IN FACE OF REAL WARS, I'LL SKIP 'STAR WARS'

One thing that's puzzled me this winter is the astonishing box-office success of "Star Wars: The Force Awakens," which is nearing the $2 billion mark in ticket sales. This is remarkable for the seventh movie in a series consisting of a trilogy, a prequel trilogy, and a sequel trilogy now under way.

I haven't seen "The Force Awakens" yet. But I did watch the trailer and study the website. The dominating images are those of uniformed soldiers, bombs, saber duels, aircraft dogfights and widespread destruction. This is what I remember seeing in 1977 when I eagerly joined the throng in Tacoma, Wash., to watch the much-hyped debut. Apparently, the force of Disney marketing never awakened in me.

I completely understand the first word of the movie title: "star." Fantasy escape is a potent form of entertainment. In this case, it's from the confines of daily life to "a galaxy far, far away" and "a long time ago." What I do not understand is the second word: "war." This subject has almost universal appeal for reasons that make less sense to me the longer I think about them.

I acknowledge that war is an important reality that deserves careful study and reporting. The Navy, for example, has its own War College where every academic discipline is brought to bear on the subject. But it's not a subject I'm willing to spend another dime on for entertainment. Perhaps it's because I've been fleeced too long by the U.S. government to pay for a long list of ill-begotten wars that I've voted against since coming of age during Vietnam War. And we've already mortgaged our future to keep up the fighting.

The good news is that "Star Wars" is escapist fiction. The bad news is that the here-and-now non-fiction of planet Earth is inching toward the sort of destruction portrayed by the films. One measure of this trend is the strengthened appetite young people have for apocalyptic fiction. "The Hunger Games" trilogy comes to mind.

An explicit measure is the Doomsday Clock kept by scientists and policy analysts who monitor how close planet Earth is to actual death and destruction. Their group is called the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, an international, independent, nonpartisan, non-profit organization advised by 16 Nobel laureates, and founded in 1945 by scientists of the Manhattan Project. These were the people who, while building the first atomic bombs, accepted the moral responsibility for the consequences of their work. The Bulletin is also an award-winning resource (journal-magazine-website-meetings) that I've been fortunate to contribute to, one with more than 15,000 institution subscriptions worldwide.

Prior to late 2015, Bulletin timekeepers set the Doomsday Clock to five minutes before midnight. In fantasy fiction, that's when Cinderella was dancing with the prince, blissfully ignoring her pending midnight reboot to scullery maid reality. In nuclear nonfiction, that's when sober, clear-headed, well-informed thinkers were working hard to avert the nuclear fate of the world.

They decided that five minutes before midnight on the Doomsday Clock was too wide a margin. So they moved the clock forward two minutes to only three minutes before midnight because: "Unchecked climate change, global nuclear weapons modernizations and outsized nuclear weapons arsenals pose extraordinary and undeniable threats to the continued existence of humanity, and world leaders have failed to act with the speed or on the scale required to protect citizens from potential catastrophe."
Alas, we fiddle while Rome burns, even as Bulletin analysts work on fire prevention. We listen to the siren song of John Williams, who composed the beautiful score for the "Star Wars" movies, rather than to the mundane conversation of conference table dialogue. We pay to watch post-apocalyptic Hollywood fiction, rather than do the grunt work of repairing an increasingly dysfunctional pre-apocalyptic planet.

I'm no pessimist. I'm no alarmist. I'm no party pooper. And I'm no curmudgeon. I just don't find the subject of war entertaining.