

Hobbits, superheroes put magic in NZ film industry

November 25 2012, by Nick Perry



In this photo taken Saturday, Nov. 24, 2012, a giant sculpture of Gollum, a character from "The Hobbit," is displayed in the Wellington Airport to celebrate the upcoming premiere of the first movie in the trilogy, in Wellington, New Zealand. The sculpture was created at Weta Workshop, part of Peter Jackson's movie empire in the Wellington suburb of Miramar. The world premiere of "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey" is Nov. 28 at Wellington's Embassy Theatre. (AP Photo/Nick Perry)

A crate full of sushi arrives. Workers wearing wetsuit shirts or in bare feet bustle past with slim laptops. With days to go, a buzzing intensity fills the once-dilapidated warehouses where Peter Jackson's visual-effects studio is rushing to finish the opening film in "The Hobbit" trilogy.

The fevered pace at the Weta Digital studio near Wellington will last nearly until the actors walk the red carpet Nov. 28 for the world premiere. But after "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey" hits theaters, there's more work to be done.

Weta Digital is the centerpiece of a filmmaking empire that Jackson and close collaborators have built in his New Zealand hometown, realizing his dream of bringing a slice of Hollywood to Wellington. It's a one-stop shop for making major movies—not only his own, but other blockbusters like "Avatar" and "The Avengers" and hoped-for blockbusters like next year's "Man of Steel."

Along the way, Jackson has become revered here, even receiving a knighthood. His humble demeanor and crumpled appearance appeal to distinctly New Zealand values, yet his modesty belies his influence. He's also attracted criticism along the way.

The special-effects workforce of 150 on "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy a decade ago now numbers 1,100. Only five of Weta Digital's workers are actual employees, however, while the rest are contractors. Many accept the situation because movie work often comes irregularly but pays well. Union leaders, though, say the workers lack labor protections existing in almost any other industry.

Like many colleagues, Weta Digital's director, Joe Letteri, came to New Zealand in 2001 to work on the "Rings" trilogy for two years. The work kept coming, so he bought a house in Wellington and stayed.



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"People come here because they know it's their chance to do something really great and to get it up on the screen," he said in a recent interview.

Jackson, who declined to be interviewed for this story, launched Weta in 1993 with fellow filmmakers Jamie Selkirk and Richard Taylor. Named after an oversized New Zealand insect, the company later was split into

its digital arm and Weta Workshop, which makes props and costumes.

Loving homages to the craft are present in Weta Digital's seven buildings around the green-hilled suburb of Miramar. There are old-time movie posters, prop skulls of dinosaurs and apes, and a wall of latex face impressions of actors from Chris O'Donnell to Tom Cruise.

Its huge data center, with the computing power of 30,000 laptops, resembles a milk-processing plant because only the dairy industry in New Zealand knew how to build cooling systems on such a grand scale.

Little of Weta's current work was visible. Visitors must sign confidentiality agreements, and the working areas of the facilities are off-limits. The company is secretive about any unannounced projects, beyond saying Weta will be working solidly for the next two years, when the two later "Hobbit" films are scheduled to be released.

The workforce has changed from majority American to about 60 percent New Zealanders. The only skill that's needed, Letteri says, is the ability to use a computer as a tool.

Beyond having creativity as a filmmaker, Jackson has proved a savvy businessman, Letteri says.

"The film business in general is volatile, and visual effects has to be sitting right on the crest of that wave," Letteri says. "We don't get asked to do something that somebody has seen before."

The government calculates that feature films contribute \$560 million each year to New Zealand's economy. Like many countries, New Zealand offers incentives and rebates to film companies and will contribute about \$100 million toward the \$500 million production costs of "The Hobbit" trilogy. Almost every big budget film goes through

Jackson's companies.

"New Zealand has a good reputation for delivering films on time and under budget, and Jackson has been superb at that," says John Yeabsley, a senior fellow at New Zealand's Institute of Economic Research.

"Nobody has the same record or the magic ability to bring home the bacon as Sir Peter."

"You cannot overestimate the fact that Peter is a brand," says Graeme Mason, chief executive of the New Zealand Film Commission. "He's built this incredible reputational position, which has a snowball effect."



In this Nov. 14, 2012 photo, Weta Digital General Manager Tom Greally stands in front of a large bank of servers with the computing power of 30,000 laptops used for animation work in the companies Wellington studios in New Zealand. Weta Digital is the centerpiece of a filmmaking empire that Peter Jackson and

close collaborators have built in his New Zealand hometown, realizing his dream of bringing a slice of Hollywood to Wellington. It's a one-stop shop for making major movies - not only his own, but other blockbusters like "Avatar" and "The Avengers" and hoped-for blockbusters like next year's "Man of Steel." (AP Photo/Nick Perry)

Back in 2010, however, a labor dispute erupted before filming began on "The Hobbit." Unions said they would boycott the movie if the actors didn't get to collectively negotiate. Jackson and others warned that New Zealand could lose the films to Europe. Warner Bros. executives flew to New Zealand and held a high-stakes meeting with Prime Minister John Key, whose government changed labor laws overnight to clarify that movie workers were exempt from being treated as regular employees.

Helen Kelly, president of the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, says a compromise could easily have been reached. She says the law changes amounted to unnecessary union-busting and a "gross breach" of employment laws.

"I was very disappointed at Peter Jackson for lobbying for that," she says, "and I was furious at the government for doing it."

Weta Digital's general manager Tom Greally compared it to the construction industry, where multiple contractors and mobile workers do specific projects and then move on.

Animal rights activists said last week they plan to picket the premiere of "The Hobbit" after wranglers alleged that three horses and up to two dozen other animals died in unsafe conditions at a farm where animals were boarded for the movies. Jackson's spokesman Matt Dravitzki acknowledged two horses died preventable deaths at the farm but said

the production company worked quickly to improve animal housing and safety. He rejected claims any animals were mistreated or abused.

Jackson's team pointed out that 55 percent of animal images in "The Hobbit" were computer generated at Weta. The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have asked Jackson in the future to create all his animals in the studio.

Controversies aside, the rise of Weta and the expat American community in and around Miramar is visible in everything from a Mexican restaurant to yoga classes. On Halloween, which in the past was not much celebrated in New Zealand, hundreds of costumed children roamed about collecting candy. Americans gave the tradition a boost here, but the locals have embraced it.

The National Business Review newspaper estimates Jackson's personal fortune to be about \$400 million, which could rise considerably if "The Hobbit" franchise succeeds. Public records show Jackson has partial ownership stakes in 21 private companies, most connected with his film empire. He's spent some of his money on philanthropy, helping save a historic church and a performance theater.

For all his influence, Jackson maintains a hobbit-like existence himself, preferring a quiet home life outside of work. In the end, many say, he seems to be driven by what has interested him from the start: telling great stories on the big screen.

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