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## 'King Kong' Blurs Line Between Films and Games

By [LAURA M. HOLSON](#)

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 23 - When the producers of the upcoming movie "Halo" sought a location for shooting, they headed to the director [Peter Jackson's](#) studio in New Zealand. Mr. Jackson's soundstages were empty, since he had finished directing and writing a remake of the movie "King Kong." And Mr. Jackson was an avid gamer who admired the futuristic universe of "Halo," the video game on which the movie was to be based.

Universal Pictures, which is making the "Halo" movie, also got the 43-year-old director himself; they made him an executive producer who would offer creative input while sharing in the movie's profits. Few movies based on video games are easy blockbusters: just this weekend, the movie based on the video game Doom made its debut and early estimates showed that it took in only \$15.4 million at the domestic box office, below expectations.

But "Halo" got immediate attention from video game players because of the involvement of Mr. Jackson, director of the hit "Lord of the Rings" movies. And, gamers were already anticipating the release of the King Kong video game in November, which Mr. Jackson co-developed with the French game maker Ubisoft.

Video games are among the fastest-growing, most-profitable businesses in the entertainment world. In the United States, domestic sales of video games and consoles generated \$10 billion in revenue last year, compared with movie ticket sales of \$9.4 billion. But with the exception of a few well-known directors - like [George Lucas](#), who created a series of Star Wars video games, and Andy and Larry Wachowski, who wrote and directed "The Matrix" movies and helped create Matrix games - few in Hollywood have been able to successfully operate in both worlds.

But that seems to be changing. Mr. Jackson is among a generation of mainstream movie directors who grew up playing video games. He, and a few others, are now looking to create video games, branding themselves to keep control over franchises while sharing in enormous video game profits. Two weeks ago, for instance, Electronic Arts announced that the director [Steven Spielberg](#) would help develop three original video games, which the director could later turn into movies.

Video game development has mostly been left to computer programmers who are experts at writing code and have less skill in cinematic storytelling. But with a new generation of game consoles and more lifelike graphics being released, the line between the two worlds is blurring. Major movie studios, with their vast libraries, want to make their own games. And video game companies are seeking new Hollywood-style franchises to compete.

"Video game makers are looking for people to help them bridge the gap," said Cody Alexander, who heads up the video game division at the Hollywood agent William Morris.

In the case of King Kong, Mr. Jackson wanted to create a video game that allowed players to experience a universe he created that otherwise would be confined to a two-hour movie. His collaboration with Ubisoft on the King Kong game goes back to early 2004, when Mr. Jackson was in Los Angeles to attend the Academy Awards and met several game publishers.

Mr. Jackson, said close associates, chafed at his dealings with the industry heavyweight, Electronic Arts, during the making of the Lord of the Rings games. "Electronic Arts was not interested in input from the filmmaker," but later marketed the games as if he were closely involved, said Ken Kamins, Mr. Jackson's manager.

An Electronic Arts spokeswoman said in response that the access given by Mr. Jackson for the game was "above and beyond expectations."

Mr. Jackson turned to Ubisoft, which has a studio in Montpellier, in the South of France, where the critically acclaimed (but commercially unsuccessful) game Beyond Good and Evil was developed.

That game, a favorite of Mr. Jackson's, was directed and designed by Michel Ancel of Ubisoft, who is also overseeing the making of the King Kong video game. In Montpellier, Mr. Ancel works with a staff of 30 game designers, animators and programmers. For King Kong, the staff swelled to 80, said Xavier Poix, a studio director and producer of the King Kong game, which is budgeted at more than \$20 million.

The more expensive games can cost up to \$25 million to make. But if successful, they can turn into big money-makers: Halo and its sequel sold 135 million copies and generated sales of \$600 million in North America. Ubisoft did not disclose financial details for King Kong, but Mr. Jackson will receive a percentage of the game's profits, an unusual arrangement for a movie director.

In April 2004, Mr. Poix, Mr. Ancel and a team of game designers and cinematographers flew to New Zealand to meet Mr. Jackson. For several hours, Mr. Jackson regaled them with stories and gave them descriptions about what the scenes should look like. Mr. Jackson had not finished his movie script, but his story is similar to the original: Kong is captured and brought to New York, where he dies.

On the walls of the conference room where they met were drawings of Skull Island, where Kong lived and fell in love with Ann Darrow, played in Mr. Jackson's remake by [Naomi Watts](#).

Mr. Poix said some of the animals Mr. Jackson had created for the game, including large-winged bats, would not be in the two-hour movie. Mr. Jackson gave drawings of the bats to Mr. Ancel and his team so they could be included in the game, which Mr. Jackson hoped would take 10 hours for a gamer to play.

Mr. Jackson was interested in creating a universe apart from the film, one that showed the emotional complexities of both the hunter and the hunted. "He showed gestures of Kong and explained how Kong moved," said Mr. Ancel. At one point, Mr. Jackson raised his arms over his head to simulate Kong as the ape captured a dinosaur and slammed it to the ground. "It was like an interview with Kong himself," said Mr. Ancel.

Added Mr. Poix: "Peter told us he wanted King Kong to be intuitive to the player; to give him the pleasure to feel the power of Kong. He said, 'Hey, it's a gorilla. Just make him move like a gorilla.'" Mr. Jackson wanted gamers to experience Kong's ferocity, but also asked Ubisoft to come up with a way for players to play from the perspective of Jack Driscoll, the actor who is played by [Adrien Brody](#) in the movie and who is captivated by Ms. Darrow. (About 70 percent of the game is played from Mr. Driscoll's perspective.) "He wanted the game player to feel both emotions," said Mr. Poix of Mr. Jackson.

After several days, Mr. Ancel and Ubisoft's creative team left with a bundle of drawings they would use to create the game's look. Two months later, in June, Mr. Poix said, he and his colleagues saw an early script of the film "King Kong" in the London offices of Universal Pictures, which is owned by [Vivendi Universal](#).

Mr. Poix said that the script was revised several times after they first read it, and that they were allowed only to read it, not to copy it or take notes, to prevent its

distribution outside the studio. Mr. Ancel and his team then drafted their own script for the game, which they later showed Mr. Jackson.

One of the challenges, said Mr. Ancel, was to make the game hard enough to satisfy hard-core players, but easy enough that players would end up in New York City for the game's climactic battle. Scale of the characters was an issue, too. Kong "was so big he took up a lot of the screen," said Mr. Ancel.

Mr. Jackson also wanted the video game screen to resemble a movie experience. "Everything on the screen had to be in that world," said Mr. Poix. Video games often have bars on the screen to show how much longer players have to live, or what kind of ammunition they have at their disposal. Instead of a life bar, Mr. Ancel's team made the screen turn blood-red every time a player was attacked to suggest the player was dying. And about a year ago, Mr. Poix said, Mr. Jackson came up with the idea of having an airplane fly overhead to air-drop much-needed ammunition. (There is no such plane in the movie.)

Unlike other video games these days, including popular games like Grand Theft Auto, the game creators did not want to make it especially violent, but somewhat realistic given the jungle setting. Weapons include fire, bones, spears and animals that attack: dinosaurs, large centipedes, even King Kong himself. "It is not too much a hack-and-slash game," said Mr. Ancel.

Mr. Poix said Ubisoft worked for about 10 months to come up with original music, which he hoped would contribute to the emotion that a game player feels. The team kept in contact with Mr. Jackson, who frequently e-mailed his feedback on the different levels of the game that Mr. Ancel and Mr. Poix sent him.

At the beginning of 2005, Mr. Poix said, he and two other Ubisoft executives met for three days with Philippa Boyens, Mr. Jackson's collaborator and a writer on the movie "King Kong" to refine the script and record some voice-overs. They spent two days reviewing dialogue. On the third day, Ubisoft spent eight hours recording [Jack Black](#), who plays the filmmaker Carl Denham in the movie and who sought to capture Kong.

In June, Ubisoft recorded Ms. Watts in Los Angeles. ("Naomi Watts is really good at screaming," said Mr. Poix.) And Ms. Boyens recorded some voice-overs in their absence, including some of Jamie Bell, the actor who plays Jimmy.

In May, the game was enthusiastically embraced by attendees of the Electronic Entertainment Expo, where video game makers promoted their most promising offerings for the coming year. A line 100 feet long snaked around a faux wooden gate at the King Kong booth as eager fans sought an early peek on a big screen at the hairy beast roaming Skull Island. Even Mr. Spielberg was spotted inside the cavernous hall, where nearly 300 attendees showed up to meet King Kong's designers.

Now, with four weeks to go before the game's Nov. 20 introduction, Ubisoft has been working to get rid of code glitches and finishing the climactic battles in New York. And in what seems to be an indication that the game may be the first of more to come from the director, it is now officially called Peter Jackson's King Kong.