

## How famous Star Wars title sequence survived imperial assaults

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'A long time ago ...'

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At the beginning of the Star Wars movies, that famous typographic walkway has always been essential to the experience. It both echoed the silent movie era and was filled with futuristic vision. How thrillingly disorientating to read "A long time ago ..." while looking out at what was not yet possible.

The great cinematic graphic designer Saul Bass once said that he "saw the title as a way of conditioning the audience, so that when the film actually began, viewers would already have an emotional resonance with it". Star Wars is one of the great examples of what he was talking about. Not surprisingly, it reappeared in all subsequent instalments. Yet the fact that no one has managed to wreck it along the way was by no means a sure thing.

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## Star Wars - All Opening Crawls (HD)



Though you could generate those iconic titles on a home computer these days, cinematographer Richard Edlund had to develop the necessary technical equipment from scratch back in 1977. He had scoured the used equipment houses of Hollywood to put together a computer-controlled 35mm film camera on tracks. This had various uses for visual effects during the film, such as allowing multiple exposures that could combine different elements and give motion blur.

For the title he put a clear on black film of the text on a lightbox and moved the camera over it on a tilt to create perspective, before adding the star field and colour later. His exacting approach to effects won consecutive Academy Awards for the first two Star Wars movies. At the time, they were the best visual effects ever seen.

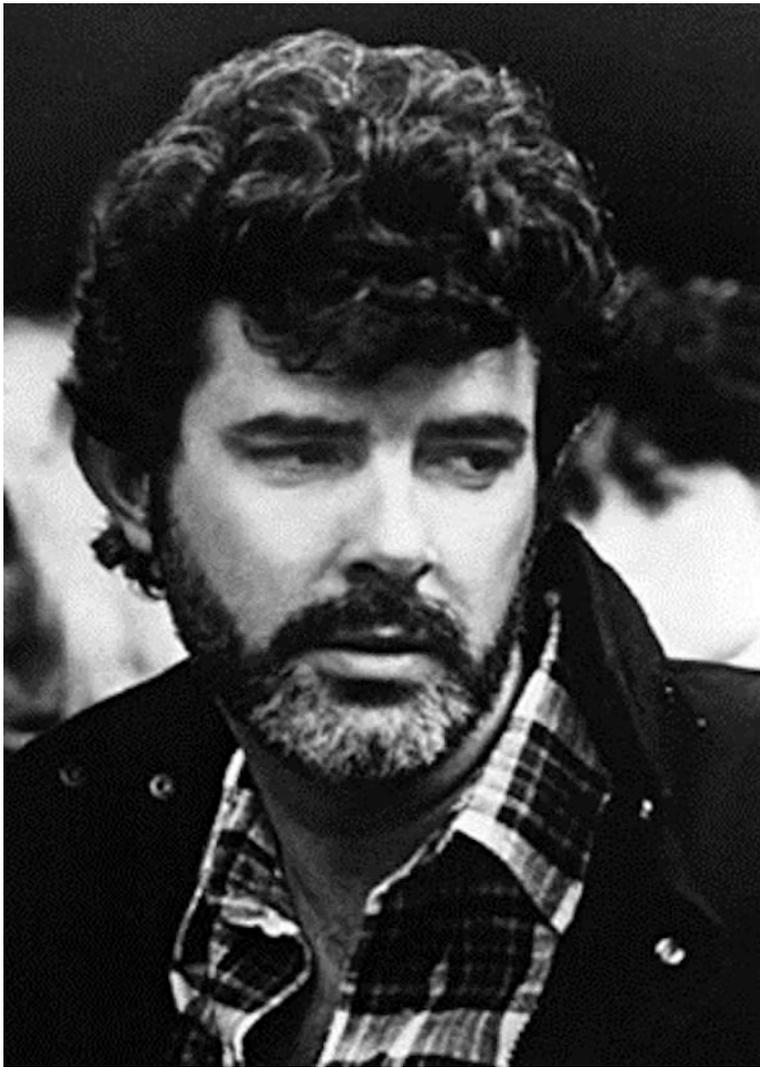


Star Wars queue in London's Leicester Square in 1977. PA Archive

## The guild strikes back

Star Wars creator George Lucas had to fight to maintain his vision of going straight into the story through the use of his rolling text sequence. He thought that opening credits were nothing to do with making a movie, seeing them as an example of the old-school posturing that he and his new Hollywood contemporaries had spurned. In this he could well have been inspired by George Méliès' A Trip to the Moon (1902), which is regarded as the first sci-fi film and avoided using any credits because the visual narrative was so strong.

Lucas did end up having to put the studio and Lucasfilm idents at the start of the reel, but he put his own directing and producing credits at the end of the film. He argued that credits would destroy the impact of the opening, and put them at the end of the film instead.



Yester-Lucas. Wikimedia, CC BY-SA

Lucas did the same thing for Empire Strikes Back in 1980, which was directed not by himself but by Irving Kershner. This time the Directors Guild of America objected, even though Kershner didn't mind. The guild wanted the movie withdrawn from theatres, the opening re-titled with Kershner's directing credit at a cost of US\$500,000 (£1.4m today), and that Lucas pay a \$25,000 fine.

Lucas was incensed and took the guild to court. When it countersued, he decided to pay the fine to avoid entangling Kershner in the dispute. It was a pyrrhic victory for the guild, however. Lucas resigned from both the writers' and directors' guilds and all future Star Wars opening titles were untouched and consistent with the original.

## Castle hassle

Soft vignette fade-in to 2015 – to quote the classic Star Wars style – and my sons were anxious as we counted down to the launch of *The Force Awakens*. This was no sequel or franchise in their eyes, but part of a treasured legend. And in keeping with their dad's line of work, they weren't so worried about bad plot twists or clunky new characters or contrived visual effects. Their main concern was whether with Disney, now at the helm of the Star Wars universe, would wreck the atmosphere at the beginning with its trademark fairy-tale castle and looping script.

True, Disney has displayed a level of branding versatility in recent years that gave us reason to be optimistic. Recent releases like [Frankenweenie \(2012\)](#), [Maleficent \(2013\)](#), [Planes \(2013\)](#) and [Into the Woods \(2014\)](#) all included bespoke versions of the ident that fitted the mood of the movie. But it could easily come a cropper with Star Wars. If they were using the Death Star to create an arc of light behind the castle or something, we could be in trouble.



But the Force Awakens begins with the trademark scrolling text and John Williams score. Once again, the producer and director credits were not at the start. And I'm pleased to say that Disney hasn't overcooked its arrival in the Star Wars universe. Its distribution credit is miniscule and left to the end list of credits. Only the Lucasfilms logo sits between the rating certificate and the Star Wars opening ident, revealed by a gentle passing beam of light.

The force of the fan base has triumphed.