

Star Wars fans, DVD, and cultural ownership:
an interview with Will Brooker.

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Star Wars Fans, DVD, and Cultural Ownership: An Interview with Will Brooker

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

***Star Wars* Fans, DVD, and Cultural
Ownership:**
An Interview with Will Brooker

Derek Johnson

Although DVD titles have been distributed in the United States since 1997, three of the most popular and high-grossing films of all time—*Star Wars* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and *Return of the Jedi* (1983)—have only recently been digitally restored and released worldwide in the format.¹ With the theatrical rerelease of all three films in special editions in 1997 and the launch of a prequel trilogy in 1999 with *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* and its continuation with *Episode II—Attack of the Clones* in 2002, the *Star Wars* saga has remained in the public eye throughout the entirety of this absence. While each of these cultural events represented a chance for a cross-promotion and has kept *Star Wars* in the public eye, Lucasfilm, Ltd. (the production company of franchise creator and overseer George Lucas), did not deign to circulate this original trilogy on DVD until September 2004. In the interim consumer demand was allowed to simmer; retailers like amazon.com claim these three films went unchallenged as the number one, two, and three most requested DVD titles throughout the majority of the seven-year wait.² This perceived demand was borne out by the DVD release itself, in which 2.5 million copies of the four-disc box set (retailing at \$69.98) were sold on the first day of release, setting a record for single-day multidisc titles but also (with the concurrent launch of the *Star Wars: Battlefront* video game) for the amount of money—\$115 million—spent on an entertainment franchise in a single day.³

Although the actual DVD release of these long-awaited films could be attributed to even larger cross-promotional imperatives (the special features do indeed offer glimpses of the last film in the prequel trilogy, *Episode III—Revenge of the Sith*, in order to build interest for its premiere in May 2005), their escape from the Lucasfilm vaults might alternately be explained by threats to the corporation's distributional hegemony. Lucas himself explains that he hadn't wanted to release the original trilogy on DVD for another several years but that "the market has shifted so dramatically. A lot of people are getting very worried about piracy. That has really eaten dramatically into the sales. . . . So rather than just sit by and watch the whole thing fall apart, better to bring it out early and get it over with."⁴ But while Lucas and other producers must surely be

concerned about the impact of piracy on their DVD profits, *Star Wars* at the same time presents a particular case in which the bootleg market may be more culturally complex than this industry-under-siege discourse suggests. While these three films have finally been released officially on DVD with restored prints and enhanced sound, the question remains whether it is the saga for which some audiences have truly been waiting.

DVD consumers—and *Star Wars* fans in particular—have paid much attention to the *changes* that Lucas has made to these films in this most recent release in order to bring the franchise more in line with his original, authorial intent. Just like the changes made to the films in the 1997 theatrical special editions, these new alterations have proven quite controversial among attentive audiences who catalog the changes in online discussion while debating their merits and their impact on the narrative.⁵ Many of these fans express disappointment that Lucas has refused to release the originals along with these newly enhanced versions that work to eliminate the diegetic inconsistencies between themselves and the prequel trilogy.⁶ After all, how original is the original trilogy any longer? Lucas nevertheless insists that these original cuts were unfinished works in progress, drafts of his original vision. The original trilogy as it was in the 1970s and 1980s "doesn't really exist anymore," Lucas explains. "It's like this [the 2004 DVD] is the movie I wanted it to be, and I'm sorry if you saw half a completed film and fell in love with it. But I want it to..."

Star Wars Fans, DVD, and Cultural Ownership: An Interview with Will Brooker

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