

# 1988 | THE FORCE IS STRONG WITH THIS HOOSIER

*Alumnus walks in two worlds — the real world and a galaxy far, far away* | BY KURT ANTHONY KRUG



Archaeologist David West Reynolds has parlayed a lifelong love of *Star Wars* into a flourishing side career as a film location scout, author, and speaker.

Seeing 1977's *Star Wars* changed **David West Reynolds's** life forever.

"(It) burst upon my imagination like nothing else I had ever experienced," explains Reynolds, BA'88, of New Albany, Ind. "What bowled me over most of all was how *real* those exotic cinematic worlds seemed to be. The movie had the convincing look and feel of gritty reality, and the rich tapestry of its fantasy cultures had the layers and depth of authentic history."

He loved the creativity that went into the design of *Star Wars*. Reynolds found he could dwell on its details and constantly discover new facets of meaning and interest.

"This inspired me to devise my own details and backstory to add to what I saw and read — to imagine that I, like the movie's creators, also had the special license and power to explore this incredible world," he says.

His explorations led him to North Africa after Reynolds learned the scenes on Tatooine — Luke Skywalker's planet — were filmed in Tunisia. As an archaeology doctoral student, Reynolds independently conducted a search for the original *Star Wars* sets in Tunisia in the mid-1990s. He found the bones of the large, fictional Tatooine sand creature — a skeleton that C-3PO walks past in one of the movie's scenes — but Reynolds left it alone.

"(It's) my belief that the true archaeologist isn't a treasure hunter, but a seeker of knowledge. I had come seeking an experience, and to test myself, and I had found what I sought. I did not feel the need to take anything away," says Reynolds.

Reynolds wrote about his expedition for the official fanzine *Star Wars Insider*. He caught the attention of *Star Wars* producer Rick McCallum, who hired Reynolds as a location scout for 1999's *Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace*, which revisited Tatooine.

McCallum was dumbfounded to see that Reynolds had left the bones where he found them. "(McCallum) hoisted the foremost of them and told me, 'This one's yours, take it,'" recalls Reynolds. "He shipped the (rest) back to Skywalker Ranch."

The bone is not the only original *Star Wars* prop in Reynolds's collection. He owns pieces of the Death Star's surface, blueprints used to build the original sets, and panels from the Cantina's doorframe. He also has a replica of a full-size stormtrooper helmet and suit of armor.

Reynolds continued to pour his passion into the franchise. He's penned nine best-selling *Star Wars* visual dictionaries since 1997. At the time, no fictional universe had ever been subjected to such scrutiny. Nowadays, it's typical to see franchises with companion guides.

"I viewed myself as someone polishing the glass so that we could all see their work more clearly," he says.

Today, Reynolds runs the Phaeton Group, a multi-disciplinary consulting firm that crosses traditional interdisciplinary barriers to work with businesses, the government and military, and academia. He's even written and co-written nonfiction books for NASA.

Reynolds says the real adventure for him has been building a career people told him was impossible. As a kid, he dreamed of being a Renaissance man or an explorer.

"They told me in high school and in graduate school over and over, 'Nobody does that today. You can't do it,'" he says. "But IU was different. My mentors in Bloomington said, 'You can do it if you're willing to work for it.'"

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