18 Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars? *Digital Cinema, Media Convergence, and Participatory Culture*

Henry Jenkins

For me the great hope is now that 8mm video recorders are coming out, people who normally wouldn't make movies are going to be making them. And that one day a little fat girl in Ohio is going to be the new Mozart and make a beautiful film with her father's camcorder. For once the so-called professionalism about movies will be destroyed and it will really become an art form.

—Francis Ford Coppola

We're going to empower a writer, somewhere in the world, who doesn't have filmmaking resources at his or her disposal. This is the future of cinema—Star Wars is the catalyst.

—Jason Wishnow, maker of the digital film *Tatooine or Bust*

Maybe you received a digital postcard from someone you know during the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandals. Like so much that circulates on the Net, it came without any clear-cut attribution of authorship. The same image now appears on a variety of Web sites without much indication of its origins. Given such an image's decentralized circulation, we have no way of knowing whether it was seen by more or fewer people than saw the Elian Gonzales spoof of the "Whazzup" commercials or the image of Bill Gates as a Borg from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Yet, few of us could be ignorant of the source material it parodies—the Brothers Hildebrant's famous poster for the original release of *Star Wars*. In this contemporary and somewhat off-color version, Bill Clinton thrusts his power cigar skyward as a scantly clad Monica clings to his leg, her black thong barely visible through her translucent white robe. The sinister face of Ken Starr looms ominously in the background; Hillary shields Chelsea's eyes from this frightful spectacle.

This grassroots appropriation of *Star Wars* became part of the huge media phenomenon that surrounded first the release of the digitally enhanced original *Star Wars* trilogy in 1997 and the subsequent release of *The Phantom Menace* in 1999. Spoofs and parodies of

Star Wars were omnipresent the summer of 1999. The trailer for *Austin Powers II: The Spy Who Shagged Me* toyed with trigger-happy audiences eagerly anticipating their first glimpse of *The Phantom Menace* preview reel. It opened with ominous music, heavy breathing, and a space ship interior, as a narrator explained, "Years ago, a battle was fought and an empire was destroyed. Now the saga will continue." The chair revolves around to reveal not the anticipated Darth Vader (or his later-day counterpart, Darth Maul), but Doctor Evil, who shrugs and says, "You were expecting someone else?" Bowing before the media phenomenon, *Austin Powers* was released with the slogan, "If you see only one movie this summer, see . . . *Star Wars*. If you see two movies, see Austin Powers." Doonesbury did a series of cartoons depicting the "refuge camps" awaiting entry into the *Star Wars* films. Weird Al Yankovich, who had previously been successful with a music video, "Yoda," offered his own prequel with "The Saga Begins." *Mad TV* ran two spoofs—one that imagined Randy Newman composing feel-good music for the film, while another featured George Lucas as an obnoxious, overweight male fan who seeks inspiration by dressing in an Ewok costume and who hopes to introduce Jar Jar's aunt "Jar-Jar-Mina" in his next release. David Letterman proposed casting smooth-voiced singer Barry White as Darth Vader. Accepting Harvard's Hasty Pudding Award, Samuel L. Jackson offered his own imitation of how Yoda might have delivered his lines from *Pulp Fiction*. Almost all of us can add many more entries to the list of mass-market spoofs, parodies, and appropriations of the *Star Wars* saga—some aimed at the film's director, some at its fans, and others at the content of the series itself, with Jar Jar Binks bashing becoming the order of the day.

I begin with these various commercial spoofs of *Star Wars* as a reminder that such creative reworkings of science fiction film and television are no longer, and perhaps never were, restricted to fan culture, but have become increasingly central to how contemporary popular culture operates. Too often, fan appropriation and transformation of media content gets marginalized or exoticised, treated as something that people do when they have too much time on their hands. The assumption is that anyone who would invest so much creative and emotional energy into the products of mass culture must surely have something wrong with them. In this essay, I will take a very different perspective—viewing media fans as active participants within the current media revolution and their cultural products as an important aspect of the digital cinema movement. If many advocates of digital cinema have sought to democratize the means of cultural production, to foster grassroots creativity by opening up the tools of media production and distribution to a broader segment of the general public, then the rapid proliferation of fan-produced *Star Wars* films may represent a significant early success story for that movement. Force Flicks, one of several databases for fan film production, lists almost 300 amateur-produced *Star Wars* films currently in circulation on the Web and identifies an even larger number of such works as "in production." There is a tremendous diversity of theme, approach, and quality represented in this sample of the current state of amateur digital filmmaking. Some of the films have developed enormous cult followings. Amazon.com, the online bookseller, reports that sales of *George Lucas in Love* was outselling *The Phantom Menace* among their video customers, while *Troops* (which offers a *Cops*-style behind-the-scenes look at the routine experience of stormtroopers serving their hitch on Tatooine) was featured in a two-page spread in *Entertainment Weekly*, and its director, Kevin Rubio, was reported to have attracted offers of production contracts from major studios.

In this essay, I will explore how and why *Star Wars* became, according to Jason Wishnow, a "catalyst" for amateur digital filmmaking and what this case study suggests about the future directions popular culture may take. *Star Wars* fan films represent the intersection of two significant cultural trends—the corporate movement toward media convergence and the unleashing of significant new tools that enable the grassroots archiving, annotation, appropriation, and recirculation of media content. These fan films build on long-standing practices of the fan community, but they also reflect the influence of this changed technological environment that has dramatically lowered the costs of film production and distribution. I will argue that this new production and distribution context profoundly alters our understanding of what amateur cinema is and how it intersects with the commercial film industry. In the end, I want to propose the fan film aesthetic as a significant middle ground between the commercial focus of the new "dot-coms" and the avant-garde aesthetics of the "low-res" film movement, an approach that facilitates grassroots cultural production by building on our investment in mainstream culture.

Media in Transition: Two Models

Media Convergence

Media critics, such as Robert McChesney, have noted that the current trend within the entertainment industry has been toward the increased concentration of media ownership into the hands of a smaller number of transmedia and transnational conglomerates.[1] Horizontal integration, that is, the consolidation of holdings across multiple industries, has displaced the old vertical integration of the Hollywood studios. Certain companies, such as Viacom and Time Warner, maintain interests in film, cable, and network television;

video, newspapers, and magazines; book publishing and digital media. What emerged are new strategies of content development and distribution designed to increase the "synergy" between the different divisions of the same company. Studios seek content that can move fluidly across media channels. Following the "high concept" logic that has dominated the American cinema since the 1970s, production companies favored films with pre-sold content based on material from other media ("books"); simple, easily summarized narrative "hooks"; and distinctive "looks," broadly defined characters, striking icons, and highly quotable lines.[2]

Initially, this "books, hooks, and looks" approach required the ability to construct ancillary markets for a successful film or television program. Increasingly, however, it has become difficult to determine which markets are ancillary and which are core to the success of a media narrative. The process may start with any media channel, but a successful product will flow across media until it becomes pervasive within the culture at large—comics into computer games, television shows into films, and so forth. Marsha Kinder has proposed the term "entertainment supersystem" to refer to the series of intertextual references and promotions spawned by any successful product.[3] The industry increasingly refers to *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* as "franchises," using a term that makes clear the commercial stakes in these transactions. This new "franchise" system actively encourages viewers to pursue their interests in media content across various transmission channels, to be alert to the potential for new experiences offered by these various tie-ins.

As a consequence of these new patterns of media ownership and production, there is increasing pressure toward *convergence,* the technological integration of the various content delivery systems. Technological convergence is attractive to media industries because it opens multiple entry points into the consumption process and, at the same time, enables consumers to more quickly locate new manifestations of a popular narrative. One may be able to move from watching a television drama to ordering the soundtrack, purchasing videos, or buying products that have been effectively "placed" within the narrative universe.

Such an approach requires the constant development of media content that can provoke strong audience engagement and investment. For this synergy-based strategy to be successful, media audiences must not simply buy an isolated product or experience, but rather, must buy into a prolonged relationship with a particular narrative universe, which is rich enough and complex enough to sustain their interest over time and thus motivate a succession of consumer choices. This approach encourages studios to be more attentive to audience interests, and they are using the Web to directly solicit feedback as well as to monitor unsolicited fan responses to their products.

The strength of this new style of popular culture is that it enables multiple points of entry into the consumption process; the vulnerability is that if audiences fail to engage with the particular content on offer, then that choice has a ripple effect across all of the divisions of the media conglomerate. For every *Batman* that demonstrates the enormous potential of this franchising process, there is a *Dick Tracy* that nearly takes the producing company down with it. In such a world, intellectual property that has proven popular with mass audiences has enormous economic value, and companies seek to tightly regulate its flow in order to maximize profits and minimize the risk of diluting their trademark and copyright holdings. *Star Wars* is, in many ways, the prime example of media convergence at work. Lucas's decision to defer salary for the first *Star Wars* film in favor of maintaining a share of ancillary profits has been widely cited as a turning point in the emergence of this new strategy of media production and distribution. Lucas made a ton of money, and Twentieth Century Fox learned a valuable lesson. Kenner's *Star Wars* action figures are thought to have been key in re-establishing the value of media tie-in products in the toy industry, and John Williams's score helped to revitalize the market for soundtrack albums. The rich narrative universe of the *Star Wars* saga provided countless images, icons, and artifacts that could be reproduced in a wide variety of forms and sold to diverse groups of consumers. The serialized structures of the films helped to sustain audience interest across a broad span of time and to provide an opportunity to revitalize it as each new sequel or prequel is released. Despite an almost two-decade gap between the release dates for *Return of the Jedi* and *The Phantom Menace,* Lucasfilm continued to generate profits from its *Star Wars* franchise through the production of original novels and comic books, the distribution of video and audio tapes, the continued marketing of *Star Wars* toys and merchandise, and the maintenance of an elaborate publicity apparatus, including a monthly glossy newsletter for *Star Wars* fans. The careful licensing of the *Star Wars* iconography enabled Lucasfilm to form strategic alliances with a multitude of corporate partners, including fast food franchises and soft drink bottlers, which sought to both exploit and enlarge public interest in their forthcoming release. As a consequence, by spring 1999, it was impossible to go anywhere without finding yourself face to face with the distinctive personas of Darth Maul, Queen Amidala, or Jar Jar Binks.

This climate of heightened expectations also fostered the production of the various commercial *Star Wars* parodies mentioned earlier, as other media producers sought to "poke fun" at the hype surrounding *Star Wars* phenomenon while tapping into audience awareness of the film's impending release. Letterman's spoofs of *Star Wars* were as much a part of the publicity campaign for the movie as were the appearance of Natalie Portman

and the other film stars on his program. The good-natured trailer of *Austin Powers* played with the audience's anticipation of *Star Wars* and became a vehicle for creating media buzz about both works.

Participatory Culture

Patterns of media consumption have been profoundly altered by a succession of new media technologies that enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation of media content. Participatory culture refers to the new style of consumerism that emerges in this environment. If media convergence is to become a viable corporate strategy, it will be because consumers have learned new ways to interact with media content. Not surprisingly, participatory culture is running ahead of the technological developments necessary to sustain industrial visions of media convergence and thus making demands on popular culture that the studios are not yet, and perhaps never will be, able to satisfy. The first and foremost demand consumers make is the right to participate in the creation and distribution of media narratives. Media consumers want to become media producers, while media producers want to maintain their traditional dominance over media content.

A history of participatory culture might well start with the photocopier, which quickly became "the people's printing press," paving the way for a broad range of subcultural communities to publish and circulate their perspectives on contemporary society. The Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) enabled consumers to bring the broadcast signal more fully under their control, to build large libraries of personally meaningful media content, and increasingly, to give them tools that facilitated amateur media production. By the early 1990s, media fans were using the VCR to re-edit footage of their favorite television programs to provide raw materials for the production of music videos. The availability of low-cost camcorders and, more recently, digital cameras has empowered more people to enter directly into the filmmaking process; the power of the camcorder as a means of documentary production was aptly illustrated by the Rodney King video, which placed the issue of police brutality in Los Angeles onto the national agenda. Portable technologies, such as the Walkman and cell phone, enabled us to carry our media with us from place to place, to create our own "soundtracks" for our real world experiences, and to see ourselves more and more connected within a networked communications environment. Computer and video games encouraged us to see ourselves as active participants in the world of fiction, to "fight like a Jedi" or to "outshoot Clint Eastwood." Digital photography and audio-sampling technologies made it easy to manipulate and rework the sights

and sounds of our contemporary media environment, paving the way for new forms of cultural expression, such as Photoshop collages and music sampling. These technologies do not simply alter the ways that media are produced or consumed; they also help to break down barriers of entry into the media marketplace. The Net opened up new space for public discussions of media content, and the Web became an important showcase for grassroots cultural production. On one of my favorite Web sites, known as the Refrigerator, parents can scan in their children's artwork and place them on global display. In many ways, the Web has become the digital refrigerator for the "Do-It-Yourself" ("DIY") movement. Prior to the Web, amateurs might write stories, compose music, or make movies, but they had no venue to exhibit their works beyond their immediate circles of family and friends. For example, among those "digital movies" indexed by the various *Star Wars* fan Web sites were Super-8 productions dating back to the original release of *A New Hope* (such as *Star Wars Remake*) but only now reaching a broader audience because of their online circulation. The Web made it possible for alternative media productions of all kinds to gain greater visibility.

This ability to exhibit grassroots cultural productions has in turn fostered a new excitement about self-expression and creativity. For some, these grassroots cultural productions are understood as offering a radical alternative to dominant media content, providing space for various minority groups to tell their own stories or to question hegemonic representations of their culture. Groups such as the Goths or the Riot Grrls have been quick to explore these political uses of the Web, as have a variety of racial and ethnic groups. Culture jammers seek to use the power of digital media to call into question the consumerist logic of mass media. Others employ the Web as a means of getting greater visibility, of attracting public notice as a prelude for entering directly into the commercial media world. The Web has become an important showcase for productions of film school students, for example. Still others understand their cultural productions in the context of building social ties within a "virtual community" defined around shared interests. The pervasiveness of popular culture content has made it a particularly rich basis for forming social ties within the geographically dispersed population of the Internet. People who may never meet face to face, and thus have few real-world connections with each other, can tap into the shared framework of popular culture to facilitate communication. Fans were early adopters of all of these media technologies and as a consequence, their aesthetics and cultural politics have been highly influential in shaping public understanding of the relationship between dominant and grassroots media. Such groups seek not to shut down the corporate apparatus of the mass media but rather to build on their

enjoyment of particular media products, to claim affiliation with specific films or television programs, and to use them as inspiration for their own cultural production, social interaction, and intellectual exchange.

As more and more amateur works have entered into circulation via the Web, the result has been a turn back toward a more folk-culture understanding of creativity. Historically, our culture evolved through a collective process of collaboration and elaboration. Folktales, legends, myths, and ballads were built up over time as people added elements that made them more meaningful to their own contexts. The Industrial Revolution resulted in the privatization of culture and the emergence of a concept of intellectual property that assumes that cultural value originates from the original contributions of individual authors. In practice, of course, any act of cultural creation builds on what has come before, borrowing genre conventions and cultural archetypes, if nothing else. The ability of corporations to control their "intellectual property" has had a devastating effect on the production and circulation of cultural materials, meaning that the general population has come to see themselves primarily as consumers of—rather than participants within—their culture. The mass production of culture has largely displaced the old folk culture, but we have lost the possibility for cultural myths to accrue new meanings and associations over time, resulting in single authorized versions (or at best, corporately controlled efforts to rewrite and update the myths of our popular heroes). Our emotional and social investments in culture have not shifted, but new structures of ownership diminish our ability to participate in the creation and interpretation of that culture.

Fans respond to this situation of an increasingly privatized culture by applying the traditional practices of a folk culture to mass culture, treating film or television as if it offered them raw materials for telling their own stories and resources for forging their own communities. Just as the American folk songs of the nineteenth century were often related to issues of work, the American folk culture of the twentieth century speaks to issues of leisure and consumption. Fan culture, thus, represents a participatory culture through which fans explore and question the ideologies of mass culture, speaking from a position sometimes inside and sometimes outside the cultural logic of commercial entertainment. The key difference between fan culture and traditional folk culture doesn't have to do with fan actions but with corporate reactions. Robin Hood, Pecos Bill, John Henry, Coyote, and Br'er Rabbit belonged to the folk. Kirk and Spock, Scully and Mulder, Han and Chewbacca, or Xena and Gabrielle belong to corporations.

Fan fiction repairs some of the damage caused by the privatization of culture, allowing these potentially rich cultural archetypes to speak to and for a much broader range of

social and political visions. Fan fiction helps to broaden the potential interest in a series by pulling its content toward fantasies that are unlikely to gain widespread distribution, tailoring it to cultural niches under-represented within and under-served by the aired material. In theory, such efforts could increase the commercial value of media products by opening them to new audiences, though producers rarely understand them in those terms.

Consider, for example, this statement made by a fan:

> What I love about fandom is the freedom we have allowed ourselves to create and recreate our characters over and over again. Fanfic rarely sits still. It's like a living, evolving thing, taking on its own life, one story building on another, each writer's reality bouncing off another's and maybe even melding together to form a whole new creation. . . . I find that fandom can be extremely creative because we have the ability to keep changing our characters and giving them a new life over and over. We can kill and resurrect them as often as we like. We can change their personalities and how they react to situations. We can take a character and make him charming and sweet or cold-blooded and cruel. We can give them an infinite, always-changing life rather than the single life of their original creation.[4]

Fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate. Instead, fans envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths. What is most striking about the quote above is that the right to participate actively in the culture is assumed to be "the freedom we have allowed ourselves," not a privilege granted by a benevolent company. Fans also reject the studio's assumption that intellectual property is a "limited good," to be tightly controlled lest it dilute its value. Instead, they embrace an understanding of intellectual property as "shareware," something that accrues value as it moves across different contexts, gets retold in various ways, attracts multiple audiences, and opens itself up to a proliferation of alternative meanings. Giving up absolute control over intellectual property, they argue, increases its cultural value (if not its economic worth) by encouraging new, creative input and thus enabling us to see familiar characters and plots from fresh perspectives. Media conglomerates often respond to these new forms of participatory culture by seeking to shut them down or reigning in their free play with cultural material. If the media industries understand the new cultural and technological environment as demanding greater audience participation within what one media analyst calls the "experience economy,"[5] they seek to tightly structure the terms by which we may interact with their intellectual property, preferring the pre-programmed activities offered

by computer games or commercial Web sites to the free-form participation represented by fan culture. The conflict between these two paradigms—the corporate-based concept of media convergence and the grassroots-based concept of participatory culture—will determine the long-term cultural consequences of our current moment of media in transition.

If *Star Wars* was an important ur-text for the new corporate strategy of media convergence, *Star Wars* has also been the focal point of an enormous quantity of grassroots media production, becoming the very embodiment of the new participatory culture. Fans began to write original fiction based on the *Star Wars* characters within a few months of the first film's release, building on an infrastructure for the production and distribution of fanzines that had first grown up around *Star Trek*. Fan writers sustained the production of original *Star Wars* stories throughout the "dark years," when Lucas had seemingly turned his back on his own mythology, and the release of *The Phantom Menace* provoked an enormous wave of new fan stories on the Web.

Grassroots appropriation and transformation of *Star Wars* has not, however, been restricted to media fandom per se but has spread across many other sectors of the new DIY culture. Will Brooker, for example, notes the persistence of *Star Wars* references in punk and techno music, British underground comics, novels like Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs,* films like Kevin Smith's *Clerks,* and various punk, thrasher, and slacker 'zines. Brooker argues that the rebellion depicted in the *Star Wars* films provides a useful model for thinking about the coalition-based cultural politics that define this whole DIY movement. The Empire, Brooker argues, is a "colonizing force" that seeks to impose top-down regimentation and demand conformity to its dictates. The Rebellion is a ragtag coalition of different races and cultures, a temporary alliance based on constant flux and movement from base to base, and dependent on often decentralized and democratic forms of decision making.[6]

Encouraged by Lucas's romantic myth about grassroots resistance to controlling institutions, these fans have actively resisted efforts by Lucasfilm to tighten its control over intellectual property. Through the years, Lucasfilm has been one of the most aggressive corporate groups in trying to halt fan cultural production. As early as 1981, Lucasfilm had issued legal notices and warnings to fans who published 'zines containing sexually explicit stories, while implicitly giving permission to publish non-erotic stories about the characters. Many fans felt that Lucasfilm was claiming the right to ideologically police their shared "fantasies." Much of the writing of fan erotica was pushed underground by this policy, though it continued to circulate informally. In fall 1997, the Usenet discussion group devoted to *Star Wars* responded to increased traffic sparked by the re-release

of the "digitally enhanced" versions of the original films, creating a separate newsgroup where fans could post and critique original fiction set in the *Star Wars* universe. In a rare action, the Usenet hierarchy vetoed the plan, not even allowing it to be presented for a formal vote, claiming that it promoted "illegal activities," i.e., that net discussions of fan fiction encouraged the violation of Lucasfilm's copyright. Many believe that they made this decision based on a series of "cease and desist" letters, issued by Lucasfilm attorneys, aimed at shutting down *Star Wars* fan Web sites or blocking the circulation of fanzines. Controversy erupted again when, in a shift of position that some felt was more encouraging to fans, Lucasfilm offered *Star Wars* fans free Web space and unique content for their sites, but only under the condition that whatever they created would become the studio's intellectual property. Fan activists were sharply critical of these arrangements, both on political grounds (insisting that it set a precedent that went directly against their own argument that fan fiction constituted a legitimate exercise of their "fair use" rights) and on economic grounds (concerned that such arrangements would make it impossible for them to profit in the future from their creative efforts, noting that some *Star Trek* fan writers had been able to turn their fan fiction into the basis for professional novels).

Yet if studio legal departments still encourage the rigorous enforcement of intellectual property law as a means of regulating the flow of media materials, their creative departments often display a rather different understanding of the intersection between media convergence and participatory culture. The culture industry has its own reasons for encouraging active, rather than passive, modes of consumption. They seek consumers who move between different media channels and make meaningful links between different manifestations of the same story. Contemporary popular culture has absorbed many aspects of "fan culture" that would have seemed marginal a decade ago. Media producers are consciously building into their texts opportunities for fan elaboration and collaboration—codes to be deciphered, enigmas to be resolved, loose ends to be woven together, teasers and spoilers for upcoming developments—and they leak information to the media, which sparks controversy and speculation. Media producers also actively monitor and, in some cases, directly participate in the fan discussions on the Web as a way of measuring grassroots response to their productions. The products that are emerging within this new media culture, then, are more complex in their reliance on back story and foreshadowing, more dependent on the audience's familiarity with character history, more open to serialization, genre-mixing, cross-overs between different fictional universes, and more playful in their reliance on in-joke references or spoofing of other media content. As such, these media producers rely on audience access to an archive of episodes on

videotape (and on their servers) and the informational infrastructure provided by various fan-generated Web sites and databases. The most adept producers in this new media environment are, in fact, using the Web to reinforce or expand on the information contained in the commercial material.

The old either-or oppositions (co-optation vs. resistance) have long dominated debates between political economy and cultural studies. Approaches derived from the study of political economy may, perhaps, provide the best vocabulary for discussing media convergence, while cultural studies language has historically framed our understanding of participatory culture. Neither theoretical tradition, however, can truly speak to what happens at the intersection between the two. The result may be conflict (as in ongoing legal battles for access to or regulation over intellectual property rights), critique (as in the political activism of culture jammers who use participatory culture to break down the dominance of the media industries), challenge (as occurs with the blurring of the lines between professional and amateur products that may now compete for viewer interest if not revenues), collaboration (as in various plans for the incorporation of viewer-generated materials), or recruitment (as when commercial producers use the amateur media as a training ground or testing ground for emerging ideas and talent). In some cases, amateur media draws direct and explicit inspiration from mainstream media content, while in others, commercial culture seeks to absorb or mimic the appropriative aesthetic of participatory culture to reach hip, media-savvy consumers. These complex interrelationships provide the context for public awareness and response to amateur digital cinema production around *Star Wars*. I will explore more fully the ways that *Star Wars* fan filmmakers have negotiated a place for themselves somewhere between these two competing trends, trying to co-exist with the mainstream media, while opening up an arena for grassroots creativity.

DUDE, WE'RE GONNA BE JEDI!

> Maru *pays homage to* Star Wars *and is intended to demonstrate to everyone who spent their entire childhood dreaming of wielding a light saber that inspired personal visions can now be realized using tools that are readily available to all of us.* Maru *was made using a camcorder and a PC with a budget of about $500. . . . Technology and the new media facilitate the articulation and exchange of ideas in ways never before imagined, and we hope that others will harness the power of these tools as we have in order to share their dreams with the world.*
>
> —amateur filmmakers Adam Dorr, Erik Benson, Hien Nguyen, and Jon Jones

George Lucas in Love, perhaps the best known of the *Star Wars* parodies, depicts the future media mastermind as a singularly clueless USC film student who can't quite come up with a good idea for his production assignment, despite the fact that he inhabits a realm rich with narrative possibilities. His stoner roommate emerges from behind the hood of his dressing gown and lectures Lucas on "this giant cosmic force, an energy field created by all living things." His sinister next-door-neighbor, an archrival, dresses all in black and breathes with an asthmatic wheeze as he proclaims, "My script is complete. Soon I will rule the entertainment universe." As Lucas races to class, he encounters a brash young friend who brags about his souped-up sports car and his furry-faced sidekick who growls when he hits his head on the hood while trying to do some basic repairs. His professor, a smallish man, babbles cryptic advice, but all of this adds up to little until Lucas meets and falls madly for a beautiful young woman with buns on both sides of her head. Alas, the romance leads to naught as he eventually discovers that she is his long-lost sister.

George Lucas in Love is, of course, a spoof of *Shakespeare in Love* as well as a tribute from one generation of USC film students to another. As co-director Joseph Levy, a twenty-four-year-old graduate from Lucas's alma mater, explained, "Lucas is definitely the god of USC. . . . We shot our screening-room scene in the George Lucas Instructional Building—which we're sitting in right now. Lucas is incredibly supportive of student filmmakers and developing their careers and providing facilities for them to be caught up to technology."[7] Yet what makes this film so endearing is the way that it pulls Lucas down to the same level of countless other amateur filmmakers and in so doing, helps to blur the line between the fantastical realm of space opera ("A long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away") and the familiar realm of everyday life (the world of stoner roommates, snotty neighbors, and incomprehensible professors). Its protagonist is hapless in love, clueless at filmmaking, yet somehow he manages to pull it all together and produce one of the top-grossing motion pictures of all time. *George Lucas in Love* offers us a portrait of the artist as a young geek.

One might contrast this rather down-to-earth representation of Lucas—the auteur as amateur—with the way fan filmmaker Evan Mather's Web site constructs the amateur as an emergent auteur. Along one column of the site can be found a filmography, listing all of Mather's productions going back to high school, as well as a listing of the various newspapers, magazines, Web sites, television and radio stations which have covered his work—*La Republica, Le Monde,* the *New York Times, Wired, Entertainment Weekly,* CNN, NPR, and so forth. Another sidebar provides up to the moment information about his works in progress. Elsewhere, you can see news of the various film festival screenings of his films and whatever awards they have won. A tongue-in-cheek manifesto outlines his views on digital filmmaking: " . . . no dialogue . . . no narration . . . soundtrack must be

monaural . . . length of credits may not exceed ⅒ the length of the film . . . nonverbal human or animal utterances are permitted . . . nonsense sounds whilst permitted are discouraged . . . all credits and captions must be in both English and French whilst the type size of the French title may be no greater in height than ½ the height of the English . . . . " More than nineteen digital films are featured with photographs, descriptions, and links that enable you to download them in multiple formats. Another link allows you to call up a PDF file reproducing a glossy full-color, professionally designed brochure documenting the making of his most recent work, *Les Pantless Menace,* which includes close-ups of various props and settings, reproductions of stills, score sheets, and storyboards, and detailed explanations of how he was able to do the special effects, soundtrack, and editing for the film. We learn, for example, that some of the dialogue was taken directly from Commtech chips that were embedded within Hasbro *Star Wars* toys. A biography provides some background: "Evan Mather spent much of his childhood running around south Louisiana with an eight-millimeter silent camera staging hitchhikings and assorted buggery. . . . As a landscape architect, Mr. Mather spends his days designing a variety of urban and park environments in the Seattle area. By night, Mr. Mather explores the realm of digital cinema and is the renown creator of short films which fuse traditional hand drawn and stop motion animation techniques with the flexibility and realism of computer generated special effects."

The self-promotional aspects of Mather's site are far from unique. The Force.Net Fan Theater, for example, offers amateur directors a chance to offer their own commentary on the production and thematic ambitions of their movies. The creators of *When Senators Attack IV,* for example, give "comprehensive scene-by-scene commentary" on their film: "Over the next 90 pages or so, you'll receive an insight into what we were thinking when we made a particular shot, what methods we used, explanations to some of the more puzzling scenes, and anything else that comes to mind." Such materials often constitute a conscious parodying of the tendency of recent DVD releases to include alternative scenes, cut footage, storyboards, and director's commentary. Many of the Web sites provide information about fan films under production or may even include preliminary footage, storyboards, and trailers for films that may never be completed. Almost all of the amateur filmmakers have developed their own posters and advertising images for their productions, taking advantage of new Pagemaker and Photoshop software packages that make it easy to manipulate and rearrange images using the home computer. In many cases, the fan filmmakers often produce elaborate trailers, complete with advertising catchphrases.

Some of these materials serve useful functions within amateur film culture. The making-of articles that are found on so many of the fan Web sites enable a sharing of technical advice; trading such information helps to improve the overall quality of work within the community. The trailers also respond to the specific challenges of the Web as a distribution channel: it can take hours to download relatively long digital movies and as a consequence, the shorter, lower resolution trailers (often distributed in a streaming video format) allow would-be viewers a chance to glimpse the work and determine if it is worth the effort. Yet, these mechanisms of self-promotion move beyond what would be required to support a functional network for amateur film distribution, suggesting that the fans, too, have come to understand that the art of "high concept" filmmaking (and the franchise system it supports) depends as much on the art of advertising and marketing as on the art of storytelling.

Many of the fans, after all, got their first glimpse of footage from *The Phantom Menace* by downloading the much-publicized trailer. In many cases, fan parodies of the trailer started to appear in the months during which fans were eagerly awaiting a chance to see the film itself. In some early examples, fans simply re-dubbed the original trailer with alternative soundtracks; in other cases, they remade the trailer shot-by-shot. For example, downloading the trailer inspired Ayaz Asif to produce a parody employing characters taken from *South Park.* When an acquaintance, Ted Bracewell, sent him a wallpaper he had drawn depicting *South Park* characters in *Star Wars* garb, the two decided to collaborate, resulting in a quickly made trailer for *Park Wars: The Little Menace,* then for a more elaborately-made "special edition," and then for a series of other shorts based on the *Star Wars* version of the *South Park* characters. The production received such media interest, including an interview with Asif during a Sci-Fi Channel documentary, that the young filmmakers were ultimately invited to air it on Comedy Central, the same network that produced Trey Parker and Matt Stone's series.

Trailervision.com pushes fan cinema's fascination with the trailer format to its logical extreme, releasing a trailer each Monday for a non-existent film. In some cases, these trailers spoof commercial films which hit the theaters that same week, including *The Jar Jar Binks Project, I Know What You'll Want to Do Next Summer, The Wimp Club, Scam 3,* and *American Booty.* These spoof trailers are, in some senses, the perfect genre for the current state of digital cinema—short, pithy, reflecting the amateur filmmaker's self-conscious relationship to commercial media, and recognizable by a mass audience who can be assumed to be familiar with the material that inspired them. These spoof trailers enable amateur and aspiring filmmakers to surf the publicity generated by a current release and thus

to get media coverage (as was the case with a surprising number of the *Star Wars* spoofs) or to draw audiences already worked up about the commercial product.

All of this publicity surrounding the *Star Wars* parodies serves as a reminder of what is one of the most distinctive qualities of these amateur films—the fact that they are so public. Mather, for example, reports, "Since I started keeping track in February 1998, this site has been visited by over a half-million people from all seven continents, including such faraway places as Antarctica, Iran, San Marino . . . and Canada." The idea that amateur filmmakers could develop such a global following runs counter to the historical marginalization of grassroots media production.

In her book *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film,* Patricia R. Zimmerman offers a compelling history of amateur filmmaking in the United States, examining the intersection between nonprofessional film production and the Hollywood entertainment system. As Zimmerman notes, a variety of critics and theorists, including Harry Potempkin in the 1920s, Maya Deren in the 1950s, Jonas Mekas and George Kuchar in the 1960s, and Hans Magnus Enzensberger in the 1970s, had identified a radical potential in broadening popular access to the cinematic apparatus, fostering a new public consciousness about how media images are constructed and opening a space for alternative experimentation and personal expression outside of the industrial context of the studio system. Amateur film production emerged alongside the first moving pictures. Tom Gunning has argued that the Lumière Brothers' shorts were best understood within a context of amateur photography in France,[8] while Zimmerman points to the ways that amateur theater movements in the United States, as well as a prevailing entrepreneurial spirit, provided a base of support of amateur filmmaking efforts in the 1910s. However, the amateur film has remained, first and foremost, the "home movie," in several senses of the term: first, amateur films were exhibited primarily in private (and most often, domestic) spaces lacking any viable channel of distribution to a larger public; second, amateur films were most often documentaries of domestic and family life rather than attempts to make fictional or avant-garde films; and third, amateur films were perceived to be technically flawed and of marginal interest beyond the immediate family. Jokes and cartoons about the painfulness of being subjected to someone else's home movies are pervasive in our culture and represent a devaluing of the potential for an amateur cinema movement. Zimmerman cites a range of different critical appraisals that stressed the artlessness and spontaneity of amateur film in contrast with the technical polish and aesthetic sophistication of commercial films. She concludes, "[Amateur film] was gradually squeezed into the nuclear family. Technical standards, aesthetic norms, socialization pressures and political goals

derailed its cultural construction into a privatized, almost silly, hobby."[9] Writing in the early 1990s, Zimmerman saw little reason to believe that the camcorder and the VCR would significantly alter this situation, suggesting that the medium's technical limitations made it hard for amateurs to edit their films and that the only public means of exhibition were controlled by commercial media-makers (as in programs such as *America's Funniest Home Videos*).

Digital filmmaking alters many of the conditions which Zimmerman felt had led to the marginalization of previous amateur filmmaking efforts—the Web provides an exhibition outlet that moves amateur filmmaking from private into public space; digital editing is far simpler than editing Super-8 or video and thus opens up a space for amateur artists to more directly reshape their material; the home PC has even enabled the amateur filmmaker to directly mimic the special effects associated with Hollywood blockbusters like *Star Wars.* As a consequence, digital cinema constitutes a new chapter in the complex history of interactions between amateur filmmakers and the commercial media. These films remain amateur, in the sense that they are made on low budgets, produced and distributed in noncommercial contexts, and generated by nonprofessional filmmakers (albeit often by people who want entry into the professional sphere), yet, many of the other classic markers of amateur film production have disappeared. No longer home movies, these films are public movies—public in that from the start, they are intended for audiences beyond the filmmaker's immediate circle of friends and acquaintances; public in their content, which involves the reworking of personal concerns into the shared cultural framework provided by popular mythologies; and public in their aesthetic focus on existing in dialogue with the commercial cinema (rather than existing outside of the Hollywood system altogether).

Digital filmmakers tackled the challenge of making *Star Wars* movies for many different reasons. *Kid Wars* director, Dana Smith, is a fourteen-year old who had recently acquired a camcorder and decided to stage scenes from *Star Wars* involving his younger brother and his friends, who armed themselves for battle with squirt guns and Nerf weapons. *The Jedi Who Loved Me* was shot by the members of a wedding party and intended as a tribute to the bride and groom, who were *Star Wars* fans. Some films—such as *Macbeth*—were school projects. Two high school students—Bievenido Concepcion and Don Fitz-Roy—shot the film, which creatively blurs the lines between Lucas and Shakespeare, for their high school advanced-placement English class. They staged light saber battles down the school hallway, though the principal was concerned about potential damage to lockers; the Millennium Falcon lifted off from the gym, though they had to

composite it over the cheerleaders who were rehearsing the day they shot that particular sequence. Still other films emerged as collective projects for various *Star Wars* fan clubs. *Boba Fett: Bounty Trail,* for example, was filmed for a competition hosted by a Melbourne, Australia, Lucasfilm convention. Each cast member made their own costumes, building on previous experience with science fiction masquerades and costume contests. The film's stiffest competition came from *Dark Redemption,* a production of the Sydney fan community, which featured a light-saber-waving female protagonist, Mara Jade. Their personal motives for making such films are of secondary interest, however, once they are distributed on the Web. If such films are attracting worldwide interest, it is not because we all care whether or not Bievenido Concepcion and Don Fitz-Roy made a good grade on their Shakespeare assignment; we are unlikely to know any of the members of the wedding party that made *The Jedi Who Loved Me.* Rather, what motivates viewers to watch such films is our shared investments in the *Star Wars* universe. These amateur filmmakers have re framed their personal experiences or interests within the context of a popular culture mythology that is known around the world.

In a very tangible sense, digital filmmaking has blurred the line between amateur and professional, with films made for miniscule budgets duplicating special effects which had cost a small fortune to generate only a decade earlier. Amateur filmmakers can make pod racers skim along the surface of the ocean or landspeeders scatter dust as they zoom across the desert. They can make laser beams shoot out of ships and explode things before our eyes. Several fans tried to duplicate Jar Jar's character animation and inserted him into their own movies with varying degrees of success. (One filmmaker spoofed the defects of his own work, having Jar Jar explain that he took on a different accent for his part in Lucas's movie and suggesting that he had recently undergone a nose job.) The light saber battle, however, has become the gold standard of amateur filmmaking, with almost every filmmaker compelled to demonstrate his or her ability to achieve this particular effect. Many of the *Star Wars* shorts, in fact, consist of little more than light saber battles staged in suburban rec-rooms and basements, in empty lots, in the hallways of local schools, inside shopping malls, or more exotically against the backdrop of medieval ruins (shot during vacations).

As amateur filmmakers are quick to note, Lucas and Steven Spielberg both made Super-8 fiction films as teenagers and saw this experience as a major influence on their subsequent work. Although these films have not been made available to the general public, some of them have been discussed in detail in various biographies and magazine profiles. These "movie brat" filmmakers have been quick to embrace the potentials of digital filmmaking, not simply as a means of lowering production costs for their own films, but also as a training ground for new talent. Lucas, for example, told *Wired* magazine, "Some of the special effects that we redid for *Star Wars* were done on a Macintosh, on a laptop, in a couple of hours. . . . I could have very easily shot the *Young Indy* TV series on Hi-8. . . . So you can get a Hi-8 camera for a few thousand bucks, more for the software and the computer for less than $10,000 you have a movie studio. There's nothing to stop you from doing something provocative and significant in that medium." Elsewhere, he has paid tribute to several of the fan filmmakers, including Kevin Rubio (the director of *Troops*) and Joe Nussbaum (the director of *George Lucas in Love*).

Lucas's rhetoric about the potentials of digital filmmaking seems to have captured the imaginations of amateur filmmakers, and they are struggling to confront the master on his own ground, to use digital cinema to create a far more vivid version of their childhood fantasies. As Clay Kronke, the Texas A&M University undergraduate who made *The New World,* explained, "This film has been a labor of love. A venture into a new medium. . . . I've always loved light sabers and the mythos of the Jedi and after getting my hands on some software that would allow me to actually become what I had once only admired at a distance, a vague idea soon started becoming a reality. . . . Dude, we're gonna be Jedi." Kronke openly celebrates the fact that he made the film on a $26.79 budget with most of the props and costumes part of their pre-existing collections of *Star Wars* paraphernalia, that the biggest problem they faced on the set was that their plastic light sabers kept breaking after they clashed them together too often, and that those sound effects he wasn't able to borrow from a Phantom Menace PC game were "follied around my apartment, including the sound of a coat hanger against a metal flashlight, my microwave door, and myself falling on the floor several times."

The amateur's pride in recreating professional quality special effects always seems to compete with a recognition of the enormous gap between their own productions and the big-budget Hollywood film they are mimicking. Scholars and critics writing about third-world filmmaking have described those films as an "imperfect cinema," noting the ways that filmmakers have had to deal with low budgets and limited access to high-tech production facilities, making it impossible to compete with Hollywood on its own terms. Instead, these filmmakers have made a virtue out of their limitations, often spoofing or parodying Hollywood genre conventions and stylistic norms through films that are intentionally crude or ragged in style. The abruptness in editing, the roughness of camera movement, the grittiness of film stock, and the unevenness of lighting have become markers of authenticity, a kind of direct challenge to the polished look of a big budget screen

production. These amateur filmmakers have also recognized and made their peace with the fact that digital cinema is, in some senses, an "imperfect cinema," with the small and grainy images a poor substitute for the larger-than-life qualities of Lucas's original films when projected on a big screen with Dolby Surroundsound. The trailer for the *Battle of the Bedroom* promises "lots of dodgy special effects," while the team that made *When Senators Attack* chose to call themselves Ultracheese Ltd. In some cases, the films are truly slapdash, relishing their sloppy special effects, embarrassing delivery, and thrift shop costumes. *The Throne Room,* for example, brags that it was shot and edited in only thirty minutes, and it shows. Two hammy adolescents cut-up in home movie footage clearly shot their living room and inserted into the *Throne Room* sequence from *A New Hope* to suggest their flirtation with Princess Leia. In others, the productions are quite polished, but the filmmakers still take pleasure in showing the seams. Setting its story in "a long, long time ago in a galaxy far cheaper than this one," Ceri Llewellyn's technically accomplished *Star Wras* reproduces the assault on the Death Star, using origami-folded paper TIE fighters and a basketball painted white as a stand-in for the Death Star. As the Death Star bursts into flames, we hear a loud boink as the elastic string holding it in space snaps and it falls out of the frame.

If the third-world filmmakers saw "imperfect cinema" as the basis for an implicit, and often very explicit, critique of the ideologies and market forces behind the Hollywood blockbuster and saw their parodies of American genre films as helping to "destroy the very toys of mystification," no such radical goal governs the production of these amateur films. They have, indeed, turned toward parody as the most effective genre for negotiating between these competing desires to reproduce, not to destroy, the special effects at the heart of the contemporary blockbuster and to acknowledge their own amateur status. Yet, their parody is almost always affectionate and rarely attempts to make an explicit political statement.

A notable exception may be *Tie-Tanic,* which directly references the huge corporate apparatus behind *Star Wars*'s success and calls into question the franchising of contemporary popular culture. The filmmaker, John Bunt, re-dubbed a sequence from the original *Star Wars* film depicting a conference between Darth Vader, Grand Moff Tarkin, and other imperial forces so that it now represented a Lucasfilm marketing meeting as corporate executives plot to rob consumers of their entertainment dollars. During a period of "nostalgic consumption" the *Star Wars* trilogy has regained its bid to be the highest grossing box-office success of all time but remains potentially vulnerable to challenge while the producers are nervously awaiting the completion of the prequels. The slow deployment

of trailers can hold the audience's attention for only so long in an environment of competing blockbusters. While the studio executives are convinced that "talking pigs will hold the mouse-lovers in line," the real point of vulnerability is teenage girls: "If the rebels arouse sympathy and pathos in adolescent girls, it is possible—however unlikely—that they might find a market and exploit it." Darth Vader warns them that "the ability to control the medium for twenty years is insignificant next to the power of a good chick flick," only to be dismissed, "don't try to frighten us with your demographic ways, Lord Vader." Yet, Grand Moff Tarkin heeds his advice and dispatches him to deal with all challenges to this market segment. In a spectacular finale, which mixes and matches footage, sometimes within the same composite image, from *Star Wars* and *Titanic,* Vader's stormtroopers and TIE fighters open fire on the luxury liner. In several remarkable shots, we see R2D2, C-3PO, and a flaming Ewok among the terrified passengers flying from the sinking ship and watch a TIE fighter swoop down and blow up one of the escaping lifeboats. Rarely has the cut-throat competition between media conglomerates been depicted with such vivid and witty images! Yet, such an overt—and still pretty tame—critique of market forces is the exception rather than the rule.

More often, these amateur filmmakers see themselves as actively promoting media texts that they admire. For example, *Shadows of the Empire* is an unauthorized fan-made adaptation of Steve Perry's commercial *Star Wars* novel. Perry's original novel explored events that occurred between the end of *Empire Strikes Back* and the opening moments of *Return of the Jedi. Shadows of the Empire* has proven especially popular with *Star Wars* fans because it pays significant attention to the bounty hunter, Boba Fett, a character relatively marginal to the original films but central to the fan culture. Frustrated that this novel had never been adopted to the screen, fan filmmakers Jeff Hendrich and Bob Branch created their own serialization of the story: "We pooled every *Star Wars* action-figure and toy that we could beg, borrow or steal to make up the cast of the film. The occasional special guest toy stands in for the characters we just couldn't find and as extras in the crowd scenes." Though the adaptation was unauthorized, it nevertheless follows the logic of the franchise system itself.

The Qui-Gon Show aptly suggests the blurring between professional and fan efforts which occurs in this context. The script emerged as part of AtomFilms.com's "Makin' Wookie" competition, a commercially sponsored contest that attracted more than 300 amateur and semi-professional entries, including such promising titles as *Mos Angeles, The Real World—Tatooine, Springer Wars, Star Wars: Close Encounters,* and *Wookie Nights.* AtomFilms then provided a budget for several of the more acclaimed fan filmmakers, including

Jason Wishnow and Evan Mather, to produce a short based on Robert Fyvolent's contest-winning script. As with *The Qui-Gon Show,* many of the films have been distributed through the new commercial sites devoted to digital cinema and in several notable cases, have been released on commercial video.

Even in the absence of such direct commercial connections, the mass marketing of *Star Wars* inadvertently provided many of the resources needed to support these productions. The amateur filmmakers often make use of commercially available costumes and props, sample music from the soundtrack album and sounds of *Star Wars* videos or computer games, and draw advice on special effects techniques from television documentaries and mass-market magazines. For example, the makers of *Duel* described the sources for their soundtrack: "We sampled most of the light saber sounds from the *Empire Strikes Back* Special Edition laserdisc, and a few from *A New Hope. Jedi* was mostly useless to us, as the light saber battles in the film are always accompanied by music. The kicking sounds are really punch sounds from *Raiders of the Lost Ark,* and there's one sound—hideous running across the sand—that we got from *Lawrence of Arabia.* Music, of course, comes from the *Phantom Menace* soundtrack." By contrast, some filmmakers made use of images from the films themselves, but added soundtracks from other sources. *Stooge Wars,* for example, juxtaposes footage of Darth Vader and the stormtroopers with sounds and dialogue sampled from *I'll Never Heil Again,* a Three Stooges short that featured Moe as Hitler.

More broadly, the availability of these various ancillary products has encouraged these filmmakers, since childhood, to construct their own fantasies within the *Star Wars* universe. As one fan critic explained, "Odds are if you were a kid in the seventies, you probably fought in schoolyards over who would play Han, lost a Wookie action figure in your backyard and dreamed of firing that last shot on the Death Star. And probably your daydreams and conversations weren't about William Wallace, Robin Hood, or Odysseus, but, instead, light saber battles, frozen men, and forgotten fathers. In other words, we talked about our legend." Lucasfilm and Kenner may have initially understood the *Star Wars* action figures as commodities, but their cultural effects go much deeper. The action figures provided this generation with some of their earliest avatars, encouraging them to assume the role of a Jedi knight or an intergalactic bounty hunter, enabling them to physically manipulate the characters and props in order to construct their own stories. Fans, for example, note that the Boba Fett action figure, far more than the character's small role in the trilogy, helped to make this character a favorite among digital filmmakers. The fans, as children, had fleshed out Boba Fett's intentionally murky character, giving him (or her) a personality, motives, goals, and conflicts, which helped to inspire the plots of a number of the amateur movies.

Not surprisingly, a significant number of filmmakers in their late teens and early twenties have turned toward those action figures as resources for their first production efforts. For example, *Toy Wars* producers Aaron Halon and Jason VandenBerghe have launched an ambitious plan to produce a shot-by-shot remake of *Star Wars.* Others, such as Damon Wellner and Sebastian O'Brien, two self-proclaimed "action figure nerds" from Cambridge, Mass., formed Probot Productions with the goal of "making toys as alive as they seemed in childhood." Probot has made several action figure movies, including the forty-minute long *Star Wars* epic, *Prequel: Revenge of the Snaggletooth* (which they bill as "homage to the franchise that redefined Movie Merchandi$ing") and *Aliens 5* ("In space, no one can hear you playing with toys"). The Probot Web site offers this explanation of their production process: "The first thing you need to know about Probot Productions is that we're broke. We spend all our $$$ on toys. This leaves a very small budget for special effects, so we literally have to work with what we can find in the garbage. You may be surprised at what you can create with a video camera and some simple household items. . . . If you have seen *Aliens 5,* you may remember Ripley and Bishop running down the computer-generated hallways of the space ship. . . . This effect was done simply by placing the camera directly in front of a TV, having one person holding the action figures up in front of the screen and another person playing the Alien vs. Predator video game. . . . We used a lot of pyrotechnics in the film, and had a fire extinguisher on the set at all times. . . . We used pump-action hairspray (not aerosol!!) and a lighter to create our flame-thrower effect. . . . For sets we used a breadbox, a ventilation tube from a dryer, cardboard boxes, a discarded piece from a vending machine, and milk crates. Large Styrofoam pieces from stereo component boxes work very well to create spaceship-like environments!" Despite such primitive working conditions, Probot has been able to mimic the original film's light saber battles, space weaponry, and holographic images.

No digital filmmaker has pushed the aesthetics of the action figure as far as Evan Mather. Mather's films, such as *Godzilla versus Disco Lando, Kung-fu Kenobi's Big Adventure,* and *Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars,* represent a no-holds-barred romp through contemporary popular culture. The rock-'em sock-'em action of *Kung-Fu Kenobi's Big Adventure* takes place against the backdrop of settings sampled from the film, drawn by hand, or built from Lego blocks, with the eclectic and evocative soundtrack borrowed from Neil Diamond, *Mission Impossible, Pee-Wee's Big Adventure,* and *Charlie Brown's Christmas Special.* Dialogue in Mather's movies is often sampled from the original films or elsewhere in popular culture. *Disco Lando* puts the moves on everyone from Admiral Ackbar to Jabba's blue-skinned dancing girl and all of his pick-up-lines come from the soundtrack of *The*

Empire Strikes Back. Mace Windu "gets medieval" on the Jedi Council, delivering Samuel L. Jackson's lines from *Pulp Fiction,* before shooting up the place. The camera focuses on the bald head of a dying Darth Vader as he gasps "rosebud." Rebels and stormtroopers battle it out on the snowy landscape of Hoth while cheery yuletide music plays in the background.

Literary critic Lois Rostow Kuznets has discussed the recurrent motif of toys coming to life across several centuries of children's literature, noting that such stories provide a variety of functions for their readers and authors: "Toy characters embody the secrets of the night: they inhabit a secret, sexual, sensual world, one that exists in closed toy shops, under Christmas trees, and behind the doors of dollhouses—and those of our parents' bedrooms. This is an uncanny (in Freudian terms) world of adult mysteries and domestic intrigue. It can be marginal, liminal, potentially carnival world."[10] Mather and the other action figure filmmakers explore the secrets of the night, blurring the boundaries between different fictional universes, playfully transgressing the family values of the original *Star Wars* films, to encourage our carnivalesque play with their molded plastic protagonists. The humor is often scatological. Yoda eats too many Banta Beans and farts repeatedly in Obi-Wan's face. A naked Barbie spews green vomit into a commode. His characters belch, fart, and barf with total abandon, as they punch, kick, and pummel each other with little or no provocation. *Disco Lando* climaxes with a bloody fistfight between Godzilla and the Virgin Mary. Mather also loves to insinuate tabloid-style secret lives for the various characters. Obi-Wan wakes up in bed snuggling with Lobot. Luke Skywalker enjoys dressing in Princess Leia's skimpy slavegirl costume. As for Leia, Mather shows her smooching with her brother, Luke, and then pulls back to show a whole lineup of panting aliens waiting their turn for the Princess.

Apart from their anarchic humor and rapid-fire pace, Mather's films stand out because of their visual sophistication. In some cases, Mather deftly mixes the visual styles of contemporary filmmakers and borrows heavily from Tarantino in particular. Moreover, Mather's own frenetic style has become increasingly distinguished across the body of his works, constantly experimenting with different forms of animation, flashing or masked images, and dynamic camera movements. Mather has made a virtue of his materials, using the plastic qualities of the action figures to justify a movement into a brightly colored and surreal mise-en-scène.

Yet, if the action figure filmmakers have developed an aesthetic based on their appropriation of materials from the mainstream media, then the mainstream media has been quick to imitate that aesthetic. Nickelodeon's *Action League Now,* for example, has a regular cast of characters consisting of mismatched dolls and mutilated action figures. In some cases, their faces have been melted or mangled through inappropriate play. One protagonist has no clothes. They come in various size scales, suggesting the collision of different narrative universes that characterizes children's action figure play. Recurring gags involve the smashing of brittle characters or dogs gnawing on and mutilating the protagonists, situations all too common in domestic play. MTV's *Celebrity Deathmatch* creates its action figures using claymation, staging World Wrestling Federation-style bouts between various celebrities, some likely (Monica Lewinsky against Hillary Clinton), some simply bizarre (the rock star formerly known as Prince against Prince Charles). Screenwriter/director Steve Oedekerk (*Ace Ventura 2, The Nutty Professor, Patch Adams*) produced *Thumb Wars* using thumbs, dressed in elaborate costumes, as his primary performers and then digitally adding on facial features and expressions. UPN aired the decisively low-tech and low-humor result the week the *Star Wars* prequel opened in the theaters. It is in the context of such unlikely cult television productions that it becomes plausible to see the creation of a high-quality fan film for Web distribution as a "try-out" for gaining access into the media industries.

We are witnessing the emergence of an elaborate feedback loop between the emerging "DIY" aesthetics of participatory culture and the mainstream industry. The Web represents a site of experimentation and innovation, where amateurs test the waters, developing new practices, themes, and generating materials that may well attract cult followings on their own terms. The most commercially viable of those practices are then absorbed into the mainstream media, either directly through the hiring of new talent or the development of television, video, or big screen works based on those materials, or indirectly, through a second-order imitation of the same aesthetic and thematic qualities. In return, the mainstream media materials may provide inspiration for subsequent amateur efforts, which, in turn, push popular culture in new directions. In such a world, fan works can no longer be understood as simply derivative of mainstream materials but must be understood as themselves open to appropriation and reworking by the media industries.

This process is aptly illustrated by considering the work of popular artists like Kevin Smith, Quentin Tarantino, Mike Judge, Matt Groening, and Kevin Williamson, whose films and television series reflect this mainstreaming of fan aesthetics and politics. Their works often deal explicitly with the process of forming one's own mythology using images borrowed from the mass media. One of the protagonists of *Pulp Fiction,* for example, decides at the end that he wants to "wander the earth" like Kane in television's *Kung Fu. Reservoir Dogs* opens with a five-minute discussion of the erotic connotations of Madonna's

"Like A Virgin," defining the characters first and foremost through their relationships to popular culture. Characters in *Chasing Amy* engage in animated debates about the sexuality of the various teens in the Archie comics, while *Dazed and Confused* opens with the scene of high school students trying to recall as many different episodes of *Gilligan's Island* as they can, before one of the women offers a devastating critique of how the series builds on the iconography of male pornography. Kevin Smith's films make recurring in-joke references to *Star Wars,* including a debate about the ethical obligations of the independent contractors who worked on the Death Star (*Clerks*), a comic episode in which Silent Bob becomes convinced that he can actually perform Jedi mind tricks (*Mall Rats*), and a long rant about the "blackness" of Darth Vader (*Chasing Amy*); Smith devotes an entire issue of his *Clerks* comic book to various characters' attempts to corner the market on collectible *Star Wars* action figures.

The protagonist of Williamson's television series, *Dawson's Creek,* decorates his room with posters for Steven Spielberg films, routinely discusses and critiques classic and contemporary films with the other characters on the series, and draws inspiration from them for the creation of his own videos. Tarantino's whole aesthetic seems to have emerged from his formative experiences working at a video store. In such an environment, older and newer films are more or less equally accessible; some movie is always playing on the monitor and providing a background for everyday interactions. These video store experiences encourage a somewhat scrambled but aesthetically productive relationship to film history. Tarantino, Smith, Williamson, and their contemporaries make films that attract the interests of other video store habitues, much as earlier generations of filmmakers—the French New Wave or the American Movie Brats—made movies for other cineastes. Much as the cineaste filmmakers set scenes in movie theatres or made whole movies centering around their protagonist's obsessions with the filmgoing experience, these newer filmmakers frequently cast video store clerks as protagonists (*Clerks, Scream*), celebrating their expertise about genre conventions or their insightful speculations about popular films. This video store aesthetic mixes and matches elements from different genres, different artistic movements, and different periods with absolute abandon. Tarantino's tendency toward quotation runs riot in the famous Jack Flash restaurant sequence in *Pulp Fiction,* where all of the service personnel are impersonating iconic figures of the 1950s and the menu uses different comedy teams to designate different shake flavors. As the John Travolta character explains, "It's like a wax museum with a pulse," a phrase that might describe Tarantino's whole approach to filmmaking. Even his casting decisions, such as the use of *Medium Cool*'s Robert Forster and blaxploitation star Pam Grier in *Jackie Brown,* constitute quotations and appropriations from earlier film classics.

Not surprisingly, the works of these "video store filmmakers" have been deeply influential on the emerging generation of amateur digital filmmakers—almost as influential in fact as *Star Wars* itself. Jeff Allen, a 27-year-old "HTML monkey" for an Atlanta-based Internet company, for example, made *Trooperclerks,* a spoof of the trailer for *Clerks,* which deals with the drab routine confronted by the stormtroopers who work in convenience stores and video rental outlets on board the Death Star. The short spoof, which was immediately embraced and promoted by Kevin Smith's View Askew, was later followed by a half-hour animated film based on the same premise, made in response to the news that *Clerks* was being adapted as an animated network series. Allen's focus on *Clerks* came only after he considered and rejected the thought of doing a *Star Wars* parody based on Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs.* Similarly, Allen Smith heads a team that is producing a feature-length animated film, *Pulp Phantom,* which offers a scene by scene spoof of *Pulp Fiction,* recast with characters from *Star Wars.* As of late 2002, the team has produced more than ten episodes for the Web, taking the story up to the point where paid assassin Darth Maul races the overdosing Princess Amidala to the home of drug dealer Hans Solo, frantic lest he get into trouble with her jealous gangland husband, Darth Vader. In a particularly inspired bit of casting, Jar Jar Binks plays the geeky college student who, in an installment still in the works, Maul accidentally blows away in the back of Boba Fett's vehicle. "Fan boy" filmmakers like Smith and Tarantino are thus inspiring the efforts of the next generation of amateur filmmakers, who are, in turn, developing cult followings that may ultimately gain them access to the commercial mainstream. The *Pulp Phantom* Web site, for example, includes a mechanism where loyal fans can receive e-mail each time a new installment of the series gets posted.

This cyclical process has only accelerated since the box office success of *The Blair Witch Project,* which presented itself as an amateur digital film (albeit one that got commercial distribution and challenged *Phantom Menace* at the box office in the summer of 1999) and had built public interest through its sophisticated use of the Web. *The Blair Witch Project,* in turn, has inspired countless Web-based amateur parodies (including *The Jar Jar Binks Project* and *The Wicked Witch Project*) and has sparked increased public and industry interest in the search for up-and-coming amateurs who can break into the mainstream, while the bigger budget sequel to *The Blair Witch Project* takes as its central image the explosion of amateur filmmakers who have come to Burkittsville, Maryland, in hopes of making their own documentaries on the mysterious deaths.

Conclusion

> *I personally find the opportunity to explore this new form of entertainment and creative expression both stimulating and liberating. While much of what we have learned throughout our careers will apply, I am also certain that new and unusual aesthetic values will quickly evolve—shaped by the medium itself, the public and the creative collaborations which this company will encourage.*
> —Ron Howard

> *Just as MTV introduced a new entertainment forum for music videos, we think this new enterprise will offer a new form of entertainment for the rapidly growing population of Internet users. Pop.com has the capability not only to offer a variety of entertainment options, but to tap into an as-yet-undiscovered talent pool that is as global as the Internet itself.*
> —Jeffrey Katzenberg

What is the future of digital cinema? One position sees digital cinema as an extension of avant-garde filmmaking practices, opening a new space for formal experimentation and alternative cultural politics and offering experimental artists access to a broader public than can be attracted to screenings of their works at film festivals, museums, or university classes. Another position, represented by the founders of Pop.com, sees the digital cinema as a potential new site for commercial developments, an extension of the logic of media convergence, a kind of MTV for the twenty-first century. In this vision, established filmmakers, such as Steven Spielberg or Tim Burton, can produce shorter and riskier works, emerging talents can develop their production skills, and works may move fluidly back and forth between the Web, television, film, and computer games. Interestingly, both groups want to tap into the hipness of "DIY" culture, promoting their particular vision of the future of digital cinema in terms of democratic participation and amateur self-expression, pinning their hopes, as Coppola suggests, on the prospect that a "little fat girl" from the midwest will become the Mozart of digital filmmaking. Both visions have inherent limitations: the "low-res" movement's appeals to avant-garde aesthetics, its language of manifestos, and its focus on film festival screenings may well prove as elitist as the earlier film movements it seeks to supplant, while the new commercial version of the digital cinema may re-inscribe the same cultural gatekeepers who have narrowed the potential diversity of network television or Hollywood cinema.

The *Star Wars* fan films discussed here represent a potentially important third space between the two. Shaped by the intersection between contemporary trends toward media convergence and participatory culture, these fan films are hybrid by nature—neither fully commercial nor fully alternative, existing as part of a grassroots dialogue with mass culture. We are witnessing the transformation of amateur film culture from a focus on home movies toward a focus on public movies, from local audiences to a global audience, from mastering the technology to mastering the mechanisms for publicity and promotion, and from self-documentation to an aesthetic based on appropriation, parody, and the dialogic. Coppola's "little fat girl" has found a way to talk back to the dominant media culture, to express herself within a shared language constructed through the powerful images and narratives that constitute contemporary popular culture. She will find ways to tap into the mythology of *Star Wars* and use it as a resource for the production of her own stories, stories that are broadly accessible to a popular audience and, in turn, inspire others to create their own works, as Lucas created *Star Wars* through the clever appropriation and transformation of various popular culture influences (ranging from Laurel and Hardy to *Battleship Yomamoto* and *The Hidden Fortress*).

This third space will survive, however, only if we maintain a vigorous and effective defense of the principle of "fair use," recognize the rights of consumers to participate fully, actively, and creatively within their own culture, and hold in check the desires of the culture industries to tighten their control over their own intellectual property in response to the economic opportunities posed by an era of media convergence. At the moment, we are on a collision course between a new economic and legal culture that encourages monopoly power over cultural mythologies and new technologies that empower consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and re-circulate media images. The recent legal disputes around Napster represent only the beginning of what is likely to be a decade long war over intellectual property, a war that will determine not simply the future direction of digital cinema but the nature of creative expression in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
2. Justin Wyatt, *High Concept* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
3. Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
4. Shoshanna Green, Cynthia Jenkins, and Henry Jenkins, "The Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking," in Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (eds.), *Theorizing Fandom* (New York: Hampton, 1998).

5. James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 1999).
6. Will Brooker, "New Hope: The Postmodern Project of *Star Wars,*" in Peter Brooker and Will Brooker (eds.), *Postmodern After-Images* (London: Arnold, 1997). See also Will Brooker, *Using the Force* (London: Continuum, 2002).
7. Paul Clinton, "Filmmakers score with 'Lucas in Love,'" CNN, June 24, 1999, <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9906/24/movies.lucas.love/>.
8. Tom Gunning, "The Lumière Kinematograph and Amateur Photography Culture: Seizing the Instant," Lecture Presented at MIT Communications Forum, February 25, 1998.
9. Patricia Zimmerman, *Reel Families* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 157.
10. Lois Rostow Kuznets, *When Toys Come Alive* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 2.

Digital Filmography

Alien 5 (Damon Wellner and Sebastian O'Brien), <http://home.earthlink.net/~bsplendor/index.htm>.

American Booty (Albert Nerenberg), http://www.trailervision.com/trailerPages/booty_choose.html>.

Battle of the Bedroom (Scott Middlebrook), <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Video/6351/botb/botb1.html>.

Boba Fett: Bounty Trail (Justin Dix), <http://theforce.net/theater/shortfilms/bountytrail/index.shtml>.

Dark Redemption (Warren Duxbury, Peter Mether), <http://theforce.net/theater/shortfilms/darkredemption/index.shtml>.

Duel (Mark Thomas and Dave Macomber), <http://theforce.net/theater/shortfilms/duel/index.shtml>.

George Lucas in Love (Joe Nussbaum and Joseph Levy), <http://www1.mediatrip.com/per/House_Picks/George_Lucas_In_Love1media.html>.

Godzilla versus Disco Lando (Evan Mather), <http://www.evanmather.com>.

I Know What You Want Next Summer (Albert Nerenberg), <http://www.trailervision.com/trailerPages/want.htm>.

The Jar Jar Binks Project (Albert Nerenberg), <http://www.trailervision.com/trailerPages/jarjar_1.htm>.

The Jedi Who Loves Me (Henry Burrows and Adam Ahmad), <http://saturn.spaceports.com/~jedi/>.

Kid Wars (Dana Smith), <http://members.xoom.com/ip_president>.

Kung-Fu Kenobi's Big Adventure (Evan Mather), <http://www.evanmather.com>.

Les Pantless Menace (Evan Mather), <http://www.evanmather.com>.

MacBeth (Students of Glen Ridge High School), <http://www.glenridge.org/macbeth/mainpage.htm>.

Maru (Adam Dorr, Erik Benson, Hien Nguyen, Jon Jones), <http://theforce.net/theater/shortfilms/maru/index.shtml>.

The New World (Clay Kronke), <http://theforce.net/theater/shortfilms/newworld/index.shtml>.

Park Wars: The Little Menace (Ted Bracewell, Ayaz A. Asif), <http://www.parkwars.com>.

Prequel: Revenge of Tall Snaggletooth (Damon Wellner), <http://home.earthlink.net/~bsplendor/about.htm>.

Pulp Phantom (Allen Smith, Dustin Resch, Brian Snook), <http://www.pulpphantom.com>.

Quenton Tarantino's Star Wars (Evan Mather), <http:/www.evanmather.com>.

The Qui-Gon Show (Robert Fyvolent, Evan Mather, John Stavopoulos, Jason Wishnow), <http://www.evanmather.com>.

Scam 3 (Albert Nerenberg), <http://www.trailervision.com/trailerPages/scam3.html>.

Shadows of the Empire (Jeff Hendricks, Bob Branch), no longer on the Web.

Star Wars Remake (Jim Longsma, John Longsma, and Gary Baker), <http://home.earthlink.net/~jimjongsma/StarWarsRemake/Page001.html>.

Star Wras (Ceri Llewellyn), <http://www.theforce.net/theater/animation/starwras/index.shtml>.

Stooge Wars (Matt Spease), <http://members.xoom.com/Matt_Spease/stoogewars.html>.

Tatooine or Bust (Jason Wishnow), <http://www.wishnow.com/production/index.html>.

Throne Room (Steve Latham, Ben Latham), <http://homepages.go.com/~lathamfilm/movies.html>.

Thumb Wars (Steve Oedekirk), <http://www.thumbtv.com/thumbwars/index.html>.

Tie-Tantic (Tri Studio Productions), <http://www.tie_tanic.com>.

Toy Wars (Jason VandenBerghe, Aaron Halon), <http://www.toywars.org>.

Trooper Clerks (Jeff Allen), <http://www.studiocreations.com/trooperclerks>.

Trooper Clerks: The Animated One-Shot (Jeff Allen), <http://www.studiocreations.com/trooperclerks>.

Troops (Kevin Rubio), <http://www.theforce.net/troops>.

When Senators Attack IV (Ryan Mannion, Daniel Hawley), <http://theforce.net/theater/animation/wsa4/index.shtml>.

The Wicked Witch Project (Joe Barlow), <http://www.wickedwitchproject.com>.

Wimp Club (Albert Nerenberg), <http://trailervision.com/trailerPages/wimpclub.htm>.