FINDING THE FORCE OF THE
STAR WARS
FRANCHISE

FANS, MERCHANDISE, & CRITICS

EDITED BY

MATTHEW WILHELM KAPELL & JOHN SHELTON LAWRENCE

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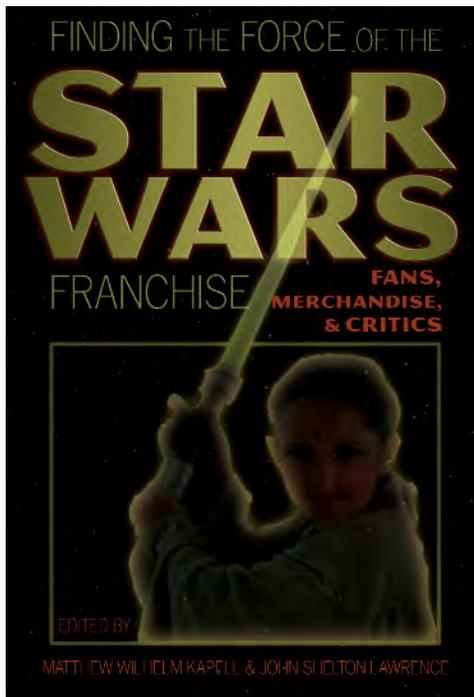
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The Menace of the Fans
to the Franchise

Mark McDermott

That *The Phantom Menace* (1999) disappointed *Star Wars* fans is a cultural commonplace. Yet the critical failure of the first prequel trilogy film has been belied by the movie's actual box-office performance. Each of the latest three *Star Wars* movies has grossed over $300 million in U.S. box-office receipts, already surpassing *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983). As of September 30, 2005, the *Exhibitor Relations* list of all-time box-office leaders had *TPM* at #5, just $30 million behind *A New Hope* (1977) at #2. A quarter century of movie ticket inflation had long ago knocked *ANH* off its perch as the all-time box-office leader, but its 1997 "Special Edition" release allowed it to gain new momentum behind the reigning champ, *Titanic* (1997).[1]

It is notable that the fans of the original franchise have been the most vocal critics of the new films. Will Brooker's study, *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and* Star Wars *Fans* (2002), detailed the split on Internet bulletin boards between "Bashers," who saw *TPM* as failed kiddie entertainment by an auteur who had lost his storytelling skills, and "Gushers," who, even as they stood up for Lucas's vision, admitted to being troubled by some of its aspects—but more often than not would return to the theatre to seek something else to make them believe in the message of the franchise (91–3). The worldwide popularity of the *Star Wars* franchise has assured that criticism of *TPM* and later, *Attack of the Clones* (2002), would expand beyond the purview of nitpicky fans and affect the public at large.

How did the vocal *Star Wars* fans engage the issue of the apparent decline of their beloved franchise? Here I examine three forms of creative public expression that reflect their dissatisfactions. First is the commentary on the movie series from current creators of cultural texts, many of whom had identified the *Star Wars* movies as an influence in their own lives. Second, there are the efforts of current dedicated *Star Wars* fans who have communicated their

feelings about the franchise at the same creative plane as the movies themselves: by making their own short films for the *Star Wars* Fan Film Awards (SWFFAs) and for any other forum that will allow them to exhibit their efforts or spare the bandwidth to host their films over the Internet. Third is the small number of fans whose commentary on the films has taken the form of re-editing the movies themselves, giving rise to the first of what is likely to become a succession of "Phantom Edits" of popular films.

Surprisingly, many of the source materials cited in this essay have not only described some disappointment at Lucas's direction with the franchise, but they have also implied a form of direct action in taking back *Star Wars.* Some of these works figuratively wrestled the film itself from Lucas's hands. Others hijacked the films by creating new versions that attempted to better fit the temperament of the adult fan.

"Alternate Ending: Luke's Father is Chewbacca": The Popular Media Responds

Unlike movies whose failure among critics and at the theatres provided much fodder for late-night talk show monologues, *Waterworld* (1995) or *Gigli* (2003) being examples, nearly everyone with an opinion on *TPM* or *AOTC* can be presumed to have at least seen the movies. Yet the perceived artistic failure of the first films in the prequel trilogy has been set in the public mind. Much of this perception seems to have stemmed from the influence of other creators of popular culture texts. Nearly all of the current generation of Hollywood creators, popular writers, and artists can trace their desire to work in their fields to the influence of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. It was many of these who said publicly that they felt let down by the prequel trilogy, and they expressed their feelings through their creative output.

Among the first creators to "break bad" over *TPM* was Aaron McGruder, author of the comic strip *Boondocks* and an admitted "near-fanatical *Star Wars* enthusiast" (Templeton). During May of 1999, before *TPM*'s opening, the strip's protagonist, a politically radical African American youngster named Huey Freeman, had several encounters with the "Psycho *Star Wars* Guy." Though portrayed as a young white male who was never seen without an Obi-Wan Kenobi hood and who waited in line at the theater weeks before the opening of *TPM*, Psycho *Star Wars* Guy seemed to be drawn from McGruder's own love of the series. Huey's only beef with the movie before its opening was tied to his happiness that Lucas had cast African American actor Samuel L. Jackson as the Jedi Mace Windu. After pondering for a moment, Huey declared, "he had BETTER not be the first one to die." (May 9, 1999). But in strips running the week of July 5 through 10, after *TPM* had made its mark on the moviegoer, McGruder's characters are seen working through their disap-

pointment with the movie, as Huey and his brother Riley tried to bring Psycho *Star Wars* Guy out of his denial and admit that it was a bad film. (A year later, the strip showed Psycho *Star Wars* Guy acting on Huey's off-hand remark and kicking Lucas in the rear on national television.) The main source of McGruder's anger with the movie appeared in the July 4th Sunday strip, which started with a caption reading that *Boondocks* had been replaced with a new comic, "Wacky Fun with Jar Jar Binks." This strip showed Jar Jar reprising many of his speech patterns and actions that had earned him comparisons with minstrel stereotypes, ending with the signoff "Oh-Tay!" that mimicked Buckwheat of the Little Rascals series. After seeing *AOTC,* McGruder admitted that it was a slightly better movie, which was damning by faint praise. However, as with *TPM,* the movie was far too long, spent too much time rehashing plot points and making "Mission Statements," and gave too little time to action. "There are 40 Jedi with light sabers in that scene," he says, "and for some reason I'm looking at C3PO acting silly. Get the robot off the screen and show me a Jedi knight killing something. Or like, Mace Windu is about to go head to head with the bad guy—and here comes this alien bull creature. I don't want to see a bull right now. There are important things happening" (qtd. in Templeton).

Bill Amend's strip *Fox Trot* features a character, Jason Fox, who represents all the characteristics of a comics/movies fanboy, and has provided running commentary on many aspects of the *Star Wars* films. In a Sunday strip of April 2005, Jason and his friend Marcus are using action figures to act out what could motivate Anakin Skywalker to turn to the Dark Side: In one panel, Jar Jar announces "Meesa gonna be your Padawan!" Another has Anakin being assigned the lightsaber with the pink blade. The final straw comes when Palpatine assures him, "I promise to never call you 'Ani'."

The writing staff of the *Simpsons* shot several succinct barbs at Lucas but, in many cases, long after the movies had come out. The many *Star Wars* references in the show, from the first season on, had been duly noted by the *Star Wars* community. An article in *Star Wars Insider* quotes Bill Morrison, editor of the *Simpsons* comic books: "Most of us working not only on the show, but also on the *Simpsons* comic grew up with *Star Wars* [*ANH*] ... [which] came out the year I graduated high school, and I didn't have a summer job, so I ended up seeing *Star Wars* 25 times" (qtd. in Chernoff). This mutual admiration from both camps turned concrete with the 1994 episode "Burns' Heir." With the family seated in Springfield's Aztec Theatre to watch "Siskel & Ebert: The Movie," the entire audience gets blown out their seats by a parody of the THX "the audience is listening" promo. Lucas himself apparently liked the parody so much that he had Lucasfilm, creator of the THX standard, commission a wide screen remake of the animated gag to show as the real THX trailer that summer (Chernoff).

That the *Simpsons* was always prepared to bite the hand that feeds them Butterfingers (despite what one of Bart's blackboard gags reads) has long been apparent in their repeated pokes at Rupert Murdoch and Fox. Yet, it took three years for the show to finally comment directly on *TPM*: In the 2002 episode, "Half-Decent Proposal," the story opens on a montage of Springfield denizens asleep in their beds. The camera wanders into the bedroom of "Comic Book Guy," adorned with an array of *Star Wars* posters. As the camera zooms in to Comic Book Guy, sleeping beneath *Star Wars* bedding in Chewbacca pajamas, he is clutching a Jar Jar Binks doll and murmuring "Oh Jar Jar, everyone hates you but me." The 2003 episode, "C.E. D'oh," featured Homer's coworkers Lenny and Carl fighting each other, using plutonium rods as lightsabers, with Lenny arguing, *"The Phantom Menace* sucked more!" and Carl claiming, *"Attack of the Clones* sucked more!" Oddly, the *Simpsons'* most direct criticism of Lucas required the use of pseudonymous characters. The 2004 episode, "Co-Dependent's Day," sees Bart and Lisa going to the long-awaited latest movie in the "Cosmic Wars" series: "The Gathering Shadow."

The movie turns out to be a long drone about galactic economics, echoing science fiction writer David Brin's *Salon* (<http://www.salon.com>) complaint that the only plot device in *TPM* that wasn't a recycled cliché was the movie's opening crawl setup: "A sci-fi action movie whose premise is based on taxation of trade routes and negotiations over tariff treaties? Now that ... (yawn) ... is something ... I've ... never ... (snore)" (1999). The new movie offers none of the exciting action sequences of the previous entries and has a tiresome comedy relief character named Jim-Jam Banks. When their complaint letter to the film's creator, "Randall Curtis," elicits a form letter response, Bart and Lisa confront Curtis personally at his northern California ranch. Curtis is drawn to exactly resemble George Lucas, and, in his home, we clearly recognize *Star Wars* props, such as Yoda and Stormtrooper statues, C-3PO, and R2-D2. Here, Curtis/Lucas actually acknowledges the weaknesses in his film and, as consolation, offers the children boxes of Jim-Jam Cereal ("It's just Alpha Bits with extra J's.") before riding off on a Tauntaun.

Another prominent jab, this one at both Lucas and Steven Spielberg's habit of altering their films for re-release and home video, occurred in the 2002 *South Park* episode "Free Hat." The boys are alarmed to see a trailer for the re-release of *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial,* in which all the guns had been digitally changed to walkie-talkies. Following this was a trailer for a fictional re-release of *Saving Private Ryan,* again with guns changed to walkie-talkies and the word "Nazis" replaced with "persons with political differences." The feature turns out to be a re-re-re-release of *The Empire Strikes Back* with all the characters digitally replaced by Ewoks. This leads Stan and Kyle to start the "Save Films from Their Own Directors" club. But the club's appearance on ABC's *Nightline* only inspires Spielberg and Lucas to re-edit *Raiders of the Lost Ark.* To

save the only negative of the film, the boys break into Skywalker Ranch and find themselves amid props from *Star Wars* and *Raiders* and a glass case displaying a *Howard the Duck* costume. Intercepted by Lucas as they try to make off with *Raiders'* film cans, the boys make one final appeal:

> KYLE. You yourself led the campaign against the colorization of films. You understand why films shouldn't be changed.

> GEORGE LUCAS. M-that's different. These are my movies. I made them, and I have the right to do whatever I want with them

> STAN. You're wrong, Mr. Lucas. They're not your movies. They're ours. All of ours. We paid to go see them, and they're just as much a part of our lives as they are of yours.

> KYLE. When an artist creates, whatever they create belongs to society.

Lucas and Spielberg go ahead with the re-edit anyway, and they premier it in a familiar desert canyon. Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Tweek (Kenny having remained dead for that entire season) have been tied to posts by walkie-talkie toting guards. As the directors, joined by their partner in revisionism, Francis Ford Coppola, start the movie, Stan quotes Indiana Jones in warning his friends: "Close your eyes.... Don't watch the movie, you guys. It'll be terrible. Close your eyes!" Sure enough, the new version is so bad that it kills all of the audience and melts the directors' faces just as in the original *Raiders*.

Creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker have claimed credit for the decision by Lucas and Spielberg that they would not alter the *Indiana Jones* movies for DVD release, a decision announced shortly after the *South Park* episode aired (yet, the release re-titled the first movie as *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*) (Hill).

Brooker also notes a BBC television comedy called *Spaced*, whose protagonist, a comic book artist, is still dealing with his disappointment over *TPM* eighteen months after its release and who loses his job at a comic book shop when he bawls out a young customer for wanting to buy a Jar Jar Binks doll (79–81). Regrettably, this comedy has not yet made its U.S. run on BBC America.

The creators of these entertainments no doubt either remember the first time they saw *Star Wars* in the theatre—before it was saddled with the *A New Hope* episode header—or else the franchise has simply always been a part of their lives. They grew from adolescence to adulthood with the movies available for repeated viewing, each time reinterpreting the text of the film according to their maturing expectations. Those who wished to explore the franchise *Expanded Universe* could choose hundreds of books and comics appropriate to their changing worldview. But even as far back as *ROTJ* (1983), the movies

seemed to be directed to an increasingly juvenile audience: *ROTJ* with its overly cute Ewoks knocking off the Empire with rocks and sticks (and spinning off into a cartoon series and TV special) and *TPM* with the ten-year-old Anakin Skywalker, building his own droid and Podracer with innate technical skills unmatched even by Jimmy Neutron, and the childlike Jar Jar Binks.

"Controlsa-Altsa-Deletesa": The Fan Film Competitions

Fans of popular movies or television shows have long sought ways to interact with the universe created by these entertainments and to create their own experiences in these universes. Genre fan culture has a history almost as old as any given genre itself. The Wikipedia entry on *fan fiction* notes that reference to original popular texts as *canon* originated with the Baker Street Irregulars ("Fan Fiction"). The first science fiction fanzine, the *Comet,* was published in 1930 by the Science Correspondence Club in Chicago, the Superman character first appeared in 1932 in Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Science Fiction* fanzine, and the World Science Fiction Convention began meeting in 1939. Filking, or folk singing based on science fiction works, became popular in the 1950s.

The spread of fan culture was limited by available technology and the attendant cost of production and distribution. Early fanzines were carefully typed to hectograph masters that might yield up to a hundred copies. No doubt, many 8-mm film reels of *Flash Gordon* pastiches were shot by enthusiastic fans over the years, with no means to duplicate copies. But the growing audiences at science fiction and comics conventions, and at campus film screenings in the 1970s, topped by *Star Wars'* popularity, finally made fan films a viable means of expression.

The best-known early *Star Wars* pastiche was *Hardware Wars* (1977). It was not so much a fan film, but more a *Cracked* magazine style lampoon that wasted no opportunity for a gag, from the brown Cookie Monster Muppet as "Chewchilla the Wookiee Monster" to the pastries forming "Princess Ann Droid's" hairstyle. Paul Frees, who narrated the first *Star Wars* teaser, was also hired for this film, intoning, "You'll laugh! You'll cry! You'll kiss three bucks goodbye!" The short reveled in its cheapness, especially in the "blaster fire" created by simply scratching the film, and is said to be one of the most profitable short films of all time. Director Ernie Fosselius later produced the Coppola parody *Porklips Now* (1980), and can be heard on *ROTJ* performing the sobs of the Rancor Keeper after Luke Skywalker kills his beloved pet ("Ernie Fosselius").

The directory of films on the fan site TheForce.Net (<http://www.theforce.net>) (TFN) lists the oldest fan film as *"The Empire Strikes Quack"* (1991). John Hudgens synchronized clips from the original trilogy to the audio

track of the Warner Brothers cartoon *Duck Dodgers in the 24½th Century* (1953), with Luke Skywalker reading Daffy Duck's lines, C-3PO as Porky Pig, and Darth Vader as Marvin the Martian. The film was wildly popular on the convention circuit, but Hudgens has not transferred it to any electronic format since the film was technically illegal. He went on to create a humorous music video using footage from the TV series *Babylon 5* and was hired by that series' creator Joe Straczynski to create more videos for the convention circuit ("Dragon*Con").

The short that really fired up the current fad in fan films seems to have been *Troops* (1998). Director Kevin Rubio created a crossover parody with the television show *Cops,* following the mundane routine of the Imperial Stormtroopers on Tatooine as they investigated a report of two stolen droids, and ended up showing what *really* happened to the Jawas and to Owen and Beru in *ANH*. The ten-minute movie featured quality special effects, re-created *Star Wars* props and costumes (The Stormtroopers were fans wearing their homemade armor while waiting in line for a showing of one of the Special Edition films. Rubio spotted them as they were being interviewed on TV.) George Lucas called the production "lost footage from *Star Wars*" (Trivia for Troops).

Troops' popularity in the fan community, tied to the general anticipation over the promise of new *Star Wars* movies, helped launch a wave of fan films for *Star Wars* and for many other popular fictions. Since fan films by definition appropriate the intellectual property of another creator, they could never be exhibited or sold for profit. But by the late 1990s, advancing computer technology allowed filmmakers to shoot on digital video and edit on home computers or create animated shorts using Macromedia Flash and Shockwave, and other tools. This brought film production into the realm of the hobbyist, a reasonable expense for most dedicated fans.

The Internet was, of course, a major shaping influence on the fan film community. Sites and discussion forums traded information on creating special effects (a proper lightsaber glow is an absolute must), sounds, props, or costumes. Producers could locate fans willing to lend or rent their recreated sets or X-wing starfighters. Distribution of the end product could be limited only by bandwidth.

I surveyed films from two sites: the SWFFAs on AtomFilms (<http://www.atomfilms.com/af/spotlight/collections/starwars/>) and the "Fan Films" section of the fan-run site TFN. The SWFFAs are operated in partnership with Lucasfilm and offer prizes, including a George Lucas Selects award and possible commercial distribution—a group of SWFFA selections was shown at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival, in concert with *Revenge of the Sith's* out-of-competition showing. AtomFilms accepts submissions over a period of several months and chooses selections to be posted on its Web site and voted on by surfers. The competition has a set of rules for competing films: Films must be

under ten minutes in length, and subjects are to cover "parodies of the existing *Star Wars* universe" or "documentaries of the fan experience" but not fan fiction that expands the existing *Star Wars* universe. Action figures, books, and other licensed products could be shown, but not music, video, or still images from the *Star Wars* movies. The site offers official sound effects for download ("SWFFA Terms").

The TFN Fan Films are reviewed and posted on a continuous basis. They have fewer restrictions on content, allowing for stories "in-universe," and hosting non–*Star Wars* topics as well (*Batman* and *The Matrix* are popular). TFN requests, but does not demand, exclusive online distribution for the films and will also post information on and links to popular fan films that they are not hosting, such as the forty-five-minute *Expanded Universe* opus, *Star Wars: Revelations* (2005). Both sites use a review process to decide which films are hosted, implying a responsibility on the part of their reviewers to assure fan appeal, and with an eye toward standards for family entertainment, and, even for TFN Fan Films, the tacit approval of Lucasfilm and its legal department.

Not surprisingly, many of the films on both sites are crossover parodies in the vein of *Troops. Escape from Tatooine* blends in elements of *Planet of the Apes* (1968/2001), while the animated *Dark Side Switch Campaign* features Anakin in a parody of the Apple Computers commercials; *Sith Apprentice* (2005), directed by John Hudgens, has the tag line, "With 'The Emperor,' 'you're fired' takes on a whole new meaning." And no explanation of the inspiration for *Anakin Dynamite* should be required.

But films starring the fans themselves can offer an interesting look into the relationship between the fans and their beloved source material. In *For Love of the Film* (2005), the theatre's projector breaks down at a showing of the 1997 Special Edition of *ANH*. When the theatre manager cannot calm the unhappy patrons, he offers a line of Obi-Wan Kenobi's dialogue from the movie. The fans immediately pick up on the cue, and end up re-enacting the entire movie, with an emotional climax worthy of a DeBeers diamond commercial. This film won the George Lucas Selects award at the 2005 SWFFA. Within the warm fuzzies evoked by this film, there is a subtext that the fans are indeed the true guardians of the *Star Wars* canon, and they are prepared to take over the narrative if need be. The Web site for Atom Films (see fig. 6) celebrates this protective role.

Confiscation of the narrative is the theme of the TFN Fan Film *Fanboys* (2003). Set in the year 1999, the film has a *Star Wars* fan approached by a group of strangers claiming to be with the so-called "real" Rebellion. They claim to be fighting the Empire everywhere else in the galaxy and that the *Star Wars* films are actually their propaganda to prepare uncontacted worlds to take their part in the rebellion. But the Earth's edition of the trilogies was sabotaged by the Empire; instead of going on indefinitely, the series ended with

ROTJ showing the Empire easily conquered by "a bunch of teddy bears," making it seem like the Empire is not a threat. And, the Rebel agents explain, the new *TPM* is another Imperial ruse to turn Earth fans to the Dark Side, which has the cool double-bladed lightsabers and droid armies. One of the rebels holds up a picture of Jar Jar, explaining that the audience will "want to be on the side that's killing him!" The fan is recruited to steal a preview copy of *TPM* so it can be re-altered. The so-called "rebels," however, are merely movie pirates trying to steal a film print. One pirate is a mole in Lucas' employ, who secures the movie, leaving the real pirates to discover they've stolen a copy of the 1978 *Star Wars Holiday Special.*

Figure 6: The home page on the Internet for Atom Films, a fan site, permits visitors to videostream into their computer screens *For the Love of the Film*, a mere five minutes and twenty-five seconds.

Where fan films take a critical look at the canon, Jar Jar has usually served as the convenient whipping boy. In a SWFFA selection, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace Prologue* (2002), it's "Darth Jar Jar" who dispatches a trio of Jedi Knights investigating reports of a new hidden evil on the planet Naboo. That the three Jedi are played for laughs, behaving somewhat like argumentative

fans, suggests that it was indeed Jar Jar who destroyed the fans' ability to enjoy the prequel movies.

Ultimately, the popularity of *Jar Jar's Walking Papers* (2002) suggests a desire by fandom assembled that Lucas would admit his mistakes and move on. This short, chosen as Best Animation at the 2002 SWFFAs, used stylish hand-drawn animation to show Lucas giving Jar Jar the bad news at a Bennigan's. The cartoon Lucas explains that Jar Jar was originally expected to become the Christ figure of the *Star Wars* stories. "Are you at all familiar with the Christ story?" he asks. "A lot of it hinges on the fact that He was ... uh, He was a well-liked guy. I mean people just liked Him. He wasn't spazzy or irritating in any way." After deflecting Jar Jar's objections ("Oooh! Meestah Lucas! I could growsa beardsa!" and "Ooh! Ooh! Waitsa! Waitsa Mr. Lucasa! C3PO! He's irritating!"), Lucas opens a laptop computer: "The guys wrote down the keystrokes for me here. Oh, that's funny. (Jar Jar: 'Whatsa?') The keystrokes. See, it's kind of cute. It's 'Controlsa-Altsa-Deletesa.'" And Jar Jar disappears.

Such criticism of Lucas' creative decisions is interesting in that it is found in fan films hosted on a site with Lucas's participation. The implicit acceptance of this criticism by Lucasfilm should justify the subjective choice of films discussed in this section. And while those who have a beef against the prequel trilogy can enumerate many faults beyond the presence of Jar Jar Binks, the character seems to have become the primary icon representing fan dissatisfaction with *TPM*.[2] It is worth noting that the Gungan's role has diminished in the remaining two prequel movies, with C-3PO taking on the duties of intrusive comedy relief in *Revenge of the Sith*.

The "Phantom Edits" and the Future of Fan Interaction

For all the clever parodies and critical subtext of the fan films, they still cannot engage their source texts on an equal footing. Film producers may be able to duplicate costumes and sets, make use of John Williams' soundtrack music, and download authentic sound effects, but without access to the original canon—the films themselves—most fan films can engage the viewer only at the same level as any cleverly written fan fiction. But the advance of consumer technology has made it possible for some fans to take control of the original canon by appropriating the original films themselves.

It already seems oddly nostalgic to recall that *TPM* was released to home video on VHS in 2000, a full year before the DVD edition. By summer 2001, however, *Star Wars* fan boards and newsgroups were discussing digital copies of the movie that had appeared on file sharing networks, in comics stores, or at conventions in VHS and Video CD formats. By this time, it was already possible to import a VHS video into a computer with applications like Apple's iMovie, making simple edits and burning a disc with the result. But these mov-

ies weren't just dubs; they were re-edited in an attempt to smooth many flaws fans had found with the Lucas product. One of these re-edits included a new version of the famous opening crawl:

> Episode I.I: THE PHANTOM EDIT
>
> Anticipating the arrival of the newest Star Wars film, some fans, like myself, were extremely disappointed by the finished product.
>
> So being someone of the "George Lucas Generation," I have re-edited a standard VHS version of "The Phantom Menace" into what I believe is a much stronger film by relieving the viewer of as much story redundancy, pointless Anakin actions and dialogue, and Jar Jar Binks, as possible.
>
> I created this version to bring new hope to a large group of Star Wars fans that felt unsatisfied by the seemingly misguided theatrical release of, "The Phantom Menace." [sic]
>
> To Mr. Lucas and those that I may offend with this re-edit, I am sorry :(
>
> —THE PHANTOM EDITOR
> thephantomedit@hotmail.com

Thus the term *Phantom Edit* has come to be applied to any similar fan project. Other edited versions circulated with their own fixes. Mainstream critics like the *Chicago Tribune's* Michael Wilmington reviewed it. The "signed" version was called the "West Coast Version" by *Film Threat's* Chris Gore.

Figure 7: The opening crawl for *Star Wars: Episode II.I – Attack of the Phantom* (2003) reads: "Upon viewing the second film of the Star War (sic) prequels, I was again disappointed by abandonment of the previous story telling and filmmaking philosophies in favor of new technology showcasing."

Most fans were simply pleased by this version's attempts to reduce Jar Jar's involvement as much as possible, especially his poop and fart gags. Much of young Anakin Skywalker's dialogue was trimmed, especially his shouts of "Yippie!" The entire scene of Jar Jar, Qui-Gon, and Obi-Wan traveling through the water-filled core of Naboo was dropped as well. Redundant discussions of midi-chlorians were also dropped. The final result ended up at 120 minutes, twenty minutes less than the original. What was called the "East Coast Version" ran shorter at 112 minutes but did not cut Jar Jar's scenes. Instead, Jar Jar and the other Gungans' dialogue was scrambled to sound like alien language, while subtitles beneath the widescreen picture gave Jar Jar aphorisms like "Pride will blind you to the truth."

Most attention fell on the West Coast Version, since it included a name and e-mail address and, later, a Web site (<http://www.thephantomeditor. com>). Some guessed that the director was Kevin Smith—another avowed *Star Wars* fan—or perhaps disgruntled Lucasfilm employees. The *Washington Post* contacted the Phantom and he agreed to out himself as a freelance film editor in Santa Clarita, California (Greenberg). I too have corresponded with the Phantom while researching this paper, and he requested that I continue to refer to him by his *nom de Moviola,* leaving the curious to look up his real identity in the Wikipedia.[3] His Web site lists a background as a video store clerk and cable access TV host in Aurora, Illinois (long after *Wayne's World*). The Phantom reworked his re-edit once the *TPM* DVD was released, using a stock Apple Macintosh G4 and its Final Cut Pro video-editing suite. The new *Phantom Edit* DVD, now titled *Episode I.II*, offered a commentary track, which, the Phantom noted, was recorded using the microphone that came with the Mac, attached to an ironing board in his apartment.

The DVD included two extras cobbled from the deleted scenes in the original DVD: One scene showed the Gungan bongo craft surfacing at the Naboo capital city, then getting carried over a waterfall with Qui-Gon, Obi Wan, and Jar Jar barely swimming to safety. The Phantom version left Jar Jar in the bongo, screaming as he fell to his death. The other scene has Qui-Gon first encountering Anakin in a Mos Eisley street, fighting with a Rodian who may have been young Greedo. After the fight ends, the Rodian runs to a parent, whose alien words of comfort were resubtitled, "You're always starting trouble, Greedo. Everyone knows that YOU shouldn't attack someone first."

The commentary track allowed the Phantom to point out many edits he had made and to explain his motivations. By this time, he had heard from fans who were disappointed that he hadn't removed Jar Jar completely from the VHS version of the edit: "He has a purpose in the story, and it is his link to the Gungans that provides them with an army at the end of the movie. He has a couple other purposes, one of which doesn't quite hit his mark, to be comic relief. And so to remove him entirely from the story, it just wouldn't work."

It's Jar Jar who warns Qui-Gon in the Gungan Red Council chamber not to trust Boss Nass. Later, the Phantom compliments Lucas's characterization of Queen Amidala. After the Senate refused to offer military assistance to Naboo, Jar Jar asks Amidala, "People gonna die?" The Phantom notes,

> When Jar Jar says that they're not giving up without a fight, they have a grand army … the cut is actually full on her looking. That way, it's implying that she's hearing him say that they [the Gungan] have a grand army, registering in her head; maybe making a calculation in her head that his alliance with this army will actually be what will save them at the end of this movie, and she makes note of that…. It'll be very effective in the very next scene where they [Senator Palpatine and staff] tell her "We don't have an army; we can't fight a war for you." And she looks over to Jar Jar Binks, with everyone else seeming somewhat oblivious, and she says "I need your help." That's a characteristic of leadership. (*Star Wars: Episode I.II*).

Despite Jar Jar's importance to the story, the Phantom deleted the scene in the Battle of Naboo in which he is the first to surrender to the droid army. "If that [surrender scene] stays in, even with his accidental heroics, what business does he have being accorded a hero's welcome afterward?" the Phantom asks. Overall, Jar Jar spends much of the movie looking oddly to the left and right, but generally comports himself with more dignity—except that the painful energy discharge he receives from Anakin's Podracer is left intact in the re-edit.

It's also during a decisive battle that Anakin Skywalker has scenes and lines cut. Anakin impulsively leapt into a starfighter, managing to infiltrate and destroy the Trade Federation's Droid Control Ship, but completely by accident. The re-edit cut Anakin's cries of "Oops!" and his "Did I do that?" reaction shots to suggest guidance by the Force rather than happy accident. Earlier in the film, many more of Jake Lloyd's lines as Anakin were cut, leaving him with silent reaction shots that the Phantom claimed were more effective. Also stricken was much of the discussion of Anakin's midi-chlorian levels, an editing decision that favored fans upset that communion with the Force now depended more on one's bloodstream than one's religion.

The Phantom's commentary also pointed out many of the more technical aspects of his work. He tightened the narrative by cutting the long rising and falling action in many scenes and dropped dialogue in which characters merely described what happened in preceding scenes. To recreate Lucas's famous "window-shade" wipes, he had to alter the video's frame rate when trimming a scene to make the wipe as smooth as the movie. And a few scenes revealed continuity errors: During Qui-Gon's funeral, Obi-Wan looks over at Anakin, who in turn looks at him; then the next angle shows Anakin not looking at Obi-Wan, so the Phantom went so far as to rotoscope the characters so their actions matched.

Even without Jar Jar's active participation in *AOTC*, the Phantom describes the movie's "point of failure" as coming just after the beginning. On

the commentary track to his *Episode II.I–Attack of the Phantom* DVD, he pointed out that Anakin failed to establish himself as a sympathetic character or someone whom we want to see get together with Amidala. Some of this failure of characterization is driven by the audience's foreknowledge that the relationship is doomed, even if the two will conceive the heroes of the first trilogy.

The Phantom also declared that any chance Lucas had to make the audience invest emotionally in his story was lost in the opening scene: Amidala's starship makes a risky trip to Coruscant; upon landing, the pilots express relief that they've survived a dangerous trip ... and the ship blows up. He compared this scene to the false suspense of the *Friday the 13th* horror series, where the endangered teenagers appear to have killed Jason Vorhees; then a character pauses by a picture window ... through which Jason crashes to kill her. "They always make the audience aware that danger is about to happen," he says, so now the audience knows more than the characters. An Easter egg on the DVD drives the point home by showing illustrative clips from the *Friday the 13th* films (*Star Wars: Episode I.II*).

Ultimately, the Phantom reveals himself as not merely a fan, but as someone who was inspired by Lucas's filmmaking vision to attempt to work in Hollywood himself. The Phantom Edit was originally a side project, perhaps a calling card, whose effect went far beyond the creator's intent. The Phantom's Web site details that Lucas himself requested a copy of the VHS version at the 2001 MTV Music Awards. Since other creators of fan films ended up working for Lucasfilm, it could have been a positive step. But in the June/July 2002 issue of *Film Comment*, Lucas, interviewed by editor Gavin Smith, said, "*The Phantom Edit* was fine until they started selling it. Once they started selling it became a piracy issue" ("Message").

From that point, the Phantom made many more media appearances to reiterate the fact that he had never sold copies of *The Phantom Edit*. He allowed himself to be interviewed by *Access Hollywood* for a segment to air June 27, 2001. After promoting the interview in the previous day's episode and continuing to billboard it up to two hours before broadcast time, when the episode aired, the interview was never mentioned; instead, *Access Hollywood* suddenly had an exclusive preview from next year's *AOTC*. The Phantom wrote that he realized he had never even been asked to sign a release form for the interview and suspected he was used as a bargaining chip to get the previews from Lucasfilm ("How *Not* to Reveal").

The Phantom Edits have been possible because of the confluence of trends in computer technology. Fans have attempted to remix their favorite cultural texts the best way that current technology and economy would allow. *Star Trek* scriptwriter David Gerrold described the case of a "sweet little old lady from Southern California who has tape-recorded every single *Star Trek*

episode—for the express purpose of later dubbing in her own voice over the leading lady's" (108–9).[4] It has already been a generation since the rock band Yes brought digital sampling into the mainstream with "Owner of a Lonely Heart" (1983). Elvis Presley gained his biggest posthumous hit in 2002 when RCA authorized Dutch electronica project Junkie XL's underground remix of "A Little Less Conversation" for a Nike commercial. Although DJ Danger Mouse had complied with a cease-and-desist order from EMI records to stop distributing his mash-up *The Grey Album*, this fusion of The Beatles' *White Album* with vocals from Jay-Z's *Black Album* continued to propagate unchecked among Internet file sharing servers. By 2004, underground video distribution was such that a pirate could surreptitiously tape the first showing of *Spider-Man 2* in a Manhattan theatre at 12:01 a.m. on June 30, 2004, put a copy on the Internet within four hours, and authorities could find counterfeit copies on sale in the Philippines that morning (Healey and Philips). Each year the cost of entry into the realm of digital production has gone down, and the learning curve to proficiency has smoothed out.

It should not be surprising that there are re-edits of wildly popular movies. A cinematic remix is an easy beginner's exercise or after-hours project in film schools. Considering the copious time and effort that fans can expend making films, building spaceship sets, or tailoring costumes, it was inevitable that what's considered a flawed movie would go under an amateur editor's knife. The Phantom Edits succeeded because the editor was both a fan and a professional. So far, it is uncertain whether re-edits of *Revenge of the Sith* will be appearing soon, but the widespread distribution of the existing re-edits suggests they filled a need by fans to take control of their canon. To them, perhaps, George Lucas abrogated his responsibility to the franchise by waiting too long to extend the canon and by refusing to match the prequel to the expectations of an adult audience that grew up on the original films. Lucas deflected fan criticism of *TPM* by claiming it was intended for younger audiences, yet, in *ROTS*, the juvenile hero would end up turning to the Dark Side, killing all the younglings in the Jedi Academy, getting his legs chopped off by Obi-Wan, and being left to die in a magma flow until his rescue by the presumptive Emperor Palpatine. If Lucas would not cater to the tastes of fans that had grown up with the franchise, it was up to the fans to remake the prequel trilogy according to their own expectations.

As a reconstructed Trekkie myself, I could recognize the feelings of possession held by *Star Wars* fans, who felt they had carried the flame for Lucas's universe during the decade-and-change that Lucas had apparently abandoned it. Gerrold said as much about *Star Trek* fans' trepidations over the plot turns of the first *Trek* theatricals, because, "Indeed, it is the fans who act as if they are the actual owners of the show." Gerrold cited Howard Zimmerman, editor of *Starlog* magazine, who concurred:

Oh yes—they think they own the show because for a very long time they were the only ones keeping it alive. Paramount didn't seem to care, Paramount wasn't bringing the show back, so Paramount was the enemy. Now ... the fans resent it that Paramount has taken it away from them. They resent the studio, the producers—anyone who violates what they think *Star Trek* should be. (Gerrold 119)

Some twenty years later, Lucasfilm's head of fan relations, Stephen J. Sansweet, acknowledged the same for their franchise; noting, "*Star Wars* fans really have a sense of ownership about *Star Wars*" (Evangelista E1).

For the *Star Wars* fans, it was not a soulless corporate movie studio that had taken the franchise out of their hands—and fans could not have asked for a better villain than Fox's media robber baron, Rupert Murdoch—but instead the creator of *Star Wars* himself. It was Lucas, not Fox, who expended the resources to preserve the film elements of the original trilogy, then went on to add more visual clutter for the 1997 Special Edition re-releases. It was Lucas, not a studio censor, who twice reworked Han Solo's confrontation with Greedo to make it plain that Greedo shot first. And it was Lucas who decreed that the first trilogy would never be presented the way that fans saw when they first encountered *Star Wars*, but that the changes to the DVD release would be the final word. It seemed a final thumb of the nose that the Special Edition ending of *ROTJ*, with its scenes of simultaneous galaxy-wide celebration over the fall of the Empire, had a further change for the DVD: a shot of humans and Gungans on Naboo celebrating, with a distinctive voice calling out "Weesa free!"

The massive promotional effort aimed at pushing each movie in the prequel trilogy seemed off-putting to anyone who had first discovered *Star Wars*, like myself, from the May 30, 1977, *Time* magazine with the corner cover blurb, "Inside: The Year's Best Movie." Computer-generated aliens in Pepsi commercial tie-ins to *TPM* spent more time gushing over the movie than the product they were hyping. Later, Yoda himself would be pimping Pepsi, while Chewbacca was recording cell phone ring tones for Cingular Wireless. But the disaffected productions from a large core of fans would not have been enough to promulgate the perception of artistic failure for *TPM* and, to a lesser extent, *AOTC*. That took the work of many influential Hollywood creators for whom *Star Wars* had been an important touchstone in their lives. When Johnny Carson ruled late-night TV, other comedy writers concerned whether a joke about the entertainment industry was too inside would find out whether Carson's monologue had already joked about the topic (Evanier 30). Somewhere there was a similar tipping point at which writers or producers authorized themselves to let their inner fanboys describe their disappointment with the prequels to the rest of America.

Like the creators of most popular fictions with fanatical followings, Lucas has had to seek a medium between protecting the *Star Wars* brand and en-

couraging fan support by indulging their creativity in its support. The universe created in *Star Wars* has proven to be sufficiently big and adventurous to inspire fans to chronicle their participation in that universe, either as participants in it or **as** fans of it. One aspect of that participation has included chronicling their feelings that Lucas has led his creation astray or left the original fans in the dust while pursuing a more lucrative younger generation. Thus, the *South Park* boys and the characters in *Fanboys* attempt to literally take back the film reels of Lucas's creations. Even *For Love of the Film,* a Lucas favorite, shows fans taking over the presentation of *ANH* in a theatre. Compare the long-interrupted official narratives of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* with other entertainment franchises with large fan bases: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The X-Files*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess* remained under the guidance of creators who recognized and encouraged their fan followings and were able to end their narratives at a time of their choosing.

Fan films and Phantom Edits seem to have a growing role in the interplay between fans of popular entertainments and their creators. Paramount has given its imprimatur to *Star Trek–New Voyages*, a fan film series set in year four of Kirk and Spock's first five-year mission. Though all the familiar roles are being played by fan actors, the series has attracted the participation of Walter Koenig and original series scriptwriter D. C. Fontana. The students of the Digital Animation & Visual Effects School at Universal Studios Florida created a fan film, *Batman: New Times*, told with computer-generated Lego figures and with Adam West reprising his TV Batman role and Mark Hamill playing the Joker. All of the fan films cited here have entries on the Internet Movie Database, further implying some permission from the owners of the source texts.

The issue of Phantom Edits may remain a thorny one for some time. It's unlikely that every fan favorite will be fan edited with a critical eye. *TPM* lent itself easily to this process simply by the fact that there was so much footage in the commercial DVD release that could be removed. Still, there are other films with a critical fan base that may be ready for the Phantom treatment. There exists a "Purist Edit" of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, which reverses the changes made by Peter Jackson to Tolkien's original narrative, including the presence of Elves at Helm's Deep. The Superman Home Page (<http://www.supermanhomepage.com>) offers a scene-by-scene review of the "Restored International Cut" of *Superman II* (1980), which tracks down scenes filmed by original director Richard Donner before he was fired in favor of Richard Lester. Efforts by Warner Bros. to shut down sales of the cut have resulted in its becoming more available as a free download.

The creators of cultural texts have traditionally operated with the assurance that the process of creation is a one-way street: They publish or broadcast, and the fans consume. The producers of genre texts such as science fiction or

comics have come to enjoy the support of a fan base, but only on a subservient basis: Fandom and fan writing were essentially the rookie leagues from which a Roy Thomas or a Kevin Smith might one day graduate to the big show. And any problems a bunch of fanboy geeks might have with a new movie or TV spin-off was unlikely to bother the greater viewing public.

But too many of these have indeed become producers of entertainment themselves. They've taken *Star Wars* and other favorites as their inspiration for joining the entertainment world, and they now have a soapbox to proclaim their dissatisfaction with dilutions to their favored texts. And a general public that follows the weekend movie box office like a baseball box score is listening. Even those that have remained at the fan level have taken advantage of new technology and the connected fan community to engage the studios on their own level.

Notes for Chapter 15

1. The "All-Time USA Boxoffice" chart, viewable at the Internet Movie Database, shows the following figures as of October 31, 2005:

Rank	Title	USA Box Office
1.	*Titanic* (1997)	$600,779,824
2.	*Star Wars* (1977)	$460,935,665
5.	*Episode I–The Phantom Menace* (1999)	$431,065,444
7.	*Episode III–Revenge of the Sith* (2005)	$380,262,555
18.	*Episode II–Attack of the Clones* (2002)	$310,675,583
19.	*Episode VI–Return of the Jedi* (1983)	$309,125,409
23.	*Episode V–The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)	$290,158,751

2. I would also note a well-reasoned defense by Chris Aylott of Jar Jar as *TPM*'s hero in the Joseph Campbell mold: "Jar Jar, Hidden Jedi?"

3. He also has an entry under his real name on the Internet Movie Database for his legitimate work, from which the "Trivia" item about having been the Phantom Editor was removed.

4. Gerrold's original 1973 edition, which noted the existence of K/S (Kirk/Spock) stories (120), was possibly the first mainstream book to describe fan *slash* fiction. It thus predated most academic recognition of the origins of fan-written slash fiction. For further details on the *slash* phenomenon, as well as an excellent introduction to fandom generally, see Penley.

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