

The Tragic Appeal of Disaster Movies

An airplane full of passengers is in deep trouble. Both pilots have gotten sick after eating contaminated food, and many of the passengers are ill as well. A huge storm is making it difficult to fly, let alone land safely. Only one man can save the day: an ex-army pilot with a drinking problem. Can he be the hero that everyone needs?

If you think this sounds like the plot of a movie, you're right. It's an example of a disaster movie, a genre in which ordinary people deal with all kinds of dangers. The perils in these movies range from natural disasters such as earthquakes and meteor strikes to man-made situations such as terrorist attacks. A group of characters is introduced, disaster strikes, and the characters have to respond. It's likely that some of them will die, while human drama, such as romances or family conflicts, usually accompanies the main action.

Disaster movies were being made as far back as the silent film era. An early example, *The End of the World* (1916), shows the effects of a comet passing close to Earth. As time passed and special effects became better, disaster movies became big-budget affairs. The 1970s were a golden age for disaster movies, with the decade producing classics like *Airport* and *The Poseidon Adventure*.

Movies featuring disasters often reflect real-world worries. After World War II, the fear of nuclear disaster became a theme, particularly in the Japanese *Godzilla* film series. As science developed, so did the disasters, with climate change being a feature of *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *Snowpiercer* (2013). But what is it that makes disaster movies so popular?

There are several reasons why people flock to theaters to see disaster movies. For one thing, they help us confront our fears. The same real-world situations that inspire movie disasters are things we worry about, whether they be climate change, terrorist bombings, or earthquakes. For another, we see our worst nightmares unfold before our eyes, but we also see how ordinary people manage to survive them.

This relates to another theory, which states that we're unconsciously preparing for how to deal with these life-or-death events. Part of this comes from watching what people do, and learning what works—or what doesn't. What's more, watching these movies reassures us that it's possible to survive these disasters. According to Roland Emmerich, director of *Independence Day* (1996), "You see all this destruction [...],

but in the end, the right people save the day.”

The disaster genre isn't restricted to movies. There are numerous video and board games in which the objective is to survive an awful event. *Disaster Report4 Plus: Summer Memories* is a 2018 Japanese game set in a city struck by an earthquake. Players must find food, water, shelter, and even bathroom facilities to survive.

There are also many books that tell the stories of disasters and those who live through them. In *The Terrible Hours* (1999), 33 people are trapped in the *Squalus*, a flooding submarine, with time and oxygen running out. To save them all, one man tries every means possible. What makes this story even more thrilling is that it actually happened! Perhaps someday this fascinating tale will become a Hollywood blockbuster, continuing a tradition in disaster movies that will likely never go out of style.

Freedom and Slavery in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Huckleberry Finn, nicknamed Huck, is a teenage boy living in the rural Mississippi Valley in the 1830s. He and his friend, Tom Sawyer, were rewarded US\$6,000 each during their previous adventures. Abandoned by his father, Huck was adopted by the Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson. They do their best to “civilize” the rough, coarse Huck by improving his manners and forcing him to attend school and church.

When Huck’s violent, alcoholic father returns and demands Huck’s money, Huck fakes his own death and runs away to a nearby uninhabited island. There, he finds Jim, Miss Watson’s escaped black slave. Jim ran away because Miss Watson planned to sell him, which would have separated him from his wife and children. Unfortunately, everyone now assumes Jim murdered Huck.

Huck and Jim float on a raft down the Mississippi River to Cairo, Illinois. There, Jim can take a riverboat to the free states, where slavery is illegal and he can earn money to buy his family’s freedom. Throughout the journey, Huck has a moral crisis. Is it the right thing to assist the kind and helpful Jim escape, or to return Jim to Miss Watson, as he is legally her property?

Along the way, Jim and Huck encounter many obstacles, including being separated and witnessing a long-standing dispute between two families. They also get involved with two criminals who try to cheat a family out of its inheritance. Later, it’s revealed that Miss Watson has died and freed Jim in her will. Huck’s father is also dead. Jim is free to reunite with his family, and Huck leaves to continue his adventures out west.

Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, was born in Missouri, US, in 1835. He was the sixth of seven children, and grew up in Hannibal, a frontier town next to the Mississippi River. Although he had a comfortable childhood, Twain’s father died in 1847, leaving the family in hardship. Twain quit school at 13 and worked for his brother’s newspaper. At 17, he left Hannibal and worked as a printer and a journalist in the eastern US.

Twain became a licensed riverboat pilot in 1859 and took many ships up and down the Mississippi River. He loved the job and wrote many articles and stories about the experience. It was during this time that he adopted the pen name “Mark

Twain” from a sailing term. The start of the Civil War in 1861 ended Twain’s piloting career, however. He headed west and worked as a journalist and fiction writer.

In 1870, Twain married Olivia Langdon. The couple had a son, who died of diphtheria at two years old, and later had three daughters. Twain traveled across the US and Europe on a lecture series and wrote a successful novel, *The Gilded Age*, in 1873. It was about corruption and abuse of the public’s welfare. Twain then became a full-time writer and produced his best-known works, *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. These novels were the first to portray the difference in characters’ social class through dialect. Twain became famous and was awarded honorary university degrees by Yale and Oxford. He died in 1910, having outlived his wife and children. Twain is remembered as a classic American author and the voice of an era.

Some of the important themes in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are racism and slavery, the hypocrisy of “civilized” society, and the development from youth to maturity.

Although slavery in the US officially ended two decades before Twain wrote the novel, black people still had few rights. By setting the novel in a time when slavery was still a fact of life, Twain wanted to show that many black people’s lives had not changed much. The novel has a strong message against racism and slavery. Despite breaking the law by escaping from his owner, Jim is presented as one of the most moral and sympathetic characters in order to demonstrate the humanity of slaves to Twain’s contemporary readers.

Twain further shows the hypocrisy of the morals and laws followed by the people that Huck and Jim encounter. For example, the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson are highly respectable, religious women who try to teach Christian morals and proper behavior to Huck. Yet, Miss Watson is a slave owner and therefore part of the problem in an unjust society. Huck, who practically grew up as an orphan and had to feed himself by hunting and fishing, finds the natural, outdoor life morally superior to civilized society because it leads him to his own conclusions about what is right.

The novel shows Huck’s development from a boy holding society’s racist attitudes to a young man willing to break the law to help Jim escape. His conversations with Jim reveal that he stops thinking of him as a slave and starts to consider him a friend. In the end, he shows maturity by following his soul’s moral instincts against slavery.

How the Tudors Changed England

English history is full of notable periods, but few saw as much change and upheaval as the Tudor Dynasty (1485–1603). When it began, England was emerging from years of bloody civil war, yet when it ended, England was a powerful international player with the beginnings of a mighty overseas empire.

The first Tudor king was Henry VII. He won the last major battle of the series of civil wars known as the Wars of the Roses. Afterward, he united the warring factions via marriage. In the following peace, England recovered and grew wealthy again.

Henry VIII succeeded his father at the young age of 17. Through a combination of wars, political marriages, and the skillful diplomacy of his politicians, England gained power and influence. Henry loved ships, and in his day, the royal navy became a force to be reckoned with.

Henry is also famous for having six wives. The first was Catherine of Aragon, his older brother's widow, but Henry divorced her when she failed to give birth to a son. Anne Boleyn followed, but he had her executed. The next wife bore him a son and heir, but she died. His fourth wife he divorced, the fifth he had beheaded, and the sixth outlived him.

His children, Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I, ruled England in that order after his death. Though relatively peaceful at home, the years of his children's reigns would pit England against one of the strongest nations in Europe: Spain. In Elizabeth's time, her navy defeated a much larger force of invading ships, the Spanish Armada, and saved the nation. Elizabeth died without children in 1603, and the throne passed to James I, the first of the Stuart Dynasty.

The changes that took place during the Tudor period left a lasting impact on English culture. The greatest example is probably Henry VIII's first divorce, as this brought him into direct conflict with the pope and the Catholic Church. Rather than submitting to the church's ban on remarriage, Henry ordered his religious scholars to come up with a new way of doing things.

This resulted in the Reformation, when England moved away from the Catholic Church and began following the Protestant doctrine that had emerged in Europe under Martin Luther. Henry became the head of the newly formed Anglican Church. It took several more civil wars during the Stuart Dynasty for the Anglican Church to become dominant. Today, it's still the main Christian denomination in the UK.

The defeat of the Spanish Armada by Elizabeth's navy in 1588 was also a turning point. It made England feared at sea as one of the world's leading naval powers. A leading admiral, Sir Francis Drake, had already become the first captain to sail all the way around the world. Twenty years later, Sir Walter Raleigh, a naval advisor during the war with the Spanish, founded the colony of Virginia in the New World. England's superior ships and sailors traveled all over the globe, claiming more lands for what would eventually become the British Empire.

Thanks to these historic events and famous figures, the Tudor period continues to fascinate people. Movies like *Elizabeth* and TV shows such as *The Tudors* explore the lives of the rulers, while the critically acclaimed novel *Wolf Hall* looks at the key players in the Reformation. With both its appeal to fans of popular culture and lasting influence on English society, the Tudor name will never be erased from the history books.

The Noble Game of Go

Two people sit at a table, each wearing a look of intense concentration. Beside one player is a bowl of white stones, all flat, smooth, and round; the other player's stones are black. Between them is a square board painted with 19 horizontal lines and 19 vertical lines. Black and white pieces already occupy many of the places where the lines intersect. These people are playing Go, an ancient game that has been entertaining people for centuries.

No one knows just how ancient Go is. According to popular belief, the game was invented by Chinese Emperor Yao in 2300 BC. He is said to have devised the game as a way to teach his son Danzhu discipline and concentration. The first documented evidence of the game is found in *Zuo zhuan*, making it at least 2,500 years old. At the time, the game was called *yi*, but later became known as *weiqi*. In China, *yi* was seen as a game for nobles and scholars, though simple stone boards have also been found, suggesting that ordinary civilians enjoyed it as well.

Go's popularity grew, and it spread to Japan from China in the seventh or eighth century. Just as in China, it was especially enjoyed by the nobility. Warlords played as though their pieces were soldiers on the battlefield, thus sharpening their battle skills. The greatest players were rewarded with money, and special schools were set up to train players for national tournaments. From Japan, Go spread to the Western world, and professional competitions are now held in several countries. People now play Go on the Internet, and the game is more popular than ever.

The rules of Go are simple, but this allows for complex gameplay. Starting with black, each player takes turns placing a single stone at the intersection of two lines. In one version, points are scored when a player surrounds an empty intersection with their own stones. However, if a player's pieces are surrounded by those of their opponent, they are "captured" and removed from the board. A game ends when neither player wishes to move (a draw), or one surrenders. In some versions, the final scores are determined by counting up surrounded intersections only, while in others, the stones a player has on the board are added as well.

Go's influence can be found in Chinese and Japanese culture from ancient times until today. In ancient China, the game was considered one of the four pursuits of a gentleman scholar, along with calligraphy, painting, and playing the *guqin*, a stringed musical instrument. The game is referenced in novels such as *The Tale of Genji*, a

classic of Japanese literature. In recent times, Go's popularity has been boosted in Japan by the manga *Hikaru no Go*. The story concerns a boy possessed by the spirit of a famous Go player.

The game also made news headlines in March 2016 when AlphaGo, an artificial intelligence program, beat a human Go champion in a five-game series. This was hailed as a breakthrough in computer programming. AlphaGo studied old games and played itself millions of times, learning from its mistakes and becoming a Go master. AlphaGo was able to increase its intelligence, just as playing Go with friends helps us develop our minds— exactly what Emperor Yao had intended.

