

# My Family, My Movie

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The Family Movie Act of 2005, signed by President George W. Bush on Wednesday, was aimed at folks who use software to cut out four-letter words, nudity and graphic violence from movies they rent or buy for home viewing.

But the law may also loosen Hollywood's tight control over its products. It passes some of the control over how movies are edited to you and, hypothetically, a mini-industry of movie remix artists.

U.S. copyright law makes it illegal to sell edited versions of Hollywood films. But the Family Movie Act says if you use software to "mak[e] imperceptible changes to...limited portions of audio or video content of a motion picture...from an authorized copy of the motion picture," you're OK. Just don't create a "fixed copy of the altered version."

The law came about in part due to the efforts of William Aho and his tiny Salt Lake City software company called ClearPlay. For years, Aho had scratched his head and wondered why Hollywood refused to release on DVD versions of its most popular movies that would be slightly altered to appeal more to squeamish parents. Sensing an opportunity, he founded ClearPlay (see "Monster In A Box").

Aho's software, when installed onto a DVD player, makes the player mute or skip ahead when something objectionable happens in a movie. (The software isn't smart enough to recognize curse words or violence; Aho employs teams of editors who watch movies, find the objectionable bits and program a movie-specific filter to excise the bad stuff frame by frame.) Aho successfully lobbied to create the Family Movie Act after billionaire director Steven Spielberg, Robert Redford, Steven Soderbergh, 13 other famed Hollywood directors and eight large studios sued ClearPlay in U.S. District Court in Denver, claiming its software violated copyright laws. The new law is a direct blow to them.

But could it also seed a new industry? Annual DVD sales are around \$16 billion. It's easy to envision a side business in DVD filters. Since it's now OK for ClearPlay to create filters that make Spider-Man 2--produced by Sony (nyse: SNE - news - people)--less violent, it's also legal for bowdlerizers to create filters that would serve other purposes. Somebody, for example, needs to create a filter that would excise all the stupidity about Gaelic poetry in Million Dollar Baby, from Time Warner's (nyse: TWX - news - people ) Warner Bros. studio. Another hot-selling filter would be one that mutes out all the ruinous voice-over in Wonder Boys.

There's a proven market for these kinds of edits; witness what happened to George Lucas' Star Wars: Episode I--The Phantom Menace. In 2001, an alternative version of Lucas' unloved sequel, called Episode 1.1--The Phantom Edit, created a sensation among fans of the 1970s original. Created by a fan, the edited version cut 20 minutes from the film. The excisions all but deleted a dopey character (Jar Jar Binks) and got rid of several other annoyances, like Anakin Skywalker's shouts of "Yahoo!" and "Whoopee!" during the movie's pod-racing sequence.

Lucas went from amused to horrified. And the edit-happy fan--no doubt worried about getting sued--later apologized. If the Family Movie Act had been in force then, he could have been rolling in dough instead.

Aho admits the law "doesn't discriminate" about what kind of filters you would create. "As long as it was purely subtractive, the law supports it," he says. He believes the market for family-type filters is around \$100 million, "but I don't think there's much of a market for filters [that aren't] family-friendly."

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