

'Episode II' becomes first battle of digital revolution

By Robert W. Butler
Knight Ridder Newspapers

SKYWALKER RANCH, MARIN COUNTY, Calif. (KRT) — The future is here.

At 12:01 a.m. today, the first paying customers in selected theaters will sit back and experience "Star Wars: Episode II — Attack of the Clones."

It will mark the first time a major Hollywood live-action blockbuster has been shot, edited and projected in the digital process. There are only about 60 digital auditoriums on the planet, and the nearest ones to Eugene, Ore., are the Seattle Cinema Theatre in Seattle and the Loews Cineplex Metreon Theatres & IMAX in San Francisco. Fans who see the movie in these auditoriums will experience a depth, clarity and subtlety of lighting that in some instances seems practically three-dimensional.

But that may not necessarily be to the liking of film buffs. Unlike projected film, a digital movie doesn't flicker. Rather, it flows. There is no gate — a mechanism in a conventional movie projector that rapidly opens and closes to allow separate frames of film to be illuminated. As the gate jiggles, it creates the flickering sensation that has accompanied cinema since its creation more than a century ago.

"Some people call the flicker created by the giggling gate the 'soul of film,'" Lucas told reporters last week during a series of interviews at his Skywalker Ranch north of San Francisco. "Really, all it is, is the gate moving around, making it hard to see the image, so that it's sort of fuzzy. You can create that effect digitally if you want. But it's easier on the eyes if you don't have it."

Some say a digitally made and projected film gives the viewer the illusion of being immersed in the scene rather than merely watching it.

"It's like going from a cassette tape to CD sound," explains Brett Miller, vice president of operations for the Kansas-based Dickinson chain, which recently installed a digital projector at its new NorthRock multiplex in Wichita. "It's so much sharper — just beautiful."

Technically speaking, "Attack of the Clones" isn't really a film, because true film — that perforated

strip coated with light-sensitive chemicals — has been eliminated from the process.

Instead Lucas shot his latest space fantasy using a "24-frame high-definition progressive scan" digital camera specially made for him by the Sony and Panavision corporations. The images he captured were not frozen on film but collected on a computer hard drive, then manipulated by digital effects artists to create the fantastic worlds of a long-ago time in a galaxy far, far away.

Until now, digital filmmaking has been largely the domain of moviemakers trying to avoid the high costs associated with conventional film, particularly expensive laboratory developing fees and the price of scanning film footage into a computer so that it can be edited electronically (a process pioneered several years ago by Lucas and now used throughout the industry).

Recent low-budget movies shot digitally (although they had to be transferred to film so they could be shown in the theaters) include "The Anniversary Party," "Italian for Beginners," "Breaking the Waves," "The Center of the World," "Time Code" and virtually all documentaries in recent years.

But those projects inhabit the margins of mainstream moviegoing. They were made with less-than-perfect cameras and look more like videotape — fuzzy and blurred — when projected on the big screen.

"Attack of the Clones," though, is as mainstream as you can get, part of the most lucrative and popular movie franchise of all time. Its images are near-perfect. And Lucas is using the technical excellence of his latest movie as a sort of velvet gauntlet to coax — or club — theater operators and the big studios into enlisting in the digital revolution.

The problem is money. Exhibitors so far have been unwilling to pay the \$150,000 or so per auditorium required to install digital equipment. Most of the more than 3,000 screens showing "Clones" this weekend will be using conventional prints.

And that clearly frustrates Lucas, who described to reporters a near-conspiracy between the studios and the exhibitors to block the

spread of digital cinema.

"For about a year we've been struggling to get theaters to go for this, and they've locked arms and said, basically, 'We're not going to do it,'" Lucas said. "And if anybody does, they're breaking this sacred oath we have."

"We've even offered to give certain theaters digital equipment for free. And those theaters are being told, 'Don't take it from them.'"

"They're stalling because they want to know how they can make money from this. The issue is, you don't make money from this. You just have to put aside your greed for the sake of the audience."

Lucas said he had hoped that "Attack of the Clones" would be shown digitally in 400 or more theaters. He'll have to settle for only 60, most of them in North America.

So, whether it's a case of conspiracy or just industry-wide caution, most "Star Wars" fans will have to watch "Attack of the Clones" in conventional theaters using conventional film projection.

And what they'll get is a rapidly deteriorating imitation of the real thing, according to "Attack of the Clones" producer Rick McCallum, who came to work for Lucas more than a decade ago.

"You spend \$100 million making a film over four years. ... Now how do you get that to the audience so they can see the exact film you made?" McCallum said. "Once a release print goes on a platter system at a multiplex, it's run 25 to 50 feet over wires to a projector, and it becomes degraded very quickly. Within a couple of days, it doesn't even resemble the film we made. It's absolutely imperative to us to change that."

With digital prints, the movie is always seen in its pristine state. No matter how many times it is shown, there will be no dust spots, tears, scratches, faded colors or blips.

"The studios just don't believe audiences care about it. They're about to learn differently."

In fact, Lucas promises that when the next "Star Wars" movie comes out in a couple of years, he'll allow it to play only on digital screens.

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Features and Pulse editor John Liehardt contributed to this report.

the most entertaining lightsaber duel in the history of the Republic.

Lightsaber duels abound in "Attack of the Clones." The usually pacifist Jedi can't go anywhere without getting into some kind of trouble in this movie. Dozens of Jedi clash with a droid army against the backdrop of a large Roman-style coliseum. The contrast of ancient ruins and modern technology combined with the energy of the scene sets pulses racing.

The design team also deserves props for making Coruscant look like a real city. Instead of simply having flying vehicles whiz by a window as in "Phantom Menace," the characters actually interact with the scenery. They have added details such as billboard advertisements and news broadcasts that give a richness to the vast fantasy city.

Finding fault in "Attack of the Clones" is not an easy task. Although some of the politics in the

movie may be hard to follow because of new enemies and various subplots, the confusion legitimizes the political feud — politics are confusing. Besides, anyone who has seen the classic trilogy knows how the war ends.

There are also some scenes that do not flow well with the story, and on the surface they may seem gratuitous. The scene where Anakin's mother Shmi Skywalker dies seems choppy and almost unnecessary. But we have to remember that his mother needs to die in order to help push Anakin down the path to the dark side. And the scene gives Anakin a reason to meet the Lars, who will later become Luke's Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen.

"Attack of the Clones" has something for everyone — action, comedy, romance, drama. It is not geared toward any one age group or gender, and it's wide-based appeal will no doubt connect with many audiences.

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Review

continued from page 7

enemies. The feeling of being out of control comes across well on the screen.

By far, the most entertaining scene in the entire movie is the lightsaber duel between Yoda (voiced by Frank Oz) and Count Dooku (played by Christopher Lee). Don't let the cane fool you. Yoda morphs from the aging, Zen-like philosopher to a rockin' bad-ass warrior in this scene.

The animation team recreated Yoda as an entirely digital character, but unlike the much-hated Jar Jar Binks, the animators have done an outstanding job digitizing the ancient Jedi master. They paid special detail to Yoda and added many of the idiosyncrasies of the puppet. Yoda remains lifelike but has even more maneuverability and facial expressions that allow for probably

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