'USE THE CAMCORDER LUKE': STAR WARS FAN FILMS AND DIGITAL MOVIEMAKING

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the recent phenomenon of online Star Wars fan films as a site to consider the complex and dynamic interrelationship between mainstream and amateur and global and regional, digital moviemaking cultures. Fan filmmakers utilise the resources of mainstream popular texts to meet their own alternative interests – whether these are to tell their own stories, to have some fun, or to break into the commercial film industry. It is argued that Star Wars fan films demonstrate the cultural significance of digital video technologies in changing who gets to make movies, how they are made, who gets to see them, and what they are 'about'. The paper concludes by arguing that Star Wars fan films have become an important sub-culture in digital moviemaking and are helping to change mainstream and amateur movie culture and culture in general.

INTRODUCTION: A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR, AWAY...

When *Star Wars* first burst onto cinema screens (a long, long time ago) in 1977, its then groundbreaking special effects, enormous budget, extensive cast and crew and sophisticated marketing strategies were part of a new era in moviemaking that brought forth what became known as the Hollywood 'blockbuster'.

Right now – in our very own galaxy – ordinary people like you and me are creating *Star Wars* movies on our home computers using software packages that enable us to create the kind of special effects that – in the very recent past – have required the resources and backing of major production companies.

Many of these 'homemade' movies are being exhibited across the Internet to a potential audience of millions, and one of these amateur digital movies (the *Star Wars* spoof *George Lucas in Love*) actually outsold *The Phantom Menace* in its opening week of sales at Amazon.com (Newton, 2001). *Star Wars* fan films are yet further evidence that the *Star Wars* series has become a significant cultural phenomenon.

Not only has *Star Wars* been an important text in defining the moviemaking practices of mainstream culture, it has also recently become an important point of reference for amateur and fan-based digital moviemaking, especially on the Internet. In many ways, the narrative universe of *Star Wars* – which maps out the struggle between the colonizing force of the Empire and the grassroots resistance of the rebellion – might seem to be an appropriate metaphor for the relationship between mainstream movie culture and amateur or fan films. However, as Henry Jenkins notes, the old either-or oppositions (co-optation vs. resistance) which have long dominated approaches to media studies simply do not do justice to the multiple, dynamic, and often complimentary relationships between mainstream and amateur media production (Jenkins, n.d.). Building on Jenkins' insights, in this paper, I want to use *Star Wars* fan films and the recently established (and LucasFilm funded) 'Star Wars Fan Film Awards' to consider something of the complex and dynamic interrelationship between mainstream/amateur and global/local digital moviemaking.

DIGITAL MOVIEMAKING AND FAN CULTURE

Fan movies are, in many ways, the perfect genre for amateur moviemakers working within the digital environment, for they cleverly utilise and tap into well known popular culture texts in order to create short movies that can be played online and which are recognizable by a mass audience. *Star Wars* fan films are an excellent example of this. *Star Wars* fan films refer to a specific sub-genre of fan films that use and rework key aspects of the *Star Wars* universe – characters, costumes, weapons, mythology, cinematic style – to tell alternative stories through a diverse range of styles, approaches, and production values. *Star Wars* fan films not only experiment with the *Star Wars* universe, they also significantly expand it with new characters and scenarios, or parody it via clever send-ups (Allen, 2002).

As such, *Star Wars* fan films build on a long-standing practice of fan fiction in which fans create their own versions of their favourite stories. Fan fiction often fills in the missing pieces of a story by focusing on minor characters or providing sequels or prequels that extend the 'official' story. For example, *Dark Redemption* is set just before the events of the original *Star Wars* and follows the adventures of a female Jedi, while the fan film *A Question of Faith* explores the tensions and drama of two Jedi Brothers who are on opposite sides of the Force.

Fan fiction can also express interests and subjectivities that are not often catered for in many mainstream texts. For example, 'slash' refers to a sub-genre of fan fiction that celebrates a broader range of sexualities and desires than appears in the original text (homosexual relationships between Spock and Captain Kirk are common in this genre).

While there is a long and extensive tradition of fan fiction in books and magazines, fan filmmaking has been a more recent phenomenon. Much of this has to do with the development of digital technologies, which have taken fan fiction to a new level in terms of production values and distribution. For, with access to inexpensive digital camcorders, desktop computers, graphics software, and the Internet, fans now have the means to create and distribute their own *Star Wars* movies (often with suprisingly high quality special effects) to an audience of millions. Furthermore, digital moviemaking technologies facilitate the practices of appropriation, remastering and the combining and compositing of diverse media elements that is required to rework and transform the footage from mainstream texts into the stuff of fan films.

The emergence of *Star Wars* fan films on the Internet is generally linked to *Troops,* a parody film that crossed *Star Wars* with the reality TV show *Cops*. Made in 1998 it was released online and quickly became a cult movie among the Internet's extensive *Star Wars* fan base. Over the past four years, *Star Wars* fan films have become a specific and significant sub-genre of amateur digital moviemaking and most fan films are now distributed across the Internet via any number of fan film sites such as TheForce.net, Star Wars Fan Film Database, Atomfilms.com and many others.

Digital technologies also enable fan filmmakers to share resources such as special effects and production techniques over the Internet. For example, 'many designers who have made their own 3-D models of 'Star Wars' vehicles and droids are willing to share their work for credit on a fan film' (Wen, 2000, p.2). There are also a number of tutorials available online that instruct filmmakers on the finer points of recreating the Star Wars universe by covering everything from how to create light saber and laser-blast effects, to making authentic-looking costumes and props. While these tutorials can't compete with the special-effects force of Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic they generate impressive results. According to one fan filmmaker, 'We will always be a step or two behind ILM [Industrial Light and Magic], but I think how close we have come would shock most people' (Wen, 2000, p.2). What allows Lucas to keep one step ahead of the amateur moviemakers is, of course, his extensive budget and the cutting edge technology that goes along with mainstream, 'blockbuster' digital moviemaking.

However, a number of fan films deliberately use the limitations and aesthetics of amateur filmmaking to their advantage by making corny, low budget spoofs that mock the special effects of the Hollywood originals. A good example of this is *Star Thumbs: Wheel of Misfortune,* a fan film that features the central *Star Wars* characters as (really badly) decorated thumbs on a popular game show.

Another fan film that both tries to reproduce the special effects of the original and celebrates the DIY aesthetics of fan filmmaking is the appropriately titled *The Empire Strikes Backyard.* This fan film, which comes complete with a promotional trailer, 'mockumentary', and behind-the-scenes footage also indicates how fan filmmakers are tapping into the marketing and 'making of' the culture of mainstream media production.

According to Henry Jenkins, this kind of self-conscious deployment of promotional and marketing strategies is one of the markers of contemporary amateur moviemaking:

> We are witnessing the transformation of amateur film culture from a focus on home movies towards a focus on public movies, from a focus on local audiences towards a focus on a potential global audience, from a focus on mastering the technology toward a focus on mastering the mechanisms for publicity and promotion, and from a focus on self-documentation towards a focus on an aesthetic based on appropriation, parody and the dialogic. (Jenkins, n.d.)

Whatever the individual production and marketing values of individual fan films, the increasing advances in digital moviemaking technologies and broadband capabilities of the Internet, means that fan filmmaking poses distinct challenges and pressures for mainstream media producers. For, as one *Star Wars* fan filmmaker argues, 'if the creators won't give you more, now you can simply create more yourself' (Wen, 2000, p.5). The advent of digital moviemaking technologies has certainly helped fans do just that.

'MAY THE FARCE BE WITH YOU'

In the previous section I considered how digital technologies have allowed fan filmmakers to reproduce and parody many of the special effects of the original mainstream movies. In this section, I want to consider the cultural significance of parody as a form of fan filmmaking.

While fan films range across 'serious' genres – such as dramas that expand the official *Star Wars* universe and documentaries about fan culture – the most visible examples of *Star Wars* fan films, by far, are movies that playfully parody the series and other popular culture texts. For example, *Troops* adopts this approach by combining the *Star Wars* universe with *Cops; Park Wars* merges *Star Wars* and *South Park; Star Wars: A Christmas Carol* sets the *Star Wars* characters in a Dickensian context; while *Your Lightsaber and You* utilises the genre conventions of the 1950s educational short film to instruct Jedis in the art of caring for their weaponry.

By parodying the codes and conventions of a range of popular texts, these fan films demonstrate the sophisticated cinematic and popular culture literacies of the fan moviemakers and the audiences who enjoy their movies. At the same time, parody lends itself to the lower production values and DIY aesthetics of the amateur moviemaker. According to Jenkins,

> Fans have turned toward parody as the most effective genre for negotiating between the 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. (Jenkins, n.d.)

In this sense, fan parodies are quite different to many other forms of independent or alternative moviemaking in that they explicitly seek to tap into, rather than critique, challenge, and disrupt the ideologies and cinematic styles that fund mainstream, and especially blockbuster, movies.

George Lucas in Love is an excellent case in point. Made in 1999 by two recent graduates of a film course at the University of Southern California (the same university that George Lucas went to), the film 'affectionately' mixes together and parodies *Star Wars* and *Shakespeare in Love.* In this parody, George Lucas is a film student with 'writer's block' who can't finish the script of his student film even though he is surrounded by potentially inspirational characters in his everyday life. For example, his next door neighbour is a dark and sinister fellow film student who wheezes (thanks to his asthma) and claims that he will soon "control the entertainment universe", while his Yoda-like professor talks in mysterious riddles 'inspiration will you not find...it will find you'.

George Lucas in Love is the most widely watched short film in Internet history with around 8 million viewers having streamed it while it was available online. It is now available only through Amazon.com and has become a phenomenal cultural and commercial success outselling *The Phantom Menace* in its opening week of sales (Newton, 2001).

One of the main reasons it is so successful is because it parodies two highly successful movies in popular culture. It used the brilliant narrative structure of *Shakespeare in Love* and adapted it for the short-film genre. By adapting an existing and well known work, the moviemakers could apply quite a complex narrative logic within the constraints of a short movie. It also tapped into the existing mythology of the *Star Wars* saga, which is one of the most popular and well known story worlds in contemporary movie culture. In this respect the moviemakers were actually employing a script-writing strategy that Lucas also uses to great effect. Indeed, one of the reasons why the *Star Wars* series is so successful is because Lucas is able to exploit and utilise so many existing cultural myths-the journey of the hero, good verus evil, Christian and Buddhist references, etc – in creating the *Star Wars* universe. By parodying both *Shakespeare in Love* and *Star Wars,* the makers of *George Lucas in Love* were able to attract an existing and extensive fan base (especially the huge numbers of *Star Wars* fans on the Internet). They readily acknowledge this by arguing that 'satire allows you to capture a ready-made

audience-people are already familiar with the films you're playing off' (Alumni Profiles, n.d.).

However, *George Lucas in Love* is not a fan film in the strict sense so much as a strategic career move. The moviemakers have stated that they self-consciously used the *Star Wars* universe as a means to break into mainstream moviemaking (Interview with Joe Nussbaum, n.d.). In this sense, they are similar to Joe Monroe, the director of *Knightquest*, who used his *Star Wars* fan film to further his career:

> I needed a demo reel. This is what I want to do for a living. And a lot of people say, 'You're stupid. You should've taken that money, made something original, and tried to get people interested in your work that way, instead of doing a fan film.' But my argument is, these fan films have a built-in audience. I've got people waiting to see this. (Wen, 2000, p. 2)

He certainly does. And the strategy seems to pay off. For example, the creators of *Troops, George Lucas in Love,* and *Bounty Trail* all now work in the mainstream movie industry. In fact, *Bounty Trail* caught the attention of Lucas, who hired the fan-filmmaker to work on the production of the second *Star Wars* prequel (Wen, 2000, p. 2).

From this perspective, fan filmmaking can be seen as existing in an important middle space between mainstream moviemaking and alternative moviemaking, for these films are 'hybrid by nature – neither fully commercial nor fully alternative, existing as a part of a grassroots dialogue with mass culture' (Jenkins, n.d.). Movies such as George Lucas in Love blur the boundaries between commercial and amateur cinema and moviemaking practice. But just how flexible are these boundaries? In the following section I want to consider some of the various ways in which LucasFilm – the production company behind the Star Wars series-is responding to the challenges posed by Star Wars fan films. The recently established (and Lucas Film funded) 'Star Wars Fan Film Awards' is a particularly interesting illustration of the complex interrelationship-both complimentary and contradictory-that exists between mainstream and amateur digital moviemaking.

FAN FILMS AND LUCASFILM LTD.

While fan films on the Internet are a recent phenomenon, there is, of course, a long and established tradition of fans appropriating and re-working their favourite texts. According to Jenkins, this has always been a basic component of cultural practice: 'Throughout most of human history, people operated according to a folk culture model – that is, they saw themselves as entitled to add to or retell the core myths and stories of their culture' (quoted in Wen, 2000, p. 2). For Jenkins, what is new in contemporary culture is not fans actions but the reactions of media corporations and the rise of intellectual property laws. '[Fans] want to become media producers, while media producers want to maintain their traditional dominance over media content' (Jenkins, n.d.).

What these comments suggest is a real conflict and tension between the rise of digital technologies that allow fans and amateur moviemakers to more fully participate in the production and circulation of popular culture, and the existence of a legal culture that seeks to clamp down on copyright infringement. From this perspective, the *Star Wars* fan films raise important issues regarding copyright and intellectual property law in relation to digital moviemaking.

Surprisingly, however, there has been minimal legal backlash against most *Star Wars* fan cinema from LucasFilm given Lucas's reputation for aggressively protecting his franchise. But, perhaps, this is a strategic approach on the part of LucasFilm? Perhaps, like Jenkins, George Lucas realises that,

> Soon, [copyright holders] are going to need those active fans more than ever before....In a world with multiple media options, video on demand and micropayments, fans may become the new gatekeepers who help direct consumers toward interesting and engaging media content. The smart media executive should figure out which direction the media-consuming public is moving, run around in front and shout, 'Follow me.' (quoted in Wen, 2000, p. 4).

As a smart media executive, Lucas does indeed seem to be leading the way. Late last year LucasFilm and AtomFilms announced that they would partner to launch the 'Star Wars Fan Film Network', which features fan-made movies on the Internet. Here is part of that announcement:

> *Star Wars* has always inspired creativity in its fans around the world. This project provides a creative outlet for amateur filmmakers and animators to showcase their work on an official site. Participants in the *Star Wars* Fan Film Network will have access to a library of audio clips from Darth Vader breathing to the lightsaber wave and Rebel blaster fire to incorporate into their own original works. As an added incentive to submit their short films for consideration, fan filmmakers whose short films are selected for the network will receive royalty payments based on the advertising and sponsorship revenues generated from the site.

(Star Wars Fan Film Network Announced, 2000, November 6)

The Star Wars Fan Film Network is currently holding its first Star Wars Fan Film Awards. The awards will be presented at 'Star Wars Celebration II' – the official Star Wars fan conventions-which recently took place just prior to the theatrical release of *Star Wars*: *Episode II Attack of the Clones*. This festival, and the online screening of the finalists, enables amateur and aspiring filmmakers to tap into the publicity and hype generated by the current release of the next *Star Wars* episode and thus generates media coverage for both the mainstream movie and the fan films. It also allows the mainstream movie producers to tap into alternative and fan-based movie cultures. These examples indicate how mainstream movie culture and amateur or alternative movie cultures are merging and converging on the Internet. Perhaps the most spectacular example of this is the fact that the winning entry in the Star Wars Fan Film Awards – the movie George himself chose above all others – was a short animated film about a little girl who desperately wants the latest *Star Wars* action figures for Christmas. This is surely a perfect illustration of the convergence of mainstream and alternative moviemaking (and marketing) in action!

The official fan film festivals are interesting, then, in that they indicate something of the complex relationship between mainstream *Star Wars* films and fan films, for they are both used to promote and extend the cultural and creative interests of each other. They also indicate how new approaches in amateur digital moviemaking can be absorbed into the mainstream.

Despite the obvious feedback loop that is happening in these officially-sponsored fan film festivals (i.e., marketing strategies, audience tie-ins and pre-release build-up for the next official *Star Wars* movie that these fan film festivals generate), representatives from AtomFilms and LucasFilm only discuss the advantages of the fan film network for the fans themselves. For example, according to Mich Chau, Executive Vice President of LucasFilm,

> Lucas Online is interested in supporting amateur filmmakers and engaging fans to share their passion for *Star Wars*. By teaming up with AtomFilms we hope to create an easy-to-find, entertaining site for *Star Wars* fans to share their creativity and have fun. (Announcing Star Wars Fan Film Awards, 2001, December 21)

For Scott Roesch, Director of eb entertainment for AtomFilms, "*Star Wars* is a cultural phenomenon unlike any other in film history. We are thrilled to be leveraging our online entertainment expertise to create the first official short film outlet for the loyal *Star Wars* fans". (Announcing Star Wars Fan Film Awards, 2001, December 21)

But this is not, however, an outlet for all fans and all fan films. According to Roesch, 'one thing LucasFilm did not want to work with were films that were kind of serious-minded attempts to expand on George Lucas' universe' (Rivera, 2002, p.1). No doubt LucasFilm didn't want to work with 'slash' films either. Indeed, LucasFilm has been extremely aggressive in trying to police certain kinds of fan cultural production-particularly those that contain sexually-explicit stories-while encouraging and rewarding non-erotic stories through his involvement with the fan film network and festivals. As such, LucasFilm is able to 'police' and regulate fan films through an informal agreement with *Star Wars* fans. 'We encourage our fans to have fun and celebrate *Star Wars*,' says Jim Ward, vice-president of marketing at LucasFilm, adding

> As long as we deem these things celebratory in nature, that fans are trying to have fun and express themselves positively, and are not trying to make money off of copyrighted material, or use it in a way that is offensive to our core audience, offensive to kids, or are using it in connection with pornography-all of those kinds of areas cross the line for us. That's when we have an issue with it. (Quoted in Allen, 2002, p. 2)

So, it seems that the issue is not copyright per se but how the material is used. In other words, the distribution or censoring of Star Wars fan films becomes a moral and ethical issue rather than a legal issue and it is George who gets to determine where the boundaries lie between them. The LucasFilm empire can and does strike back whenever fan films cross the line between 'good taste' and profit. Certainly, as the copyright holder, Lucas can do whatever he wants with his material and can determine who he allows to use it and how they use it. However, it is important to note that the 'informal agreement' Lucas has with his fans is one of the ways in which grassroots and amateur fan-based movies-and alternative fan films and fantasies-are 'policed' (Jenkins, n.d.).

THE FANS STRIKE BACK: THE PHANTOM EDIT

While LucasFilm is finding new ways of tapping into and regulating fan film production, the fans themselves are finding new means of engaging with the Star Wars texts. For example, not long after the commercial release of The Phantom Menace, a number of fans, disappointed by the new addition to the series, edited their own versions of The Phantom Menace, using the footage from Lucas's original. The first and most famous re-edit, known simply as Episode 1.1 The Phantom Edit, is, by all accounts, actually better than the original. Created by an anonymous fan using the pseudonym 'Phantom Editor,' the movie removes twenty minutes worth of scenes and dialogue that many fans found irritating, irrelevant, or objectionable.

The Phantom Edit begins with the now-famous "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...." but then provides an explanation for the new 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 action and dialog, 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.'
>
> To Mr. Lucas and those that I may offend with this re-edit, I am sorry: (THE PHANTOM EDITOR (Quoted in Rodgers, 2001, p. 1)

As the above quotation outlines, one of the main objectives of The Phantom Edit was to edit out Jar Jar Binks (a character that has drawn considerable criticism for being, at best, irritating and, at worst, a racial stereotype) and reframe Anakin as a quieter, more thoughtful (and more Jedi-like character).

Another phantom edit that took issue with Jar Jar re-dubbed some of the audio to give him an alien-sounding speech, and provided new dialogue via subtitles. By changing the audio and adding subtitles (such as 'Children and fools ask more questions' and 'Pride will blind you to the truth') Jar Jar is apparently transformed from an irritating fool into a wise and more meaningful character (Rodgers, 2001, p.1). By removing Jar Jar's racially inflected voice-over, this phantom edit also avoids the racial and ethnic stereotyping that many fans and critics found so objectionable in the original.

In many ways, these fan film re-edits are just as culturally, cinematically, and technologically significant as the Star Wars films themselves – perhaps even more so-for they demonstrate how amateur moviemakers can use digital technologies to challenge and re-invent mainstream media content, media production, and mainstream media industries. In this sense, I agree with Daniel Kraus that,

> What's exciting is that one or two of these versions will not only be reedits but reimaginings, radically changing the narrative through unexpected audio and visual juxtapositions. The possibilities are endless – indeed, 'Battlefield Earth' may be a much better picture when re-edited into a 15-minute experimental short film. In the upcoming years we will be privileged to witness, essentially, critics making movies, which we haven't seen in abundance since French New Wavers like Godard and Truffaut decided that the best response to a film was making another film. If nothing else, the arrival of the fan edit takes its place alongside the recent slew of good movies made on consumer video cameras (such as 'The Celebration,' 'Dancer in the Dark,' 'Chuck & Buck,' 'The Blair Witch Project' and the just-released 'Lisa Picard Is Famous'), as yet another way in which the proliferation of digital technology could change the movie industry for the better. Because if the filmmakers themselves can't cut it, the fans will. (Kraus, 2001, p.2)

I don't know about you, but I love the idea of *Battlefield Earth* as a 15 minute experimental short! (Come to think of it, just watching 15 minutes would have to be an improvement on the original). What this example illustrates is that there are many different ways of editing the same material and that the professional moviemakers are not necessarily more creatively, technically, or culturally sophisticated than amateur moviemakers. Indeed, freed from the constraints of market forces, production schedules, and financiers, these amateur moviemakers may be in a much better position to engage in creative experimentation.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I've used the *Star Wars* fan films to explore the complex relationship between mainstream and amateur digital moviemaking by showing how fan filmmakers utilise the resources of mainstream popular texts to meet their own alternative interests – whether these are to tell their own stories, to have some fun, or break into the commercial film industry. I've also tried to show how mainstream moviemakers can also use fan films and fan filmmakers to promote and market the mainstream texts they re-produce. In the process, fan films have become an important subculture in digital moviemaking and are helping to change the way we experience mainstream and amateur movies and culture itself.

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