

The Origins of Kingdom

The idea and script for "Kingdom" were derived from an earlier screenplay Barker had completed called "I Tyrannis" (The Tyrant Monarch). "I Tyrannis" was a decidedly adult take on the adventure-fantasy genre. Even less surprising is the revelation that this screenplay involved the use of extensive CGI, but once again Barker (as writer) was striving to put the story before glossy visuals. Over the course of several months he seriously contemplated self-producing "I Tyrannis". However the screenplay called for elaborate sets and costume design. Persistent as Barker is he also had a modicum of mental self-preservation. "That film would have been a nightmare to produce with a low budget, so the plans were shelved".

About this time the impetus on Barker to shoot a feature film began to grow. He would often go for long walks late at night to think out his company's strategy. "Before filming my mind would race away with all the possibilities, it still does today, but I'm at the other end of the process now". "Kingdom" was one of two projects he developed to shoot on a low budget. Barker believed the premise of "I Tyrannis" had commercial potential but he still drew blanks when trying to secure an investor or production company interested in producing the screenplay. "I also began to realise that I could shoot a film directly for VHS sell-through because it would be essentially quick and cheap". Using celluloid film obviously had a high degree of desirability but the costs were out of the fledgling Producer's league. Besides, the fact remained; many low-budget wholly British produced films fail to obtain a theatrical release. Barker reasoned that if he produced "Kingdom" for video, he could self-distribute the end product without incurring the costs (and the losses) if it had been shot on celluloid. So "Kingdom" along with "Nepenthes" (the other project) became his primary focus. Still the doubts and the doubters lingered. Could he really produce such a film on a low/no budget? Barker went through the process of producing an extensive business plan to secure investors; he also sent it to several production companies. Still no joy, the gist of the replies was; "Nice effort Mr Barker, but we have enough screenplays from other wannabe's. We wish you the best of luck placing your script elsewhere. Thank you".

Fate then played its hand for the first time in a string of convoluted events that were to occur over the next two years. Barker had been introduced to a skilled modeller and special effects designer called Gary Rowntree. Thinking he would be able to secure Rowntree's services Barker let him read both "Kingdom" and "Nepenthes". Simultaneously Barker's girlfriend Jaqui Winter told him to 'stop talking about it and go make your bloody film'.

In early September 1997 another meeting took place with Rowntree. Barker admired Rowntree's previous work and knowing he was particularly inventive (and partially out of interest in testing his attitude), Barker asked if he could build an aircraft carrier out of 'two strips of plastic and a washing up liquid bottle?' Rowntree said yes without batting an eyelid. The point being, Rowntree was keen for the opportunity and capable of delivering to order. Shortly after that meeting Rowntree confirmed he could build the planned full-sized dragon props. He also arranged to demonstrate a computer generated walk cycle for a dragon. Suddenly "Kingdom" became a viable project. Gross body movements for the dragons would be accomplished on PCs running industry standard animation software. Other shots would use rod-controlled puppets.

The actors would perform against the full size dragon rigs that would use interchangeable skins and heads for the different dragon characters. The company had just acquired a Hi8 video camera to shot the film and a low-end video

capture card that would allow the film to be edited digitally. The ensuing months suddenly became a controlled dash to assemble a cast and pre-produce "Kingdom" to a point where the production could shoot. The crewing changed almost daily. Barker re-learned the need to remain focused and how to stay positive even though the pre-production phase was throwing up all manner of obstacles.

The plan to build two full size rigs changed to the much less troublesome option of using rod-controlled puppets (with the intention of digitally removing the rods in post-production). Around January '98 the backbone to the project was in place but WOTR was still cash starved. The March '98 shooting date was looming close and casting had been ongoing for a number of weeks, (Barker used a room at his old film school for the auditions). Two casting calls in PCR London prompted over two hundred replies from actors! By the time the cast were being auditioned in person, Barker and his casting assistants Jiaone Bilbao and Georgina Templeman had been reviewing the potential cast's resumes for over eight weeks.

The shooting date was looming closer and still no investors could be found. Fortuitously Barker had designed the project to shoot on a low budget. Post-production was reasonably well defined by this time. As long as the right material was shot in principal photography, post-production would be fine. Hi8 had its limits but what was the alternative on no budget? Remember these were the days before DV cameras dropped so rapidly in price.

On the 7th April, about a month before principal photography was due to commence Barker presented "Kingdom" and the company business plan at YABA. Apart from meeting some mild interest they were no solid responses. Pre-production charged ahead. Eight days later an investor James Ritchie made that fateful phone call out of the blue. Andrew Cockburn the Production Office Co-coordinator and Jaqui Winter were the only other people to know about James' involvement at this time; just in case he pulled out at the eleventh hour. But James was serious. He had read the business plan and made his decision. James investment allowed the company to purchase a broadcast quality, full size DV camera. He also injected enough capital to take the shoot right through principal photography. Barker reset the schedule back by one week to the 27th April until the new camera and the production finance came on stream.

Production

27th April 1998 is a day Barker will always remember for all the right reasons. As the first day of principal photography it was full to capacity with six dialogue-rich scenes involving several different actors. Kay Ferris whom Barker often called 'Madam DP' developed the mother of all headaches (most likely stress-induced), but the schedule and tempers held out. Nothing went wrong apart from the traffic lights near the location, setting the shoot back by about an hour as people were stuck in heavy tailbacks.

The weather remained perfect for almost the entire shoot bar rain on two days. Barker had made a conscious decision in pre-production to keep the daily schedule relatively light and flexible. He was asking the cast and crew to do a lot of work for very little upfront reward; it was not reasonable to overextend the goodwill during the next forty-one days.

Observation quickly determined two things during the shoot for Barker. First, only begin a take when you (that is the Director and actors) are ready to do so. Second the Director says 'cut' and decides to move on when he and only he is

satisfied with the performance and the shot. There is no room for 'I'm not quite sure...' The actors would soon lose their thread, patience and respect. The production did not have the schedule (in terms of time) or resources to endlessly tweak a take to perfection. In fairness this requirement only occurred once in the whole shoot. The cast were all highly attuned to their characters and delivered great performances within a few takes. The learning curve was admittedly steep but Barker stayed ahead of it, "I have to confess to being hooked on the Directing bug but my first love will always be producing".

Barker had to maintain the actors' sense of trust in him especially when it came to them performing with the CG characters. Half way through the shoot is scene 36 where WISDOM first appears. This was the first major scene where the human cast had to interact with one of their CG brethren. All credit is due to the actors for being able to perform with a visual effects element that would be added almost a year later in post-production. That spirit must also be extended to Effectsland Chief visual effects and CG supervisor Arif Majothi. Arif said exactly where WISDOM would appear in the frame and he has proved absolutely true to his word. The shoot went almost exactly to plan and what few surprises that were encountered were quickly overcome. Forty-one days was a tight schedule for such an effects rich film. An eighty-two day schedule would have been more accommodating but that was just not practical. By the time of the last days principal photography the crew had developed a real sense of achievement and pride not only in themselves but in the film as well. Principal photography was completed on June 11th (on scene 47). Barker savoured those immortal words "That's a wrap". Luckily nobody stole that from him, "Otherwise I would have to go through the whole forty-one days again!"

The WOTR wrap party was well attended by cast and crew; there was a palpable buzz and a thrill of being part of a unique project. Amongst the wrap party revellers several beers were consumed that night...

Then on a bright morning of June 12th 1998 there remained the considerable task of assembling all the footage and other elements into the end product.

Post Production

From day one Barker knew producing a feature length film with several of the 'cast' only existing as CG characters was a tall order. "I knew full well the technical and logistical problems the effects team was to face and we have summarily met and addressed each one. What is personally heartening for me is being able to remain constantly 'aggressive' in solving problems and producing a film whose overall production values would shame many higher budgeted rivals". Indeed Post-production became Barker's new mistress casting a spell over him with her exotic technology and demanding ways.

The video format allowed DP Kay Ferris to shoot extensively without exceeding the production budget. The shooting ratio was approximately 6:1 generating a modest 18 hours of footage to work from in the edit. "Kingdom's" editor Heidi Stiene whom Barker had worked with previously on a short called "Philips Flashing Finger" had been aboard the project since December '97. As the shoot consumed more and more master tape a system was worked out to copy the masters to VHS for viewing purposes. In that way Stiene was able to comment on the coverage from an early stage. Stiene and Barker envisioned using a non-linear edit system because of the operational flexibility they allowed, but after examining the market place and finding nothing suitable for their needs Barker proposed to build a proprietary system. Within a few weeks Gisela version 1,

quickly followed by an improved version 2 was commissioned. (Gisela is Heidi's middle name and titled in honour of her). Stiene worked for four weeks, averaging eleven hours a day and five days a week to deliver a working copy of "Kingdom" for the visual effects team at Effectsland. In fact her cut was so accurate it would require little effort to later insert the completed visual effects shots. The first of these began to arrive during mid October '98.

As visual effects shots were added to "Kingdom" the whole picture edit was refined in a process of tightening and trimming. After locking the picture, music was added and cued to create the best dramatic effect on a scene by scene basis. Barker originally secured the services of the Leeds Sinfonia under the conductor David Greed. Unfortunately a composer could not be secured in time to compose a score before the Sinfonia had to complete other commitments on their heavy schedule. High quality production music was used instead to round out the sound track. However a great picture and music is meaningless without great sound effects. The adept Sound engineer can employ a myriad of software packages custom designed for the generation and manipulation of sounds. Many ambient sound and spot effects were recorded (as wild tracks) and added to the "Kingdom" soundtrack to enhance the film's CG illusions. Finally in a series of specially set up recording sessions, the actors Leigh Gardner, David Robertson and Stephen Anderson provided the voices of the dragons. Real animal sounds that had been digitally altered and processed enhanced the voice artists' vocal talents.

Each dragon was designed in collaboration between Barker and Arif Majothi. The designs were modelled as half-sided clay marquettes before being Laser scanned, which converted the solid geometry into 3D computer models. Back in Effectsland's computers, the models were reassembled and given skin textures. Finally an electronic skeleton was added to allow the animators to make the five dragons interact with the human cast.

One facet of effects-heavy film making soon began to rear its ugly head. In one scene the sorceress Celine played with obvious relish by Manouk Van der Meulen, creates five magical rings for ensnaring the dragons. The rings would be realised as CG models for the planned series of shots where they magically take on a life of their own. However it soon became apparent that each individual shot was taking too long to composite and render using a stand alone workstation computer. "At this ponderous rate", Majothi commented, "the film would be completed sometime around the next passing of Haley's comet". This concern was borne out by the further realisation that if the entire rendering requirement for "Kingdom" was subcontracted to a third party supplier; the production budget would have to be quadrupled.

The solution was to set up a render farm that was dedicated to "Kingdom". 'Daisy' (as it was later christened) the render farm was commissioned and producing full quality production CG shots within a month. The cost savings in using Daisy were tremendous. Not only did it produce production shots for "Kingdom" but it allowed Effectsland a degree of experimentation time to innovate without incurring time penalties. In fact Daisy was so fast she frequently cut long render jobs to a sixth of the time previously incurred by a stand alone machine.

Have you heard that song, "Does your chewing gum lose its flavour on the bedpost over night?" Try the WOTR version 'Does your editing machine lose its data on the hard rive overnight?' That is exactly what happened in the closing stages of post-production on Kingdom. The story all starts in a computer a long time ago on a hard drive far, far away. Due to an oversight in the operating mode used on Gisela (the non-linear editing system), the project file that contained all edit

and sound for Kingdom was susceptible to being corrupted. Unfortunately this set of eventualities decided to rear its unwanted head mere weeks before the premiere and not in the intervening 17 months. However as all computer professionals know to back up their work, copies of the project file for Kingdom were saved independently in several different places. The project files were in various states of completion for the entire film. Although it was time consuming to rebuild one of these earlier versions of the film, it proved to be feasible. The problem may have been compounded by the editing software also not being able to cope with the sheer amount of data it was being asked to handle. That situation called for a rapid update to the latest version of the editing software and the production team was back on line and able to make up the last down time.

The Kingdom premiere.

Friday 19th November 1999 will be a date to remember long into WOTR's future because it was the day of the gala cast and crew screening for "Kingdom". The screening venue was the plush Metropole Hotel in Leeds. WOTR enlisted the services of Gez Walker as event co-ordinator and what an evening she provided. With a full house and everybody dressed in black tie the screening was a resounding success. Barker presented especially commissioned bouquets to Jaqui Winter (graphic designer and his long-suffering partner), Heidi Stiene (Editor), Sharon Holland (Actress) and Gez Walker. He then went on to acknowledge members of the film crew and the Effectsland team for their outstanding contributions to "Kingdom". At the prescribed time the room lights dimmed and the screen burst into life. The next hour and a half would be the production teams 'acid test'. They need not have worried, by all accounts the audience thoroughly enjoyed watching Kingdom - they even laughed in the right places. "The film's content had been locked by Heidi (the editor) for quite some time. I was totally confident in what she had done and in Kingdom being a piece of work that represented my artistic vision, along with carrying this huge load of the actors' expectations", said Barker after the screening. "I was always balefully aware that audience would give me their criticisms or opinions after the screening. But I'm pleased to report the audience reaction exceeded my expectations, phew!"