

## Film Feature: Five Things We Want From ‘Star Wars, Episode VII’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 7, 2012 - 1:56pm

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CHICAGO – There was a time when the idea of actual sequels to George Lucas’ original “Star Wars” trilogy seemed like the most fantastic (and unlikely) of all the fanboy fantasy fodder in the multiverse. How could chapters VII through IX work? How do you follow the “teddy bear picnic” ending of “Return of the Jedi”? Would the new sequels be based on Timothy Zahn’s beloved Thrawn Trilogy of “Star Wars” novels? Would some archaic contractual clause from the 1970s force Harrison Ford to make the most begrudging cameo in movie history? (Or at least since Sean Connery was forced to appear in “Highlander 2.”) The whole thing just seemed so damned improbable, but then...Disney buys Lucasfilm and “Star Wars: Episode VII” gets scheduled for a 2015 release. It’s a funny old world we live in.

So, how did this happen? The prequel trilogy. Regardless of how you feel about the prequels, they certainly failed to make the original “Star Wars” films feel like the sacred cows that they were regarded as during the 1980s and ’90s. Episodes I-III proved that new “Star Wars” films could be made, whether you liked them or not, and all of the subsequent “Star Wars” media tie-ins – the “Clone Wars” series, the “Family Guy”/“Robot Chicken” specials, the LEGO and Angry Birds games, to name a few – all evolved from that same idea: Everything in the “Star Wars” universe is now fluid. If George Lucas was OK with writing new (and constantly revising his old) “Star Wars” films, why couldn’t there be chapters VII, VIII, and IX? Stranger things have happened. (Google “Star Wars Dance-Off” and see what I mean.)

And, now that Lucas has turned the “Star Wars” reins over to Disney, it actually opens up an even wider realm of possibilities for this new sequel trilogy. Unlike the prequels – which were all written and directed by Lucas – we have no idea who will be driving the creative team behind these new “Star Wars” movies. And, while 1980s-me would’ve found this terrifying, 2012-me finds the prospect exhilarating. For the first time in a long while, I’m rooting for a “Star Wars” movie to work, to really blow my socks off, and, as such, I’ve assembled this list of FIVE things that I really, really want from “Star Wars: Episode VII,” INCLUDING my picks for the ideal writer and director for the seventh chapter in the Skywalker saga.

### **1. DO NOT Hire the Predictable Choices for the Creative Team**

As soon as “Episode VII” was announced, there were about 9,000 subsequent blog posts calling for the sequel to be directed by everyone from Christopher Nolan to Joss Whedon. And, while I get the inspirations for such geeky dream-casting, most of the suggestions just don’t make a ton of sense. Yes, Christopher Nolan is an amazing director, but he’s also just finished his Batman trilogy and (following that and “Inception”) now has the cache to basically direct whatever he wants. So why would he want to play with someone else’s toys for years on end, knowing that, at the end of the day, a billion fanboys will just be sharpening their bayonets and waiting for him to fail? It’s a lose-lose for prospect for Nolan. Same goes for Joss Whedon, J.J. Abrams, and a lot of the other popularly-touted “Episode VII” candidates. Most have either got a good thing going somewhere else – the Avengers and Star Trek franchises, for example – or their signature styles would just be a bad fit for a “Star Wars” movie. (Paul Greengrass is a heck of a filmmaker, but I don’t really want to see a shaky-cam lightsaber fight.)



Joss Whedon

Photo credit: Marvel/Disney

I think the key to a strong “Episode VII” director lies in the strategy that Lucas used to find directors for “Empire Strikes Back” and “Return of the Jedi” – find a solid, workman director who knows how to balance characterization and suspense, who brings a creative spark to their work, but who doesn’t have such a definitive style that their past work would overwhelm their take on a “Star Wars” movie. Look at the filmographies of Irvin Kershner and Richard Marquand – directors of “Empire Strikes Back” and “Return of the Jedi”, the first and third best “Star Wars” movies ever. Neither of them had the longest resume or tons of blockbuster hits to their name before their foray into the “Star Wars” universe, but they both brought a knack for storytelling and talent for working with actors that benefited each film greatly. I think most of the directorial names being tossed around for “Episode VII” – ranging from Brett Ratner (no!) to Jon Favreau (decent) – just have too much blockbuster baggage to disappear into a “Star Wars” movie. So, who does have that perfect mixture of technical skill, creative verve, relative anonymity, strong rapport with actors, and fanboy street cred? One name immediately jumps to mind...

## 2. Hire Rian Johnson as the Director of “Episode VII”

“Search your feelings, Lord Vader. You know it to be true.” Rian Johnson, the writer/director of “Brick”, “The Brothers Bloom”, and, most recently, “Looper”, would be a PERFECT candidate to direct “Star Wars: Episode VII”. Like Kershner and Marquand, he’s got a solid (but not huge) list of critically acclaimed features under his belt, along with some high-profile, very well-executed TV work (his episodes of “Breaking Bad” and “Terriers” were great). All three of his movies were suspenseful – though the tone varies in each – but their high-concept storylines were always extremely character-driven, just like the original “Star Wars” movies. And he obviously works well with actors – he’s got a special rapport with Joseph Gordon-Levitt while Bruce Willis and Emily Blunt both RAVED about “Looper”. Plus, even though there are very stylized elements in each of his movies, it would be hard (per se) to lock down the Rian Johnson-style yet. Which is a good thing. It means he could bring his as-yet-undefined, unlimited creativity into the “Star Wars” universe and really make a mark, without having to worry about trying to force the “Star Wars” world into his already-set personal aesthetic . (One of many reasons why Wes Anderson would never direct a “Star Wars” movie, not that he’d want to.)



Rian Johnson

Photo credit: Sony

Additionally, he’s got the perfect level of geek cred for the job. He’s not a full-on geek icon yet – there are no “Rian Johnson Is Now My Master” t-shirts yet, as far as I know – but he knows how to talk the talk and walk the walk. (He hired “Primer” director Shane Carruth to consult on his time travel movie, for Pete’s sake.) He could sink into that lofty director’s chair, knowing that the film community respects him, the fanboy community approves of him, and the general public is just indifferent enough to his presence that he can disappear into the film and make something really, really special without having to worry about living up to his last blockbuster. Also, while directors like Brad Bird, Andrew Stanton, or Zack Snyder are already known and quantified Hollywood properties, Johnson is still a bit of a variable. While a roaring triumph with “Episode VII” wouldn’t do much to change Kathryn Bigelow or Steven Soderbergh’s level of cache in the film industry, Johnson could probably parlay that success into funding several of his next, more-homegrown directorial efforts. And that’s a definite win-win scenario. It means we get an awesome new “Star Wars” movie AND we fund the career of a promising young filmmaker. You can’t say the same thing if Ben Affleck or David Yates gets the job.

I don’t know if Johnson wants to direct the next “Star Wars” movie, but, personally, I can’t think of a better choice. However, I should note that, even though Johnson has written every movie that he’s directed so far, I don’t think he should WRITE “Episode VII”. (The auteur thing



doesn’t work in the “Star Wars” world unless you’re Lucas.) So, who SHOULD write “Star Wars: Episode VII”?

### **3. Hire Ben Acker and Ben Blacker to Write “Episode VII”**

Chances are – More of you are familiar with Rian Johnson than you are with Ben Acker and Ben Blacker. If that’s the case, Google “Thrilling Adventure Hour” and mail me a handwritten thank you note later. Acker and Blacker are the creators of “The Thrilling Adventure Hour”, one of the most fantastic live shows/podcasts currently in existence. Running since 2005, “The Thrilling Adventure Hour” is a monthly stage show in Los Angeles – now recorded as a Nerdist podcast - where a troupe of actors and comedians perform live hilarious serialized adventures in the “style of old-time radio.” The shows are scripted in Acker and Blacker’s trademark whip-smart writing style, and the anarchic fun of their scripts has attracted a tremendous cast of recurring actors (known as the “Work Juice Players”), including Paul F. Tompkins, Paget Brewster, Nathan Fillion, Marc Evan Jackson, Gillian Jacobs, Busy Phillips, Patton Oswalt, and many, many more. (There’s a very cool Kickstarter campaign at the moment to turn “The Thrilling Adventure Hour” into a concert film and a graphic novel.) Acker and Blacker have also written for the fanboy favorite series, CW’s “Supernatural”, and scripted the surprisingly charming low-budget indie “Drones”.



Thrilling Adventure Hour

Photo credit: LifeofReilly

So, why do Acker and Blacker’s resumes make them perfect to write a “Star Wars” movie? First of all, one of the big inspirations for Lucas’ original “Star Wars” movies were the old film serials of the 1930s – the cliffhanger adventures of “Flash Gordon” and the “Fighting Devil Dogs” and the like. Well, Acker and Blacker are EXPERTS when it comes to the nuances of serialized storytelling, and their passion for old film and radio serials is extremely evident in their work. And, even though “The Thrilling Adventure Hour” is a comedy show, that doesn’t mean that Acker and Blacker are writing parodies. Their storytelling talent goes much deeper than that. While, yes, the stories are hysterical, they’re also steeped in real characters with real plots that advance along from chapter to chapter. In their recurring series “Beyond Belief”, we really care about the hard-drinking married mediums, Frank and Sadie Doyle, and the various supernatural entities they find themselves facing. In “Sparks Nevada: Marshall on Mars”, they’ve created an expansive cast of engaging characters that puts “John Carter” to shame. Yes, the episodes are FUNNY, first and foremost, but they’re so well written that they work as pure serialized adventures on their own. Much in the same way that Terry Pratchett novels both poke fun at and exemplify the best of fantasy storytelling, Acker and Blacker know how tread that thin line between taking the piss and taking themselves seriously. And their deep knowledge of sci-fi and fantasy bleeds through the entire history of “The Thrilling Adventure Hour” – in one episode of “Beyond Belief”, they did a riff on the “Peter Pan” legend, turning Pan into a hand-eating monster, that was one of the best takes on the Pan story I’ve ever heard. Personally, I think Ben Acker and Ben Blacker could do something really amazing and fun with a new “Star Wars” movie. Because, more than anything else, we want a new “Star Wars” to be fun, right? Acker and Blacker know how to deliver character-driven adventure and comedy, and, thanks to “TAH” and “Supernatural”, they’re also adept at juggling back-stories and mythologies. I think they’d make fantastic stewards of the “Star Wars” legacy and that they could find a way to bring back the cliffhanging spirit of the original trilogy.

One last note – While, yes, Acker and Blacker don’t have a lot of feature screenwriting experience under their belts, I’d bring your attention to the case of one Mr. Lawrence Kasdan, the screenwriter of “Empire Strikes Back”, a.k.a. the best “Star Wars” movie ever. Do you know what was Kasdan’s first produced screenplay? “EMPIRE STRIKES BACK”. That’s right. He got the job because Lucas read some of his unproduced scripts which had sold in Hollywood – most notably, “Continental Divide” – and Lucas took a chance on him. (Spielberg did the same with Kasdan for “Raiders of the Lost Ark”.) All of the other great Lawrence Kasdan movies – “Big Chill”, etc. – all came after his first two movies that hit the big screen in 1980 – “Empire Strikes Back” and “Raiders of the Lost Ark”. So, just because Acker and Blacker haven’t had as many films produced as workmen like David Koepp, John August, or John Logan, that doesn’t mean they couldn’t do something fantastic with “Episode VII”.

### **4. Make “Episode VII” a Direct Sequel to “Return of the Jedi”**

There’s an assumption that, since the newly announced “Star Wars” movie is being called “Episode VII,” that it will take place after “Return of the Jedi”. As far as I know, that hasn’t been confirmed yet. But, man oh man, I hope that’s confirmed soon. Can we all admit that we have “prequel fatigue”? That, even if we dig the Cartoon Network’s “Clone Wars” series, we really don’t want to know ANY more about the period between “Attack of the Clones” and the original trilogy? One of the most exhilarating things about the title “Episode VII” is that it promises



things we’ve never seen before and I really hope the movie lives up to that promise.



Return of the Jedi

*Photo credit: Lucasfilm*

Because, with the prequels, there was this inevitability to so much of the plotting. OK, we KNOW we have to see Anakin turn to the Dark Side, we KNOW the Emperor will rise, we KNOW Luke and Leia will be born, we KNOW someone has to wipe the memory of the droids... the whole prequel trilogy was mapped out by these benchmarks that we knew the storytelling had to reach at some point and, frankly, it made the experience feel rote and predictable at times. What I love about the idea of “Episode VII” is that all bets are off. NO ONE KNOWS what happens next. And that feels fresher and more exciting than a prequel ever could. And, for that reason, even though this might be an unpopular sentiment among hardcore “Star Wars” fans, I hope that the new sequels DON’T follow Timothy Zahn’s acclaimed Thrawn Trilogy, a series of novels focused on Luke, Han, and Leia (and their children) fighting against an evil Admiral of the Empire and various Dark Jedi. I’m sure it’s a great story, but this is the first chance the “Star Wars” film universe has had in a very long time to create something NEW, to create a story that we know won’t eventually end with the Death Star detonation in “Return of the Jedi”. I want the new “Star Wars” movies to go boldly into that post-Jedi undiscovered country (apologies for the Trek references), and I hope that they opt to create something wholly original rather than retreading old tales or borrowed plots from other arms of the “Star Wars” universe.

##### **5. Do NOT Cast a 10-Year-Old as the Lead and Other Lessons Learned from the Prequel Trilogy**



The Phantom Menace

*Photo credit: Lucasfilm*

When George Lucas was the one and only all-powerful Grand Moff Tarkin of the “Star Wars” universe, many of the creative decisions regarding the franchise were solely up to him. If he wanted to cast a 10-year-old as the lead of “The Phantom Menace”, that was his call. If he wanted to create a racially-ambiguous alien sidekick and let his children name him “Jar-Jar Binks”, hey, George pays the bills. He gets to do

what he wants. Now that the creative ownership of the “Star Wars” franchise is no longer the concern of just one man, I’m hoping that the new owners will be able to cast a more critical eye towards the prequel trilogy and really work hard to improve the areas that simply didn’t work. For example, while I understand that the “Star Wars” movies speak to children, I hope they’ll think twice about making a not-even-a-tween the action lead of “Episode VII”. Other elements that I hope that are abandoned include: the strange racial overtones of the alien races (the Asian Trade Federation guys were really terrible), storylines involving embargoes or tax problems, the entire concept of midi-chlorians, any sort of musical number, and the tendency to hire staggeringly-talented, award-winning actors and allowing them to mutter their lines in front of a green screen, rather than actually building a set and working with them on their performances. I’m not trying to rip on every aspect of the prequel trilogy, but I do think that, now that the new “Star Wars” movies won’t have to live or die by the opinions of just one man – the man who wrote and directed the prequels himself – there’s an exciting opportunity to look backwards, devoid of emotion or personal prejudices, and really examine what worked and what didn’t. And, hopefully, that whole process, that critical review, that drive for continuous improvement will result in a new trilogy (or more) of “Star Wars” movies that will mean as much to subsequent generations as the originals did to ours.

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