

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JAR JAR BINKS

He could've gone down in movie history as more than just another character in the Star Wars saga, because he really was a pioneer in digital filmmaking. In the end, Jar Jar did become a cultural phenomenon, though for all the wrong reasons. Here's his fascinating—and tragic—story.

WE WAITED FOR *THIS!*

May 19, 1999, was a pop culture milestone: *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, the first *Star Wars* movie in 16 years, opened in the United States. It set a single-day box-office record, bringing in \$28 million. More than two million people took the day off of work to see it. And what did those fans get after all of the hype? A movie that drew mixed reviews at best.

And as the summer rolled on, one name kept popping up in news reports and on Internet message boards: Jar Jar Binks. While there was some disagreement as to whether the rest of the film worked, the alien sidekick character was almost universally reviled. A typical review came from the *Village Voice*: “Jar Jar sucks the oxygen out of every scene he’s in.” So what went wrong?

SUPPORTING CAST

While outlining *The Phantom Menace* in the mid-1990s, *Star Wars* creator George Lucas wanted a character that served the same purpose as R2-D2 and C-3PO had in the original trilogy—someone who had no special abilities but could comment on the proceedings, provide comic relief, and even help out in the end.

So he created Jar Jar Binks, member a race of amphibian-like creatures called Gungans who live on the planet Naboo. In the movie, we learn that Jar Jar’s people banished him from their underwater city because he’s clumsy. While living on the surface, Jar Jar meets two Jedi knights who are on a mission to warn the planet’s human population of an imminent invasion. Jar Jar joins forces with the good guys, gets in all sorts of trouble, makes a lot

of wisecracks, provides plot exposition for younger viewers, and ends up an unwitting hero in the final battle.

Lucas had another goal for Jar Jar: to make him the first 100 percent computer-generated character who interacts with live actors. So Jar Jar couldn't be a puppet (like Yoda) or a man in a suit (like Chewbacca). Instead, his exaggerated movements, floppy ears, and long snout were created by Industrial Light & Magic. Helping bring the character to life was a dancer named Ahmed Best, who provided Jar Jar's voice and big, loping movements. "I wore what's called a motion capture suit, which is like a tight scuba suit with a bunch of light sensors on it," he recalled. "They had infrared cameras that caught the light-sensor data and input that into a computer." Then digital animators "painted" Binks over the infrared images of Best. The process took nearly two years and resulted in the first completely digitized principle character in movie history. But that wasn't what people were talking about.

A STAR IS TORN

The first thing that annoyed viewers was Jar Jar's squeaky voice and fractured grammar: "Mesa day startin' pretty okee-day with a brisky morning munchy, then BOOM! Gettin' very scared and grabbin' that Jedi and POW! Mesa here!"

People didn't merely dislike Jar Jar Binks—they *hated* him. Several organizations sprang up calling for the alien's head, such as the "Society for the Extermination of Jar Jar Binks" and "Jar Jar Binks Must Die!"—which was also the title of a song by the rap group Damn Nation. Sample lyrics: "He's got big freakin' ears, and eyes like a bug / Every time I eat a taco I see his ugly mug." (People were also upset by the rampant use of the character in TV commercials.) One *Star Wars* fan, Mike Nichols, was so disappointed by *Episode I* that he recut the film on his home computer—removing most of Jar Jar's scenes and dialogue—and released it online as *The Phantom Edit*...to rave reviews.

And then there were the accusations of racism. To some critics, Jar Jar's dialect, combined with his long "dreadlocks-style" ears, were reminiscent of drugged-out Jamaicans. To Brent Staples of the *New York Times*, "Jar Jar lopes along in a combination shuffle and pimp walk. Binks is by far the stupidest person in the film.

Who came up with the name "Jar Jar"? George Lucas's son, Jett.

His simple-minded devotion to his (white) Jedi masters has reminded people of Hollywood's most offensive racial stereotypes."

THE FILMMAKERS STRIKE BACK

Suddenly, instead of celebrating the achievement of the first digital character, Lucas was defending him. He wasn't caught completely off guard, though—many older filmgoers didn't like the "cute" Ewoks from 1983's *Return of the Jedi*, either. His standard defense: "The movies are for children but the older fans don't want to admit that. They want the films to be tough like *The Terminator*." Lucas maintained that he didn't model the alien after African Americans or Jamaicans. Jar Jar, he said, was a combination of Charlie Chaplin, Jimmy Stewart, and Danny Kaye. And his exaggerated walk wasn't a "pimp walk," it was an effect of his amphibious nature—Jar Jar walks as if he's swimming. Concerning the alien's voice, Lucas charged that those critiques were made by people "who've obviously never met a Jamaican, because it's definitely not Jamaican and if you were to say those lines in Jamaican they wouldn't be anything like that." Best, an African American, also denied the voicework was racist, explaining that he and the filmmakers wanted it to sound "fun."

DEMOTED

Jar Jar's role was greatly reduced in 2002's *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. He appears only in a few scenes, though one is crucial to the greater story arc: He's been appointed representative of Naboo, and is unwittingly duped into making a motion in the Galactic Senate that will grant absolute power to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. Without realizing it, Jar Jar is instrumental in turning Palpatine into the evil emperor, the saga's true villain.

In *Episode III*, Jar Jar makes only one cameo appearance. Though Lucas maintains he'd always planned to cut back on the part, movie insiders insist that it was actually done in response to the massively negative reaction.

Adding insult to injury, all of the technical accolades Lucas was expecting for Jar Jar never happened. Instead, they were bestowed upon the similarly rendered character of Gollum in 2002's *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Gollum's creators, not Jar Jar's, won the Academy Award. (Jar Jar supporters are quick to point out that

Percent of Americans who were farmers in 1801: 95%. In 2001: 2%.

among all of the problems people have with him, most viewers take his presence on the screen for granted, at least proving the filmmakers got that part right.)

ATTACK OF THE CLOWNS

Today, Jar Jar is still disliked, having been named in several polls “the most annoying character in movie history.” But he does have his supporters. In 2009 filmmaker and Huffington Post columnist Bryan Young wrote a passionate defense of the character:

I find Jar Jar just as obnoxious as you guys do. But that doesn't mean I don't like him and that he doesn't serve a specific and brilliant purpose to the Star Wars saga. Looking to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, we see Lancelot the Clown featuring prominently in the early act of the play, providing useful commentary, lessons, and above all, laughs—and then largely disappearing later in the body of the work. Jar Jar works the same way. His role in the second episode was particularly poignant and explored how even the most well-meaning person can, by no fault of anything but his intention to do the right thing, be manipulated into perpetrating a great evil.

Here's another view: In 2009 *New Yorker* columnist Amy Davidson used Jar Jar in a political commentary. Contrary to the popular opinion that former President George W. Bush was the Darth Vader to Vice President Dick Cheney's Emperor, she wrote, Bush was more akin to “Jar Jar Binks, who, after a buffoonish youth, improbably rises to a prominent political position and obliviously fronts for the soon-to-be emperor in getting the *Star Wars* equivalent of the PATRIOT Act passed.”

A JARRING FUTURE

So Jar Jar Binks has become as well known as any other *Star Wars* character. But will audiences ever warm up to him? For many older viewers, scorn for Jar Jar runs deep. If there is any hope for the much-maligned alien, it's with children, who can now view the entire saga from beginning to end without all of the pop culture hullabaloo that surrounded it. They can just enjoy the story for what it is: a space fantasy full of corny dialogue, neat ships, cool battles, bizarre planets, and strange creatures. And to George Lucas—who modeled *Star Wars* after the 1950s *Flash Gordon* serials he enjoyed from his own childhood—that's all he was going for in the first place.

Donald Duck's parents are named Hortense and Quackmore.