part of it. The first two movies came and went without his character, and he knew that if he was to put the costume back on, it would have to be soon. Nearing his mid-50s, it was getting harder for Mayhew to walk, much less run. Being over seven feet tall was difficult for him as a young man, and it grew even more so as he aged. “When I go to restaurants I can never get my legs under a table,” he said at the time. “I bump my head in planes. People who sit behind me in the theater hate me. But I have given up apologizing to the world.”

Knowing that he could live comfortably on the fees he earned signing autographs at conventions, Mayhew decided to dedicate the rest of his life to *Star Wars*, becoming, as he called it, a “Chewbacca Ambassador.” He got married and moved to Texas in 1999 and attended upward of 20 conventions per year. He truly loved meeting fans and was known to chime in on Reddit *Star Wars* discussions from time to time. In addition to founding the Peter Mayhew Foundation, “devoted to the alleviation of disease, pain, suffering and the financial toll brought on by life’s traumatic events,” Mayhew wrote two children’s books—one about being different, and one about standing up to bullies.

Ouch! Most gallstones ever removed from one person: 11,950, from an Indian woman in 2015.

RETURN OF THE WOOKIEE

In the early 2000s, George Lucas decided to bring Chewie back for the third prequel, *Revenge of the Sith*. Even though Mayhew was pushing 60, he signed on. Otherwise, Lucas might not have even included the Wookiee, saying at the time, “Peter Mayhew is Chewbacca. He’s very unique the way he has created the character, and the way he walks, and the way he tilts his head, the way he uses his eyes. You can’t put anybody else in the suit.”

One problem: there was no suit to put Mayhew in; the only remaining original Chewbacca costume had been altered for another Wookiee character in 1999’s *The Phantom Menace*. So they were forced to start from scratch. “Chewbacca has to look like Chewbacca,” said creature designer Dave Elsey. “Nobody wants to do a character from *Star Wars* and get it wrong, especially one that’s so cherished by so many people.” With a pivotal scene taking place on Chewie’s home world, the effects artists designed and built seven Wookiees. (Dozens more Wookiees were added using CGI.)

For the new Chewbacca, designers mostly stuck with the original 1970s techniques, but were much more concerned with Mayhew’s comfort level than Stuart Freeborn had been. The updated suit came with a cooling system and remote-controlled servos to give Chewie more nuanced jaw movements. And the fur was mostly synthetic, making it lighter.

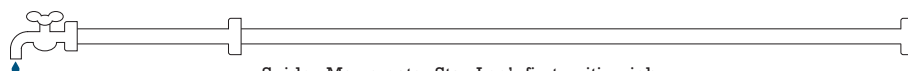
CHEWBACCA AWAKENS

Star Wars outlasted Lucas’s involvement with the franchise. After Disney took over in 2012, they hired writer-director J. J. Abrams to oversee the final three films. Abrams knew right away that fans were going to want to see Han and Chewie reunite on the *Millennium Falcon*, so he called up Mayhew and said coyly, “There’s a little thing I’d like you to do for me.” Now close to 70, Mayhew was excited to bring Chewbacca back for *The Force Awakens*, but he told Abrams that he’d spent the previous few years in a wheelchair and had just undergone double knee replacement surgery. “I can do most things, but the only thing I can’t really do is walk. But I can do the facial expressions and everything else like that for Chewie.”

Abrams agreed to use Mayhew for the scenes where the Wookiee is on the *Falcon*, but they’d need someone else to handle all the action scenes. It was time to find a new Chewbacca.

PASSING THE BOWCASTER

“I was told to send in an audition tape of me doing a caveman impression,” said Joonas Suotamo, a Finnish former professional basketball player who answered a worldwide casting call for an actor who topped seven feet. He didn’t even know what



Spider-Man creator Stan Lee’s first writing job:
producing “advance obituaries” for celebrities who weren’t dead yet for the Associated Press.

movie it was for when he auditioned, and when he found out it was for the new *Star Wars*, it wasn't until after he signed a contract that Abrams informed him he'd be taking over the role of Chewbacca.

Suotamo wasn't ideal for the part, being several inches shorter than Mayhew at 6' 11", but the Penn State Film School graduate had something Mayhew didn't have: acting experience. "I loved doing theater in high school," he said. "I just didn't believe my chances to get any acting part were possible because of my size, so I studied more behind the camera." He was selling insurance in Finland when he auditioned in 2013. Once cast, Suotamo had a lot more sources to draw from than Mayhew did back in 1976—including all the films and Mayhew himself, whose new title was "Chewbacca Consultant."

"Joonas learned very, very quickly," said Mayhew. "He had seen Chewie as a hero for him, and he's almost as big as I am. By the time he got the costume on, there was not that much difference between us." (Suotamo got a boost from the two-inch heels inside his Chewbacca feet/boots.) After fully taking over the role in 2017's *The Last Jedi*, Suotamo assured fans that the Wookiee is in good hands, saying, "I now have a pretty good idea of what Chewie would do in any situation. It's a very specific character. That's part of why he's so lovable."

THE BIG TEDDY BEAR

Peter Mayhew underwent spinal surgery in 2018 to increase his mobility, but died of a heart attack a year later. He was 74. As the news of his death spread, celebrities and fans from all walks of life started paying their respects. "Thank you Peter for inspiring generations of explorers," tweeted NASA astronaut Nick Hague from the International Space Station.

"What was so remarkable about Peter," said Mark Hamill, "was his spirit. His gentleness was so close to what a Wookiee is. He just radiated happiness and warmth. We hit it off immediately and stayed friends for over 40 years." Harrison Ford also said he and Mayhew remained friends and praised the way he "invested his soul in the character." George Lucas wrote, "Peter was a wonderful man. He was the closest any human being could be to a Wookiee: big heart, gentle nature—and I learned to always let him win."

But Mayhew always knew that it was Chewbacca—not the people who created him or the man who played him—that fans adored. And he knew why: "My character is a teddy bear, basically. How many people had a teddy bear or a security blanket as a youngster? And that's what Chewie is, he looks after everybody."

For more exciting adventures of the galaxy's most famous Wookiee, set the Falcon's navicomputer for page 388 and then...punch it, Chewie!

What's the Slovakian expression for "it's raining cats and dogs"? "Tractors are falling."

THE CHEWBACCA CHRONICLES

We found more fun bits of Wookiee trivia than we could fit into the Chewbacca story (page 304), so we smuggled the surplus over to this page.

Things That Sound Like Chewbacca

Apparently it's very difficult to do a convincing Chewbacca impression. (Don't believe it? Try it.) That makes sense, considering that his "voice" was created by splicing together several different animal sounds. But some *Star Wars* fans have been able to re-create it by using inanimate objects. Here are some odd examples we found on the Internet that bear an uncanny resemblance to the Wookiee's call:

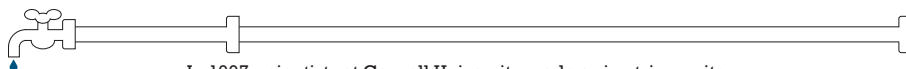
- A wooden chair sliding across a stone floor
- A car driving through a tunnel
- A stuck kitchen drawer being pulled open
- A wall heater turning on
- Old elevator doors opening
- An electric car window opening and closing
- An electric toothbrush with a low battery
- A toilet paper dispenser in a public restroom stall

Bigfoot from Space

In 1967, two men exploring a remote creek in northern California filmed the now-famous blurry footage of a supposed Sasquatch (see page 352) walking briskly past them, sparking off the modern Bigfoot craze. Fifteen years later, in a redwood forest only a few miles from that original sighting, a movie crew was filming *Return of the Jedi*. Just to be safe, while Peter Mayhew was in his Chewbacca costume, he was accompanied by bodyguards wearing bright orange vests...on the off chance that a hunter would mistake the Wookiee for Bigfoot.

The Chewbacca Defense

In 1998, *South Park* used the Wookiee to satirize the O. J. Simpson trial. In the episode, attorney Johnnie Cochran is suing the Chef. "Ladies and gentlemen of this supposed jury," he says, "I have one final thing I want you to consider. Ladies and gentlemen, this is Chewbacca. Chewbacca is a Wookiee from the planet Kashyyyk. But Chewbacca lives on the planet Endor. Now think about it; that does not make sense! Why would a Wookiee, an eight-foot-tall Wookiee, want to live on Endor, with



In 1997, scientists at Cornell University made a six-string guitar the size of a single human blood cell. It's played by shooting laser beams at the strings.

a bunch of two-foot-tall Ewoks?” The other attorney says, “Damn it! He’s using the Chewbacca defense!”

Cochran continues, “That does not make sense! But more important, you have to ask yourself: What does this have to do with this case? Nothing. Ladies and gentlemen, it has nothing to do with this case! It does not make sense! Look at me. I’m a lawyer defending a major record company, and I’m talkin’ about Chewbacca! Does that make sense? Ladies and gentlemen, I am not making any sense! None of this makes sense! And so you have to remember, when you’re in that jury room deliberatin’ and conjugatin’ the Emancipation Proclamation, does it make sense? No! Ladies and gentlemen of this supposed jury, it does not make sense! If Chewbacca lives on Endor, you must acquit! The defense rests.”

Although Cochran’s argument has nothing to do with the case, he wins...much like the way he won the Simpson trial by getting the jury to ignore overwhelming evidence and focus only on the questionable size of one glove. (And for the record, Chewbacca never lived on Endor; he was just visiting.)

Head Games

At a Profiles in History auction in 2012, a Chewbacca head that had been used in the original *Star Wars* trilogy sold to a private collector for \$172,200.

That’s No Cane

In 2013, Peter Mayhew, then 69, was going through security at Denver International Airport when he was stopped by TSA agents. Reason: they were suspicious of his cane, which was much heavier than a regular cane and looked a lot like a lightsaber from *Star Wars*. The 7' 3" Mayhew explained that he needed a sturdy cane, and that it looked like a lightsaber because he is Chewbacca. He was briefly detained while they made sure his laser sword was not operational. During the holdup, Mayhew took the opportunity to send out a tweet to his 25,000 Twitter followers: “@AmericanAir won’t allow me through the airport with me cane!” Mayhew’s faithful fans inundated the airline’s Twitter page with cries of “Let Chewbacca fly!” Less than five minutes later, Mayhew was on his way (but American denied it had anything to do with the tweets).

Wookiee Talk

According to Wookieepedia, the online *Star Wars* encyclopedia, Chewbacca’s language is

IN THE KNOW

Ever heard of a Wookiee Cookie? No, it’s not something you might step in on a Kashyyyk forest floor. It’s one of 29 recipes in *The Star Wars Cookbook: Wookiee Cookies and Other Galactic Recipes*, by Robin Davis. In addition to the chewy (Chewie?) chocolate snacks, there are recipes for “Boba Fett-uccine,” “Greedo’s Burritos,” “Han-burgers,” “Jabba Jiggle,” and “Obi-Wan Kebobs.”

called Shyriiwook, which translates to “Tongue of the Tree People.” (It’s said that Shyriiwook has more than 150 words for “wood.”) Here are a few phrases from the *Star Wars Galactic Phrase Book & Travel Guide* by Ben Burtt, the man who came up with Chewie’s voice:

- *Wyaaaaaa. Ruh ruh.* (“Hello. How are you?”)
- *Huwaa muua mumwa.* (“Can I buy you a drink?”)
- *Roooarrrgh ur roo.* (“I have a bad feeling about this.”)
- *Wua ga ma uma ahuma ooma.* (“I think my arm has been pulled out of the socket.”)
- *Wooo hwa hwa?* (“Nice weather, eh?”)

Death of a Wookiee

Q: How do you upset an entire legion of *Star Wars* fans?

A: Kill Chewbacca.

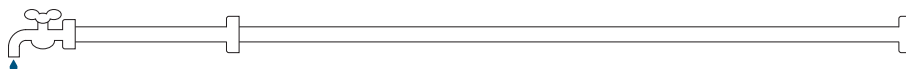
That’s exactly what George Lucas allowed to happen in a novel from the *Star Wars* EU (Expanded Universe)—the collection of licensed *Star Wars* spin-off material in books, comics, video games, and other media that is considered canon (elements of the story that, together, are accepted as part of the official version of the story). That means that if a character dies in an EU book or TV show, that character is dead in every other incarnation, even the movies. In 1999, with interest in the *Star Wars* EU starting to wane, editors from Del Rey Books sent George Lucas a letter asking if they could kill off a major character (reportedly, their number-one wish was Luke Skywalker). Lucas sent back a letter with a list of characters they could *not* kill. Skywalker was on that list...but Chewbacca wasn’t.

So in October 1999, the New Jedi Order novel *Vector Prime* was published. In a pivotal scene, Chewbacca gets stranded on a planet...that gets crushed by its own moon. He does not survive. The novel, which even had its own TV commercial, made the *New York Times* best-seller list. Suffice it to say there was a great disturbance in the Force when news of the Wookiee’s demise spread. Some radio stations were even falsely reporting that Chewbacca’s portrayer, Peter Mayhew, had died (he hadn’t). After Disney took over the franchise in 2012, it scrapped every last EU storyline from the canon...and Chewbacca came back to life.

* * *

“You’re not a star until they can spell your name in Karachi.”

—Humphrey Bogart



Put together, all the parking spaces in the U.S. take up more space than the entire nation of Israel.