

## Phil Johnston and Jennifer Lee discuss *Wreck-It Ralph*

Written by CUE Editor

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Columbia MFA graduates **Phil Johnston** (FILM '04) and **Jennifer Lee** (FILM '05) launched into the big leagues of animated feature films this fall with the release of

*Wreck-It Ralph*

, the hit they penned for Disney about an arcade-game villain who decides he's sick of being the bad guy. The movie has been successful both at the box office and with critics, garnering an Oscar nomination for best animated film. Phil and Jenn have also been nominated for an Annie award for best writing in an animated feature production. The two took time to answer some of our questions about their paths from Columbia to Hollywood, and how working in animation differs from live-action.

**CUE: What was your path from graduating to writing *Wreck-It Ralph*? How did you decide to team up on this script?**

**PJ:** About a year out of Columbia, I sold a movie and a TV show and had financing for a movie I was going to write and direct. The movie didn't get made, the show didn't get made and the financing fell apart. Hooray! In the following years, I finally got a movie made ( *Cedar Rapids*) and

a TV show (

*Ghosts/Aliens*

, which never aired). I came onto

*Wreck-It Ralph*

in 2009 after meeting with the director, Rich Moore. He and I worked alone for about nine months, figuring out the characters and the story. Then the rest of the story team (the artists who draw the initial story boards) was put together, led by a guy named Jim Reardon-- a crazily talented dude who knows more about comedy films than can be considered healthy.

Ever since meeting the first day of orientation (a week or so before September 11, 2001), Jennifer and I have collaborated-- never co-writing but always reading and critiquing each other's work-- more honestly and harshly as the years have passed. So, over the years, we developed a shorthand of sorts. After more than 2 years on *Wreck-It Ralph*, I was finding myself getting too busy with a couple other projects to handle the day to day rigors of animation (which are profound and taxing!). Knowing Jennifer as well as I do, and trusting her implicitly,

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we brought her on as co-writer. She moved to LA from Brooklyn and dove right in. She was there every day in the story room, fighting the fights with the lunatic artists. From then until the film came out, we collaborated closely on the script.

**JL:** While at Columbia, one of my scripts won the Columbia Film Festival, and that got me my first manager. A couple of years later another one of my scripts was optioned (then went into turn around). My next script was optioned, too, by Leonardo DiCaprio's *Appian Way*. They're just now securing the financing after four years. I was also hired to write a Steinbeck adaptation that's somewhere in the pre-production stage. Yes, there's a pattern here -- a lot of work, a lot of potential movies getting made, and a lot of variables working against it. So, when Phil called me up one afternoon and said, "any chance you'd want to up and move to California...like...tomorrow?" I was ready.

As Phil said, he and I met the first day of orientation. Our writing styles were nothing alike, but our sensibilities just fit. Even after graduating we met every week with pages. We pushed each other as writers. We pepped-talked each other when the industry was kicking our asses. But we'd never written together. It was a leap of faith for him to ask me to join Ralph, one I'm so grateful and honored he took.

**CUE: Where did this project originate, and how did you land the pitch/get the job/stay on the project?**

**PJ:** The idea for a video game movie had been floating around Disney for more than a decade. There were apparently a couple of unsuccessful development attempts with this concept. But when Rich and I started working on it, we were coming at it with fresh eyes-- new story, new worlds, new characters. Animation isn't like live action, in that you are constantly pitching and re-pitching the movie. In the early months, I probably pitched the thing to various people (John Lasseter, Bob Iger, different directors, animators, marketing people, etc.) at least 30 times. And Jenn (who is now writing and directing another Disney film) I'm sure will have done it 100 times before her movie comes out. It's insane. I stayed on the project because of my relationship to the characters and the material, in addition to my relationship with Rich, who has become a great friend.

**JL:** I remember Phil talking about the project early on. I was a huge video game kid, so I loved the concept. When I read the first draft of the script I was blown away by the characters. Phil and Rich had created these beautifully damaged, lovable original characters -- the best kind.

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When they first asked me to come on board, it was just for 8 weeks, to work on a rewrite and get them to the next screening. I was intimidated. Phil is one of the most talented writers out there, and here he was trusting me with his characters and story. Luckily, he was always there for me. We were on the phone, sometimes daily, discussing pages and ideas. He kept me sane in what was the most intense creative 8 weeks of my life. I got notes daily from a room of story artists (the harshest critics known to man). I was writing and rewriting constantly and sitting in on editorial sessions and recording sessions. It was like filmmaking boot camp. But I fell in love with it. After the screening, Disney extended my contract to stay on until the end of the picture and that was that.

**CUE: Can you describe the process of writing for animation and how it differs from writing for live action? What was the timeline on Wreck It Ralph? At what point in the process was the script locked down? Do you get to revise at all once the animation process starts?**

**PJ:** I started in the spring of 2009 and was basically finished writing in August of 2012 (though I can't remember when our last voicing session was (we were almost always at the sessions with the actors, doing rewrites on the fly, improvising, etc.). The script was never really locked down. Because different scenes and sequences are getting animated at different times, there's never really a locked script the way there would be in live action. Over the course of our movie, we screened 7 different versions. The early screenings are very rough-- simply story boards cut together and voice acting done by non-actors. But getting it up in front of an audience is crucial. Because even with the crudest animation, you can tell when the story is working. Not much of our first screening ended up in the final movie-- maybe just a couple jokes. But the characters are very much the people we ended up with. You can see them change and grow with each screening, though, which is a really gratifying part of the process.

That said, the process is maddening for the very reason I just described. Nothing is ever finished. The written word is utterly disposable. And if you don't LOVE collaborating, this is not the medium for you. The Beckett quote-- "fail, fail again, fail better," is very apt for this medium.

**JL:** Phil described it really well; it's insane. As John Lasseter likes to say, "the story isn't locked until the movie comes out." On the plus side, unlike live action, writers in animation are a part of the process every step of the way. We are in the edit room with the director. We are in the recording room with the actors. We're able to test out various ideas with the story artists. We literally get to see our movie (in a rough form) up several times, learn from it, and really push ourselves.

**CUE: What's next for you?**

**PJ:** I have a couple things ahead of me that will keep me busy for a bit. I'm just finishing up a script I'm doing with Sacha Baron Cohen that I hope will go into production shortly. After that, I'll get started on the adaptation of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, which Zach Galifianakis will star in.

**JL:** I'm actually still here at Disney Animation, writing their next feature, *FROZEN*, which comes out in November of this year. I've also been asked to direct it along with Chris Buck, which is a new, crazy experience, but loads of fun.

**CUE: Anything you'd like to add? Any advice for aspiring screenwriters? Any advice or insights unique to your experience with animation?**

**PJ:** Advice: Find people whose work you respect and befriend them. Having a friend who will read your work and tear it to shreds is invaluable-- all the more when you are working in the studio system (where notes can often be soul-crushing and idiotic!).

**JL:** I'll second that...third it...forth it. I'll also add: learn to love rewriting and learn to listen to notes. Even the crazy ones are often a clue that something needs attention. And finally, get used to collaboration. No one person can make a film happen. We've got 300 people working on *FROZEN* right now. They do their best work when inspired, involved, and when they are allowed to bring themselves to the project. Being open to that can be exhausting, but it's worth it if, in any way, it makes the film better.