

Jenkins, Henry. "Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars? Grassroots Creativity Meets the Media Industry." In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006, pp. 131-168.

## Quentin Tarantino's *Star Wars*?

### *Grassroots Creativity Meets the Media Industry*

Shooting in garages and basement rec rooms, rendering F/X on home computers, and ripping music from CDs and MP3 files, fans have created new versions of the *Star Wars* (1977) mythology. In the words of *Star Wars* or *Bust* director Jason Wishnow, "This is the future of cinema — *Star Wars* is the catalyst."<sup>1</sup>

The widespread circulation of *Star Wars*-related commodities has placed resources into the hands of a generation of emerging filmmakers in their teens or early twenties. They grew up dressing as Darth Vader for Halloween, sleeping on Princess Leia sheets, battling with plastic light sabers, and playing with Boba Fett action figures. *Star Wars* has become their "legend," and now they are determined to remake it on their own terms.

When AtomFilms launched an official *Star Wars* fan film contest in 2003, they received more than 250 submissions. Although the ardor has died down somewhat, the 2005 competition received more than 150 submissions.<sup>2</sup> And many more are springing up on the Web via unofficial sites such as TheForce.net, which would fall outside the rules for the official contest. Many of these films come complete with their own posters or advertising campaigns. Some Web sites provide updated information about amateur films still in production.

Fans have always been early adapters of new media technologies; their fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production, ranging from costumes to fanzines and, now, digital cinema. Fans are the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants.<sup>3</sup> None of this is new. What has shifted is the visibility of fan culture. The Web provides a powerful new distribution channel for amateur cultural production. Amateurs

have been making home movies for decades; these movies are going public.

When Amazon introduced DVDs of *George Lucas in Love* (1999), perhaps the best known of the *Star Wars* parodies, it outsold the DVD of *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) in its opening week.<sup>4</sup> Fan filmmakers, with some legitimacy, see their works as “calling cards” that may help them break into the commercial industry. In spring 1998, a two-page color spread in *Entertainment Weekly* profiled aspiring digital filmmaker Kevin Rubio, whose ten-minute, \$1,200 film, *Troops* (1998), had attracted the interests of Hollywood insiders.<sup>5</sup> *Troops* spoofs *Star Wars* by offering a *Cops*-like profile of the stormtroopers who do the day-in, day-out work of policing Tatooine, settling domestic disputes, rounding up space hustlers, and trying to crush the Jedi Knights. As a result, the story reported, Rubio was fielding offers from several studios interested in financing his next project. Lucas admired the film so much that he gave Rubio a job writing for the *Star Wars* comic books. Rubio surfaced again in 2004 as a writer and producer for *Duel Masters* (2004), a little-known series on the Cartoon Network.

Fan digital film is to cinema what the punk DIY culture was to music. There, grassroots experimentation generated new sounds, new artists, new techniques, and new relations to consumers which have been pulled more and more into mainstream practice. Here, fan filmmakers are starting to make their way into the mainstream industry, and we are starting to see ideas—such as the use of game engines as animation tools—bubbling up from the amateurs and making their way into commercial media.

If, as some have argued, the emergence of modern mass media spelled the doom for the vital folk culture traditions that thrived in nineteenth-century America, the current moment of media change is reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture. Like the older folk culture of quilting bees and barn dances, this new vernacular culture encourages broad participation, grassroots creativity, and a bartering or gift economy. This is what happens when consumers take media into their own hands. Of course, this may be altogether the wrong way to talk about it—since in a folk culture, there is no clear division between producers and consumers. Within convergence culture, everyone's a participant—although participants may have different degrees of status and influence.

It may be useful to draw a distinction between interactivity and participation, words that are often used interchangeably but which, in this book, assume rather different meanings.<sup>6</sup> Interactivity refers to the ways that new technologies have been designed to be more responsive to consumer feedback. One can imagine differing degrees of interactivity enabled by different communication technologies, ranging from television, which allows us only to change the channel, to video games that can allow consumers to act upon the represented world. Such relationships are of course not fixed: the introduction of TiVo can fundamentally reshape our interactions with television. The constraints on interactivity are technological. In almost every case, what you can do in an interactive environment is prestructured by the designer.

Participation, on the other hand, is shaped by the cultural and social protocols. So, for example, the amount of conversation possible in a movie theater is determined more by the tolerance of audiences in different subcultures or national contexts than by any innate property of cinema itself. Participation is more open-ended, less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers.

Initially, the computer offered expanded opportunities for interacting with media content and as long as it operated on that level, it was relatively easy for media companies to commodify and control what took place. Increasingly, though, the Web has become a site of consumer participation that includes many unauthorized and unanticipated ways of relating to media content. Though this new participatory culture has its roots in practices that have occurred just below the radar of the media industry throughout the twentieth century, the Web has pushed that hidden layer of cultural activity into the foreground, forcing the media industries to confront its implications for their commercial interests. Allowing consumers to interact with media under controlled circumstances is one thing; allowing them to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods—on their own terms—is something else altogether.

Grant McCracken, the cultural anthropologist and industry consultant, suggests that in the future, media producers must accommodate consumer demands to participate or they will run the risk of losing the most active and passionate consumers to some other media interest that is more tolerant: “Corporations must decide whether they are, literally, in or out. Will they make themselves an island or will they enter

the mix? Making themselves an island may have certain short-term financial benefits, but the long-term costs can be substantial.<sup>77</sup> As we have seen, the media industry is increasingly dependent on active and committed consumers to spread the word about valued properties in an overcrowded media marketplace, and in some cases they are seeking ways to channel the creative output of media fans to lower their production costs. At the same time, they are terrified of what happens if this consumer power gets out of control, as they claim occurred following the introduction of Napster and other file-sharing services. As fan productivity goes public, it can no longer be ignored by the media industries, but it can not be fully contained or channeled by them, either.

One can trace two characteristic responses of media industries to this grassroots expression: starting with the legal battles over Napster, the media industries have increasingly adopted a scorched-earth policy toward their consumers, seeking to regulate and criminalize many forms of fan participation that once fell below their radar. Let's call them the prohibitionists. To date, the prohibitionist stance has been dominant within old media companies (film, television, the recording industry), though these groups are to varying degrees starting to reexamine some of these assumptions. So far, the prohibitionists get most of the press—with law suits directed against teens who download music or against fan Webmasters getting more and more coverage in the popular media. At the same time, on the fringes, new media companies (Internet, games, and to a lesser degree, the mobile phone companies) are experimenting with new approaches that see fans as important collaborators in the production of content and as grassroots intermediaries helping to promote the franchise. We will call them the collaborationists.

The *Star Wars* franchise has been pulled between these two extremes both over time (as it responds to shifting consumer tactics and technological resources) and across media (as its content straddles between old and new media). Within the *Star Wars* franchise, Hollywood has sought to shut down fan fiction, later, to assert ownership over it and finally to ignore its existence; they have promoted the works of fan video makers but also limited what kinds of movies they can make; and they have sought to collaborate with gamers to shape a massively multiplayer game so that it better satisfies player fantasies.

## Folk Culture, Mass Culture, Convergence Culture

At the risks of painting with broad strokes, the story of American arts in the nineteenth century might be told in terms of the mixing, matching, and merging of folk traditions taken from various indigenous and immigrant populations. Cultural production occurred mostly on the grassroots level; creative skills and artistic traditions were passed down mother to daughter, father to son. Stories and songs circulated broadly, well beyond their points of origin, with little or no expectation of economic compensation; many of the best ballads or folktales come to us today with no clear marks of individual authorship. While new commercialized forms of entertainment—the minstrel shows, the circuses, the showboats—emerged in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, these professional entertainments competed with thriving local traditions of barn dances, church sings, quilting bees, and campfire stories. There was no pure boundary between the emergent commercial culture and the residual folk culture: the commercial culture raided folk culture and folk culture raided commercial culture.

The story of American arts in the twentieth century might be told in terms of the displacement of folk culture by mass media. Initially, the emerging entertainment industry made its peace with folk practices, seeing the availability of grassroots singers and musicians as a potential talent pool, incorporating community sing-a-longs into film exhibition practices, and broadcasting amateur-hour talent competitions. The new industrialized arts required huge investments and thus demanded a mass audience. The commercial entertainment industry set standards of technical perfection and professional accomplishment few grassroots performers could match. The commercial industries developed powerful infrastructures that ensured that their messages reached everyone in America who wasn't living under a rock. Increasingly, the commercial culture generated the stories, images, and sounds that mattered most to the public.

Folk culture practices were pushed underground—people still composed and sang songs, amateur writers still scribbled verse, weekend painters still dabbled, people still told stories, and some local communities still held square dances. At the same time, grassroots fan communities emerged in response to mass media content. Some media scholars hold on to the useful distinction between mass culture

(a category of production) and popular culture (a category of consumption), arguing that popular culture is what happens to the materials of mass culture when they get into the hands of consumers, when a song played on the radio becomes so associated with a particularly romantic evening that two young lovers decide to call it "our song," or when a fan becomes so fascinated with a particular television series that it inspires her to write original stories about its characters. In other words, popular culture is what happens as mass culture gets pulled back into folk culture. The culture industries never really had to confront the existence of this alternative cultural economy because, for the most part, it existed behind closed doors and its products circulated only among a small circle of friends and neighbors. Home movies never threatened Hollywood, as long as they remained in the home.

The story of American arts in the twenty-first century might be told in terms of the public reemergence of grassroots creativity as everyday people take advantage of new technologies that enable them to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content. It probably started with the photocopier and desktop publishing; perhaps it started with the videocassette revolution, which gave the public access to movie-making tools and enabled every home to have its own film library. But this creative revolution has so far culminated with the Web. To create is much more fun and meaningful if you can share what you can create with others and the Web, built for collaboration within the scientific community, provides an infrastructure for sharing the things average Americans are making in their rec rooms. Once you have a reliable system of distribution, folk culture production begins to flourish again overnight. Most of what the amateurs create is gosh-awful bad, yet a thriving culture needs spaces where people can do bad art, get feedback, and get better. After all, much of what circulates through mass media is also bad by almost any criteria, but the expectations of professional polish make it a less hospitable environment for newcomers to learn and grow. Some of what amateurs create will be surprisingly good, and the best artists will be recruited into commercial entertainment or the art world. Much of it will be good enough to engage the interest of some modest public, to inspire someone else to create, to provide new content which, when polished through many hands, may turn into something more valuable down the line. That's the way the folk process works and grassroots convergence represents the folk process accelerated and expanded for the digital age.

Given this history, it should be no surprise that much of what the public creates models itself after, exists in dialogue with, reacts to or against, and/or otherwise repurposes materials drawn from commercial culture. Grassroots convergence is embodied, for example, in the work of the game modders, who build on code and design tools created for commercial games as a foundation for amateur game production, or in digital filmmaking, which often directly samples material from commercial media, or adusting, which borrows iconography from Madison Avenue to deliver an anticorporate or anticonsumerist message. Having buried the old folk culture, this commercial culture becomes the common culture. The older American folk culture was built on borrowings from various mother countries; the modern mass media builds upon borrowings from folk culture; the new convergence culture will be built on borrowings from various media conglomerates.

The Web has made visible the hidden compromises that enabled participatory culture and commercial culture to coexist throughout much of the twentieth century. Nobody minded, really, if you photocopied a few stories and circulated them within your fan club. Nobody minded, really, if you copied a few songs and shared the dub tape with a friend. Corporations might know, abstractly, that such transactions were occurring all around them, every day, but they didn't know, concretely, who was doing it. And even if they did, they weren't going to come bursting into people's homes at night. But, as those transactions came out from behind closed doors, they represented a visible, public threat to the absolute control the culture industries asserted over their intellectual property.

With the consolidation of power represented by the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998, American intellectual property law has been rewritten to reflect the demands of mass media producers—away from providing economic incentives for individual artists and toward protecting the enormous economic investments media companies made in branded entertainment; away from a limited duration protection that allows ideas to enter general circulation while they still benefited the common good and toward the notion that copyright should last forever; away from the ideal of a cultural commons and toward the ideal of intellectual property. As Lawrence Lessig notes, the law has been rewritten so that "no one can do to the Disney Corporation what Walt Disney did to the Brothers Grimm."<sup>8</sup> One of the ways that the studios have propped up these expanded claims of copyright protection is

through the issuing of cease and desist letters intended to intimidate amateur cultural creators into removing their works from the Web. Chapter 5 describes what happened when Warner Bros. studio sent out cease and desist letters to young *Harry Potter* (1998) fans. In such situations, the studios often assert much broader control than they could legally defend: someone who stands to lose their home or their kid's college funds by going head-to-head with studio attorneys is apt to fold. After three decades of such disputes, there is still no case law that would help determine to what degree fan fiction is protected under fair use law.

Efforts to shut down fan communities run in the face of what we have learned so far about the new kinds of affective relationships advertisers and entertainment companies want to form with their consumers. Over the past several decades, corporations have sought to market branded content so that consumers become the bearers of their marketing messages. Marketers have turned our children into walking, talking billboards who wear logos on their T-shirts, sew patches on their backpacks, plaster stickers on their lockers, hang posters on their walls, but they must not, under penalty of law, post them on their home pages. Somehow, once consumers choose when and where to display those images, their active participation in the circulation of brands suddenly becomes a moral outrage and a threat to the industry's economic well-being.

Today's teens—the so-called Napster generation—aren't the only ones who are confused about where to draw the lines here; media companies are giving out profoundly mixed signals because they really can't decide what kind of relationships they want to have with this new kind of consumer. They want us to look at but *not* touch, buy but *not* use, media content. This contradiction is felt perhaps most acutely when it comes to cult media content. A cult media success depends on courting fan constituencies and niche markets; a mainstream success is seen by the media producers as depending on distancing themselves from them. The system depends on covert relationships between producers and consumers. The fans' labor in enhancing the value of an intellectual property can never be publicly recognized if the studio is going to maintain that the studio alone is the source of all value in that property. The Internet, though, has blown their cover, since those fan sites are now visible to anyone who knows how to Google.

Some industry insiders—for example, Chris Albrecht, who runs the

official *Star Wars* film competition at AtomFilms, or Raph Koster, the former mudder who has helped shape the *Star Wars Galaxies* (2002) game—come out of these grassroots communities and have a healthy respect for their value. They see fans as potentially revitalizing stagnant franchises and providing a low-cost means of generating new media content. Often, such people are locked into power struggles within their own companies with others who would prohibit grassroots creativity.

### “Dude, We're Gonna Be Jedi!”

*George Lucas in Love* 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* (1998) and of *Star Wars* itself. It is also a tribute from one generation of USC film students to another. As co-creator Joseph Levy, a twenty-four-year-old recent 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. Lucas is incredibly supportive of student filmmakers and developing their careers and providing facilities for them to be caught up to technology.”<sup>9</sup> Yet what makes this film so endearing is the way it pulls Lucas down to the same level as 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 (<http://www.evanmather.com/>) constructs the amateur as an emergent auteur.<sup>10</sup> 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 that have covered his work—*La Repubblica*, *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. More than nineteen digital films are featured with photographs, descriptions, and links for downloading them in multiple formats.

Another link allows you to call up a glossy full-color, professionally designed brochure documenting the making of *Les Pantless Menace* (1999), 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 (fig. 4.1). 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.

Though his background and production techniques are fairly unique, the incredibly elaborate, self-conscious, and determinedly professional



Fig. 4.1. Fan filmmaker Evan Mather's *Les Pantless Menace* creates anarchic comedy through creative use of *Star Wars* action figures. (Reprinted with the permission of the artist.)

design of his Web site is anything but. His Web site illustrates what happens as this new amateur culture gets directed toward larger and larger publics.

TheForce.net's Fan Theater, for example, allows amateur directors to offer their own commentary. The creators of *When Senators Attack IV* (1999), 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."<sup>11</sup> Such materials mirror 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, including preliminary footage, storyboards, and trailers for films that may never be completed. Almost all of the amateur filmmakers create posters and advertising images, taking advantage of Adobe PageMaker and Adobe Photoshop. In many cases, the fan filmmakers produce elaborate trailers. These materials facilitate amateur film culture. The making-of articles share technical advice; 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 the shorter, lower resolution trailers (often distributed in a streaming video format) allow would-be viewers to sample the work.

All of this publicity surrounding the *Star Wars* parodies serves as a reminder of what is the most distinctive quality of these amateur films—the fact that they are so public. 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* (1995), film historian Patricia R. Zimmermann offers a compelling history of amateur filmmaking in the United States, examining the intersection between nonprofessional film production and the Hollywood entertainment system. While amateur filmmaking has existed since the advent of cinema, and while periodically critics have promoted it as a grassroots alternative to commercial production, 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 public distribution; second, amateur films were most often documentaries of domestic and family life; and third, amateur films were perceived to be technically flawed and of marginal interest beyond the immediate family. Critics stressed the artlessness and spontaneity of amateur film in contrast with the technical polish and aesthetic sophistication of commercial films. Zimmerman 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."<sup>12</sup> Writing in the early 1990s, Zimmermann saw little reason to believe that the camcorder and the VCR would significantly alter this situation. The medium's technical limitations made it difficult for amateurs to edit their films, and the only public means of exhibition were controlled by commercial media makers (as in programs such as *America's Funniest Home Videos*, 1990).

Digital filmmaking alters many of the conditions that led to the marginalization of previous amateur filmmaking efforts—the Web provides an exhibition outlet moving 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 reshape their material more directly; the home PC has even enabled the amateur filmmaker to mimic the special effects associated with Hollywood blockbusters like *Star Wars*. Digital cinema is 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 clas-

sic 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 popular mythologies; and public in their dialogue with the commercial cinema.

Digital filmmakers tackled the challenge of making *Star Wars* movies for many different reasons. As *George Lucas in Love* co-creator Joseph Levy has explained, "Our only intention . . . was to do something that would get the agents and producers to put the tapes into their VCRs instead of throwing them away."<sup>13</sup> *Kid Wars* (2000) 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* (2000) 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* (1998)—were school projects. Two high school students—Bienvenido Concepcion and Don Fitz-Roy—shot the film, which creatively blurred 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* (2002), for example, was filmed for a competition hosted by a Melbourne, Australia, Lucasfilm convention. Each cast member made his or her own costumes, building on previous experience with science fiction masquerades and costume contests. 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 Bienvenido Concepcion and Don Fitz-Roy got a good grade on their Shakespeare assignment. Rather, what motivated faraway viewers to watch such films is their shared investment in the *Star Wars* universe.

Amateur filmmakers are producing commercial- or near-commercial-quality content on minuscule budgets. They remain amateur in the sense that they do not earn their revenue through their work (much the

way we might call Olympic athletes amateur), but they are duplicating special effects that 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 land speeders 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 their hands at duplicating Jar-Jar's character animation and inserting him into their own movies with varying degrees of success. 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 dens 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). Shane Faleux used an open source approach to completing his forty-minute opus, *Star Wars: Revelations* (2005), one of the most acclaimed recent works in the movement (fig. 4.2). As Faleux explained, "*Revelations* was created to give artisans and craftsmen the chance to showcase their work, allow all those involved a chance to live the dream, and maybe—just maybe—open the eyes in the industry as to what can be done with a small budget, dedicated people, and undiscovered talent."<sup>14</sup> Hundreds of people around the world contributed to the project, including more than thirty different computer-graphics artists, ranging from folks within special effects companies to talented teenagers. When the film was released via the Web, more than a million people downloaded it.

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 are not publicly available, 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



Fig. 4.2. Publicity materials created for *Star Wars: Revelations*, a forty-minute opus made through the combined efforts of hundreds of fan filmmakers worldwide.

movie studio. There's nothing to stop you from doing something provocative and significant in that medium."<sup>15</sup> Lucas's rhetoric about the potentials of digital filmmaking has captured the imagination of amateur filmmakers and they are taking on the master on his own ground.

As Clay Kronke, a Texas A&M University undergraduate who made *The New World* (1999), 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."<sup>16</sup> 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 preexisting collections of *Star Wars* paraphernalia, that the biggest problem they faced on the set was that their plastic light sabers kept shattering, and that its sound effects included "the sound of a coat hanger against a metal flashlight, my microwave door, and myself falling on the floor several times."

The mass marketing of *Star Wars* inadvertently provided many of the resources needed to support these productions. *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 Film Corporation learned a valuable lesson. Kenner's *Star Wars* action figures are thought to have been the key in reestablishing 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. Despite the lengthy gap between the release dates for *Return of the Jedi* (1983) and *The Phantom Menace* (1999), Lucasfilm continued to generate profits from its *Star Wars* franchise through the production of original novels and comic books, the distribution of video tapes 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.

Many of these toys and trinkets were trivial when read in relation to the kinds of transmedia storytelling described in the previous chapter: they add little new information to the expanding franchise. Yet they took on deeper meanings as they became resources for children's play or for digital filmmaking. 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."<sup>17</sup> The availability of these various ancillary products has encouraged these filmmakers, since childhood, to construct their own fantasies within the *Star Wars* universe. 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 Wookiee 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."<sup>18</sup> 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 to construct their own stories.

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. *Toy Wars* (2002) producers Aaron Halon and Jason VandenBerghe launched an ambitious plan to produce a shot-by-shot remake of *Star Wars: A New Hope* cast entirely with action figures. These action figure movies require constant resourcefulness on the part of the amateur filmmakers. Damon Weilner and Sebastian O'Brien, two self-proclaimed "action figure nerds" from Cambridge, Massachusetts, formed Probot Productions with the goal of "making toys as alive as they seemed in childhood." The Probot Web site ([www.probotproductions.com](http://www.probotproductions.com)) 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. . . . 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!<sup>19</sup>

No digital filmmaker has pushed the aesthetics of action figure cinema 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* (1996), *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* (1985), and *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965). *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* (1994) before shooting up the place. The camera focuses on the bald-head of a dying Darth Vader as he gasps "rosebud." Apart

from their anarchic humor and rapid-fire pace, Mather's films stand out because of their visual sophistication. 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.

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 short-lived *Action League Now!!!* (1994), for example, had a regular cast of characters consisting of mismatched dolls and mutilated action figures. In some cases, their faces had been melted or mangled through inappropriate play. One protagonist had no clothes. They came in various size scales, suggesting the collision of different narrative universes that characterizes children's action figure play. MTV's *Celebrity Deathmatch* (1998) created 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).

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 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.

### "The 500-Pound Wookiee"

Fans take reassurance that Lucas and his cronies, at least sometimes, take a look at what fans have made and send them his blessing. In fact, part of the allure of participating in the official *Star Wars* fan cinema

competition is the fact that Lucas personally selects the winner from finalists identified by AtomFilm's Chris Albrecht and vetted by staffers at LucasArts. There is no doubt that Lucas personally likes at least some form of fan creativity. As Albrecht explains, "Hats off to Lucas for recognizing that this is happening and giving the public a chance to participate in a universe they know and love. There's nothing else like this out there. No other producer has gone this far."<sup>20</sup> On other levels, the company—and perhaps Lucas himself—has wanted to control what fans produced and circulated. Jim Ward, vice president of marketing for Lucasfilm, told *New York Times* reporter Amy Harmon in 2002: "We've been very clear all along on where we draw the line. We love our fans. We want them to have fun. But if in fact somebody is using our characters to create a story unto itself, that's not in the spirit of what we think fandom is about. Fandom is about celebrating the story the way it is."<sup>21</sup> Lucas wants to be "celebrated" but not appropriated.

Lucas has opened up a space for fans to create and share what they create with others but only on his terms. The franchise has struggled with these issues from the 1970s to the present, desiring some zone of tolerance within which fans can operate while asserting some control over what happens to his story. In that history, there have been some periods when the company was highly tolerant and others when it was pretty aggressive about trying to close off all or some forms of fan fiction. At the same time, the different divisions of the same company have developed different approaches to dealing with fans: the games division has thought of fans in ways consistent with how other game companies think about fans (and is probably on the more permissive end of the spectrum), and the film division has tended to think like a motion picture company and has been a bit less comfortable with fan participation. I make this point not to say LucasArts is bad to fans—in many ways, the company seems more forward

### Pixelvision and Machinema

The hazy images of Kyle Cassidy's *Toy Soldiers* (1996) evoke faint childhood memories. This short film expresses the hopes and anxieties of a small boy as he awaits the next news from his father who is serving in Vietnam. Adult concerns shape his everyday rituals and practices as he plays with his green plastic army guys in the backyard and reflects on the fate of those who have been run over by the lawnmower, as he watches the flickering television newscast with his mother, and as he awaits the next letter. *Toy Soldiers* has the intimacy of a home movie, even though it is re-created decades later from the director's own memories. Cassidy made the critically acclaimed film with his Pixelvision 2000 camera, which has a plastic case and plastic lens, runs on six AA batteries, and records its images on a regular audiocassette tape. The Pixelvision camera, marketed from 1987 to 1989 for \$100 by Fisher-Price, is the cheapest self-contained camcorder ever made.

The Pixelvision camera has a fixed focus lens which, like a pinhole camera, theoretically has absolute focus from zero to infinity, but in practice does best when what is being filmed remains a few feet from the camera. The camera can shoot well in very low light settings but almost everything has a shadowy and washed-out look. It was originally intended for children, but kids never really were wild about it because their movies didn't look anything like what they were seeing on television. The Pixelvision image has 2,000 black-and-white dots, making it far coarser than a standard TV image with its 200,000 pixels.

But the Pixelvision camera has found its way into the hearts and hands of a growing number of amateur and avant-garde filmmakers who like it for many of the reasons the device disappointed its target market. The Pixelvision's murky, grainy, and unstable image has become the marker of alternative media authenticity. Pixelvision enthusiasts love the "point and shoot" quality of the camera, which they say allows neophytes to start doing creative work right away. Budding artists can put their energies into communicating ideas rather than learning to control the technology. A once expensive toy has become an incredibly cheap tool.

The Pixelvision movement is the artistic equivalent of a cargo cult: a junked technology, abandoned by its manufacturer, found its way into unanticipated but highly dedicated hands, and we can now see two decades of elaboration as its worshippers have managed to turn its "bugs" into desirable features and have developed a new mode of expression around its unique properties. Pixelvision fans have created their own Web sites, spawned their own criticism, and developed their own film

thinking and responsive to the fan community than most Hollywood companies—but to illustrate the ways the media industry is trying to figure out its response to fan creativity.

In the beginning, Lucasfilm actively encouraged fan fiction, establishing a no-fee licensing bureau in 1977 that would review material and offer advice about potential copyright infringement.<sup>22</sup> By the early 1980s, these arrangements broke down, allegedly because Lucas had stumbled onto some examples of fan erotica that shocked his sensibilities. By 1981, Lucasfilm was issuing warnings to fans who published zines containing sexually explicit stories, while implicitly giving permission to publish nonerotic stories about the characters as long as they were not sold for profit: "Since all of the *Star Wars* saga is PG-rated, any story those publishers print should also be PG. Lucasfilm does not produce any X-rated *Star Wars* episodes, so why should we be placed in a light where people think we do?"<sup>23</sup> Most fan erotica was pushed underground by this policy, though it continued to circulate informally. The issue resurfaced in the 1990s: fan fiction of all variety thrived on the "electronic frontier." One Web site, for example, provided regularly updated links to fan and fan fiction Web sites for more than 153 films, books, and television shows, ranging from *Airwolf* (1984) to *Zorro* (1975).<sup>24</sup> *Star Wars* zine editors poked their heads above ground, cautiously testing the waters. Jeanne Cole, a spokesman for Lucasfilm, explained, "What can you do? How

can you control it? As we look at it, we appreciate the fans, and what would we do without them? If we anger them, what's the point?"<sup>25</sup>

Media scholar Will Brooker cites a 1996 corporate notice that explains: "Since the internet is growing so fast, we are in the process of developing guidelines for how we can enhance the ability of *Star Wars* fans to communicate with each other without infringing on *Star Wars* copyrights and trademarks."<sup>26</sup> The early lawless days of the Internet were giving way to a period of heightened corporate scrutiny and expanding control. Even during what might be seen as a "honeymoon" period, some fans felt that Lucasfilm was acting like a "500-pound Wookiee," throwing its weight around and making threatening noises.<sup>27</sup>

Lucasfilm's perspective seemed relatively enlightened, even welcoming, when compared with how other media producers responded to their fans. In the late 1990s, Viacom experimented with a strong arm approach to fan culture—starting in Australia. A representative of the corporation called together leaders of fan clubs from across the country and laid down new guidelines for their activities.<sup>28</sup> These guidelines prohibited the showing of series episodes at club meetings unless those episodes had previously been made commercially available in that market. (This policy has serious consequences for Australian fans because they often get series episodes a year or two after they air in the United States and the underground circulation and

festivals (such as PXL THIS), all in the face of total neglect, and at times open disdain, from Fisher-Price. As filmmaker Eric Sacks writes, "Pixelvision is an aberrant art form, underscored by the fact that since the cameras wear out quickly, and are no longer being manufactured, it holds within itself authorized obsolescence. Each time an artist uses a PXL 2000, the whole form edges closer to extinction."<sup>1</sup>

Many of the best Pixelvision movies reveal a fascination with the processes and artifacts of everyday life: the camera has spawned a genre of confessional films, with ghostly faces speaking directly into the camera with surprising frankness. Sadie Benning, the adolescent daughter of an established experimental filmmaker, went on to fame in the art world with her simple and direct shorts, filmed in her bedroom, about coming of age as a lesbian. At nineteen, Benning was the youngest person ever to win a Rockefeller grant.

Andrea McCarty, a graduate student in MIT's Comparative Media Studies program, is studying the Pixelvision movement to better understand how grassroots creativity works. She told me: "Pixelvision's endurance and popularity prove that it was not a failed technology. . . . The fascination with Pixelvision belies its obsolescence—collectors are seeking the cameras, artists are creating with them, technology fans are modifying them and fans are watching the films at the PXL THIS festival."<sup>2</sup> The best Pixelvision films have been embraced by the art world, and the camera even has fans among commercial filmmakers. Director Michael

<sup>1</sup> Erik Saks, "Big Pixel Theory," <http://www.the-itchen.org/MovieCatalog/Titles/BigPixelTheory.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrea McCarty, personal correspondence, November 2004.

Almeryda has incorporated Pixelvision images into his big-screen releases, *Najia* (1994) and *Hamlet* (2000), to much critical praise.

This is what some had claimed would be the inevitable consequences of the digital revolution: the technology would put low-cost, easy-to-use tools for creative expression into the hands of average people. Lower the barriers of participation and provide new channels for publicity and distribution, and people will create remarkable things. Think of these subcultures as aesthetic petri dishes. Seed them and see what grows. In most, nothing really interesting will happen. We can pretty much count on Sturgeon's law holding for amateur cultural creation: 90 percent of everything is crap. But if you expand the number of people participating in the making of art, you may expand the amount of really interesting works that emerge. You can pretty much count on our creative impulses to overcome a lot of technical limitations and obstacles. Amateur artists do best when they operate within supportive communities, struggling with the same creative problems and building on one another's successes.

Let's consider a second powerful example of that process at work: Machinima. Its name, a hybrid of machine and cinema, Machinima refers to 3-D digital animation created in real time using game engines. The Machinima movement started in 1993 when *Doom* was released with a program that supported the recording and playback of in-game actions. The idea was that people might want to watch their own game-play experiences as mini action movies. There is little evidence that this controversial first-person shooter generated school shooters, but there's plenty of evidence that it inspired a

exhibition of video tapes had enabled them to participate actively on on-line discussions.) Similarly, Viacom cracked down on the publication and distribution of fanzines and prohibited the use of *Star Trek* (1966) trademarked names in convention publicity. Their explicitly stated goal was to push fans toward participation in a corporately controlled fan club.

In 2000, Lucasfilm offered *Star Wars* fans free Web space ([www.starwars.com](http://www.starwars.com)) and unique content for their sites, but only under the condition that whatever they created would become the studio's intellectual property. As the official notice launching this new "Homestead" explained, "To encourage the on-going excitement, creativity, and interaction of our dedicated fans in the online *Star Wars* community, Lucas Online (<http://www.lucasfilm.com/divisions/online/>) is pleased to offer for the first time an official home for fans to celebrate their love of *Star Wars* on the World Wide Web."<sup>29</sup> Historically, fan fiction had proven to be a point of entry into commercial publication for at least some amateurs, who were able to sell their novels to the professional book series centering on the various franchises. If Lucasfilm Ltd. claimed to own such rights, they could publish them without compensation, and they could also remove them without permission or warning.

Elizabeth Durack was one of the more outspoken leaders of a campaign urging her fellow *Star Wars* fans not to participate in these new arrangements: "That's the genius of Lucasfilm's offering fans

web space—it lets them both look amazingly generous *and* be even more controlling than before. . . . Lucasfilm doesn't hate fans, and they don't hate fan websites. They can indeed see how they benefit from the free publicity they represent—and who doesn't like being adored? This move underscores that as much as anything. But they're also scared, and that makes them hurt the people who love them."<sup>30</sup> Durack argued that fan fiction does indeed pay respect to Lucas as the creator of *Star Wars*, yet the fans also wanted to hold onto their right to participate in the production and circulation of the *Star Wars* saga that had become so much a part of their lives: "It has been observed by many writers that *Star Wars* (based purposely on the recurring themes of mythology by creator George Lucas) and other popular media creations take the place in modern America that culture myths like those of the Greeks or Native Americans did for earlier peoples. Holding modern myths hostage by way of corporate legal wrangling seems somehow contrary to nature."

Today, relations between Lucas Arts and the fan fiction community have thawed somewhat. Though I haven't been able to find any official statement signaling a shift in policy, *Star Wars* fan fiction is all over the Web, including on several of the most visible and mainstream fan sites. The Webmasters of those sites say that they deal with the official production company all the time on a range of different matters, but they have never been asked to remove what once

generation of animators (amateur and professional).

Subsequent games offered ever more sophisticated tools that allowed players to create their own digital assets, or put their own "skins" over the characters and features of the game world. Soon, people were playing the games with an eye toward recording the actions they wanted for their movies and even redesigning the games to create the characters and settings they needed to stage their own stories. These game engines would allow artists to dramatically lower the costs and decrease the production time of digital animation. Picture complex animation with the spontaneity of improvisational performance!

Most Machinima films remain deeply rooted in gamer culture—*My Trip to Liberty City* is a travelogue of the world represented in *Grand Theft Auto 3* (2001); *Halo Boys* involves boy bands in the *Halo* (2001) universe; someone restaged classic moments from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) using *Dark Ages of Camelot* (2001). But not all. Some people have taken up the technical challenge of reproducing classic action films—everything from *The Matrix* to the Omaha Beach sequence in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). More political filmmakers have taken this farther, using game engines to comment on the war on terrorism or to restage the siege of the Branch Davidians at Waco. Hugh Hancock and Gordon McDonald's *Ozymandias* adopts a poem by Percy Shelley, and Fountainhead's *Anna* depicts the life story of a flower. As with Pixelvision, the Machinima movement has launched its own Web community, critics, training programs, and film festivals.

If Pixelvision has been embraced by the art world, Machinima's greatest impact so far has been on the

commercial culture. The History Channel, for example, has launched a successful series, *Decisive Battles* (2004), which restages events such as the Battle of Marathon using Creative Assembly's *Rome: Total War* (2004) as its basic animation tool. MTV 2's *Video Mods* program features music videos by groups such as Black Eyed Peas and Fountains of Wayne that are produced using look-alike skins of the performers inserted in the world of games as diverse as *Tomb Raider*, *Leisure Suit Larry*, *The Sims 2*, and *SSX3*.

Pixelvision was largely abandoned by Fisher-Price. But Machinima—and game mods more generally—have been embraced by the games industry. Lionhead's new release, *The Movies* (2005), takes the Machinima movement a step further: the game allows you to run your own studio, produce your own movies using its characters and backlots, and then share them online with your friends.

filmmakers would agree to certain constraints on content: "Films must parody the existing *Star Wars* universe, or be a documentary of the *Star Wars* fan experience. No 'fan fiction'—which attempts to expand on the *Star Wars* universe—will be accepted. Films must not make use of copyrighted *Star Wars* music or video, but may use action figures and the audio clips provided in the production kit section of this site. Films must not make unauthorized use of copyrighted property from any other film, song, or composition."<sup>31</sup> Here, we see the copyright regimes of mass culture being applied to the folk culture process.

A work like *Star Wars: Revelations* would be prohibited from entering the official *Star Wars* competition because it sets its own original dramatic story in the interstices between the third and fourth *Star Wars* films and thus constitutes "fan fiction." Albrecht, the man who oversees the competition, offered several explanations for the prohibition. For one thing, Lucas saw himself and his company as being at risk for being sued for plagiarism if he allowed himself to come into contact

might have been read as infringing materials. Yet, what Lucas giveth, he can also take away. Many fan writers have told me that they remain nervous about how the "Powers That Be" are apt to respond to particularly controversial stories.

Lucas and his movie brat cronies clearly identified more closely with the young digital filmmakers who were making "calling card" movies to try to break into the film industry than they did with female fan writers sharing their erotic fantasies. By the end of the decade, however, Lucas's tolerance of fan filmmaking has given way to a similar strategy of incorporation and containment. In November 2000, Lucasfilm designated the commercial digital cinema site, Atomfilms.com, as the official host for *Star Wars* fan films. The site would provide a library of official sound effects and run periodic contests to recognize outstanding amateur accomplishment. In return, participating

with fan-produced materials that mimicked the dramatic structure of the film franchise should anything in any official *Star Wars* material make use of similar characters or situations. For another, Albrecht suggested, there was a growing risk of consumer confusion about what constituted an official *Star Wars* product. Speaking about *Revelations*, Albrecht suggested, "Up until the moment the actors spoke, you wouldn't be able to tell whether that was a real *Star Wars* film or a fan creation because the special effects are so good. . . . As the tools get better, there is bound to be confusion in the marketplace." In any case, Lucasfilm would have had much less legal standing in shutting down parody, which enjoys broad protections under current case law, or documentaries about the phenomenon itself, which would fall clearly into the category of journalistic and critical commentary. Lucasfilm was, in effect, tolerating what it legally must accept in return for shutting down what it might otherwise be unable to control.

These rules are anything but gender neutral: though the gender lines are starting to blur in recent years, the overwhelming majority of fan parody is produced by men, while "fan fiction" is almost entirely produced by women. In the female fan community, fans have long produced "song videos" that are edited together from found footage drawn from film or television shows and set to pop music. These fan vids often function as a form of fan fiction to draw out aspects of the emotional lives of the characters or otherwise get inside their heads. They sometimes explore underdeveloped subtexts of the original film, offer original interpretations of the story, or suggest plotlines that go beyond the work itself. The emotional tone of these works could not be more different from the tone of the parodies featured in the official contests—films such as *Sith Apprentice*, where the Emperor takes some would be stormtroopers back to the board room; *Anakin Dynamite*, where a young Jedi must confront "idiots" much like his counterpart in the cult success, *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004); or *Intergalactic Idol* (2003), where audiences get to decide which contestant really has the force. By contrast, Diane Williams's *Come What May* (2001), a typical song-vid, uses images from *The Phantom Menace* to explore the relationship between Obi-Wan Kenobi and his mentor, Qui-Gon Jinn. The images show the passionate friendship between the two men and culminate in the repeated images of Obi-Wan cradling the crumbled body of his murdered comrade following his battle with Darth Maul. The images are accompanied by the song, "Come What May," taken from the

soundtrack of Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and performed by Ewan McGregor, the actor who also plays the part of Qui-Gon Jinn in *Phantom Menace*.

Whether Atomfilms would define such a work to be a parody would be a matter of interpretation: while playful at places, it lacks the broad comedy of most of the male-produced *Star Wars* movies, involves a much closer identification with the characters, and hints at aspects of their relationship that have not explicitly been represented on screen. *Come What May* would be read by most fans as falling within the slash subgenre, constructing erotic relations between same-sex characters, and would be read melodramatically rather than satirically. Of course, from a legal standpoint, *Come What May* may represent parody, which doesn't require that the work be comical but simply that it be appropriate and transform the original for the purposes of critical commentary. It would be hard to argue that a video that depicts Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon as lovers does not transform the original in a way that expands its potential meanings. Most likely, this and other female-produced song videos would be regarded as fan fiction; *Come What May* would also run afoul of AtomFilm's rules against appropriating content from the films or from other media properties.

These rules create a two-tier system: some works can be rendered more public because they conform to what the rights holder sees as an acceptable appropriation of their intellectual property, while others

remain hidden from view (or at least distributed through less official channels). In this case, these works have been so cut off from public visibility that when I ask *Star Wars* digital filmmakers about the invisibility of these mostly female-produced works, most of them had no idea that women were even making *Star Wars* movies.

Anthropologist and marketing consultant Grant McCracken has expressed some skepticism about the parallels fans draw between their grassroots cultural production and traditional folk culture: "Ancient heroes did not belong to everyone, they did not serve everyone, they

were not for everyone to do with what they would. These commons were never very common."<sup>32</sup> For the record, my claims here are altogether more particularized than the sweeping analogies to Greek myths that provoked McCracken's ire. He is almost certainly right that who could tell those stories, under what circumstances, and for what purposes reflected hierarchies operating within classical culture. My analogy, on the other hand, refers to a specific moment in the emergence of American popular culture, where songs often circulated well beyond their points of origin, lost any acknowledgment of their original authorship, were repurposed and reused to serve a range of different interests, and were very much part of the texture of everyday life for a wide array of nonprofessional participants. This is how folk culture operated in an emergent democracy.

I don't want to turn back the clock to some mythic golden age. Rather, I want us to recognize the challenges posed by the coexistence of these two kinds of cultural logic. The kinds of production practices we are discussing here were a normal part of American life over this period. They are simply more visible now because of the shift in distribution channels for amateur cultural productions. If the corporate media couldn't crush this vernacular culture during the age when mass media power went largely unchallenged, it is hard to believe that legal threats are going to be an adequate response to a moment when new digital tools and new networks of distribution

most successful children's series, from *Pokémon* (1998) to *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (1998), coming directly from Japanese production houses. The shift occurred not through some concerted push by Japanese media companies, but rather in response to the pull of American fans who used every technology at their disposal to expand the community that knew and loved this content. Subsequent commercial efforts built on the infrastructure these fans developed over the intervening years. Grassroots convergence paved the way for new corporate convergence strategies.

Japanese animation was exported into the Western market as early as the 1960s, when *Astro Boy* (1963), *Speed Racer* (1967), and *Gigantor* (1965) made it into local syndication. By the late 1960s, however, reform efforts, such as Action for Children's Television, had used threats of boycott and federal regulation to reign in content they saw as inappropriate for American children. Japanese content targeted adults in its country of origin, often dealt with more mature themes, and was a particular target of the backlash. Discouraged Japanese distributors retreated from the American market, dumping their cartoons on Japanese-language cable channels in cities with large Asian populations.

With the rise of videotape recorders, American fans could dub shows off the Japanese-language channels and share them with their friends in other regions. Soon, fans were seeking contacts in Japan—both local youth and American GIs with access to newer series. Both Japan and the United States used the same NTSC format, easing the flow of content across national borders. American fan clubs emerged to support the archiving and circulation of Japanese animation. On college campuses,

### When Piracy Becomes Promotion

The global sales of Japanese animation and character goods, an astonishing 9 trillion yen (U.S. \$80 billion) is ten times what it was a decade ago. Much of that growth has occurred in North America and western Europe. Japanese anime has won worldwide success in part because Japanese media companies were tolerant of the kinds of grassroots activities that American media companies seem so determined to shut down. Much of the risks of entering Western markets and many of the costs of experimentation and promotion were borne by dedicated consumers. Two decades ago, the American market was totally closed to these Japanese imports. Today, the sky is the limit, with many of the

student organizations built extensive libraries of both legal and pirated materials and hosted screenings designed to educate the public about anime artists, styles, and genres. The MIT Anime Club, for example, hosts weekly screenings from a library of more than fifteen hundred films and videos. Since 1994, the club has provided a Web site designed to educate Americans about anime and anime fan culture. In most cases, the club would show content without translation. Much like listening to an opera on the radio, someone would stand up at the beginning and tell the plot, often drawing on what they remembered when they heard someone else recite the plot at another screening. Japanese distributors winked at these screenings. They didn't have permission from their mother companies to charge these fans or provide the material, but they wanted to see how much interest the shows attracted.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the emergence of "fansubbing," the amateur translation and subtitling of Japanese anime. Time-synchronized VHS and S-VHS systems supported dubbing of the tapes so that they retained accurate alignment of text and image. As MIT Anime Club president Sean Leonard explains, "Fansubbing has been critical to the growth of anime fandom in the West. If it weren't for fans showing this stuff to others in the late 70s-early 90s, there would be no interest in intelligent, 'high-brow' Japanese animation like there is today." The high costs of the earliest machines meant that fansubbing would remain a collective effort: clubs pooled time and resources to ensure their favorite series reached a wider viewership. As costs lowered, fansubbing spread outward, with clubs using the Internet to coordinate their activities, divvying up what series to

have expanded the power of ordinary people to participate in their culture. Having felt that power, fans and other subcultural groups are not going to return to docility and invisibility. They will go farther underground if they have to—they've been there before—but they aren't going to stop creating.

This is where McCracken's argument rejoins my own. McCracken argues that there is ultimately no schism between the public interest in expanding opportunities for grassroots creativity and the corporate interest in protecting its intellectual property: "Corporations will allow the public to participate in the construction and representation of its creations or they will, eventually, compromise the commercial value of their properties. The new consumer will help create value or they will refuse it. . . . Corporations have a right to keep copyright but they have an interest in releasing it. The economics of scarcity may dictate the first. The economics of plentitude dictate the second."<sup>33</sup> The expanding range of media options, what McCracken calls the "economics of plentitude," will push companies to open more space for grassroots participation and affiliation—starting perhaps with niche companies and fringe audiences, but eventually moving toward the commercial and cultural mainstream. McCracken argues that those companies that loosen their copyright control will attract the most active and committed consumers, and those who ruthlessly set limits will find themselves with a dwindling share

of the media marketplace.<sup>34</sup> Of course, this model depends on fans and audience members acting collectively in their own interest against companies who may tempt them with entertainment that is otherwise tailored to their needs. The production companies are centralized and can act in a unified manner; fans are decentralized and have no ability to ensure conformity within their rights. And so far, the media companies have shown a remarkable willingness to antagonize their consumers by taking legal actions against them in the face of all economic rationality. This is going to be an uphill fight under the best of circumstances. The most likely way for it to come about, however, may be to create some successes that demonstrate the economic value of engaging the participatory audience.

### Design Your Own Galaxy

Adopting a collaborationist logic, the creators of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) have already built a more open-ended and collaborative relationship with their consumer base. Game designers acknowledge that their craft has less to do with prestructured stories than with creating the preconditions for spontaneous community activities. Raph Koster, the man LucasArts placed in charge of developing *Star Wars Galaxies*, built his professional reputation as one of the prime architects of *Ultima Online* (1997). He was the author of an important statement of players'

subtitle and tapping a broader community for would-be translators.

Beginning in the early 1990s, large-scale anime conventions brought artists and distributors from Japan, who were astonished to see a thriving culture surrounding content they had never actually marketed overseas. They went back home motivated to try to tap this interest commercially. Some key players in the Japanese animation industry had been among those who had aided and abetted American grassroots distribution a decade earlier.

The first niche companies to distribute anime on DVD and videotape emerged as fan clubs went pro, acquiring the distribution rights from reengaged Japanese media companies. The first material to be distributed already had an enthusiastic fan following. Interested in exposing their members to the full range of content available in Japan, the fan clubs often took risks that no commercial distributor would have confronted, testing the market for new genres, producers, and series and commercial companies to follow their path wherever they found popularity. The fansubbed videos often ran an advisory urging users to "cease distribution when licensed." The clubs were not trying to profit from anime distribution but rather to expand the market; they pulled back from circulating any title that had found a commercial distributor. In any case, the commercial copies were higher quality than their multigeneration dubs.

The first commercially available copies were often dubbed and reedited as part of an effort to expand their potential interest to casual consumers. Japanese cultural critic Koichi Iwabuchi used the term "de-odorizing" to refer to the ways that Japanese "soft goods" are stripped of signs of their national

origins to open them for global circulation.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the grassroots fan community still plays an important role, educating American viewers to the cultural references and genre traditions defining these products through their Web sites and newsletters. The fan clubs continue to explore potential niche products that over time can emerge as mainstream successes.

Many U.S. media companies might have regarded all of this underground circulation as piracy and shut it down before it reached critical mass. The Japanese media company's tolerance of these fan efforts is consistent with their similar treatment of fan communities in their local market. As Temple University School of Law professor Salil K. Mehra notes, the underground sale of fan-made manga, often highly derivative of the commercial product, occurs on a massive scale in Japan, with some comics markets attracting 150,000 visitors per day; such markets are held almost every week in some parts of the country.<sup>2</sup> Rarely taking legal action, the commercial producers sponsor such events, using them to publicize their releases, to recruit potential new talent, and to monitor shifts in audience tastes. In any case, they fear the wrath of their consumers if they take action against such a well-entrenched cultural practice and the Japanese legal structure would provide for fairly small legal penalties if they did pursue infringers. More generally, as Yuichi Washida, a research director at Hakuhodo, Japan's second

largest advertising and marketing firm, has argued, Japanese corporations have sought to collaborate with fan clubs, subcultures, and other consumption communities, seeing them as important allies in developing compelling new content or broadening markets.<sup>3</sup> In courting such fans, the companies helped to construct a "moral economy" that aligned their interests in reaching a market with the American fans' desire to access more content.

Today, American companies are licensing content almost as rapidly as the Japanese are generating it. The gap between airing in Japan and in the North American market grows shorter, making it harder for fans to mount the large-scale efforts to familiarize themselves with and publicize this new content. Even many fan-started companies are adopting American corporate logic, shutting down unauthorized fan copies from the moment they acquire a license. The fans worry that these companies may be underestimating the value of the grassroots publicity and that such aggressive copyright patrolling will result in a less educated consumer base that may be less willing to experiment with unfamiliar content.<sup>4</sup>

rights before he entered the games industry, and he has developed a strong design philosophy focused on empowering players to shape their own experiences and build their own communities. Asked to describe the nature of the MMORPG, Koster famously explained, "It's not just a game. It's a service, it's a world, it's a community."<sup>35</sup> Koster also refers to managing an online community, whether a noncommercial mud or a commercial MMORPG, as an act of governance: "Just like it is not a good idea for a government to make radical legal changes without a period of public comment, it is often not wise for an operator of an online world to do the same."<sup>36</sup>

Players, he argues, must feel a sense of "ownership" over the imaginary world if they are going to put in the time and effort needed to make it come alive for themselves and for other players. Koster argues, "You can't possibly mandate a fictionally involving universe with thousands of other people. The best you can hope for is a world that is vibrant enough that people act in manners consistent with the fictional tenets."<sup>37</sup> For players to participate, they must feel that what they bring to the game makes a difference, not only in terms of their own experiences, but also the experiences of other players. Writing about the challenges of meeting community expectations on *Ultima Online*, Koster explains, "They want to shape their space, and leave a lasting mark. You must provide some means for them to do so."<sup>38</sup> Richard Bartle, another game designer and theorist, agrees:

"Self expression is another way to promote immersion. By giving players free-form ways to communicate themselves, designers can draw them more deeply into the world—they feel more of a part of it."<sup>39</sup>

Koster is known as a strong advocate of the idea of giving players room to express themselves within the game world:

Making things of any sort does generally require training. It is rare in any medium that the naïf succeeds in making something really awesome or popular. By and large it is people who have taught themselves the craft and are making conscious choices. But I absolutely favor empowering people to engage in these acts of creation because not only does talent bubble up but also economies of scale apply. If you get a large enough sample size, you will eventually create something good.

As Koster turned his attention to developing *Star Wars Galaxies*, he realized that he was working with a franchise known in all of its details by hard-core fans who had grown up playing these characters with action figures or in their backyard and who wanted to see those same fantasies rendered in the digital realm. In an open letter to the *Star Wars* fan community, Koster described what he hoped to bring to the project:

*Star Wars* is a universe beloved by many. And I think many of you are like me. You want to be there. You want to feel what it is like. Even before we think about skill trees and about Jedi advancement, before we

<sup>1</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 25–27.

<sup>2</sup> Salil K. Mehra, "Copyright and Comics in Japan: Does Law Explain Why All the Cartoons My Kid Watches Are Japanese Imports?" *Rutgers Law Review*, forthcoming, accessed at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=347620](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=347620).

<sup>3</sup> Yuichi Washida, "Collaborative Structures between Japanese High-Tech Manufacturers and Consumers," paper presented at MIT, Cambridge, Mass., January 2004.

<sup>4</sup> This account of the history of anime in North America was informed throughout by Sean Leonard, "Celebrating Two Decades of Unlawful Progress: Fan Distribution, Proselytization Commons, and the Explosive Growth of Japanese Animation," *UCLA Entertainment Law Review*, Spring 2005, pp. 191–265.

consider the stats on a weapon or the distance to Mos Eisley and where you have to go to pick up power converters—you want to just *be* there. Inhale the sharp air off the desert. Watch a few Jawas haggle over a droid. Feel the sun beat down on a body that isn't your own, in a world that is strange to you. You don't want to know about the stagecraft in those first few moments. You want to feel like you are offered a passport to a universe of limitless possibility. . . . My job is to try to capture that magic for you, so you have that experience."<sup>40</sup>

Satisfying fan interests in the franchise proved challenging. Koster told me: "There's no denying it—the fans know *Star Wars* better than the developers do. They live and breathe it. They know it in an intimate way. On the other hand, with something as large and broad as the *Star Wars* universe, there's ample scope for divergent opinions about things. These

#### At the Mall of *The Sims*

Many games companies are releasing their design tools and game engines alongside their games. Such tools are available for amateur modders to try their hand at designing additional levels or worlds that can extend their gameplay experiences. Some even developed elaborate tutorials designed to train amateurs in the use of these tools and may run contests to sponsor and recognize the modding community's accomplishments. Not every game player will take the time to develop original game content and share it with other players. But, as Bioware's Ray Muzyka explained, "If only one percent of a million user base makes content, then you have a lot of module designers. And that's enough to make a game self-sustaining for a long time."<sup>41</sup> To play the amateur games, you must buy the commercial game upon which they are based, which turns

are the things that lead to religious wars among fans and all of a sudden you have to take a side because you are going to be establishing how it works in this game."

To ensure that fans bought into his version of the *Star Wars* universe, Koster essentially treated the fan community as his client team, posting regular reports about many different elements of the game's design on the Web, creating an online forum where potential players could respond and make suggestions, ensuring that his staff regularly monitored the online discussion and posted back their own reactions to the community's recommendations. By comparison, the production of a *Star Wars* film is shrouded by secrecy. Koster compares what he did with the test screening or focus group process many Hollywood films endure, but the difference is that much of that testing goes on behind closed doors, among select groups of consumers, and is not open to the participation by anyone who wants to join the conversation. It is

hard to imagine Lucas setting up a forum site to preview plot twists and character designs with his audience. If he had done so, he would never have included Jar Jar Binks or devoted so much screen time to the childhood and adolescence of Anakin Skywalker, decisions that alienated his core audience. Koster wanted *Star Wars* fans to feel that they had, in effect, designed their own galaxy.

Games scholars Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler have studied the interactions between Koster and his fan community. Koster allowed fans to act as "content generators creating quests, missions, and social relationships that constitute the *Star Wars* world," but more importantly, fan feedback "set the tone" for the *Star Wars* culture:

These players would establish community norms for civility and role playing, giving the designers an opportunity to effectively *create* the seeds of the *Star Wars Galaxies* world months before the game ever hit the shelves. . . . The game that the designers promised and the community expected was largely player-driven. The in-game economy would consist of items (e.g. clothing, armor, houses, weapons) created by players with its prices also set by players through auctions and player-run shops. Cities and towns would be designed by players, and cities' mayors and council leaders would devise missions and quests for other players. The Galactic Civil War (the struggle between rebels and imperials) would

all of those enthusiastic modders into evangelists for the originating company.

Earlier in this chapter, I drew a distinction between interactivity (which emerged from the properties of media technologies) and participation (which emerged from the protocols and social practices around media). It might be productive to think about this distinction alongside a somewhat more famous one made by Lawrence Lessig between law and code. Law is social dicta: one is free to break the law though one may suffer penalties if one does so. Code is technical data: the programming makes it impossible to violate its restrictions on use (even if those restrictions in practice exceed any reasonable legal demand). We might see modding as a special case where participatory culture seeks to reprogram the code so as to enable new kinds of interactions with the game. Yet, it is also a special case where the commercial producer continues to exert constraints on use even as the work gets appropriated by the grassroots community. I can change the fundamental code of the game if I mod it, but at the same time, nobody can play my transformed version of the game unless they become a consumer of the original work.

Bioware and other games companies see the release of their mod tools as consumer research; they monitor the amateur mods to see what game features are popular and try to provide more professionally polished versions when they upgrade their franchises. In some cases, they buy the rights to amateur-produced games and market them directly to consumers or recruit the most gifted amateurs. *Counter-Strike* (2002), a mod on *Half-Life* (1998), is the most often cited example of a commercial success that emerged from

<sup>41</sup> Ray Muzyka, "The Audience Takes Charge: Game Engines as Creative Tools," Entertainment in the Interactive Age conference, University of Southern California, January 29–30, 2001, accessed at <http://www.annenberg.edu/interactive-age/assets/transcripts/atc.html>.

the modding community, but a number of amateur mods have been included on the expansion packs Bioware has marketed around *Neverwinter Nights* (2002). Other fan communities have historically functioned as training grounds for entry into the commercial media sector: most comic book artists and science fiction writers, for example, got their start through fan publishing. Yet, the modding community may be unique in having amateur-produced works taken up directly by commercial companies for distribution. At the same time, the line between amateur and professional production is blurring as smaller start-up companies may build their games through the use of these same tools and subsequently license with the original company to enable their distribution.<sup>2</sup>

Such practices lower the risks of innovation, allowing the amateurs to experiment with possible new directions and developments and the company to commodify those that hit pay dirt. At the same time, the modding process may prolong the shelf life of the product, with the modding community keeping alive the public interest in a property that is no longer necessarily state-of-the-art technologically. Such practices also increase consumer loyalty: the most hard-core fans are most apt to be drawn toward companies and products that support modding because they know that they can get free content that extends the life of the purchased games. In some cases, game companies are even cutting back on the material contained in the initial product they ship, counting on

<sup>2</sup> David B. Nieborg, "Am I Mod or Not? An Analysis of First Person Shooter Modification Culture," presented at the Creative Gamers Conference, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland, January 2005.

frame the game play, but players would create their own missions as they enacted the *Star Wars* saga. In short, the system was to be driven by *player interaction*, with the world being created less by designers and more by players themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Players can adopt the identities of many different alien races, from Jawas to Wookiees, represented in the *Star Wars* universe, assume many different professional classes—from pod racers to bounty hunters—and play out many different individual and shared fantasies. What they cannot do is adopt the identity of any of the primary characters of the *Star Wars* movies, and they have to earn the status of Jedi Knight by completing a series of different in-game missions. Otherwise, the fiction of the game world would break down as thousands of Han Solos tried to avoid capture by thousands of Boba Fetts. For the world to feel coherent, players had to give up their childhood fantasies of being the star and instead become a bit player, interacting with countless other bit players, within a mutually constructed fantasy. What made it possible for such negotiations and collaborations to occur was the fact that they shared a common background in the already well-established *Star Wars* mythology. As Squire and Steinkuehler note, "Designers cannot require Jedis to behave consistently within the *Star Wars* universe, but they *can* design game structures (such as bounties) that elicit Jedi-like behavior (such as placing a high

reward on capturing a Jedi which might produce covert action on the part of Jedis)." <sup>42</sup>

Coming full circle, a growing number of gamers are using the sets, props, and characters generated for the *Star Wars Galaxies* game as resources to produce their own fan films. In some cases, they are using them to do their own dramatic reenactments of scenes from the movie or to create, gasp, their own "fan fiction." Perhaps the most intriguing new form of fan cinema to emerge from the game world are the so-called Cantina Crawls.<sup>43</sup> In the spirit of the cantina sequence in the original *Star Wars* feature film, the game created a class of characters whose function in the game world is to entertain the other players. They were given special moves that allow them to dance and writhe erotically if the players hit complex combinations of keys. Teams of more than three dozen dancers and musicians plan, rehearse and execute elaborate synchronized musical numbers: for example, *The Gypsies' Christmas Crawl 1* featured such numbers as "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"; blue-skinned and tentacle-haired dance girls shake their bootie, lizard-like aliens in Santa caps play the sax, and guys with gills do boy-band moves while twinkly snowflakes fall all around them (fig. 4.3). Imagine what *Star Wars* would have looked like if it had been directed by Lawrence Welk! Whatever aesthetic abuse is taking place here, one has to admire the technical accomplishment and social coordina-

modders to expand the play experience. The analogy to Tom Sawyer whitewashing the fence lies close to the surface here: the games companies have been able to convince their consumers to generate a significant amount of free labor by treating game design as an extension of the game-play experience. At the same time, the modding community may come as close to an experimental or independent games movement as currently exists, with large number of amateurs producing games that are only loosely affiliated with the commercial industry, at a time when the consolidation of control over games production falls more and more into the hands of a small number of major publishers who are risk-averse and driven toward blockbuster-scale profits.<sup>3</sup>

Mods represents the most extreme version of more widespread practices through which game players customize their characters, their environments, or their play experiences. Will Wright, the creator of *SimCity* (1989) and *The Sims* (2000), argues that the games industry maintains much lower walls between creators and consumers than most other sectors of the entertainment industry, in part because most of the people in the industry remember when people designed games out of their garages.<sup>4</sup>

With *The Sims*, Wright created the world's most spectacular dollhouse, convinced the public to pay to come

<sup>3</sup> Hector Postigo, "From Pong to Planet Quake: Post-Industrial Transitions from Leisure to Work," *Information, Communication & Society*, December 2003. Julian Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," presented at the Creative Gamers Conference, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland, January 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, references to Will Wright reflect interview with author, June 2003.

inside and play and encouraged them to modify it to their own specifications. Wright and his team tapped the preexisting fan base for his *SimCity* franchise, offering key Webmasters the right to participate in ongoing discussions around the game's design and development, giving them advanced access to mod tools they could use to design their own skins or produce their own furnishings, and allowed them to see Webcasts and download thousands of images as the game was being developed. By the time the first *Sims* game shipped, there were already more than fifty fan Web sites devoted to *The Sims*. Today, there are thousands. Wright estimates that in the end, more than 60 percent of the content for *The Sims* will have been developed by its fans. Fans are designing clothes, building houses, manufacturing furniture, programming behaviors, and writing their own stories, amply illustrated by screen shots from the games. He modestly notes, "We were probably responsible for the first million or so units sold but it was the community which really brought it to the next level."

To distribute all of this content, fans have created a range of online sites. Perhaps the most elaborate and best known of these is "The Mall of *The Sims*." Visitors can browse at more than fifty different shops that offer everything from the most up-to-date electronics to vintage antiques, from medieval tapestries to clothes for hard-to-fit sizes—and skins that look like Britney Spears or Sarah Michelle Gellar or, for that matter, characters from *Star Wars*. The Mall has its own newspaper and television service. At present, the Mall boasts more than 10,000 subscribers. Wright notes that the success of the franchise just about led to the extinction of the fan

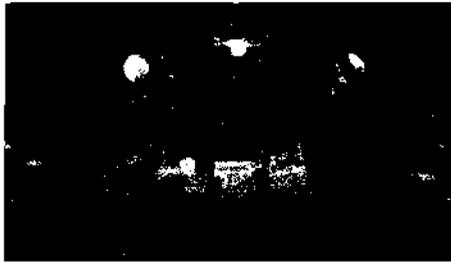


Fig. 4.3. Each character in this musical number from *The Gypsies' Christmas Crawl 1*, made using the *Star Wars Galaxies* game, is controlled by a separate player.

tion that goes into producing these films. Once you put creative tools in the hands of everyday people, there's no telling what they are going to make with them—and that's a large part of the fun.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

It is too soon to tell whether these experiments in consumer-generated content will have an influence on the mass media companies. In the end, it depends on how seriously, if at all, we should take their rhetoric about enfranchising and empowering consumers as a means of building strong brand loyalties. For the moment, the evidence is contradictory: for every franchise which has reached out to court its fan base, there are others who have fired out cease and desist letters. As we confront the intersection between corporate and grassroots modes of convergence, we shouldn't be surprised that neither producers nor consumers are cer-

tain what rules should govern their interactions, yet both sides seem determined to hold the other accountable for their choices. The difference is that the fan community must negotiate from a position of relative powerlessness and must rely solely on its collective moral authority, while the corporations, for the moment, act as if they had the force of law on their side.

Ultimately, the prohibitionist position is not going to be effective on anything other than the most local level unless the media companies can win back popular consent; whatever lines they draw are going to have to respect the growing public consensus about what constitutes fair use of media content and must allow the public to participate meaningfully in their own culture. To achieve this balance, the studios are going to have to accept (and actively promote) some basic distinctions: between commercial competition and amateur appropriation, between for-profit use and the barter economy of the Web, between creative repurposing and piracy.

Each of these concessions will be hard for the studios to swallow but necessary if they are going to exert sufficient moral authority to reign in the kinds of piracy that threaten their economic livelihood. On bad days, I don't believe the studios will voluntarily give up their stranglehold on intellectual property. What gives me some hope, however, is the degree to which a collaborationist approach is beginning to gain some toehold within the media industries. These experiments

community because the most popular sites needed to pay massive bills for the bandwidths they consumed, until the company rewrote their terms of agreement so that the fans could charge modest fees to recover the costs of maintaining their distribution centers. Everything in the shops is produced by other players, and once you've paid your dues, you can download anything you want for free.

Perhaps most importantly, all of this bears the approval of Will Wright and Maxis, the company he works for. He didn't build the Mall; he doesn't police copyright infringers, nor does he assert ownership over what the fans had made. Wright just let it happen. As he explains,

We see such benefit from interacting with our fans. They are not just people who buy our stuff. In a very real sense, they are people who helped to create our stuff. . . . We are competing with other properties for these creative individuals. All of these different games are competing for communities, which in the long run are what will drive our sales. . . . Whichever game attracts the best community will enjoy the most success. What you can do to make the game more successful is not to make the game better but to make the community better.

Here, Wright's image of game companies competing for the most creative consumers harkens back to McCracken's prediction that the smart companies of the future would empower rather than constrain consumer participation, and those who did not build stronger relations with consumers would be unable to compete. As a result of Wright's enlightened perspective, *The Sims* has become perhaps the most successful game franchise of all time.

suggest that media producers can garner greater loyalty and more compliance to legitimate concerns if they court the allegiance of fans; the best way to do this turns out to be giving them some stake in the survival of the franchise, ensuring that the provided content more fully reflects their interests, creating a space where they can make their own creative contributions, and recognizing the best work that emerges. In a world of ever-expanding media options, there is going to be a struggle for viewers the likes of which corporate media has never seen before. Many of the smartest folks in the media industry know this: some are trembling, and others are scrambling to renegotiate their relationships with consumers. In the end, the media producers need fans just as much as fans need them.