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Take It Easy, Kid— It's Only a Movie (*Hardware Wars*, 1977)

Ernie Fosselius and Michael Wiese are the Lennon and McCartney of fan films. Together, they created something meant for the kids that also won over their parents; they inspired a generation of creative souls who followed in their footsteps; and just like the Beatles singing away on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, they made their infectious brand of fun look invitingly easy.

But the analogy runs deeper than that, because while united in their art, the two songsmiths were always, distinctly, individuals. McCartney has traditionally been viewed as the one who provided focus, the artist/businessman ready to make the most of a given situation, good or bad. Lennon, on the other hand, was always too happy to point out the frayed threads at the edge of the canvas, and though that view informed his art to great effect, it also drove him to cut down targets with his acerbic wit, even when it was in his best interests to be quiet. Regardless of whatever they may have done apart, however, Lennon and McCartney remain best known for the work they created together—and such is the case, too, with Fosselius and Wiese, the braintrust behind *Hardware Wars*.

The short film is less well known to young *Star Wars* aficionados today, but in the late seventies, seeing the 12-minute satire was a true badge of honor among fans. You might have seen Lucas's original in the



Scott Mathews (standing) was recruited to play Fluke Starbucker; a musician and producer, he later worked with Barbara Streisand, David Bowie, Brian Wilson, John Lee Hooker, and Mick Jagger, among others.

(Courtesy of Michael Wiese Productions)

theater seven times, and sat in your living room, slack-jawed in disbelief at that stupid *Star Wars Holiday Special*, but if you hadn't found a way to see *Hardware Wars*, you simply weren't a hardcore true believer.

A wisecracking take on the original movie, *Hardware Wars* was purposefully as low-tech as possible, using hubcaps for space stations, eggbeaters for space ships, and an old flashlight for a lightsaber. As a fake trailer for a nonexistent movie—a very long trailer—it essentially retold the story of *Star Wars*, following the adventures of Fluke Starbucker, Ham Salad, Auggie “Ben” Doggie of the Red-Eye Knights, Princess Anne-Droid (complete with danishes on her head), and Darph Nader. Rounding out the cast were the robots 4Q2 (the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*) and Artie Deco (a busted vacuum cleaner), plus there was Chuchilla the Wookiee Monster, played by a brown puppet that bore a striking resemblance to a certain *Sesame Street* character.

Taking an *Airplane*-like approach, *Hardware Wars* still works today, lobbing jokes one after another to see what sticks. Filled with all-ages humor that nonetheless has a bit of bite, the movie has always been a hit with fans, and that includes George Lucas himself, who has said it's his favorite parody of *Star Wars*—a claim that, believe it or not, Fosselius disputes.

The flick is many things—a reverent spoof, a cult classic, and likely the most profitable short subject ever made. For all that, however, there's one simple thing it has never been: *Hardware Wars* is not a fan film.

That's right—the movie that thousands of *Star Wars* buffs, articles, and fan filmmakers point to as the great-granddaddy of all fan flicks is actually nothing of the sort. The short might look like it was made by a bunch of seventies stoner kids hanging out in their parents' basement, but in truth, it was a professional production from the start.

Wiese explains, "It's a great misconception that, one, we were students—we were already professionals; two, that we are fans—I don't own the *Star Wars* pajamas; and three, that we did it as a pathway to success—that's not the case at all. When we did the film, we had no idea *Star Wars* would become this phenomenon with multiple sequels. Also, I have to admit, it never really occurred to us that there'd be a market for *Hardware Wars*; we learned everything we knew about marketing after we shot it. We just made the movie for fun and as a send-up of Hollywood trailers."

However people perceive *Hardware Wars*, there are three things that can't be disputed: the short film was a hit; it inspired thousands of amateurs to make their own fan films; and it changed the lives of its creators forever. It's a saga of Farrah Fawcett wigs, record producers, lawyers, more lawyers, Francis Ford Coppola, and plenty of household appliances—and a grown woman with danishes on her head.

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Until its opening weekend on May 25, 1977, no one saw *Star Wars* coming; the studio that produced it, 20th Century Fox, was

convinced the film would die on the vine, and even George Lucas didn't stick around, instead opting to head off to Hawaii, where he spent the days building sand castles on the beach with Steven Spielberg. Lucas himself was so dismayed about the film's prospects that the two directors entered a fatalistic bet: whichever movie did better—*Star Wars* or the upcoming *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—its director had to give the other profit points on the picture.

Of course, Spielberg happily won the gamble, as that Memorial Day weekend marked the detonation of a cultural explosion. If no one had seen *Star Wars* coming, they sure knew about it in the years that followed, as the burgeoning franchise was all but unavoidable. People—not just traditional, die-hard, sci-fi fans, but average, everyday people—couldn't get enough of the space saga. Marketers sat up and took notice; in short order, fans and the general public were milked for every cent of interest they had—and they were very interested.

While kids were impressed, becoming a powerful fan base that only grew in the ensuing decades, adults were inspired by the epic as well—particularly folks in the film industry. Sure, most wanted to emulate Lucas's success, but there were others who had different designs altogether, such as two regular guys working on the fringes of the movie biz: Fosselius and Wiese.

"Everyone tried to talk me out of making *Hardware Wars*," Fosselius recalled. "They said, 'You'll never work in that town again,' and I said, 'Well, I haven't worked there yet, so that's OK.'"

It was easy for the two filmmakers to take pot shots at the motion picture establishment, as they both lived far from its grasp, with Fosselius in San Francisco and Wiese 20 miles north in San Anselmo. "I did about 20 films for *Sesame Street* as an assistant animator," notes Fosselius. "We did the first counting series, with spies who open their coats at the end, and the pinball series, which was 1 to 12. That was my first filmmaking experience." When he wasn't manning a light table with tracing paper to make animation cels, the filmmaker was playing in bands; a few years earlier, he'd helped found the troupe that became Oingo Boingo, the legendary New Wave act led by future film composer Danny Elfman (*The Simpsons*, *Batman*).

Meanwhile, Wiese was making documentaries in an office above San Anselmo's local art shop, just half a block from Lucas's audio company, Sprocket Systems (later renamed Skywalker Sound). "I was working on many projects around that time," Wiese recalled.

There was *Radiance: The Experience of Light* with Dorothy Fadiman, about the lights that surround holy people in art—is it a metaphor for higher consciousness or do saints really glow? I was about to start *Dolphin* with Hardy Jones, which we eventually shot in the Bahamas and were the first to record human-dolphin interaction in the open seas—Cousteau, eat your heart out! Another project was a psychedelic mandala film, *Beauty*, that put the audience into a celestial trance, and I started shooting lots of stuff on global thinker Buckminster Fuller, who was a mentor and friend—we shared the same birthday.

With all that going on, it's no wonder that the two occasionally needed to let off a little steam. Whenever Wiese threw a party in his loft, he'd invite friends over and the evening's highlight would invariably be a shadow puppet play, where they'd hang a screen between two doorways, set up a lamp behind it, and the two friends would improv their way through film stories acted out with hands and makeshift props.

After a particularly crazed rendition of *Jaws*—complete with homemade shark puppets—left everyone rolling on the floor, the pair met up to get some Chinese food, and Fosselius started goofing around, pitching Wiese on making a film trailer for a movie that didn't actually exist. They could parody *Star Wars*, big-budget Hollywood movies, and over-the-top special effects in one swoop, he explained, acting out the film using salt shakers, chopsticks, and soy sauce bottles. Soon Wiese was snickering loudly in the middle of the restaurant, and *Hardware Wars* was born.

Fosselius would write and direct, while Wiese would produce and handle cinematography. While it wouldn't be a student film, they'd make sure it looked like one; *Hardware Wars* would be made on the cheap, as much for the deliberately cheesy look as for the economic necessity. More important, however, it would be made

for the hell of it, and, who knew? If it was any good and they were lucky, maybe they'd get to meet George Lucas. After all, they'd seen him around San Anselmo; Wiese once spotted the director at a local street café and sent over a bottle of wine in hopes of starting a conversation. He got a polite wave from across the patio.

Fosselius, however, had a different agenda: "I know that other people involved wanted to impress George Lucas, but I wanted to get his attention in a different way. I'm a satirist; my idea is to go after things that I see that are pretentious—and make fun of them. A satire or parody can be irritating, and that was my goal. I knew when I made it that true fans of *Star Wars* would like it; whether or not George would like it, I didn't know. But that's the thing that I had to persuade people about in order to raise the money to make it—'People are going to like it, believe me!'"

Even as the pair made fun of Hollywood films, they still followed the first rule of the movie biz: Never spend your own money. Fosselius wrote the script in a way that didn't break copyright laws, so being allowed to show and profit from the flick wasn't a problem; instead, raising the \$5,000 budget was tough, for the simple reason that there was nowhere to show the movie after they made it. Movie theaters hadn't shown short subjects since the 1960s, TV never aired them, and the Internet—home to millions of pint-sized movies today—was in its non-public infancy. Having no place to show *Hardware Wars* meant there was no way to recoup the cost; funding the satire would amount to charity.

"The whole thing was a miniature Hollywood deal where you had to sell the idea, raise the money to do it, and promise it would pay off for the investors," says Fosselius. "People said, 'I don't really think this is going to work, what security do we have?' just like any investment. I'd go, 'Well, here's a whole bunch of percentages,' and try not to give too many away, like the Mel Brooks movie *The Producers*, where they give away 200 percent of their play. I gave out most of what I would have gotten out of it just to get the money together, so for me, it wasn't really a financial stepping stone; it was a creative one."

Friend Laurel Polanick put up the \$5,000 budget, and then joined the crew as the costume designer. Filling out those intergalactic threads, Fosselius cast most roles with people he knew,

regardless of their acting experience. Case in point: producer/musician Scott Mathews may be known in the music world for having worked with and written songs for Barbara Streisand, David Bowie, Brian Wilson, John Lee Hooker, Mick Jagger, and plenty of others, but to Fosselius, he was the perfect person to don a blond wig and play Fluke. It was a good call; Mathews won a *New York Times* Critic Pick for his work in the movie.

While the flick was being cast, Wiese was busy calling in favors, borrowing a \$2,500 5.7mm fisheye kinoptic lens for his 16mm camera so that they could swing a heavy steam iron just inches above it to replicate the real film's opening shot. Trying to get a take where the iron didn't wobble as it swung overhead, they risked the lens getting destroyed 98 times before getting the visual they wanted. Even making a purposefully imperfect movie, it turned out, required some level of perfection.

Shooting was held over the course of four days, with cardboard sets and special effects created in their temporary "studio"—a warehouse on 24th Street in San Francisco, though a few shots were grabbed on the sly in a boiler room beneath San Francisco City College. "It was all done guerilla-style," notes Fosselius. "I'm not sure if we even rented the warehouse. We told people it was student filmmaking, because they'd say, 'Oh, OK—you don't have any money? Go ahead.' Whereas if they found out we were a professional crew, they'd start charging for everything, because they'd figure, 'Oh, you're Hollywood people!'"

Following another Tinseltown tradition, the two filmmakers cameoed in their own movie, with Fosselius playing both the masked Darph Nader and the commander running the Death Star attack slideshow, while later, the back of Wiese's head appeared for a second during the dogfight. "What a performance," he comments. "I was sitting in for Ham Salad, who had already gone home."

Bob Knickerbocker, the rogue . . . er . . . rogue, wasn't the only missing actor during the film shoot. "The bar scene was shot on a Sunday morning at the Palms in San Francisco," says Wiese, "and no one showed up—everyone was still wasted from Saturday. A cop came by and asked us what we were doing as we unloaded lights; we said, 'Trying to shoot a movie, but our cast didn't arrive.' Ogling our donuts for the crew, he said, 'No problem' and started



Ernie Fosselius squats by the camera while shooting the climactic dogfight scene in *Hardware Wars*.
(Courtesy of Michael Wiese Productions)

pulling people off the street to be in the movie. We gave all the women Farrah Fawcett wigs.”

With shooting completed, they got to editing, working up a 26-minute rough cut. “It was a lot of fun for me creatively,” says Fosselius. “I’m a pretty old-fashioned, analog person, so to me, all that 16mm editing is very mechanical and fun. You can’t beat doing laser beams by scratching the film emulsion with a sewing needle rather than putting in some electronic effect.”

The massive movie was eventually cut to 12 minutes after they showed it to friends. “Our first test screening was at a restaurant,” Wiese recalls. “We set up the projector and turned out the lights while patrons tried to see their soup. There were a lot of laughs—and shouts to turn the lights back on—but we learned how to best space the comedy so the laughs wouldn’t drown out the jokes that came next.”

With all the gags lined up, they used selections from an obscure European recording of Richard Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* for the soundtrack, sticking to the ethos they’d had throughout to keep trademarked and copyrighted material out of the film, thus ensuring they could screen it for profit. The icing on the aural cake, however, came when they hired voiceover artist Paul Frees to narrate *Hardware Wars*—just he had the original advance teaser trailer for *Star Wars*.



By mid-fall of 1977, the movie was done, but they'd gone over-budget by \$3,000. With the debt weighing on their minds, it was time to achieve the next two goals: to get *Hardware Wars* distributed so that they could at least break even, and to also put the film in front of George Lucas. As they saw it, achieving the latter would probably help with the former, but with no real way to contact the man himself, they were at a loss. At one point, there was even half-serious debate about putting the movie in a film canister attached to a parachute and then dangling the whole thing from a tree in front of the director's house, with a note attached reading, "From outer space." Luckily, they discovered that one of their friends, a carpenter, was doing some work at the house and was willing to pass it along.

Lucas eventually saw *Hardware Wars* on Thanksgiving Day that year, sitting down with dinner guests to watch it after their holiday meal. His review? It was "cute"—a review that left Fosselius beside himself . . . with anguish.

"I always wanted to be the court jester, not the king," he says, "but at least the court jester got to stand there and see the king's reaction. I never got that opportunity, so I never knew his true reaction. I'm told that he sort of took it OK; they said he thought it was 'cute'—which is a horrible word—but I never really knew what he thought of it, until much, much later, when I talked to Coppola."

While a low-key, one-word review like "cute" wasn't quite what they'd hoped for (perhaps the tryptophan in the turkey left him a tad subdued), Lucas still liked it enough to have his assistant Jane Bay arrange a meeting between Wiese and Alan Ladd Jr. ("Laddie"), the legendary head of 20th Century Fox, which had produced *Star Wars*.

While Fosselius and Wiese hadn't made *Hardware Wars* to break into mainstream cinema, clearly this was the Big Opportunity, so Wiese went to Los Angeles with the film under his arm and dreams in his head, ready to show it to the most powerful executive in Hollywood. Entering the Fox studio lot, his mind raced—maybe they'd distribute it and show it in theaters. Maybe

they'd want Wiese to pitch ideas for films he and Fosselius could make at Fox. The sky was the limit, but when Wiese walked into the screening room, he found Ladd accompanied not by a clique of eager executives ready to shower him with contracts and money, but instead, a trio of stern-faced lawyers, all wearing the same three-piece suit. This was bad.

The attorneys, it turned out, were there to pass judgment on whether Fox could sue for copyright infringement. Wiese recalls, "They ran the show. No one laughed. Someone coughed and I counted it as a laugh—"They love it, they love it, they really do!" Afterward, the lawyers conferred and gave their depressing analysis: Wiese and Fosselius hadn't broken any copyrights, plus, as a parody, the short was protected by the First Amendment, so in their professional estimation, there was no way to sue and make yet more money off of *Star Wars*.

With personal financial oblivion now taken off the docket, Wiese got back to the reason why he'd come there in the first place: he had a film to sell. "Laddie asked me what I wanted. I said, 'To have 20th Century Fox show it with *Star Wars*.' I'm still waiting for them to get back to me."

Eventually, Wiese visited Santa Monica-based Pyramid Films, a distributor specializing in health and education films, which had previously distributed *Radiance* and some of his other efforts. It turned out to be exactly the meeting he'd hoped to have at Fox: "Bob Kligensmith locked me in the office on a Friday night and wouldn't let me leave until we had a deal. That's why he was later president of Paramount Video and I'm not."

What's more, the company bought into the parody angle completely, going the extra mile to fit the irreverent film into the parameters of an educational film distributor. To help teachers lead classroom discussions, Fosselius was required to write a *Hardware Wars* study guide, which he promptly filled with questions like "What makes *Star Wars* such an easy target for satire?"

"I wrote it as a parody, but they accepted it as the real thing—that was pretty cool," he admits. "Then Pyramid got it out there; they distributed to everything that wasn't a theater—schools, churches, Rotary Club, whatever. Today, I get people who say, 'I saw it at the library' or at Sunday school—just the weirdest places."

While the massive popularity of *Star Wars* helped fuel interest in the short, Pyramid and Wiese were aggressive in getting the film in front of as many people as possible. It played film festivals, garnering nearly a dozen awards in short order; became a staple of between-movie filler on HBO and other cable channels; was booked into “midnight movie” shows and some screenings of *The Empire Strikes Back*; and even the LA school district bought dozens of prints—on the condition that a nude pinup was cut from the debriefing slideshow. “The Defense Department bought half a dozen prints, too,” Wiese recalls. “Go figure—I think it was the title.”

Before long, the little movie had become to the short-subject field exactly what the real flick was to feature films: the biggest hit ever. By the end of 1978, *Hardware Wars* had grossed more than \$500,000, eventually leveling off around \$800,000 by the end of the original *Star Wars* trilogy in 1983. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two filmmakers eventually got an offer to produce a feature-length version of their space operetta, but turned it down with a sense of “been there, done that” finality.

Wiese explains, “We didn’t think the joke would hold up for an entire feature film, but that didn’t stop Mel Brooks from making *Spaceballs*, which we consider a blatant rip off of *Hardware Wars*. Of course, that’s life feeding on life: Lucas ripped off Kurosawa’s *Hidden Fortress*, we ripped off *Star Wars*, life goes on. We weren’t the only ones to notice, though—Janet Maslin, a film critic for the *New York Times*, wrote in the first paragraph of her *Spaceballs* review what a wonderful film *Hardware Wars* was and then went on to trash *Spaceballs*. We wrote her a thank-you note.”

Wiese went back to work on *Dolphin*, while Fosselius turned his satirical eye to Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, filming the less successful *Porklips Now*. With the two films under his belt, Fosselius went into screenwriting, but while his scripts had trouble getting off the ground, ironically he brought things full circle when he wound up working on the opening sequence of *Return of the Jedi* with Lucasfilm sound designer Ben Burtt, providing the comic voice of a sobbing Rancor keeper, mourning the death of his pet monster beneath Jabba the Hutt’s palace:

Ben and I hit it off because he has a pretty good sense of

humor and liked *Hardware Wars* a lot. I was walking down the hall at Fantasy Studios, visiting somebody for lunch, and they said, “Hey, come in and do a couple of lines for me, will ya?” I did some weird voice—turns out it shows up in the movie. Buy me a sandwich and I’ll do a voice! They gave me a lot of work doing weird voices and screams during lunch hour, like the two Chinese pilots at the beginning of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* who bail out of a Ford Tri-Motor. Now I get *Star Wars* mail from people all over the world, not for *Hardware Wars*, but for *Jedi*. They’ll send me a trading card that’s some character that I did the voice for, and they want me to tell them how I did it and sign the card. It’s really impresses me that they would know I did the voice, because I didn’t get a screen credit. The funny thing is that I still get royalty checks for it; I have a classic one from 20th Century Fox for one penny, framed with a sign: BIG MONEY IN SHOW BUSINESS. That seems to be the theme of my career.

Meanwhile, *Hardware Wars* continued to have legs, excerpted in a 1980 *Star Wars* TV special, *SPFX: The Empire Strikes Back*. A year later, Warner Home Video released both of Fosselius’s parodies on VHS as *Hardware Wars and Other Film Farces*, packaged with two other flicks distributed by Pyramid: *Closet Cases of the Nerd Kind* (Rick Harper’s clever spoof of Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) and, lo and behold, Marv Newland’s indefatigable *Bambi Meets Godzilla*. The VHS video was released with an extravagant \$39 price tag and eventually sold about 6,000 copies to video stores and libraries.

Just two years later, *Return of the Jedi* was released, closing out the original trilogy, and then a funny thing happened: people realized they’d had enough *Star Wars* for a good, long time. Since 1977, the media had rammed the series down the public’s throat; now, without new movies to look forward to, if people wanted a *Star Wars* fix, they would have to go looking for it—and they chose to do something else instead. The seemingly endless stream of toys, books, and other movie tie-ins slowly dried up, and by the late eighties, *Star Wars* was largely consigned to the backshelves of

closets and minds everywhere. When the mania for all things *Star Wars* eventually ran its course, *Hardware Wars*, too, disappeared.

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While *Hardware Wars* was a cult phenomenon seen by millions of people, it has a greater legacy than having merely amused audiences. In fact, the simple parody was wildly influential, because it became the first high-profile harbinger of today's fan film movement. While it may not have been a true fan film itself, plenty of viewers thought it was, and that, in turn, inspired countless kids to become backyard auteurs, making their own fan flicks.

The grand irony is that in reverse engineering a fan film, Foselius and Wiese used household items for spaceships, when the number one unwritten rule of fan productions is that one must attempt to replicate "the real thing" as closely as possible. Instead, the steam irons looked like steam irons, the wigs were hopelessly fake, and the lip-synched dialogue rarely attempted to match the actors on screen. *Hardware Wars* positively reveled in its pseudo-amateurishness.

At the same time, though, the short also provided a sly commentary on how its own audience had swallowed Lucas's creation whole. Sure, a toaster firing burned bread was amusing as a visual non sequitur, but it also questioned the emotional worth of the *Star Wars* universe: *Why* was a TIE fighter blasting lasers everywhere so much cooler than a toaster and burnt crusts? The fact that spaceships were substituted with appliances was a reminder that within the *Star Wars* universe, there was nothing special about X-Wings or the Millennium Falcon; they were just tools, the same as a waffle iron. And when Frees narrated, he wasn't merely mocking the stuff on-screen; his lines poked a friendly jab at the fans, too: "You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll kiss three bucks goodbye! Get in line now!"

So, whether intended or not, the pair of outcast filmmakers inadvertently became forerunners—and for two decades, standard bearers—of the fan film movement. Surveying their unexpected impact on amateur moviemaking, Wiese proved fairly philosophical about the turn of events: "We all emulate the things we love

and that influence us. I'm pleased that fans make fan films; usually it is a labor of love and their first movie. They learn a lot and go onto other things—or they don't, and this is very sad. By the time Ernie and I made *Hardware Wars*, we were in our thirties and had made films before. This, too, is very sad."

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With the exception of new novels and comic books that arrived in the early nineties, during the 14 years between 1983 and 1997, *Star Wars* was largely allowed to lie dormant. The franchise's core audience—Generation X—was now growing up, discovering more sophisticated entertainments and interests beyond lightsabers (like sex, for instance). By the midnineties, however, Lucasfilm decided it was time to remind the world about the franchise it had fallen in love with way back when. Following a carefully sculpted timeline of events, the public's interest would be revived through a theatrical rerelease of the original films, followed by a well-publicized, VHS box set (the latest in a very long line of such releases), videogames, and more, all leading up to the grand crescendo of May 19, 1999: the release date of *Star Wars: Episode 1—The Phantom Menace*, a film that proved as unwieldy as its title.

First came the theatrical rerelease; when Lucas announced he was going to reissue the trilogy in 1997 as Special Editions with up-to-date special effects, it was only natural that *Hardware Wars* would make a return, too. Warner's home video rights to the short had lapsed, so Wiese was toying with the idea of his own rerelease when he got a phone call from a Hollywood special effects pro.

Fred Tepper recalled, "When I first heard that they were doing a *Star Wars Special Edition* with new digital effects, I thought, 'Wouldn't it be really funny if they did that to *Hardware Wars*?' I told a couple of friends at Amblin Imaging, where we were working on *seaQuest*, *Star Trek: Voyager* and other TV stuff, and they thought it was a funny concept—so I searched for Michael Wiese on the Net, called him up out of the blue and told him the idea. He'd thought of rereleasing the film, but hadn't really thought of making any changes to it other than a nice new transfer and better

sound. I told him my friends and I would do the CGI work for free just because, A, we were fans of the original, and B, it was just so damn silly.”

Wiese warmed to the idea of new “special defects” for the re-release, but Fosselius, who had long since left the film business to forge an artistic career building ornate, mechanized wood carvings, had nothing to do with the effort.

“Ernie sometimes disappears for years at a time on creative projects and I don’t hear from him,” comments Wiese, “so I went ahead and did it. I met with these three nerdy guys—Fred Tepper and his pals; they were so nervous I could hardly hear them; they were treating me like Orson Welles! Their ideas for redoing some of the scenes were brilliant. Since we didn’t have the brilliance of Ernie’s contribution, I wanted to keep the integrity as much as I could with Ernie’s original work, and we initially thought of using very low-res computer graphics, but that would just look cheap and probably wouldn’t be funny, so we didn’t go that route.”

Tepper explains, “It was a question of where did you want the humor to come from? I thought the irony of quality effects depicting low-quality spaceships was more funny. After all, the idea doing a *Star Wars Special Edition* was to improve on the effects, so we agreed it should follow that concept, making waffle irons more believable, and everything would be a first take so it wouldn’t get too refined.”

The creation of the new effects went off without a hitch, accomplished by the team over one long weekend. Wiese and his company geared up to self-release the video. Everything was going smoothly—but there was a problem. “I sent Ernie the new version,” remembers Wiese, “and he said he would have preferred a low-tech approach.”

In fact, Fosselius was pretty ticked off. “It became the golden goose—everyone kept trying to squeeze more bucks out of it, but I was trying to move on to my next nonlucrative project,” he reflects with a chuckle. “At that time, I was off in the woods doing wood carvings; I just wanted the movie to stand as a creative work, but they did it anyway and I had to get a lawyer to fight it the best I could. All I could do was get them to attach a sticker to the box to say that I didn’t approve.”

The sticker had some unintended consequences, however, as Wiese admits: “That started the rumor that there was a big rift between us—but there wasn’t.” Another unexpected result was that fans simply thought Fosselius was the director who cried wolf: “A lot of people took it as just another one of my weird jokes—that I had done it, and didn’t approve of it,” Fosselius explains, laughing. “At the time, I was pretty upset about that, but the fact is, that’s the kind of thing I would do!”

With many of the flying irons and hand mixers now re-created using CGI, the revised *Hardware Wars: Special Edition* took on an odd patina, as the new facelift created an additional meta-joke by featuring new, high-tech, cheesy special effects re-creating old, low-tech, cheesy special effects imitating old, high-tech special effects. If that sentence doesn’t make any sense, well, neither did the movie. A little too self-referential for its own good, Wiese’s release of the *Special Edition* nonetheless went on to sell over 60,000 copies, this time priced under 10 bucks. With 20/20 hindsight, Wiese now has a different view of the remixed flick: “In the end, I agree with Ernie; the original is funnier and funkier.” In fact, even Tepper agrees: “I still think the concept of a special edition is . . . funnier than the actual thing.”

Later that year, *Hardware Wars* became even more like the real movie that inspired it when the short was licensed to become a three-issue comic book series from World Comics. Artist Justin Morenz spent four months creating the 18-page first issue, only to see the publisher go bankrupt when he handed it in. The comic was never printed and his \$5,000 check for services rendered was instead rendered worthless. However, a panel at the nation’s biggest comic book convention, the annual San Diego Comic Con, had been booked for the comic’s release, so on a whim, Morenz showed up and found 500 people jammed into the room, all anxious to find out the latest adventures of Fluke and the gang. “We had all these people show up,” he later ruefully told Colorado’s *Pueblo Chieftain* newspaper, “and I just think of all the sales we could have had in that room.”

The *Hardware Wars* saga didn’t end on that low note, however. When he’d first seen the short in 1977, Lucas had labeled it “cute”—a gentle review that was positive but hardly the effusive



Commemorating the film’s 20th anniversary in 1997 with the help of Darph Nader and original actress Cindy Freeling (Princess Anne-Droid), producer Michael Wiese rereleased the short with new “special defects” as *Hardware Wars: Special Edition*. (Courtesy of Michael Wiese Productions)

praise that Wiese and Fosselius had hoped to get. A full 22 years later, in August 1999, they finally got the ultimate accolade. By then, Wiese had moved to England, and happened to be watching the tube when Lucas appeared on UK talk show *The Big Breakfast* promoting *Star Wars: Episode 1—The Phantom Menace*. Asked about the hundreds of spoofs that had come up over the years, Lucas replied without hesitation, “*Hardware Wars* is my favorite *Star Wars* parody.” Wiese had the review on his website in under ten minutes.



And here's where things go off the rails a bit, because if you'd think the seal of approval from Lucas himself would finally make Fosselius ecstatic, too, you'd be dead wrong. Maybe. In truth, even he isn't sure how he feels about it, but one suspects that much like the old *X-Files* slogan, he wants to believe.

You see, according to Fosselius, Lucas's declared love of *Hardware Wars* is nothing more than "revisionist history." The sentiment stems back to 1980, and the considerably smaller wake left by Fosselius's other satirical film, *Porklips Now*. Creating a parody of Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam epic was an interesting choice, in part because of the longstanding relationship between the *Godfather* auteur and the younger *Star Wars* director. Coppola had mentored Lucas for years, producing his feature debut, *THX-1138*, and giving him his first directing gig, shooting *Filmmaker*, a documentary about Coppola filming *Finian's Rainbow*. A decade later, however, now the learner had become the master, creating the biggest film ever, while Coppola risked his career and mental health to make a masterwork that was met with mixed reviews and puzzlement. While *Hardware Wars* had ridden a wave of giddy, innocent excitement among moviegoers, *Porklips Now* went after an R-rated movie about a very sore topic that had left audiences polarized and confused—a reaction that Coppola may not have expected.

It was in this climate, then, that Fosselius sent a copy of his satire to Coppola, and while he may have been disappointed by the lukewarm reception he got from Lucas a few years earlier, he claims the reaction to *Porklips Now* was far colder (repeated requests for Coppola's side of the story remain unanswered).

Fosselius says weeks went by without a word from the Coppola camp, so he gave up expecting to hear anything—until Coppola called one night at 3 AM, recruiting him to join the campaign to get California governor Jerry Brown elected president. Soon the satirist found himself creating TV ads for the doomed crusade, but, he says, Coppola never once mentioned the short.

When Fosselius was invited to a party hosted by the auteur sometime later, he finally brought up the topic by bringing a

Porklips Now T-shirt as a present. As Fosselius tells it, Coppola wordlessly handed off the shirt to someone passing by and then blew his stack, making it clear in no uncertain terms that he did not like the film and felt it attacked him personally. This was capped off with, "I'll tell you one thing: I took mine a lot better than George took his!"

And that's the comment that haunts Fosselius to this day. "I went, 'Oh, OK. Well, sorry. . . .' I kinda backed away and left. But it's sort of an interesting thing—they talked about it! Like, as if they said, 'Well, what did you think of your parody?' 'Oh, I didn't like it.' So, after never really hearing how George felt, now this was the first word I had and maybe he didn't like his very much. I mean, if I were to believe Francis. So I don't know. I *still* don't know."

To be sure, there's plenty of reasons to think that Lucas *did* like *Hardware Wars*. After all, he would never have instructed his personal assistant to set up Wiese and Ladd for their ill-fated meeting otherwise, and as Fosselius himself notes, "*Hardware Wars* didn't hurt *Star Wars* at all; in fact, it helped because it enhanced the experience by reminding people of the original. Without it being there, the parody would mean nothing, so it was dependent on the film. In fact, that's why *Porklips* didn't make an impact, even though it's a much better-made film, I think, and maybe funnier—because less people saw *Apocalypse*."

Also, even if *Hardware Wars* did rub Lucas the wrong way initially, the man has been known to change his mind (Greedo shoots first; midichlorians; it's gonna be a dozen . . . wait, nine . . . oops, make that six movies), so if he eventually said it was his favorite parody, why not take that at face value?

Despite all this supporting evidence, however, Coppola's purported remark still plagues Fosselius enough that when Lucasfilm honored *Hardware Wars* with the Pioneer Award at the second *Star Wars* Fan Film Awards, held at the San Diego Comic Con in 2003, he was a no-show: "I didn't go pick it up because they were rewriting history to suit their needs." He'd spent two decades thinking that Lucas hated *Hardware Wars*, and even four years after it had received the papal blessing on UK television, the doubt was still impossible to shake off:

It's hard; I can't really psychoanalyze myself about it, but I do think about it a lot: Why would I make these satires? Why am I so interested in that kind of thing? And why do I think that people are going to love me for it rather than be irritated—but in a way, I want them to be irritated! If they want everyone to love everything they do, that's a little bit unrealistic—and maybe I do love their movies. Maybe I like the movies enough that I want to spend a lot of time thinking of ways to make fun of them. Which is a strange thing to say, but if I didn't like them at all, I probably wouldn't even be interested in them.

"Maybe I'm trying to ingratiate myself into something by making the films; everyone has friends who tease them, and you know that they care about you, but they like to give you a hard time," Fosselius continues, laughing. "So maybe it's a desperate cry for acceptance on my part—by insulting people!"

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Fosselius's dilemma with the directors may never be resolved, but the issues over *Hardware Wars: Special Edition* were worked out a few years later when he and Wiese reunited to produce the definitive version of the movie for a DVD release in 2002. Working together, they filled the disc with an hour's worth of extras, notably omitting the *Special Edition* in the process. Once again, the film was a hit, proving that even 25 years after they first hatched the idea over Chinese food, the farce was still with them.

Today, Wiese still markets the short, but spends most of his time producing documentaries and running a publishing company that concentrates on technical filmmaking books. Fosselius, meanwhile, no longer sees wood carving as something he took up after bailing out of a stalled film career; rather, both occupations are part of a broader vocation he began as a kid: satirist. Now he sell his own art; runs a traveling, hand-carved marionette show called *Cirque du So What*; and speaks at sci-fi conventions, billing himself as "Ernie Fosselius, Former Filmmaker and Celebrity Has-Been."

By treating his own appearances at conventions as metagags that fans can participate in, Fosselius proves that his satirical edge is as sharp as ever, holding nothing—particularly his own ego—sacred, but it's also indicative that the man has finally come to terms with his parodies, realizing in the process that his movies had a much larger audience than just two famous directors:

Hardware Wars is the one thing I'll always be known for. It doesn't matter what great art I've done since then; I'll never be able to live it down. For a while, that bothered me—"Look what I've just done; forget about that old thing"—but I'm starting to enjoy the fact that people come up to me with a big old smile and say it was a happy memory for them, that they saw it in a school assembly and all the kids were cracking up. That's a wonderful thing; we affected them somehow with this strange little movie. So I'm trying to live up to that idea now, and accept it and welcome it—because what's wrong with making people happy as the best thing you did in your life?