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District 9 director Neill Blomkamp



By Tasha Robinson August 12, 2009

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First-time director Neill Blomkamp acknowledges that he's a lucky guy: After a few years as a visual-effects artist, and a director working in commercials and music videos, he caught the eye of *Lord Of The Rings* director Peter Jackson, who offered him the directorial debut of a lifetime: the big-screen, big-budget adaptation of *Halo*. When that project fell through, Jackson offered to fund a more personal debut instead, in the form of Blomkamp's first feature, *District 9*. The film hits theaters this Friday, following a clever ad campaign that teased potential viewers with iconic but unrevealing poster images, and initial trailers comprised largely of footage that doesn't appear in the film.

The story, in which insectoid aliens become stranded on Earth and wind up as third-class citizens sealed in a decaying slum in Blomkamp's native Johannesburg, South Africa, mimics the apartheid

Blomkamp grew up with, but expands into a remarkably assured, personal story about a bureaucratic functionary (first-time actor Sharlto Copley) trying to cope with a plan for resettlement of the aliens in a new camp. With respect for the secrecy of the ad campaign—and the way the story unfolds far more effectively for those who don't know anything about it going in—*The A.V. Club* recently sat down with Blomkamp for a mostly spoiler-free discussion of how the film developed, why his ambitious first project was such a breeze, and why he didn't want it to be “a Hollywood spoon-feeding festival.” A few spoilery questions about the film's backstory and seeming plot holes appear at the very end.

The A.V. Club: The ad campaign for *District 9* has been unusually secretive in terms of not giving away the plot or the real tone of the movie. Were you involved in that choice?

Neill Blomkamp: Yeah. I mean, the whole marketing campaign is very much Sony's creative baby, but the one thing I kept asking was that we don't give everything away. Marc Weinstock and the guys at Sony have done an awesome job, so I'm super-happy with it. But I do think that it's always okay to show too little. People will still be interested. So why show too much?

AVC: How did you initially get involved with Peter Jackson? Was that through the *Halo* project?

NB: Yeah. In 2006, I wanted to really get into feature films, and I felt like I was ready to start doing films—I was doing commercials before that. And my agent sent all of my stuff to Mary Parent, who was at Universal, putting together *Halo*. Peter was already the producer—Guillermo del Toro was going to do it, and then he went to go do *Hellboy II*. So they needed a director, and Peter liked my stuff, and I flew down to New Zealand to meet him. After I met him, he signed off on me, and we started making *Halo*.

AVC: What happened with that project?

NB: We spent four or five months working on it, and I was developing the story and the script, and designing unbelievable amounts of everything in the movie, because there's such a volume of stuff to do with Weta Workshop. And then Fox and Universal were fighting—I mean, a lot of this happened behind closed doors, but basically, the politics between Fox and Universal crashed the movie. Fox wanted more control of the film, I think, and Universal was in the driver's seat. And they were just going at one another, and finally the whole thing fractured.

AVC: By the time that happened, did you already know you wanted to expand your short “*Alive In Joburg*” into a feature?

NB: When I did the short film, it never even occurred to me that it could be a feature. The short was just a piece of experimentation, just creative messing around, really. And then just before *Halo* came up, when I got the agent and I felt like I wanted to get into films, then I thought, “Oh, actually, this would be a good film. I could make a film out of this.” Then I got hired for *Halo* and I forgot about it. And then *Halo* collapsed, and Peter and Fran [Walsh, Jackson's wife and writing-producing partner] said, “We're really sorry this has happened, and we can help you get another film. We can help you get it green-lit, and it can be independently financed, and it can be much more like your baby than *Halo* would have been. You can make it your own.” It happened so quickly, it was like a day or two, literally, between the one collapsing and then them saying that.

AVC: Did anything you developed or were thinking about for *Halo*—ideas, themes, or visuals—end up going into *District 9*?

NB: No. I think not at all. I mean, maybe on a subconscious level, but consciously, not at all. And I actively wanted to do that, because I felt that *District 9* is a very different kind of film. In *Halo*, I was most interested in the human society—humans 500 years from now, with different planets, and hardware, and the U.S. involvement, and how the Marines have been established in this colonial force, and the industrial military complex that gave birth to Master Chief. And *District 9* needed to be completely different. I decided it wasn't going to be anything like *Halo*. I mean, the setting's South Africa, and the focus is the aliens, and it's set in the present. It's meant to be different.

AVC: What was it like working with Peter Jackson? Did he have any involvement in this film besides saying, “Go do it,” and putting money into it?

NB: I think if I had to summarize the biggest effect he's had on the movie, it's the fact that it exists at all. There's no way I could have gotten this film made as what I wanted to make, without his

involvement. So it's much more than just saying, "Go and do what you want." It's "Can I put a guy in the movie who's never acted before, but I think he can carry the lead role?" There's no way that would have happened if he wasn't producing it. So he said "Yes." And then, "Can they keep South African accents? And they're thick accents." "Yes." So that is probably the single biggest thing, is just the fact that he allowed it to happen. And then on a day-to-day basis, when we were writing the script, Terri and I would have meetings with him and Fran, and Philippa [Boyens, *Lord Of The Rings* co-writer], honing the script, and they were giving us input, and helping us really shape that. And then when I was editing the film, he was really instrumental. I'd get him into the editing bay, or he'd drop in and watch the cut if he hadn't seen it for a while, and tell me where he was confused, and how I could streamline it, or where things could be made more clear. A lot of it was to do with clarity and refining things. So I feel now, at the end of the process, almost more grateful, I think, than actually in the beginning. It's like, now I really realize how lucky I've been as a first-time filmmaker. Because it could be a completely different scenario, you could do some studio film that could just trounce you, and not an ounce of yourself is on the screen. So I'm pretty fortunate, I think.



AVC: You were born in Johannesburg, and left for Canada at some point in your life. How old were you then?

NB: I was almost 18. So I left in 1997.

AVC: What about Johannesburg made you want to use it as a setting for this film? What did it bring to the story?

NB: In my opinion, the film doesn't exist without Joburg. It's not like I had a story, and then I was trying to pick a city. It's totally the other way around. It's that when I got to Canada, in my 20s, I started to get more and more and more interested in Johannesburg, which must have been because I grew up there, but separate to that, it became this insane sociopolitical interest of mine. I actually think Johannesburg represents the future. My version of what I think the world is going to become looks like Johannesburg. Every time I'm there, it feels like I'm in the future, so I was just very, very interested in the city. And then when "Alive In Joburg" happened, I thought, "What about if I just put science fiction into this? I'd love to see what that is." So the whole film grew out of a love-hate relationship with Johannesburg, really. And then once I put the science fiction in there, which happened to be aliens arriving to Earth, which is a totally clichéd, normal piece of sci-fi that's been around for a hundred years, all of these other much more serious topics that I was aware of consciously and subconsciously started to work their way into the film. So all the segregation and racism and everything else just kind of became evident, because you can't get around that if you set a film there.

AVC: Why did you leave Johannesburg for Canada?

NB: Well, my family immigrated there. And I was at the point where I would have gone to university or art college or something, probably in the U.S., so I think I would have left anyway. But it just so happened that my family immigrated to Vancouver, and I've got a younger brother and sisters, and South Africa was pretty dodgy in the late '90s, so—actually, it's dodgy now. It'll just be continuously dodgy, but we moved so that they could not be in a state of violence all the time.

AVC: What was it like shooting there?

NB: It was really grueling, but that was because the environment we were in was so abrasive. The actual area we were in, the people were very impoverished, but they're very warm. That often happens in Johannesburg—people are super-warm, even though it's a high-crime area. So when we got to the set, I was okay, but the thing that was psychologically having a go at me was that the big crime in Joburg is hijacking. Carjacking is the number-one thing. And this convoy of us going into this part of Soweto called Chiawelo was like an hour's drive, each way, every single day... You don't get a convoy of vehicles like that coming into impoverished areas. It just doesn't happen, right? We were this moving target the whole time. And my driver one night dropped me off at my hotel, and after he left, he got hijacked. And they had a 9mm to his head, and they tried to take his girlfriend, and the car did get taken, so he had another rental car the next day. So my fear was the

transport, not our location. Though Chiawelo, that area—like I said, the people are warm, but the environment is so caustic and unbelievably disgusting to be in. The crew were realizing that people live like this *every day*, while we were battling just to be there for two months. Every single thing is difficult. There's broken glass everywhere, there's rusted barbed wire everywhere, the level of pollution is insane. And then in that environment, you're trying to be creative as well. But of course, that gave birth to the creativity, so it kind of goes both ways.

AVC: And you say that's the future of the world? Why?

NB: Well, in my opinion, you have out-of-control population growth, and you have fewer and fewer—we are heading for the biggest train wreck our civilization has ever come across ever. Ever. And I think that within 40 or 50 years, we'll be there. If your population curve is on an exponential growth, and the resources are on an exponential decline, what happens first is you get increases in wealth discrepancy, which means that you get rich pockets of gated communities with security guards outside them, and you get more and more poverty outside that area. And the resources go down, and people start having resource wars over water and food and agriculture and arable land, and then you have Joburg in 2050. And you can see signs of it everywhere. It's just overpopulation and lack of resources. We just aren't in control of our destiny.

AVC: So *District 9* is a warning about a lot more than apartheid.

NB: Yeah, but again it's subconscious, it's not like I'm consciously trying to do any of that. It's my interest in Johannesburg made me set it there.

AVC: You seem to have a dim view of humanity. The people in *District 9* are almost exclusively violent, selfish, barbaric, and consciously sadistic. Is there hope for the species?

NB: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think that what's going to happen is that you're going to have something like Ray Kurzweil's singularity happen within 50 or 60 years. And there will be a massive redefining of what it means to be human when we start merging with technology, but that's going to be like this phoenix that rises out of the ashes of billions of starving people. So I think it's both. On one hand, I think people are destined for something incredible if we don't wipe ourselves out, but I think we're going to wipe 90 percent of ourselves out.

AVC: Is it true that the production budget for *District 9* was only about \$30 million?

NB: Yeah.

AVC: Did you feel the constraints of that? Were you able to do everything you wanted with the film?

NB: Yeah, totally. I think that I'd say \$25 to \$45 million is kind of where I want to be. I don't really want to make movies that cost much more. If you're James Cameron or Peter Jackson, then you can. Because then they'll give you that much more, and you can do what you want. But if you're not them, then you're not going to get to do what you want if they give you \$150 million. You're going to do what they want, which I'm just not interested in.

AVC: You worked with four different production houses just to do the CGI in this film alone. How did you coordinate between them and select who did what, and make sure things came out looking cohesive?

NB: Well, Pete owns Weta, which is world-famous. And so when the film was conceived, I just assumed Weta would do all of it, because they were huge. But I hadn't factored in that James Cameron would bring *Avatar* there and basically consume all of Wellington, and New Zealand as a whole. So Weta was not able to do most of the film, but they ended up doing the mothership. So when I figured out that they would not be doing it—I have a background in visual effects, I used to be a visual-effects artist, and I'm from Vancouver, so I thought, "I'm going to develop relationships with Vancouver visual-effects companies." So I looked into the companies I wanted to use in Vancouver, and I have a track record with The Embassy, who did the exo-suit. But Image Engine, I hadn't ever worked with. And they're the ones that actually carried the entire film, because the aliens are all done by Image Engine. So I had a bunch of meetings, they flew down to New Zealand, and then we had a whole lot of discussions about how we were going to go about pulling off digital creatures, and we just kind of figured out a process and then stuck to it.

AVC: The aliens are seemingly meant to be repulsive. They're being victimized, but it's difficult to empathize with them. Did you want viewers to have that out-

but it's difficult to empathize with them. Did you want viewers to have that gut-level reaction of revulsion toward them initially?

NB: Yeah, exactly. I thought with the aliens, you'd think, "I don't want to sit next to that on the bus, they look insane, they look barbaric." And then by the end of the film, you've done a 180 on your perception of them. And that's why their design reflects that. They are gross. They are insect-like, which represents this sort of hive-structure society that they come from, and then they have a human sort of geometry to their face and eyes, so that at some point in the film, you can feel that there's a sentient creature behind those eyes. So they have to have both of those two things, which is a bit of a balancing act.

AVC: The relationship between the humans and aliens is essentially the relationship between whites and blacks in South Africa under apartheid. Were you concerned within that metaphor about making the victims of apartheid too inhuman, too much at fault for what happens to them?

NB: No. Obviously I don't want to make a film that offends people, but the whole world is so politically correct—I'm not going to not do something because it may be politically incorrect. At some point, the metaphors and allegories break down. They disappear, and you just have science fiction. So maybe that's where this film is a little dodgy. If you just stick to metaphors and allegories, then you can address them. But if at some point it becomes just an interest in sci-fi, and, for example, the aliens being this termite hive that have lost their queen, then maybe you're on shaky ground. But I like the idea that they're from this society that's lost their queen and their leadership, and they need to reestablish that.

AVC: That point about the queen never comes out explicitly in the film. There's a lot left to the imagination, and a lot the audience has to figure out on its own.

NB: Yeah, I think so. I really wanted the film to feel as real as possible, but I think if you spoon-feed people every piece of detail, it makes it less real. It just feels like a Hollywood spoon-feeding festival, as opposed to if you throw the audience into the middle of it, so they're kind of trying to figure out what's going on. I was okay with how much wasn't explained.

AVC: Is that why you use so much documentary-style handheld and "found" footage, to create that reality effect?

NB: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. That's the only reason.

AVC: Working with so many different visual styles, what was easiest, or hardest to get right, in terms of what you wanted it to look like?

NB: Well, I think the hardest—actually executing it, none of it was hard. But what is hard for me was the conceptualization of—I knew the documentary stuff would work, the news footage and the handheld camera stuff, when the actors are aware of the camera, as in a documentary crew is following them. I knew that would work. What I thought I was on shakier ground with was when it becomes all cinematic, and you're in a traditional filmmaking world. Even though it is handheld, it's still pure cinema. And I didn't know how those two would mesh together. I thought that the audience might be kind of pissed-off that we'd go from something that feels more real to cinematic and then back, hopping between them. So none of them were hard to pull off, but I was worried that the clash between them would be evident.

AVC: What was it like working with actors? Coming out of visual effects, you presumably didn't have much chance to direct performers.

NB: Well, visual effects certainly won't give you any experience with actors, but I had done enough commercials and shorts to feel at least like I had a jumping-off point. But I don't think anything can prepare you for—I mean, if you're a theater director, you're not going to be prepared for the technical side. And if you're a technical director, you're not going to be prepared for the acting side. The only thing you can do is go through the meat grinder of your first film. That's it. So if I was unprepared, it would have been within the realm of dealing with actors. But I had done enough that I was fine. I just really needed to hone it, and by the end I was much better, I think, than at the beginning. We were also dealing with lots of improv. Like Sharlto's character doesn't say one word that was written. That's all improvised. So there was a different structure to how it was done as well, it wasn't a normal movie that way.

AVC: Was it mostly cast locally?

NB: Yeah, they were all South African.

AVC: What about the crew?

NB: Well, the actual hands-on production guys were South African, but they were mostly from Cape Town, because Cape Town services a lot of European commercials. So they have—their crew was very good, but the very close-knit group around me was people like Trent Opaloch, who’s my DP. I know him from commercials and music videos, so I have a total shorthand with him. The heads of production were—some of them were New Zealanders from Pete’s camp, and then there were South Africans.

AVC: How did you get involved in visual effects in the first place?

NB: Well, when I was living in South Africa, by the time I was 10 or 11, I knew I wanted to be in movies, but I didn’t really know in what capacity, or what kind of films I wanted to be in. But I’ve always been a very, very visual person. Everything is always about artwork and visuals and imagery. So I thought I wanted to be in special effects, like model-making and prosthetic effects, and I thought that until I was about 15. And then computers started getting cheap enough and powerful enough that you could mess around with 3D graphics, so from the time I was 15 onward, I thought I’d be in visual effects and computer-generated effects. And then by the time I was 18, I was in Canada, and then I went to Vancouver Film School for, like, a year. And then I went into work as a visual-effects artist at a Canadian post-production company. And then by the time I was 20, that’s when I knew I wanted to be a director. So I probably only worked as an effects guy for about two years, and then I moved into directing low-budget music videos, and then commercials, and then high-budget commercials.

AVC: Did that background give you everything you needed in terms of directing the visual effects for a feature? Was there a learning curve?

NB: No. No no no no. I was totally prepared for the effects part of this. For sure. Because at some point it turns into—you know, the technology is being refined, but I’m not connected to the technology, and the fundamental foundation is exactly the same. You’re either talking about motion, texturing, and model-making, or lighting. And the foundations are the same, so the language is the same. And then you’re fine.

AVC: You sound so confident about every part of the experience. Was there anything about your first feature that threw you, or surprised you?

NB: Yeah. Yeah, totally. The process as a whole. The shoot was incredibly grueling. The shoot was tough as hell. What I was completely unprepared for is, if you talk about the two-and-a-half-year timeline of this film, and a shoot being a hundred times longer than you’re used to, all of the plotting where you are on that curve. So on day 37, you’re shooting a scene that occurs in the first five minutes of the film. It’s like you have to have this mental map in your head of this extremely long timeline, and every component is scaled up. I think that is what I was most unprepared for: “Holy shit, this is a massive undertaking.” So you’ve got to go through it to come out on the other side.

AVC: *District 9* doesn’t exactly set up a sequel, but there’s certainly room for one. Do you have any interest in that?

NB: Well, the film was so creatively rewarding to work on, it’s got all my favorite ingredients, that if the movie’s successful, and people want a sequel, I would happily make one. Because I would love to go back to the world of aliens in Johannesburg. Creatively, it’s awesome. But going forward from where the movie ends, I don’t actually know what happens. I mean, I’d have to go and seriously think about that.

AVC: That aside, what’s next for you?

NB: Well, I’ve got another sci-fi film that I’m going to start writing when I get back to Vancouver, which I think is my next film. Just another kind of idea.

AVC: Will the next one also take two and a half years?

NB: It’d probably be closer to two, I think. Because I’ve learned more, and I understand the process a bit better now. I can try to see how long I want to take in each aspect of the filmmaking process, and then arrive at around the two-year end mark.

AVC: I only came out of *District 9* with one plot question, and it involves a major spoiler, so it’s going at the very end of this interview. How was Christopher able to

get the mothership started so quickly and easily, given that none of the other aliens were able to when they were originally stranded? Why was he able to just punch a button and get it started after 20 years?

NB: The idea is that—this gets really geeky and insane, but going back to their hive-structure thing—their queen has died, and the elite population of their society has died, which are really the decision-makers. You're left with a bunch of drones that aren't directed on their own goal-setting basis. I like the idea that after 20 or 30 years, that their ESP kind of hive-mind will begin to almost elect members of its population to start—their fundamental brain architecture could actually change, and they start forming leadership roles.

So I think when they're on their ship, and they're all destitute, when you see them at the beginning of the film starving, it's that there is no one thinking on that level. They simply take orders. So it's taken 20 years for that hive to start realigning itself. And so as Christopher has gone through these years, his mind has started to be honed into forming a plan. So that's where it came from. And this nano-fluid that he had to collect, which he would have had access to on the ship back then, it's just simply that the drive didn't exist. The hive is just trying to restart itself.

AVC: If you did do a second movie, do you see yourself getting into more of those details, about how the aliens work, and who they are, the kind of thing you don't see much in this film?

NB: Yeah. Yeah, totally. Though not because I want to explain things to the audience. It's not because I feel like they didn't get things explained to them in the first one. It would be more that whichever particular road you pick within this particular alternate universe, there can be really interesting stuff, depending on which way you go. If that's one of the directions it were to go in, it'd be an interesting one. But I literally have not thought yet about which way it would go.

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