

Vancouver Film School
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DISTRICT 9

HOW VFS ALUMNI CREATED A SCI-FI MASTERPIECE

VFS

THE DISTRICT 9 ISSUE

EXCLUSIVE! "I was making the film I wanted to see" // co-writer breaks silence behind the groundbreaking effects // is this the year of VFS? // and much more



DISTRICT 9

"THE MUST-SEE MOVIE OF THE SUMMER." "THE MOST IMAGINATIVE SCIENCE-FICTION MOVIE TO COME ALONG IN AGES." THAT'S WHAT THE CRITICS SAID ABOUT *DISTRICT 9* WHEN IT HIT NORTH AMERICAN THEATRES IN AUGUST.

Then something even more astonishing happened: audiences followed. In fact, *District 9*, with its first-time feature director and no recognizable stars, made back its budget in its very first weekend. In Hollywood, they call that a miracle, even for a movie with producer Peter Jackson's name attached.

It's the kind of thing that makes careers, and that's good news for the first-timer in question, VFS 3D Animation & Visual Effects graduate Neill Blomkamp.

In fact, *District 9*'s VFS roots run even deeper than Blomkamp. There's his co-writer, Writing for Film & Television grad Terri Tatchell. And then there's the 40 VFS alumni who contributed to the visual effects, from matchmove artists to motion capture actors to team leads.

Vancouver studio Image Engine worked on the majority of the 600 or so effects shots, while Vancouver's The Embassy and Zoic, along with New Zealand's Weta Digital, did the rest. Many see *District 9* as a milestone for visual effects in Vancouver – an announcement of sorts: we're here, and we can play with the big boys.

"I DIDN'T THINK YOU GUYS WERE CAPABLE OF THAT"

Image Engine Visual Effects Executive Producer Shawn Walsh is a VFS grad who has witnessed the rapid growth of the local industry firsthand.

When Image Engine earned the contract to complete over 300 shots for *District 9*, the crew doubled in size, drawing on international talent as well as a large pool of Vancouver freelance talent, including many VFSers.

"The amount of work, the quality required, and the particular nature of the work – characters – was something that many people in visual effects said Vancouver wasn't ready for... yet," Walsh says. "Well, I am happy to have proved them wrong! The characters, and I call them that on purpose, because they are more than creatures in this film, have a nuanced and detailed performance that is absolutely essential to the film's success."

District 9's scope and relatively low budget of approximately \$40 million meant challenges – lots of challenges. "It was clear that this film was going to take an effort and reach that simply had not happened in Vancouver before."



HOW VFS ALUMNI CREATED A SCI-FI MASTERPIECE

A VANCOUVER FILM SCHOOL REUNION

“The funny thing with the Vancouver industry is you often don’t realize how many people working here went to VFS at some point,” says Visual Effects Technical Director **James McPhail**, a 2007 VFS graduate and part-time instructor. “On *District 9*, I was working with a half-dozen or so grads that were at VFS at the same time as myself, but Image Engine has people working there who were in the very first classes 10 or so years back.”

Walsh is one of those old-timers. “To be honest, I hadn’t thought of it until quite close to the end of the production. But it is amazing. Our Creature Supervisor, **James Stewart**, was in the class ahead of me at VFS. Now that’s going back a while! 1996! James, [Lighting Lead] **Rob Bourgeault**, and I all knew each other from our formative time at VFS and we all had major roles on *District 9* at Image Engine.”

Veteran composer **Geeta Basantani** is a VFS 3D grad and also served as an instructor in the program for more than three years. That made her first day at Image Engine, surrounded by former students, a reunion of sorts. “I was very overwhelmed and very proud of them for doing so well,” she says. “We were all excited and hugging each other. As a teacher, I was always trying to be motivating and friendly with them, so the whole project and celebrations after the project was finished were a great sharing experience that I

will treasure all my life.”

“I have worked with people from VFS at every studio I have been a part of,” says Animator **Anthony Di Ninno**. “It’s really nice to see how far we have all come in a very short time. The people from VFS that I consistently work with all have an amazing work ethic and are those same people who I remember working many all-nighters with back in the Ant Farm,” referring to the workspace for 3D students working on their final projects.

When crunch time came on *District 9*, Image Engine felt more than a little familiar. “It was a lot like VFS,” says Matchmove Artist **Jacob Miller**. “But if you can believe it, even more demanding and longer hours.”

A NEW BREED OF SCI-FI, A NEW KIND OF CHALLENGE

“There were challenges everywhere, and sometimes they looked pretty impossible to conquer,” says grad and Composer **Veronica Marino**. “I remember the look of the aliens, from the skin to their clothes and assets, and the final texture work took forever to be finalized.”

It all came down to realizing Blomkamp’s vision. “The biggest challenge for us on *District 9* was simply following through with Neill’s direction, which was rich, detailed, and inspiring,” Walsh explains. “All aspects of the production,

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“ THIS FILM WAS GOING TO TAKE AN EFFORT AND REACH THAT SIMPLY HAD NOT HAPPENED IN VANCOUVER BEFORE.

SHAWN WALSH

VISUAL EFFECTS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, IMAGE ENGINE



from R&D through to supervision, led us towards achieving Neill's goals. However, it has to be said again and again that Neill was a tremendous ally in achieving that challenge.”

“Modeling hero-res clothes turned out to be one of the most challenging tasks I've ever been set to,” says Modeler **Jelmer Boskma**. “Taking something as simple as a jacket and trying to make it look real was insane, especially because it has to hold up in extreme close-ups.”

“To quote my supervisor, James Stewart: ‘It separates the men from the boys.’ He wasn't kidding!”

As an Effects TD, McPhail's job was to create details to integrate the aliens into their decidedly lived-in environment. “The strangest shot was making an alien pee on a wall – it was certainly the most unusual fluid simulation that I have done.”

Paul Copeland is a Visual Effects Artist who worked on *District 9* a stone's throw from Image Engine, at “boutique shop” The Embassy – with whom Blomkamp has a long-standing connection. *District 9* was a challenge for that team too. “Since we usually handle commercials, working on a project like *District 9* with more than 100 shots was something new,” he says. “Even the work we did on *Iron Man* was not nearly as many shots.”

Back at Image Engine, Matchmove Artist **Samson Wong** (a graduate of both 3D and Foundation Visual Art & Design at VFS) agrees that their team faced challenges, but as with

any tough-job-done-well, the rewards speak for themselves. “Working on *District 9* is just like hiking: it takes a lot of time and effort climbing up, but once you're on the peak of the mountain, you see so many things that you're not able to see in a traditional Hollywood movie.”

“I'M STILL EXCITED”

District 9 is one of those projects that creates enthusiasm everywhere, even for bleary-eyed visual effects artists who've been working on it for months. From the very beginning, the film's pedigree had the team charged up. “I was super stoked when I heard that Peter Jackson was producing *District 9*,” says Lighting TD **Dominic Cheung**. “I'm a great fan of his work, and although he didn't direct it, his influence is definitely reflected in the film.”

Copeland knew Blomkamp's work already from The Embassy. “I've worked on some of his commercials and one of his short films in the past,” he explains. “I knew *District 9* was going to be something unique. I'm also a science fiction fan, so working on an original science fiction movie was a treat.”

“I really liked the variety of effects work that I got to do, as well as the look of the film overall,” elaborates McPhail. “The effects aren't the star of the show. Instead, they're there to help tell the story.”

As the film finally hit theatres, the team's excitement was palpable. “Every day that I had to get up and go to work was exciting for me,” Marino says. “Just the thought of what this movie could be and how big it would be was the most exciting part of the whole project! And I'm still excited just thinking that I was contributing to it!”

“I cannot thank our talented and dedicated crew enough,” says Walsh. “They are truly an imaginative and hard-working bunch! When we started working on this film, more than a year and a half ago, we simply could not have imagined that Sony Pictures Entertainment would be so enthusiastic and back this film with a tremendous marketing campaign.”

“I feel like Neill is getting back everything he put into this film and that's a great feeling.” ■

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL, ANYWAY?

That's easy. *District 9* gave us 42 reasons to be proud. We're proud of **Neill Blomkamp**. We're proud of Vancouver's visual effects community for wowing everybody and proud of what *District 9* says about VFS's place within that community.

“It's great to see this work being done in Vancouver,” VFS Head of Animation & Visual Effects **Alastair Macleod** tells us, echoing a common sentiment here at the school. “I'm really happy that so many of our grads could be involved with this production.”

Few things are more difficult than getting a film made. Making a film that captures critics and audiences? Now, that's something special. **This issue is dedicated to all the hard-working, incredibly talented alumni who made it happen.**

MEET NEILL BLOMKAMP



“I felt, for the most part, that I was making the film I wanted to see,” says Director, Co-writer, and VFS alum **Neill Blomkamp**. “Meaning I never questioned what I was creating, in terms of my appreciation for it. However, I would fluctuate constantly during the entire production on whether I thought anyone else would like it. Sometimes, I thought people would simply not be able to relate to it, and just pan it. Other times, I felt sure that people would enjoy it.”

STILL, HE NEVER SAW the overwhelmingly positive response coming. Who could? And now it’s time for the South Africa-born Vancouverite, who came to VFS as a mere 18-year-old, to come home and regroup. When the overseas press junkets are over and he has time to breathe, Blomkamp will return to Vancouver and get to work on his next projects. He’s said that his first order of business is getting to work on a brand-new idea for a sci-fi script. He’s also publicly hinted at the distinct possibility of a sequel, a District 10, if you will.

In fact, his commitment to the city was a big reason for bringing Image Engine, The Embassy, and Zoic Studios on board for *District 9*: it’s the groundwork for lots more.

“When [Peter Jackson’s New Zealand visual effects studio] Weta said they would be unable to do the film, I quickly decided that I wanted the work to go to Vancouver,” he explains. “Since I live there, and I will be making more films, I wanted to contribute to the local industry and also set up partnerships and relationships that will be in place for many more films.” ■

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 1998 *Stargate SG-1* (ANIMATOR)
- 2000 *Dark Angel* (ANIMATOR)
nominated for Emmy
- 2001 *Smallville* (ANIMATOR)
- 2004 *Crab, Evolution*
commercials for Nike (DIRECTOR)
- 2005 *Alive with Technology*
commercial for Citroën
won Visual Effects Society Award
Alive in Joburg (DIRECTOR)
Tetra Vaal Robotics (DIRECTOR)
- 2006 *adicolor Yellow* (DIRECTOR)
Tempbot (DIRECTOR)
- 2007 *Halo: Landfall* (DIRECTOR)
won 2008 Cannes Lion Award
- 2009 *District 9* (DIRECTOR)

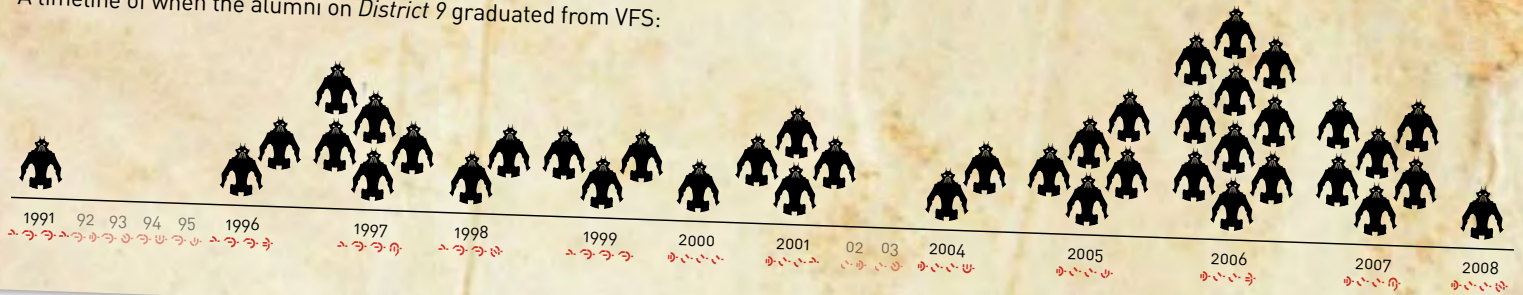
TIME CAPSULE: BLOMKAMP AT 22

Back in 2001, the Canadian magazine *Macleans* published a short profile of VFS. Pictured? A baby-faced Blomkamp standing in front of VFS’s Hastings Street campus above the caption “From student to star, Blomkamp’s got it going on.”

At 22, he was fresh off his Emmy nomination for *Dark Angel* – a great achievement that still barely hinted at what was to come. Blomkamp described his then-recent year at VFS and his quick transition to the industry: “I worked my butt off for a year, but it got me where I wanted to go.”

WHEN THEY GRADUATED

A timeline of when the alumni on *District 9* graduated from VFS:



THE LIST

Here they are: all 42 VFS graduates who worked on *District 9*.

- Neill Blomkamp**
DIRECTOR & CO-WRITER
- Terri Tatchell**
CO-WRITER
- Shawn Walsh**
VISUAL EFFECTS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
- James Stewart**
CREATURE SUPERVISOR
- Robert Bourgeault**
LIGHTING LEAD
- Derek Stevenson**
MATCHMOVE LEAD
- Brett Ineson**
MOTION CAPTURE SUPERVISOR
- Christopher Ahrens**
LIGHTING ARTIST
- Geeta Basantani**
SENIOR COMPOSITOR
- Peter Benson**
MOTION CAPTURE ACTOR
- Jelmer Boskma**
MODELER
- Freddy Chavez**
VISUAL EFFECTS COMPOSITOR
- Dominic Cheung**
LIGHTING TECHNICAL DIRECTOR
- Paul Copeland**
VISUAL EFFECTS ARTIST
- Anthony Di Ninno**
ANIMATOR
- Ian Fenton**
COMPOSITOR
- Brian Harder**
CREATURE RIGGER
- Nathaniel Holroyd**
VFX COORDINATOR
- Bernhard Huber**
EFFECTS ANIMATOR
- Steve Johnston**
RENDER WRANGLER
- Patrick Kalyan**
ANIMATOR
- Bernhard Kimbacher**
VISUAL EFFECTS DATA COORDINATOR & COMPOSITOR
- Julianna Kolakis**
CREATURE TEXTURE PAINTER
- Veronica Marino**
COMPOSITOR
- Adam Marisett**
VISUAL EFFECTS ARTIST
- James McPhail**
VISUAL EFFECTS TECHNICAL DIRECTOR
- Nikolai Michaleski**
COMPOSITOR
- Jacob Miller**
MATCHMOVE ARTIST
- Francisco Moncayo Moreno**
DIGITAL EFFECTS ARTIST
- Brendon Morfitt**
DIGITAL ARTIST
- Fernando Pazos**
ANIMATOR
- Dan Prentice**
CG ARTIST
- Mike Rhone**
VISUAL EFFECTS ARTIST
- Cynthia Rodriguez del Castillo**
DIGITAL PAINT & ROTO ARTIST
- Cesar Rodriguez Bautista**
DIGITAL PAINT & ROTO ARTIST
- Marc Roth**
VISUAL EFFECTS ARTIST
- Ben Burden Smith**
MOTION CAPTURE FIRST AD
- Richard Sur**
LIGHTING TECHNICAL DIRECTOR
- Anna Tonrunroj**
DIGITAL COMPOSITOR
- Grant Wilson**
ANIMATOR
- Joey Wilson**
MODELER
- Samson Wong**
MATCHMOVE ARTIST

EXPERIENCE REACT TO DISTRICT 9

VFSERS REACT TO DISTRICT 9

We asked a few students, grads, and instructors what they thought about *District 9* and what it might mean for the local industry. Here's a sample of what they said:

"I THINK IN SOME WAYS [DISTRICT 9] UNDERMINES THE POWER OF THE HOLLYWOOD MOVIE MACHINE, AND RAISES THE BAR FOR THE LEVEL OF VISUAL QUALITY AND NARRATIVE THAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM A LOW-BUDGET FILM."

LD SMITH, 3D ANIMATION & VISUAL EFFECTS GRAD

"IT'S MOVIES LIKE THIS THAT COMPEL ME TO WORK IN THIS INDUSTRY, AND IT ALSO SHOWS WHAT VFS ALUMNI CAN ACCOMPLISH WITH NETWORKING, CREATIVITY, AND RAW TALENT."

CAIO SUGIMOTO, 3D ANIMATION & VISUAL EFFECTS STUDENT

"IF A \$30 MILLION MOVIE CAN LOOK 10 TIMES BETTER THAN MOVIES THAT COST \$150 MILLION OR MORE, AND CAN COMPETE WITH THOSE MOVIES AT THE BOX OFFICE, THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT OPENS UP FOR FILMMAKERS AND DIGITAL EFFECTS CREATORS ARE HUGE."

RUDY THAUBERGER, WRITING FOR FILM & TELEVISION INSTRUCTOR

"EVEN PEOPLE NOT IN THE INDUSTRY, I'VE WITNESSED, ARE QUITE HAPPY TO LEARN SOMETHING OF THIS MAGNITUDE AND QUALITY WAS SHAPED LARGELY OUT OF THE CREATIVE TALENTS OF THEIR OWN CITY."

KARSTON BORST, ACTING FOR FILM & TELEVISION GRAD

WRITING GRAD ON CRAFTING A SCI-FI MASTERPIECE

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WRITING GRAD ON CRAFTING A SCI-FI MASTERPIECE



A lot of the buzz surrounding *District 9* has focused on the innovative visual effects. But many critics have also praised the storytelling for giving the film its cultural relevance and lasting quality.

IN CRAFTING THE STORY for *District 9*, Director **Neill Blomkamp** worked closely with his co-writer and Writing for Film & Television graduate, **Terri Tatchell**.

“Neill’s focus was very much the traditional action and the ‘wow’ factor, while mine was more the character development and emotional bits,” Tatchell explains. “Neill learned structure from me, while I learned to trust my gut from him.”

She attended the VFS Writing program early on in its evolution: at the time, it was only four months long. Nevertheless, she says that experience was

integral to her career as a screenwriter:

“I completely credit Vancouver Film School with putting me on my path towards being a screenwriter. While the course was only four months, it was enough to figure out that I was hooked, and provide a solid base from which to move forward and continue learning.”

Her knowledge of screenwriting undoubtedly increased while writing the screenplay for *District 9*. Tatchell and Blomkamp were lucky enough to have a few helpful mentors to show them the ropes.

“The first month of writing, we met with [Lord of the Rings writers] Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh, and Phillipa Boyens for roughly four hours a day,” Terri says. “I can’t imagine having more gifted people to learn from.”

Though Tatchell admits the numbers at the box office and the critical accolades have been surprising, she humbly chalks it all up Neill’s “incredible talent and visionary directing,” alongside the efforts of everyone involved in the film.

“I am just so proud of all of our work,” she says. ■

Vancouver Film School ON THE ROAD

EXPLORE DESIGN

October 14 – October 15, 2009

Metro Toronto Convention Centre
222 Bremner Boulevard
South Building, Halls F and G
Toronto, ON

Visit VFS at Booth #2 to pick up a brochure and hear about our 13 production programs, including our acclaimed one-year Digital Design program, spanning communication design, motion design, and interactive design.

exploredesign.ca

OTTAWA ANIMATION FESTIVAL

October 16 – October 17, 2009

FRIDAY: ANIMATION SCHOOL FAIR
National Gallery of Canada, Table A
380 Sussex Drive

ANIMARKET
Arts Court Studio, Table 12
2 Daley Avenue, Ottawa, ON

Visit the VFS booth to pick up a brochure and hear about our 13 production programs, including our three world-renowned Animation & Visual Effects programs – 3D Animation & Visual Effects, Classical Animation, and the six-month Digital Character Animation program. *3D World* named VFS the top animation school in Canada and fifth worldwide in its Ivy League ranking.

ottawa.awn.com

IMATS TORONTO

November 21, 2009

Heritage Court
100 Princess Blvd
Toronto, ON

Visit VFS at booth #157 to pick up a brochure and hear about our 13 production programs, including our world-renowned one-year Makeup Design for Film & Television program.

imats-toronto.com

2009: THE YEAR OF VFS

DISTRICT 9 MIGHT BE THE BIGGEST VFS ALUMNI SUCCESS STORY OF THE YEAR, BUT IT'S NOT THE ONLY ONE – NOT BY A LONG SHOT. 2009 HAS BEEN A BANNER YEAR FOR OUR GRADUATES AROUND THE WORLD.

Every single month has heralded more high-profile films with VFS graduates in key creative positions, including most of the year's biggest hits: *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood*

Prince, Pixar's *Up*, *Star Trek*, and *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs*, among many others.

Many of 2009's biggest films have had multiple VFS grads in their credits: 11 on *G.I. Joe*, for example,

and a whopping 19 on *Watchmen*. And during the summer blockbuster season alone, at least one new film boasting the talents of VFS alumni came out each week for 10 consecutive weeks.

COMING SOON

There's a lot of 2009 left, and some buzzed-about films still to come. Here's just a few of the upcoming movies that feature the work of VFS grads:

OCTOBER

Zombieland – 10/2

Where the Wild Things Are – 10/16

Astro Boy – 10/23

Amelia – 10/23

NOVEMBER

A Christmas Carol – 11/6

The Fourth Kind – 11/6

2012 – 11/13

Planet 51 – 11/20

DECEMBER

Invictus – 12/11

Avatar – 12/18

Sherlock Holmes – 12/25

IS AVATAR SCI-FI'S NEXT BIG THING?

IF ONE 2009 COMING ATTRACTION has created as much buzz as *District 9*, it's James Cameron's *Avatar*. The epic 3D sci-fi film has been in development for 15 years, and promises groundbreaking visuals and mind-bending landscapes. It made Apple.com history by setting the record for most trailer views in one day – 4 million.

The story follows Jake (Sam Worthington), a Marine sent to a lush jungle moon, who soon finds himself caught in the middle of a conflict between humans and the native alien species.

The gorgeous effects in *Avatar* are the handiwork of New Zealand's Weta Digital, and that means a number of VFS grads were behind the scenes. Among them are Lead Animator **Michael Cozens**, Animator **Aaron Gilman**, Technical Animator **Tamir Diab**, and Layout Technical Director **Alfredo Luzardo**.

"Weta is great," says Cozens. "It is very exciting to be working here right now. There are a lot of interesting and groundbreaking projects, and I am constantly exposed to extremely talented people."

FIND OUT EVEN MORE ABOUT THE VFS CONNECTIONS BEHIND *DISTRICT 9*.

VFS.COM/ENTERD9

- Read the un-cut interviews
- Watch exclusive videos
- See the latest *District 9* news