

Picking a winner from the new Star Wars batch!

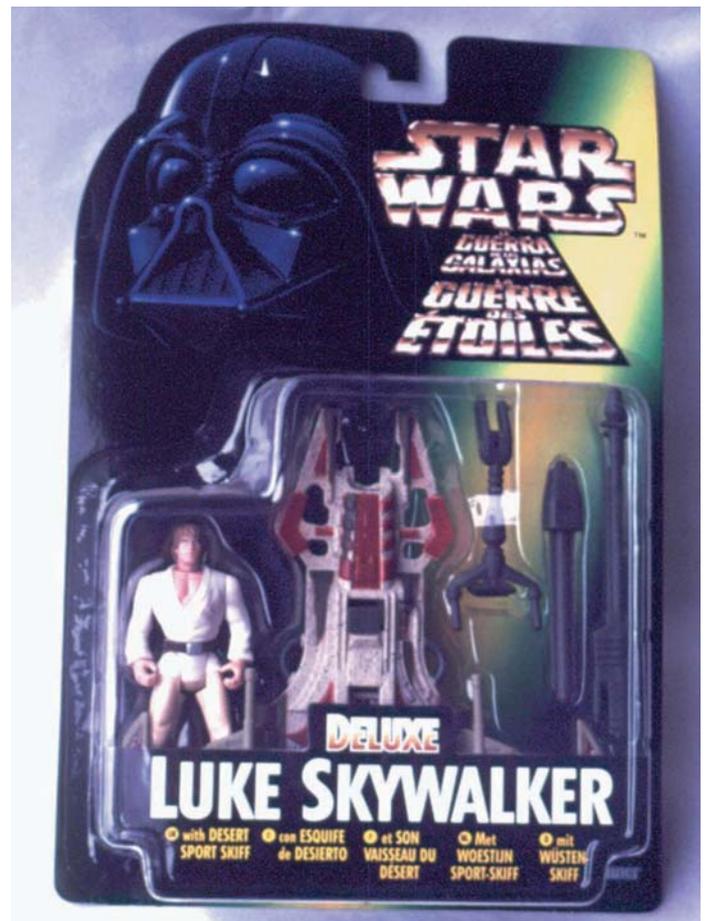
By Adrian Greenwood

George Lucas will be adding billions to his already large fortune with the huge success of the first of the *Star Wars* prequels this summer. A \$1 billion return would be a conservative estimate from the cinema and video sales. On its first day in the US the film grossed over \$100 million. But the *Star Wars* phenomenon was always more bankable in the toy shop than on the big screen. From the original merchandising, at least \$4 billion of sales were realised. The sheer range, from *Star Wars* toothpaste to wristwatches, exploited every possible facet of life and provided a *Star Wars* licensed product to accompany virtually every human activity. In turn a whole *Star Wars* collecting market was spawned, with some toys fetching over £1000 just twenty years after their first appearance on the shelves.

With such sums at stake the capacity for merchandising for the new film is increased dramatically by this ready-made army of *Star Wars* collectors anxious to snap up every related product on the market. The question for the collector looking for a return on his investment is what from the new batch will prove to be the most prized item for the *Star Wars* collector two decades hence. The original batch of *Star Wars* toys was a last minute affair. The overwhelming success of the film came as much as a surprise to toy manufacturers as to the film establishment, and the eighteen month lead time for toy development left most companies unable to exploit the initial cinema release. The most widespread of the original toys, the 3.75" figures produced by Kenner in the US, were barely ready for the Christmas season following the film's release. So Kenner offered kids a promise of the first four action figures if they bought a cardboard display stand for \$10. The ploy worked and a further 115 figures rolled out of the factories. The urge amongst manufacturers to jump on the *Star Wars* bandwagon resulted in poorly thought through prototypes hurriedly put into production, only to be discontinued later in favour of simpler models. Tiny adjustments like the change from an extending to a fixed light sabre on the Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, and Obi-Wan Kenobi figures now results in a price in the hundreds for the original extending sabre version against £10 for a later fixed sabre model.

This time the manufacturers have had years to prepare. The lessons of the early experimental models have been known for twenty years. Few of those valuable rarities from the first film will spin off from the new film. The merchandising is so much more professional that anomalies set to become the expensive collectables of the future may be virtually non-existent. But even standard products, produced in their ten of thousands today can command three figure sums. A really mint condition toy Millennium falcon issued after the first film might fetch £120 in a specialist shop, although you can pick them up for around £50 if you shop around. Values drop substantially for each subsequent issue amongst the hard core of collectors. So an *Empire Strikes Back* falcon would fetch half that and a *Return of the Jedi* falcon, even less. Before you rush up to the attic, these prices are reserved for examples, boxed and in virtually untouched condition. And how many of those still survive? Hence their rarity and hence the price. For every *Star Wars* toy in its original packaging, and untouched by human hand, there are a thousand decrepit examples with too many battle scars. These are little more than car boot sale stock.

In this market rarity is the key determinant of value. Rarity through exceptional condition, rarity through a short product run, or rarity



Luke Skywalker. Another figure produced in tandem with the re-released films. Boxed. £8.

through initial unpopularity. Film merchandising was still in its infancy when *Star Wars* erupted on to the big screen, and the toy manufacturers took a scattergun approach to marketing. The aim was to create as many *Star Wars* related toys as physically possible, as cheaply as possible and then concentrate on the best sellers. As the market in *Star Wars* matured in the 1980s, high price special editions specifically aimed at collectors, such as commemorative gold coins appeared. The original kids audience had grown into twenty-somethings with high disposable incomes of their own and the merchandising evolved to exploit their new spending power. The prices may have been hiked but quality did not necessarily follow suit. A good many Taiwanese imports started up with a bit of silver plate were flogged off at exorbitant prices through companies who specialise in overpriced nick-nacks advertised in tabloid colour supplements. The original audience for *Star Wars* are in their thirties now, and are about to be inundated with special 'collectors items of the future'.



Left. Nien Nunb £7. Right. Bossk £6.



Star Wars flight controller issued alongside the re-released films in 1995. £15.



Close up of Darth Vader figure.



Wampa £8.



Left. Hammerhead £9. Right. Emperor's royal guard.



Left. Zuckuss £10. Right. Rebel Commando £10.



Close up of Lando Calrissian figure.



Bib Fortuna £7.50.



Close up of Ewok figure.



Left. R2D2 £7. Right. Dengar. £8.



The Rancor. A nasty piece of work owned by Jabba the Hutt for disposing of unwanted guests. £28.



Princess Leia. One of a new set of figures issued with the re-released versions of the original three films. £6.



Left. 2-1B £6. Right. Snaggletooth £7.

But anything pitched as a collector's item of the future rarely fulfils the marketing hype. Initial prices are high and every single one will be carefully installed in a cabinet and cared for. The wily collector looking for a good return should go for the ephemeral *Star Wars* items. Edible items are rarely preserved, and anything with a tie-in with the film qualifies as a collectable. You'll never make a fortune with these items but you might be able to look forward to adequate returns. *Empire Strikes Back* Smarties might only be worth £2 a tube today, but they were about 15p when they first came out. That's a 1333% increase in eighteen years, which beats the price increases in Georgian furniture and Old Masters! You needed to buy a whole box to maximize the potential investment. Even items like the *Star Wars* wrappers for Lyons Maid iced lollies have a value to the collector. Food collectables have proved the best investments as the collectables market has exploded. Beatles liquorice records (which could in theory be played on a turntable) fetch £300 plus today. The Fab Four may be the grandees of modern collecting, but *Star Wars* is catching up fast. If you are looking

to stock up on *Star Wars* from a purely mercenary perspective, the supermarket will be your best hunting ground.

The market for *Star Wars* collectables in the UK is but a reflection of the collecting fever which the films caused on the other side of the Atlantic. And whilst the rest of the world collects the American *Star Wars* products the Yanks are most keen on the foreign variants that never appeared in their own native land. With the potential of the Internet already harnessed by English *Star Wars* collectables dealers to advertise English products to the Americans, there is already an export trade in the toys. This most bizarre of collecting fields already displays all the hallmarks of a mature collectors' market. The feeding frenzy that meets the new film's merchandising will only encourage it further. But if you want to put a few pieces away for the future avoid the glossy items aimed at collectors. You are more likely to see a profit on a MacDonald's paper drinks cup emblazoned with a *Star Wars* logo than with an overpriced and overlapped special edition collectable.

Photographs courtesy of Calver's Collectables, High Street, Ruislip.