

Steve Newburn panel – THE STRAIN and PACIFIC RIM: Creature and Makeup Effects

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Panels

Steve Newburn is the creature effects supervisor for THE STRAIN, and worked on special effects for PACIFIC RIM.

DelToroFilms.com staffer Kate Daley (of [Daley Kreations](#)) interviewed Steve exclusively for DELTOROCON.

Kate Daley – Hi Steve!

Thanks for agreeing to this interview

Steve Newburn – Sure.

Kate – So I know you worked on both *Pacific Rim* and *The Strain* but you mentioned that you and your co-supervisor Sean have worked with GDT on other films. Can you tell us a little about how you first met Guillermo and what your duties were on each of those projects?

Steve Newburn – Sean had previously worked on the Set crew for *Mimic* when it shot in Toronto. I had previously worked on *Blade 2* with Steve Johnson in LA back in 2000 I think it was. Had always been a fan on GDT's films of course, and I actually thought *Blade 2* was one of my favorite films to work on back then.

I hadn't met GDT in a work capacity till *Pacific Rim*. When that show came up to Toronto, GDT and the producers wanted a local group to prep as much stuff as possible. The build was initially enormous. I think something like 200 organs ranging from 3 feet to car size were quoted. Anyway, GDT remembered Sean from the *Mimic* set and I honestly think that may have single handedly put the job in that direction. There were four of us co-running *Pacific Rim*, although it was primarily Sean and myself.

- Anyway, the four of us focused on separate elements of the build it was so large, but there were also a couple other projects in the mix. One of the guys stepped back to deal with the other shows. And another, Jason, kind of split the difference between the two.. He came on to PR later in the game and by then, I think the paper trail was established with Sean and I getting most of the workload up and running. It was a union shop that was treated more or less as a production department (not unlike paint or construction). This of course was outside the norm for this type of work being that it's generally done by shops like Spectral Motion or Legacy.

Anyway, as a department, we ended up taking on bits and pieces of nearly every other department. Any specialty manufacturing. We built a large number of organs as seen in Chau's lair and in Newt's lab. We built 1/1 lifesize components of the interior of Otachi's carcass (the brain for example... 14 feet across). We built a lifesize baby Kaiju head that was ultimately replaced for a number of reasons (primarily a re-write of the post Hong Kong baby/Newt chase.) That head was in the ballpark of 20 feet long (in silicone).

We also provided pretty much everything in Chau's blackmarket lair with the exception of the animatronic Rollie Pollies built by Spectral Motion. We did built 2 dozen "shuckable" rollie pollies at the last minute though. Also components for wardrobe (the scavenger suits), and even quoted a couple sets (which didn't end up happening).

As that show was wrapping up, Guillermo had mentioned, "...I'll see you guys toward the end of the year..." Of course, we hear this all the time in this line of work, but he was true to his word and we were contacted around November 2012 to meet just after the holidays in regards to *The Strain*. We met over dinner in early January 2013. Being familiar with the scope of the story, and the amount of potential work involved, we went in thinking we would be acting as local support for one of the large LA shops. Instead, he offered us the whole project

Kate - So you got to work on *The Strain* from start to finish and develop the designs in-house?

Steve Newburn – We were definitely the first people in Canada on it. GDT had hired Guy Davis to do some concept work for *The Strain*. Simon Lee had also roughed out a few maquettes of some of the characters (The Master and The Ancients). We used their work as a starting point and continued to refine the designs in house. GDT was still in LA finishing off *Pacific Rim*, so he would come up occasionally, or Sean and I would fly down to meet with him and discuss the various designs and budgets. Once GDT had started winding down on the promo circuit for *Pacific Rim*, he came up to Toronto and started working with us to finalize the details of the various builds. *Crimson Peak*'s art department was getting up and running at the same time, so he would visit one department then the other for a couple hours each daily.

We had a whole slew of people who had worked with GDT at various times through the production, so we all kind of had a good feel for what he was looking for. It was mainly just nailing down specifics. G is always thinking, so ideas would constantly be flowing from all directions to improve wherever and whenever possible.

Kate - GDT has mentioned in interviews that he found it quite a challenge to go from the relatively long work period of a film like *Pacific Rim* to the quick turn around that you need for a TV series like *The Strain*. What were some of the major differences you found between *Pacific Rim* and *The Strain*?

Steve Newburn – Funny enough, that wouldn't really apply to us. We actually had a longer prep for *The Strain* than for *Pacific Rim*. For the production as a whole though, I could definitely see that being the case (a shorter prep).

For *Pacific Rim*, much of what we made was set dressing or elements of a bigger picture. Often we were in the background, and while seen, we weren't the primary focus of the shots. On *The Strain*, we were front and center throughout, and in fact, such a focal point for GDT that nothing could slip through the cracks. We were given basically 6 months to prep the Pilot. That's unheard of in TV, but the volume of work necessitated it, and GDT had our backs from day one. That would be the primary difference. Also, the quantity of stuff built for *The Strain* was completely opposite from the ultimate builds for *Pacific Rim*. *The Strain* has/had 100s of "small" projects makeups, builds, etc. (relatively speaking). The ultimate build for *Pacific Rim* was initially a small number of very large projects, but with a bunch of smaller ones added later. Primarily though, the big difference for us would be in how much our work was being focused on in *The Strain*. The biggest project we had was the coffins, but after that, just enormous quantities of prosthetic makeups, bodies, and some animatronics



Kate - What part of your work on *The Strain* are you most proud of?

Where there any parts that you thought were going to be particularly troublesome or challenging that turned out different than you expected?

Steve Newburn – I think everyone involved on our team would give a different answer to that. I was particularly happy with the outcome of the coffin (across the board everyone has loved it). I think for me personally, for the early part of the season, I was most happy with the suit work we did on Javier Botet (Mama) for the Pilot. We didn't have the time when shooting to go quite as far as we would have liked to go with his shots, but there is one shot that this prosthetic suit was in that I think pretty much everyone will swear is a CG / VFX shot. It doesn't seem possible, but Javier's unique physical stature gave us the means to cheat this effect in a way that I don't think has ever been done before. In fact, a certain LA shop owner didn't even realize what he was looking at when he came by the shop and we showed him pictures. It worked well... As far as anything we thought might be troublesome, there are things later in the season, but I can't really mention them now. I don't think anything specific ever came along that we just stopped in our tracks and said, were screwed. We had a strong collaboration with the VFX team at MR X, so we worked hand in hand and "kept it real" as far as who should be doing what.

Kate - Speaking of VFX, I know a lot of SFX interviews tend to focus on a sense of competition between CG and practical make-up effects. Sadly that tends to ignore a lot of innovations in the world of make-up and practical effects, like the rise in the use of silicones, the development of "peel N stick" prosthetics like Tinsley transfers, the surprising challenges of shooting in HD, and the continually lowering cost of things like 3D printer technology.

What do you see as the next big innovation in special effects work?

Steve Newburn – That’s a tough one. All of those things you mentioned were developed 10+ years ago. I know for us, we walked in hand in hand from the start with the gang at Mr X. We all knew what would work realistically, and who was going to be best suited for the particular effects. The perceived rivalry these days I think comes from a few bad apples in the bunch, and an “ignorance” by productions to the usefulness of getting something real in front of the camera. It also doesn’t help that the media often plays up the “new technology” over the old. Nobody ever mentions that there were more models built in any one of the Star Wars Prequels than the original three combined. All the media talks about is the Digital work. That said, there are shots that from a neutral standpoint, you simply can’t advocate the use of practical over CG. Part of why we had such an excepting view of what technique was best for the production in our case was in the fact that we were essentially a studio department rather than a company who needs to look out for its bottom line and overhead. We didn’t need to sell ourselves on every single thing that came along, and we could be impartial in how we broke things down. There were times we barely kept our heads above water even then for the amount of stuff there was to do. I’ve heard many shop owners say more or less what I’m about to say. It’s tough to be highly innovative in today’s effects environment. The time and money we used to see 20 years ago doesn’t exist most of the time these days. That’s true for Practical and Digital based special effects. The industry as a whole is generally forced to turn things out quickly and cheaply. Again, that applies to CG just as much as it does practical effects work. I’ve heard a number of company owners discuss how they feel that the design sense of things these days is gone. More than anything, what the industry needs is more directors and producers who are willing to see the “ART” of what we all do in the effects industry, on both sides of the fence. We need the Guillermo’s and the Chris Nolan’s who are willing to utilize effects well to tell their story rather than just fill the screen with eye candy nobody will remember 10 minutes later just because they can. It’s also tough to be innovative in what is a race to the bottom in some respects. I don’t know that there is innovation in its truest sense to be had in effects these days. Nobody is going to pay for TRUE practical innovation, when there is a perceived “one-stop” answer to everything (the computer) whether it’s true or not. In my opinion, it’s more about finding the happiest balance and allowing the artists to actually be artists. Until they can, it’s a different game than it was 20 years ago.

The next big thing... honestly, as someone who’s lived through all those innovations in the industry that you have mentioned, I don’t have an answer. Technology is always improving, but it’s irrelevant if you’re not allowed to use it or experiment with it.

I hope that the time comes when there will be far more Guillermo's out there who can see the usefulness of ALL technologies, not just practical, not just digital.

Kate - So in your mind is that what stands out the most about Guillermo? His use of effects as a element of the story telling ("eye protein" as he likes to say) instead of just eye candy? What would you say is most unique about working for Guillermo?

Steve Newburn – Guillermo is known for his films which have lots of effects in them, but he definitely uses them to tell the story. He obviously enjoys the creatures and the idea of spooky / scary, but he doesn't put it in just for the sake of it.

Every person across the board that I've worked with on his last several projects has said they would basically give their left arm to spend the rest of their career working for/with Guillermo. He's approachable. He's one of the most gracious people I've personally worked with. He's also someone who will push you to deliver your best, but he won't do it by putting you in your place. His criticism is always constructive. I've never seen him put anyone down or be mean spirited which so many directors do. More than anything, he's truly a fan of the work. I can't tell you how many genre projects we've all worked on where the director obviously wasn't even familiar with the subject matter, let alone a true fan. GDT is the real deal, and because of that, everyone bends over backwards to make him happy, not just because they appreciate him, but because they know that his passion for the work will deliver in the end.

I'd be perfectly happy to never work with anyone else again. He's a fan's fan, so to speak, and that translates into working with him as well. Honestly the only director I've ever met that I could say that about.

He allows you to give your opinions. He even expects it. He recognizes that we're all there to realize his vision, and he appreciates the input of the people around him and the expands further from that.

Kate - I think I speak for a number of his fans when I say that a lot of what you mentioned is also exactly why we as fans love him even though we've never worked with him (although it's definitely on my bucket list to do so one day).

As a fan, you know he loves the material as much as you do, and that he understands sort of how the fan mind works, because as you said he's a fan himself.

And I know that as a fan, when one gets to meet him, even if you only get 2 or 3 minutes to chat, that he definitely makes you feel like you have his full attention and that he genuinely is interested in what you have to say.

Steve Newburn – Exactly

Kate - And given that this is an interview for DelToroCon, this is probably the perfect place for us to wrap up.

Steve I want to give you another HUGE thank you for this great interview. You've given everyone tons of awesome material to enjoy

Steve Newburn – Sure thing. Anytime.