Notes from a Geographer:
A quick guide to assessment, introducing the discipline, recruiting majors and explaining what you do as a geographer.

Or

Life on the Jedi Council:
A quick guide to battling the Death Star, understanding the Jedi Way, recruiting Padawans and explaining what you, a Jedi Master, do for a living.

"You're a college professor? What do you teach?"

Ugh! How I dread that question because *I know* if I respond, "Geography"; I'll hear something like, "Oh, I loved geography in school! I memorized all mountain ranges and rivers in India!", or "I have a subscription to *National Geographic! I love pictures of elephants!*", or "How *can* you keep up with all those crazy new countries in Europe?" Occasionally I've been met with the worst retort of all, the disapproving, "Oh." What's *that* supposed to mean? I'm a bit defensive when it comes to my dear-old-friend-geography, so I'm always convinced that people who are ignorant about "real geography" are disgusted with the thought that anyone could make a living, mastering the world of maps and trivia. I am paranoid that they suspect me a sham. The weight such incrimination is unbearable, even if it's not true.

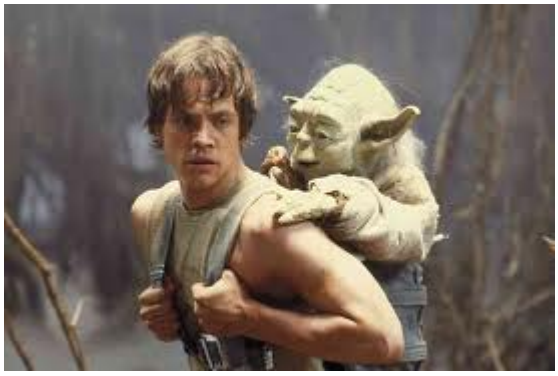
I've had that exchange many dozens of times in the years since I first declared geography my major and I cannot think of a single instance in which, I did not feel compelled to set the record straight, to defend my craft from either exuberant ignorance or patronizing scorn. I quickly find myself in full-blown first-day-of-the-semester lecture mode, with people who really don't want a lecture on geography. I fear my own pedantic tendencies, but I can't control them in the face of a challenge to my career and my real love for the discipline.

For years, I plotted to avoid all this unpleasantness by answering the *dread* question with, "I teach Astrophysics" or "Nanotechnology" using a fake BBC-flavoured British accent for effect, but the risk, however small, that my interrogator would know something of astrophysics or nanotechnology, was always too great. I'd be exposed as a fraud, an American…and a geographer. Eventually, I found that I could proudly announce my career *while* inviting others into a little geography propaganda lecture by noting that I teach, "Business Geography", "Medical Geography" or "Forensic Geography". When I note the *specific* courses I teach, rather than the department affiliated with those courses, the response I get is more along the lines of "Wow, I didn't know there was such a thing. What's that all about?" NOW, I have entrée to launch into a much abridged spiel about how geographers can study any subject, as long as that subject *takes place* because geography isn't really much of a subject or a topic, but rather a *discipline*

with a specific way of understanding problems, solving problems and communicating results that allows its practitioners to study just about anything, anywhere.

If time for conversation is abundant (flying to China or standing in line at the DMV), I explain what geography is, and what geographers do. If I were ever at Comic-Con talking to a guy dressed like Darth Vader, I would explain it like I do on the first day of class in my methods course, "The Geographer's Craft". In that course, about five years ago, I started using *Stars Wars* analogies to add color to my introduction to our class discussion about geography-as-discipline. This imagery has proven to be so powerful, I've written this essay so that other geography faculty may experiment with these analogies. In this essay, I rely on Lucasfilm terminology and the analogies derived from the double trilogy, to: 1) propose an alternative way to explain what geography *is* to students; 2) show how geography might begin to shed its unfortunate reputation as the study of place names and maps while replacing it with a reputation that is not only more accurate; but also carries some ultimate-space-fantasy-badass imagery. Maybe we'll all get a few more majors. Who knows?

Most students who've taken classes with me have energetically embraced the analogies and imagery associated with Star Wars –including students not pre-disposed to nerdy science fiction references. Today, geography students at California State University, Northridge regularly incorporate Star Wars references and photos on the student geography club Facebook page used to organize events and share geography related tips and GIS (Geographic Information Software) frustrations. Some students brought plastic lightsabers to commencement exercises this year as a way of noting the completion of their apprenticeships as a Jedi-Geographers. I'm waiting for a few to openly demand the university to replace the traditional graduation march, "Pomp and Circumstance" with the Imperial Death March (Darth Vader's Theme) so they can receive their diplomas in a proper soundscape. As a bonus, I also get to occasionally accept the über-cool title, "Master Graves", which I vastly prefer to "Doctor Graves". While I don't mind Obi-Wan references, I'm less comfortable being likened to Yoda.



Outlined below are the Star Wars analogies I've used over the years to help students understand that by majoring in geography, they are entering into a discipleship (apprenticeship) in which they should emerge, after a few years of training, with a set of guild-craft skills that are really quite unique. It's my contribution to the programmatic debates that raged among a previous generation of geographers.

Jedis See the Force

"The force is an energy field created by all living things, it surrounds us, it penetrates us, it binds the galaxy together" - Obi-Wan

The first of the Jedi skills, a geographer-in-training (a "youngling" for undergrads or a "Padawan" for graduate students?) should develop is a heightened mindfulness about both the physical and humanized environment.

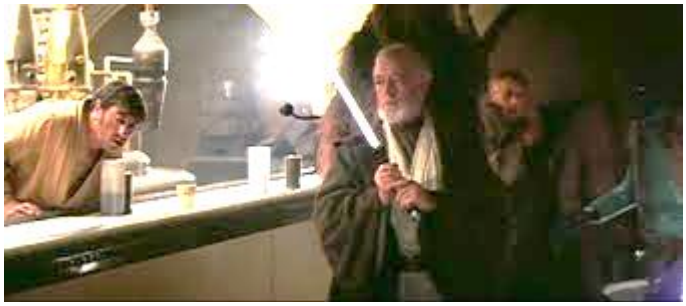
They need to be mindful in order to "see" the landscape. A well-developed ability to detect patterns, processes and meaning in both the physical and cultural landscapes is a key Jedi skill. Indeed it is a type of literacy. Geographers learn to read landscapes as texts. There is a large and fascinating landscape literature, in which master Jedis examine a scene or landscape (a meandering stream or a fast-food restaurant) and tell an expansive story about the forces that produced the landscape and the force that the landscape exerts on those around it. Jedi's can connect the local scene with the global (galactic?). I frequently urge students to put on their "Jedi goggles" so they can see such patterns. Eventually, with practice, they are able to derive rich meaning from the landscapes they encounter. If one can see and understand these forces, one can use it to advantage. But most people do not see the force (or forces) or are even aware of its existence. They simply take things for granted and never question why the world around them is arranged as it is. Seeing the force allows students to be able to look behind the material veil to see the actions which form the tangible substance of the world. They can't use the force (in the next section) unless they can see it or detect it. We must be able see what others don't, because we look for meaning where others assume there is none. Advanced Jedis should also be mindful to hear, taste and smell for meaning in the landscape as well.

Jedis Think Spatially

"Remember, a Jedi can feel the Force flowing thru him* [sic]*" - Obi-Wan

The reason geographers look for meaning where others assume there is none is because geographers also have a special "Jedi way" of acquiring knowledge. I call it "Using the Force" " while other scholars sometimes refer to this as deploying epistemology. Geographers seek knowledge in a way that is peculiar to our discipline and because this style of learning is so powerful, it can be understood as "the force", that mystical energy that fuels the Jedi way. Students and scholars of all disciplinary backgrounds are interested in understanding why things are the way they are, how they came to be that way, why things work the way they do. Geographers ask these very questions, but as Jedi-geographers seek to understand "why", we invoke the force and by doing so, privilege the question "where?" Place, location and space are the tools that allow us to invoke the force. When Luke Skywalker was in training, he was encourage to learn to "stretch out with his feelings" in order to use the force. Padawan learners in geography are taught to "invoke the magic question "where?" An example I frequently use to demonstrate the use of the force comes from a personal experience doing research a decade or more ago. While seeking a database of addresses for a research project, the person who possessed the dataset, and had been researching the topic for years, asked me, "What are you going to do with this address roster?" I replied, "To map the locations and see the sorts of neighborhoods this industry operates in, so I can better understand this industry's business model". The reply: "We've had this data for years. Nobody has once considered *mapping it* to uncover that question". My reply; under my breath? "I'm a Jedi…I'm using the force".

Jedis Use Spatial Tools



Of course, students want to know about mastering Jedi skills. They ask excitedly, "When can I learn how to use a lightsaber so I can smite that guy that stole my prom date?" Well…we don't have lightsabers per se…, but we do have tools (or "weapons" if you must!) that are unique to the Jedi way. The most lightsaber-like tools geographers have at our disposal are geospatial technologies, like GIS (Remote Sensing or RS). Like the lightsaber to the Jedi, GIS is a unique weapon, nearly exclusive to our ancient order, which when used skillfully, can help conquer foes, like hypotheses, and occasionally to strike down other enemies (economists?). In decades past, Jedis used to wield swords (regular sabers-paper maps), but improved technology resulted in the light saber. The light saber, because of its advantages can do things a sword cannot. In the same way, early Jedi-geographers wielded the map until advances in technology gave us GIS, more powerful and advanced yet, at a glance, similar in form to its ancient progenitor. The *GIS-saber* is an amazing tool because it allows geographers to grapple with datasets and data types that elude the linear or two dimensional tools wielded by other disciplines (SPSS?). For example, it allows us to easily see spatial and statistical relationships between disparate data sets, like what might exist between malaria and elevation. This is not to say that Jedi geographers can't pick up a blaster (survey instrument) or pilot a death star (Excel?), it's just that GIS allows geographers to make use of data that other disciplines find useless. By combining GIS with a powerful set of spatial analysis techniques (*Guard! Turn! Parry! Dodge! Spin! Ha! Thrust!*), Jedi geographers can wield the GIS-saber with tremendous effect. Additionally, once a Jedi has become adept with the *GIS-saber*, they begin to use the force more effectively; they know how to ask questions like a Jedi (engage the epistemology) and they begin to see data with Jedi eyes…noticing things that disciples of other disciplines might ignore.

Jedis Communicate Spatially

The last of the special Jedi skills that geographers should master is the unique language of the Jedi: cartography. Cartography, the ability read and write in the language of maps, is a type of literacy that is generally restricted to geographers. GIS and various graphics software, like Adobe Illustrator, have eliminated some of the truly arcane elements of manual cartography, but making high quality maps that are easy to ready and that communicate clearly and forcefully is both an art and a science that appears easy to many outsiders, but takes the practiced hand of the Jedi-cartographer. Certainly, a well-trained Jedi-geographer must be display solid textual literacy and numeracy skills, but in our graphics-centered, ain't-got-time-to-read-all-that world, well-crafted maps are especially useful.

Maps have power. An example of this power was related to me by a congressional staffer who I was working with to pass a new law regulating financial products sold to members of the military. The staffer recounted how the bill languished on Capitol Hill until she distributed a series of maps showing the intense concentration of subprime lending companies near military bases. Faced with the threat of *maps* displaying this reality appearing in the newspapers of each legislator's home district, the bill suddenly found dozens of co-sponsors; and the bill passed easily into law. My research wasn't brilliant. My data was publically available and the analysis was simplistic. The data was made powerful by via the map. What was once invisible was now obvious. It was a Jedi Map Trick. **Saving the Jedis from the Dark Side**

"A Jedi's strength flows from the Force, but beware of the Dark Side. " - Yoda

OK, so geography majors might find these useful, and additional majors are always at a premium, but our geography program is under attack from the Sith Lord we call "the administration". Is there a way to defeat evil? Sure, but you have to know something about the dark side in order to have any chance.

One of the problems geography departments face is articulating the value of geography courses (and departments) to budget-minded administrators. Several universities in California have lost their geography program in recent years, at a time when demand for the *skills* we teach is at an all-time high. This comes at the same time administrators have had to embrace assessment, a task which many faculties find as annoying and problematic as Jar Jar Binks. The *utility* of your geography program can be made far more visible by focusing less on what your students must learn (knowledge) and more squarely on what skills they must demonstrate after completing their coursework. The assessment mania that has swept through academia and K-12 schools could eventually help strengthen geography because geographers actually have demonstrable *skills* that are both methodologically and epistemologically unique to geography. And these skills are undeniably valuable. That point cannot be surrendered. No other *disciplinary practitioners* are equipped to teach spatial thinking, cartography or GIS. Jedis cannot be trained by geologists, historians, anthropologists or even sociologists because none of those disciplines have mastered the Jedi skills that are specific to geography.

Perhaps in a time not so long from now, in galaxy well known to us, geography can begin to shed reputation as a *subject* and can finally be understood as the *disciplinary practice* that it is. Sure, there will remain a core of subject matter expertise involving crops, capitals, climates, and it is important for Padawan Learners to acquire a certain measure of

facility with such data so that they may leverage it quickly, but such facts must cease to be central to the public concept of geography the way spelling, dates, and times tables have become peripheral to our concepts of English, History and Mathematics.

The California State Standards for both pupils and pre-service teachers must be updated so that we can abandon this 19th century notion of geography and replace it with the reality of geography as a Jedi-like discipline for the 21st century (and beyooooooond!).