

# MOVIE MASHUPS

“Director’s cut” DVDs are so twentieth century. Today’s “fan edit” film makeovers are the hotter product. Some people think they’re better than the originals. Some producers think their creators should be prosecuted.

By Blair R. Fischer  
Illustration by Clark Mitchell

One can argue the “fan edit” subculture began the instant Jar Jar Binks opened his computer-generated mouth. When he did, some 15 minutes into 1999’s *The Phantom Menace*, the *Star Wars* übernerds simply wished he’d shut the hell up. The clumsy, floppy-eared Gungan from the planet Naboo, who spoke with a grating, pseudo-Rastafarian accent, was more than enough to piss off the lightsaber-wielding dweebs who’d camped in front of Cineplexes in anticipation of the first *Star Wars* prequel.

But Jar Jar’s inexplicable debut didn’t stop Mike J. Nichols, an aspiring film editor—no relation to *The Graduate* director—from seeing it in theaters thrice. “I really wanted to like it,” he said. But, like most fans of the original trilogy, “I just couldn’t get to *that* place.” Rather than firebomb Lucasfilm, he decided to do something constructive, something ambitious, something anonymous, something that had never been done before. He waited until *The Phantom Menace* was released on VHS in April 2000, and then promptly reedited the entire movie under the alias “the

Phantom Editor,” leaving virtually all appearances by Jar Jar on the cutting-room floor.

For a while, copies of the tape circulated at comic-book conventions and from friends to friends of friends, until somebody uploaded *The Phantom Edit* to an internet newsgroup in early 2001. While the identity of the Phantom Editor remained as shrouded as a pre-*Jedi* Darth Vader, news of the *Edit*’s existence circulated mostly as rumor—like a yeti or a sexually active nerd. With no one to credit, one theory was that *Clerks* director (and known *Star Wars* nut) Kevin Smith did it, until he was forced to deny it—while at the same time confirming its existence. But as the internet expanded, so too did newsgroups, and soon the *Edit* was readily available—for free! When the *Menace* DVD came out in October



2001, Nichols reedited *Edit*—this time with commentary. He was an instant legend.

“It was the perfect storm of horrible movie, intense fan love of a franchise, and skilled editor with access to a growing technology,” says a 40-year-old fan editor from Florida known as Greencapt. “In my circles, more people were talking about [Nichols’] version than the actual movie.”

Even Ahmed Best, the voice of Jar Jar Binks, calls *The Phantom Edit* “great.” Best doesn’t feel at all slighted by Nichols’ mostly Jar Jar-free version. “If a fan thought that character should have been taken out and he took his time to do that, why should that affect me?” Best says. “That’s their idea. That’s their vision.”

“Some will like [*The Phantom Edit*] better than the original, some will call it blasphemy,” says Blueyoda, a 41-year-old fan editor from Quebec. “But it should definitely be considered a work of art on its own merits.”

Using *The Phantom Edit* as an archetype, aspiring filmmakers living in their parents’ basements all over the world—along with those needing any excuse to remain intimate with the movies they love (or, in some cases, loathe)—fired up their Womble MPEG Video Wizards and got to work. A decade after *Edit* went viral, hundreds of other fan edits now circulate on file-hosting sites like RapidShare, BitTorrent sites such as Demonoid and Pirate Bay, and a seemingly infinite number of newsgroups. FanEdit.org, for one, provides insider details about and links to more than 300 fan edits, plus the ability to download customized, pro-quality DVD artwork that’s more or less lifted from the original packaging.

Like Nichols originally did, most fan editors operate under aliases, although no two for the same reason. “My [legal] name is Steve,” says Blueyoda, who also goes by Pinkyoda when he’s feeling “naughty.” “That is the name *other* people have chosen for me. When and if you become an adult, you will develop your own opinions on life, art, what is fair and what is unfair, and build your own personal moral values system, which will be slightly or perhaps largely different from those that have been imprinted upon you. Therefore, your given name, your imprinted identity, should no longer apply.” Fair enough.

For others, like Alex (aka Reverend Bastly), it’s as simple as, “Dorky [redacted] are a good [redacted] r fake



## Jar Jar Binks and Rodney Dangerfield end up on the cutting-room floor; *Jaws* becomes a grindhouse film about a relentless mass murderer.

names.” Most, however, depend on stealth for fear of prosecution. And rightly so.

For now, the blue, pink, and yellow yodas of the cyberworld seem to be operating (and uploading) under the guise of the “fair use” doctrine, although that’s a great source of debate among those in the know. Schuyler Moore, an entertainment attorney with Stroock & Stroock & Lavan LLP, says the law protects only fan edits that parody the original; with “anything other than that, you’re just not safe.” That interpretation would potentially protect very few fan edits—and certainly not the truncated *Phantom Edit*.

“On the one end, it’s the improper use of someone else’s material,” says Jonathan Handel, an entertainment attorney with TroyGould and contributing editor at *The Hollywood Reporter*. “You’re stealing their stuff. On the other end, it’s the equivalent of putting up a poster in your dorm room, except that people’s walls are now their Facebook pages and

people don’t just put a poster up, they modify it. And the poster isn’t just a photo, it’s an audiovisual work.”

Ralph Winter, producer of many *X-Men* and *Star Trek* films—both frequent fan-edit franchises—thinks fan edits are “kinda fun.” He says, “As a filmmaker, I think it’s incredible that fans want to participate and delve a little further into the material.”

To date, no court has set a precedent on the issue of fan edits, and every major film studio refused to weigh in on the issue. However, Lucasfilm spokesperson Lynne Hale says, “We don’t support the reediting of films, but very much support fan enthusiasm done on a noncommercial level.” Smart, considering those who are disemboweling *Star Wars* films are the same people purchasing adult-size Ewok costumes. As entertainment lawyer Moore says, “You don’t want to piss off your fan base. It’s better to let them do their thing than to stop them.”

Derek Hoffman, a producer on *Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut*, concurs. “As a fan, which I am, I think [fan edits] are really interesting,” he says. “However, on the practical side, they’re recutting a film you made and using characters and telling stories



that somebody else owns. Is that any different from kids getting together and playing with *Star Wars* action figures and creating their own stories and universes there? They're just doing it in a more technological way."

That's little solace to producer/director Marshall Herskowitz, whose mostly art-house films (*Blood Diamond*, *I Am Sam*, *Traffic*) have remained fan edit-free. Herskowitz is president emeritus of the Producer's Guild of America and a big opponent of fan edits, calling them "a terrible thing."

"By changing the intended output of the author, that is an infringement on copyright," he says. "It's not about commercial exploitation. It's about promulgation of a new work that is not the intention of the author."

While former FanEdit.org head Boon23 claims the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has sent FanEdit.org at least one cease-and-desist letter demanding that the site stop promoting fan edits—and temporarily shut down the site in 2008—the MPAA seemed only vaguely concerned when we contacted them.

"We don't spend a lot of time focusing on fan edits," says John Malcolm, the MPAA's director of worldwide antipiracy operations. "There's plenty of whole distribution and copying to occupy our time." According to the MPAA, wholesale

piracy costs the film industry billions of dollars a year.

News of the MPAA's apparent ambivalence should appease fan editors, most of whom recommend the viewer buy and watch the original film before screening theirs. (FanEdit.org posts a disclaimer that states a visitor to the site must own the original film to legally watch an edit.)

According to Boon23, the *Star Wars* prequels have been fan edited more than any other franchise, simply "because they frustrated the most people," and, of course, the most rabid *Star Wars* fans are almost certifiable. More than 60 *Star Wars*-related films are listed on FanEdit.org alone. *Superman* is a distant second with around 20.

Some fan edits require almost no imagination (the title *Pulp Fiction: The Chronological Edit* speaks for itself); some remove elements deemed irritating (Rodney Dangerfield's character is mostly absent in *Caddyshack: No Respect*, as is the syrupy love story in *Pearl Harbor: Strength and Honor Edition*). Others—like *Batman and Robin De-Assified*—are complete overhauls. The handiwork of Greencapt, *De-Assified* shaves some 60 minutes off *Batman & Robin*'s running time, mostly by eliminating bad puns, juvenile visual jokes, some of the movie's stupider subplots, and too many gratuitous shots of the cast's derrieres. "I actually saw the movie in the theater when it was released," Greencapt says, "and there's nothing like seeing George Clooney's vinyl-clad ass 40 feet tall."

"As I'm editing, I'm trying to think of a name for it," Greencapt says, "and I'm like, 'The movie itself is kind of "ass." *De-Assified*, hey.'"

Fan editor the Man Behind the Mask uploaded *Jaws: The Sharksploitation Edit*, which reimagines 1975's *Jaws* as a grindhouse film and turns a great white shark who kills indiscriminately into a relentless mass murderer. The fan edit seamlessly incorporates footage from three *Jaws* films (mostly the original) and six others, including the TV movie *Spring Break Shark Attack*. In one scene, the shark assails a school of swimmers, killing a windsurfer, a little boy, a dog, and probably some trout, and wounding countless others as Iggy Pop's "fuck"-filled "Go for the Throat" blares away. Elsewhere, songs by the Beach Boys, Townes Van Zandt, Alanis Morissette, and Metallica help inject

mood-altering elements of camp and melodrama. (That music usage, by the way, is a clear copyright violation, but don't tell Lars Ulrich.) Even the ending is different. Spoiler alert: It involves the film *Orca*.

"[*Sharksploitation*] doesn't pretend to be better than the original," Blueyoda says. "And it's not. It's simply a new way to appreciate this great classic."

Blueyoda has created about 50 fan edits, or what he prefers to call "mashups." His coup de grâce is *Dead Awake*, a retooling of 1986's *Aliens* where Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and her marine crew are battling flesh-eating zombies instead of aliens. The 18-minute mashup uses footage from 12 films, including the zombie-themed *Land of the Dead*, *Day of the Dead*, and *Dawn of the Dead*, plus other Weaver films like the original *Alien* and *Copycat*. Similar to *Sharksploitation*, the ending is entirely original. Another spoiler alert: It involves an undead Newt.

"A lot of the work was watching many, many zombie movies, including some really atrocious ones, just to get the particular shots I needed," Blueyoda says. "But some of those movies I watched with friends, and nothing beats an evening of bad movies and plenty of beer."

It took Blueyoda three months to finish *Dead Awake*, at a rate of about six hours a day. You do the math. "I don't see any difference between the creation process of a 'normal' movie and what I'm creating," he says by way of explaining his sweatshop work schedule.

Boon23 adds, "It has nothing to do with respect for the original artist, but everything to do with the desire to make the world you live in your own."

Boon23—a preschool teacher from Germany who also goes by CBB—has created 40 fan edits, including *Star Trek: Kirkless Generations* and *The Matrix DeZIONized*. "If it happens that you prefer the *Mona Lisa* with a painted mustache, why not do it?" he says. "It's basically the desire for individuality that causes [fan edits]. You don't want your steak standardized. You want it with a bit more salt or pepper or some strange spice, because that's how you prefer it."