

He is, in that respect, an auteur. Then, conversely, this is a cutting-edge industry made up of hundreds of impossibly talented individuals, each contributing their own measure of magic. An industry that must remain attuned to Jackson's firm belief that creative lightning can strike at any moment. It might be days before you are due to deliver a finished film to the studio — or when a travelling journalist shatters their peace with his infernal questions.

Is it possible, *Empire* gamely wonders, for the camera to take a more glorious, panoptic view on events? How about Smaug's eye-view as he wreaks burning terror upon Lake-town?

Jackson pauses, taking a bite out of a sausage roll, the gears of his prodigious imagination clicking and whirring. "That's not a bad idea," he responds. "Emma, can we 'magic carpet' from the dragon's point of view?"

The 'magic carpet' process isolates the section of the floor Jackson is standing on as if he were riding on it. This square can then be locked to anywhere in the virtual world, such that it could pitch and yaw with the body of the dragon.

Emma Cross, Jackson's unflappable AD, relays the instruction to the computer department. As the activity pauses, Seb offers more sausage rolls and thrusts "local delicacy" Whittaker's Peanut Slab in *Empire's* direction. Meanwhile, as the image is being re-orientated on screen, the dragon flickers and disappears. There are whispers off-stage. This, it turns out, is less the work of Bard The Bowman than

a technical glitch. "They're sorting it out, Peter," Cross reports after a radio conference with Weta Digital.

"Is it a cup-of-tea problem?" enquires the director, assessing the severity of the issue against the time for another cuppa. He seems entirely unperturbed.

"They won't be a jiffy," returns Cross, leaning into her headset.

"Well, as long as they haven't deleted Smaug," he quips.

Jackson remains sanguine about saying farewell to Middle-earth. Perhaps, there is still too much to be done to even begin to feel the end drawing close. But it is also a simple lack of sentiment. "It hits you harder when you finish shooting with the actors, thinking, 'God, this is Ian McKellen's last day as Gandalf.' As for the film itself, I can just sit back and say, 'Okay, I am very proud of that, but I am looking forward to doing something else without too many pangs of regret.'"

There's a standing joke between Jackson, Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens that any time one of his closest collaborators posits a dream project, Jackson tells them they'll be far too busy with *The Silmarillion*. "That's the joke," he says. "I hope it's a joke."

Whatever he does next, and something is brewing, it's been a long time since any studio bothered to send him a script. "I could have been David Fincher before David Fincher," he laughs. "I got sent Fight Club before he did, I got sent Benjamin Button five or six years before he did it. Back in the '90s, you know. But if someone is going to pick up my rejects, I am very glad it was him." His brain isn't wired that way; he needs to know exactly why every word in the script is there. He wants to — needs to — originate the film, whether it is an adaptation or original. "It's fun, just sitting there like you and I, having cups of tea."

With algorithms having calculated new angles of trajectory, and pixels having finally gotten their act in order, the screen springs back into life and proto-Smaug reappears. We are viewing Lake-town from high above, two scaly claws hanging in the frame. The 'camera' has been relocated to the belly of the beast, somewhere near his vulnerable spot, and moving to the centre of the floor, Jackson enacts a trial run, dive-bombing over the wooden houses and spires, a full-sized version of which *Empire* recalls strolling along on set back in June 2013. "You can tell people this is your shot," he jests, aiming for a tiny Bard in the distance. Let's hope it makes the final cut.

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THE HOBBIT: THE BATTLE OF THE FIVE ARMIES IS OUT ON DECEMBER 12 AND WILL BE REVIEWED IN A FUTURE ISSUE.

HERE AND BACK AND THERE AND BACK AGAIN

WHILE BATTLE IS SET TO BE THE SHORTEST MIDDLE-EARTH MOVIE YET, HOBBIT AND RINGS STILL COMBINE TO MAKE ONE OF CINEMA'S LONGEST EPICS. WHAT ELSE COULD YOU WATCH IN THE SAME TIME...?

THE MIDDLE-EARTH SAGA* 19 hrs, 38 mins

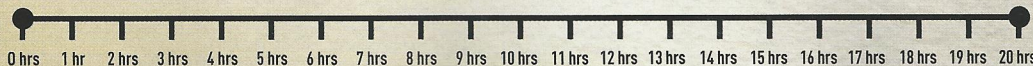
EVERY FRIDAY THE 13TH FILM 18 hrs, 26 mins

EVERY ROGER MOORE BOND FILM 14 hrs, 46 mins

EVERY LIVE-ACTION BATMAN MOVIE 17 hrs, 40 mins

EVERY ADAM SANDLER/DENNIS DUGAN COLLABORATION 13 hrs, 44 mins

EVERY MUPPET MOVIE (EVEN THE TV ONES) 16 hrs, 31 mins



* All extended editions except for *The Battle of the Five Armies*, including the runtimes for *The Desolation of Smaug* Extended Edition and *TBOTFA* theatrical cut.