

# Star Wars Fans Strike Back

is another slice of heaven for hardcore fans eager to see the movie. For many, fandom is in a galaxy far, far beyond just watching the film. By Brad King.



**SOMETIMES YOU JUST** need a Millennium Falcon in your backyard.

That's the quandary Dennis Ward found himself facing while preparing to shoot *Stuck on Star Wars*, his independent film that follows the life of Zach, a 20-something whose life is based on the popular George Lucas film series.

Fans of the series -- the real fans -- face dilemmas like these with a certain pluck. Rather than shy away, they embrace their problem.

Essentially, this raw devotion means they become part of the movie, part of the lifestyle. They keep the flame of the *Wars* alive by adding their own twists to the tale. Sports fans have fantasy leagues; *Star Wars* fanatics add their own applications to the 25-year-old phenomenon.

For some it's just a hobby, and for others it's a downright obsession.

For Ward, that naturally meant he needed to build a replica of the famous spaceship.

There was a problem. Well, there were lots of problems, but the most pressing happened to be that neither Ward nor his friends knew anything about construction.

Since they planned to craft the Falcon out of wood, the lack of carpentry skills was a hindrance.

"My dad ridiculed me because I couldn't use any tools," Ward said.

Dad, it turns out, had reason to be skeptical. Just two weeks into building, the Falcon collapsed as the group tried to raise the ship's body. "We built the middle section, and as we were lifting it up, the whole thing bowed and fell to the ground. That was our first indication that something was wrong."

That's what you get when you download blueprints for a spaceship using the Internet. So Ward's crew turned to an old Kenner toy model for inspiration. That also led to disaster. The toy ship had only three landing pads, but the ship in the film had five -- for good reason.

"The landing gear wasn't stable, so our ship was tilting, especially after we added the cockpit," Ward said. "All the weight was on one side, so we had cinder blocks and ropes tied to the ship to keep it from tipping over. We had to add so much weight on one side, everything we could find, to get it balanced."

In the end, the crew decided to make modifications themselves, creating a design model out of Popsicle sticks. Four months after they started, Ward's crew finished their life-size spaceship.

Triumphant, Ward was ready to enjoy the fruits of his labor, but Mother Nature would have something to say about that. The next weekend, a storm ripped through Kansas City, destroying the Falcon. With no reason to rebuild it, Ward and his friends gathered with lighter fluid and a six-pack of beer.

Not every project ends badly. Some just never end.

Simon Jansen of New Zealand, for example, had an epiphany in July 1997. A friend sent an e-mail, and he started tinkering with the message, putting a window around the first page and using the down arrows to scroll through the note like a movie.

Long a *Star Wars* fan, Jansen decided to re-create the entire original movie, *A New Hope*, using ASCII text. Five years later, he completed the scene where Luke and Han rescue Princess Leia from the Death Star.

Jansen, employed as a software engineer at Intel, works on the project when he can.

"I really want to finish it off, no matter how long it takes," Jansen said. "I am in no rush. People have pointed out discrepancies, and there are mistakes in it. But mostly I work from memory, so there is bound to be the odd mistake here and there.

"Besides, if I get it perfect the first time, how can I ever do a director's cut?"

Not every project proves as difficult. Just ask any of the 174 members of the 501st Legion, a group of fans who dress up like stormtroopers, Darth Vader, Boba Fett and a host of other baddies.

The Legion was out in full force during Celebration II, the beginning of the parties leading up to the release of the fifth movie, *Attack of the Clones*, on May 16. The Indianapolis festival was so crowded, stormtroopers were called upon to help keep the crowd under control.

"They got tapped to do security and ID check for the event," said Legion member Jeff Yankey. "Saturday was so crowded, they were asking all troopers available to help control the lines, so lines like, 'Have your ID ready or you will be shot' were common."

Not to be outdone, there is also a Rebel Alliance outfit, because frankly, bad guys without good guys to fight are boring. But that's the beauty of *Star Wars* -- there's always somebody else out there willing to play along.

There's even a fan website, TheForce.Net, that monitors news, events, short films, video clips, message boards, videos and any other information the 50 volunteers stationed around the world can get their hands on. The sun, it seems, now never sets on the *Star Wars* empire. The 75,000 daily visitors are thankful, devouring any new tidbit that hits the wires.

"We're the daily dose of *Star Wars*. We are the Wal-Mart of this series because, like Wal-Mart, we have everything," said Josh Griffin, the site's webmaster.

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