

# GOING UNDERGROUND

BACK IN 2005, GEORGE LUCAS ANNOUNCED STAR WARS' FIRST LIVE-ACTION TV SERIES. BUT DESPITE SEVEN YEARS OF WORK, *STAR WARS: UNDERWORLD* NEVER MATERIALISED. MATTHEW GRAHAM, ONE OF ITS WRITERS, TALKS ABOUT HIS TIME WORKING ON THE SERIES WE NEVER GOT TO SEE

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**F**OR MATTHEW GRAHAM, the phone call he'd dreamed of since he was a nine-year-old *Star Wars* fan arrived in the incongruous setting of a field outside Frome. It was from his agent.

"Are you sitting down?"

"No," Graham replied. "I'm in a field."

"Just sit down in the grass then," said the voice, "because I'm about to tell you that you're being considered for *Star Wars*!"

"It's that thing you dream of, isn't it?"

Graham enthuses now, recalling that career-quake call. "It's the ultimate daydream!"

The *Star Wars* that Graham – then flying high on the success of *Life On Mars*, the genre-splicing series he'd co-created with Tony Jordan and Ashley Pharoah – was being invited onto was a super-hush-hush TV project that Lucas had announced, to ear-splitting applause, two years previously at Celebration III. Rick McCallum, Lucas's loyal deputy at the time, would later confirm that the series was to be called *Star Wars: Underworld* and would be like "*Empire* on steroids".

Where the *Star Wars* movies had told simple stories of clean-cut heroes fighting the good fight, *Underworld* would instead, it was intimated, echo the dark, morally ambiguous worlds of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. It would have been *Star Wars*' first live-action TV series and, as it was planned, one of the most expensive shows – if not the most expensive show – ever seen on the small screen. For seven years, Lucas and McCallum teased and titillated us with nuggets of news: It would be set in the 19 years between *Revenge Of The Sith* and *A New Hope*; it was being budgeted at



around \$5 million an episode; it would in no way feature heritage characters; it would feature heritage characters; it was "*Deadwood* in space"... And so on. Then, on 30 October 2012, Disney bought Lucasfilm for an eye-watering \$4.05 billion and amid the media noise of the sequel

trilogy, *Underworld* was quietly forgotten about. When *Star Wars*' first live-action TV show finally dropped in 2019, it wouldn't be *Underworld*, though much of what we've seen in Jon Favreau's bounty hunter show owes a debt to that lost series.

"I don't think we were a million miles away from *The Mandalorian*," Matthew Graham tells *SFX*. "It was pretty dark: we had rape, we had drug-taking and drug abuse, we had beheadings. It was definitely not your grandfather's *Star Wars* – it wasn't cert U."

Let's rewind back to 2007, to the time that *Underworld* entered Matthew Graham's life. It was a few weeks after that Somerset field phone call that Graham found himself on a train to London to hook up with Lucasfilm's Rick McCallum for a getting-to-know-you power lunch.

Concept art of Coruscant created for the 1313 game.

"I really liked him," the writer says of the prequel trilogy's charismatic producer. "He's a tremendous larger-than-life character, a real raconteur, at the time a real chain-smoking, cheeseburger-munching, wine-at-lunchtime bon viveur."

In many ways, the complete opposite of his boss, then. When Graham finally sat down, a few months later, with the notoriously shy George Lucas it was in a "really downmarket"



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Test footage by Stargate Studios shows what could have been.





## UNLUCKY FOR SOME

**Star Wars: 1313, the Boba Fett videogame that never was**

Boba Fett spoke just four lines of dialogue in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, before being dumped in the Sarlacc on Tatooine. A lack of significant screentime doesn't have to be a barrier to stardom, however, which is why fans have always yearned for the return of the coolest bounty hunter in the known galaxy.

Their wish finally came true in *The Mandalorian*, the second season of which confirmed that the son of Jango had escaped the torture of being slowly digested over 1,000 years.

But before George Lucas sold up to Disney, Fett would reportedly have headed up a videogame set in the seedy criminal underbelly of Coruscant.

*Star Wars: 1313* - the number refers to the city planet's most infamous level

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London hotel that Lucasfilm had hired to interview a host of writers that McCallum had been sourcing from around the country. As Graham was waiting anxiously by the lift, a writer he recognised stepped out, ashen-faced. "I was like, 'Oh fucking hell, maybe this is going to be really scary!'" he laughs.

Blessedly, it wasn't. Graham had just been reading JW Rinzler's definitive coffee table tome *The Making Of Star Wars* and, when he

sat down in front of Lucas, launched straight into a question about greenscreen versus back projection. As he was nattering away, Graham glanced over Lucas's shoulder and saw McCallum giving an encouraging thumbs up gesture. It was working.

Half an hour later, as Graham left the room McCallum told him, "You did really well, George obviously felt very comfortable with you," admitting that some of the other writers →







“It was about finding a path between making it Star Wars but not just fanboy service”

Chibnall, and in the other, the less mythologically in-thrall Aussie scribes. “They didn’t want to come up with the names for anything,” Graham laughs. “I remember Tony McNamara having a Corellian bar, and literally in the script it said they were drinking cappuccinos and eating lasagne! I got really upset about this and Tony said, ‘Well, I don’t fucking know what they’re eating – fucking boo-boo juice!’”

“But George was absolutely great,” Graham continues. He said, ‘I know what you’re saying. Say lasagne, that’s fine, we know what you mean – I’ll come up with a word for it later.’ What was very interesting though was the Australian writers took it to places that were non-fanboy and therefore tended to be more dramatically interesting. We realised it was about finding a path between making it *Star Wars* but not making it just fanboy service, because it had to stand on its own as a real piece of drama.”

**A MEATY ROLE**

Early whispers indicated that *Underworld* was going to resist using already established *Star Wars* characters, but, as Graham notes, “George has very, very strong opinions that he will not budge on... until he budes on them.” Graham won’t be drawn on which classic characters Lucas was planning on weaving into the series, but internet scuttlebutt hints that



Real-time CG backgrounds before *The Mandalorian*.



Boba Fett was in line for a meaty role, and that Darth Vader was going to lend his dark charisma to the show after an uprising on Coruscant. There was even talk that the series would have explored Han Solo’s origins – a story eventually told, of course, in Ron Howard’s *Solo*.

While Lucas was working with Graham and co on the scripts, he was also developing the show’s eye-wowing visuals. Graham vividly recalls the day when Industrial Light & Magic’s John Knoll screened the writing team the tests that his people were doing, creating the digital sets for George’s dream project. “Everything looked way more photorealistic than the

**CURIOUS GEORGE**

**Matthew Graham on his former boss**

“I’ll happily go on the record and say George is a really nice man,” says Matthew Graham about his one-time boss. “But he likes things done his own way. He is very stubborn, and if he doesn’t agree that something shouldn’t be like that, and he disagrees with you, you could end up in a very deep war of attrition to persuade him!”

“But the genius of George is that as a producer he operates 10 years ahead of everyone else. People criticise those prequels, but George really wanted to break new ground; he wanted to go to places and do things that we’d never done before, and that’s what he was trying to do. He didn’t just want to give you what you’d seen, he wanted to give you things you’d *not* seen. We could argue about how successful he was about that, but what I love about George is that he’s always prepared to take risks and go off into those places.”



The Grim Reaper pops in for a photobomb.



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