

May the Shorts Be With You

Twenty-five years ago, one man changed the face of filmmaking with his epic science-fiction tale. That man is not who you think it is. By Brad King.



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He changed Hollywood 25 years ago with a simple tale about a farmer's quest for adventure. Directors and moviegoers alike were blown away by the special effects and epic storyline.

The filmmaker was Ernie Fosselius. The movie was Hardware Wars, a short film that spoofed George Lucas' famous Jedi saga, *Star Wars*.

Characters such as Fluke Starbucker, Audie Ben Doogie and Darth Nader aren't household names. The Deadly Waffle Irons and Flying Toasters haven't become action figure toys. But the legacy of spoofing Lucas can be traced back to Fosselius.

Since its release in 1977, the short has captured a large and loyal audience, garnering festival awards wherever it was showcased. It even got the stamp of approval from

Lucas himself, although that did little to earn the film mass recognition. For years, it was mainly relegated to late night television and small showcases.

“It did show with *Empire Strikes Back* (in 1980),” said Michael Wiese, who produced the film with Fosselius. “Fox (Studios) didn’t like that idea, but theater owners loved it. George was an advocate of the film and he got me a meeting with the Fox executives. I went into the meeting thinking big things might happen, and they have three lawyers to see if we had infringed on any copyrights. It was the worst screening I’ve ever had.”

Despite the rough treatment from the studio executives, Fox never sued, and the film made it into the theaters. The short has taken on a life of its own, culminating with the 25th anniversary DVD release that includes bonus footage of Fosselius and Wiese. Don’t expect deep commentary and thought-provoking musings, because the DVD release is a parody of, well, DVD releases.

The film wasn’t immediately embraced by Hollywood, but Fosselius’ work impressed Lucas, who gave him a job working on effects and sound. Fosselius continued to work in films as a sound engineer, although he has largely stayed out of the public eye. Wiese continues to produce and promote movies through his company.

Few have matched the success of Fosselius and Wiese over the years, but that hasn’t kept *Star Wars* fans from paying homage to their favorite films. There are countless shorts, comic books and stories posted online. There are far too many to find and watch all of them, but some stand out.

Perhaps the most intriguing is Simon Jansen’s shot-by-shot remake of *Star Wars* — with ASCII text. The characters are created using symbols such as “”, “|” and “()” to depict pictures and dialogue written in the corner of the screen. Jansen, who does all the work on the site in his spare time, has been working on the project since 1997.

Still, there’s nothing like a good short to get the *Star Wars* fans jumping. AtomFilms’ fan film competition attracted 244 entries, while TheForce.Net, home to all things *Star Wars*, selects the best shorts for its site.

After *Hardware*, there was a lull in shorts’ popularity. That all changed in 1998, when an unknown filmmaker and a few of his friends put out a *Cops* send-up called *Troops*.

Kevin Rubio's underground flick weaves a farcical storyline into the tapestry of the *Star Wars* universe.

The clever tale depicts a day in the life of Imperial Troopers out on patrol on Tatooine, a tiny planet inhabited a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. The troopers come across the possible theft of two droids and a domestic disturbance on a moisture farm that erupted after a young farmer disappeared.

Like many of his characters, Rubio found success through a random series of events that put him in the right place at the right time.

A *Star Wars* fan, Rubio and his pals (including FilmThreat.com's Chris Gore) would kick around ways to parody the movie. He'd briefly considered a comic strip called "Tales of a Death Star Scanning Crew," which would follow a day in the life of a Death Star employee who woke up, got dressed, went to his station where he scanned the Millennium Falcon after it was captured — then promptly got shot by the escaping heroes.

Instead, he settled on *Troops*. There were some daunting problems along the way, such as his inability to re-create a Death Star, so the film was limited in scope. However, his biggest problem was getting realistic Storm Troopers, a rather important detail since they were the main characters.

Then, he came across a picture of two people dressed as Storm Troopers at the *Star Wars* re-release in 1997.

"I talked to a special effects buddy of mine because there were only a few people who could build those suits," Rubio said. "It turns out, the Troopers were twin girls enrolled in the Art Center in Pasadena. My roommate was the head of admissions and she found out who they were."

After he completed filming, he made exactly two copies and handed them out at the San Diego ComiCon, a comic book convention that was celebrating its 20th anniversary while also saluting independent filmmakers. Before long, people were spending hours online, downloading the file just to get a glimpse.

Within a few weeks, Rubio signed with the William Morris Agency and began life as one of the chief *Star Wars* satirists.

Today, he writes and produces commercials while continuing to develop movies and television projects with his friends Shawnt Jordan, who runs a production company called Wandering Eye, and Drew Massey, the voice of the Count on *Greg the Bunny*.

Commercial work is his bread and butter, but he continues spoofing *Star Wars*. He released a series with Dark Horse Comics called *Tag and Bink Are Dead*, an homage to the Shakespearean spoof *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and a short story of union politics that explains how the Rebel Alliance was able to knock out the Empire's ultimate weapon not once, but twice, in *A Death Star is Born*.

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