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Hollywood film **Elysium**

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VANCOUVER INTERNATIONAL
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MATT DAMON stars in *Elysium*.
PHOTO BY KIMBERLY FRENCH © 2013 COLUMBIA
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A Hollywood Blockbuster Finished in Vancouver

Post, VFX and Sound facilities combine forces on Sony Picture's *Elysium*

Story by
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During the one and a half years of post-production on the science-fiction movie *Elysium*, Andrea Chlebak would sometimes wake up dreaming of droids in a dystopian futuristic landscape. Not because she was afraid of the creatures. She was obsessed with making the droids look completely real.

Chlebak is a film colourist and director of creative services at Digital Film Central (Central), a post-production facility in Vancouver's Cambie Corridor and one of three hubs that finalized Neill Blomkamp's second big Hollywood feature.

The producers, Media Rights Capital and Sony Pictures opened an edit bay near Central. Image Engine, only a few blocks away, was responsible for thousands of visual effects (VFX), with help from other facilities including Method Studios, The Embassy and the Moving Picture Company. Sharpe Sound Studios did sound mixing.

Elysium takes place in 2154 and tells the story of Max (Matt Damon), a

car thief living on a ruined earth, who takes on a mission to fly to *Elysium*, an idyllic, luxurious space station only accessible by humanity's elite. The film was released on August 9.

Curtis Staples landed the post-production for *Elysium* at Central, where a team of eight people was involved.

In order to provide more flexibility to the colour grading and finishing process of a film of this scope, Central developed an innovative workflow they called ShadowConform. Essentially, they created a duplicate, or "shadow" of the film, so that colour grading could begin while the cut was still being finished in the edit bay. ShadowConform enabled colour grading to happen in tandem with VFX and editorial, creating a feedback loop between all processes, which provided Blomkamp more time and freedom to achieve his vision.

During rough cut stage, Chlebak worked with "hero shots", footage from the film with key actors and key set-ups without VFX, to discuss and develop the overall look of the film with the director.

"I was able to produce a LUT, a look-up table," Chlebak says. "It's like a filter, essentially, that represented the '*Elysium* look.' That look enabled the VFX teams to preview their composites in context of the director's preferred look while they were building the effects. The director would then approve the VFX shots with

that 'Elysium look' as well, so there was no guess work for the VFX artists in terms of how the final grade might transform the CG elements."

"I think it's groundbreaking. It's a rare collaboration between a VFX company and a post-production facility," says Central's digital intermediate producer Sam Trounce.

"In order to make the VFX as good as possible, they need to know how they are going to be dealt with at the end of the process. And often what happens is, they will go ahead and VFX are wrapped before picture finishing," Trounce says. "But Central presented colouring decisions to the VFX company before they were finished, so they would know how the film would look like."

Chlebak said Blomkamp was articulate about what he wanted, but let her put her creative stamp on the project. For instance in the heist scene, when Matt Damon fights the droid while trying to kidnap Carlyle.

"Since Neill's intent was for everything to appear completely real to the audience, maintaining the integrity of the VFX work was always at the forefront of my mind. I was only afraid that in the process of shaping the look for the film, I would spoil something that was created in VFX," says Chlebak.

"I was, fortunately, invited into the VFX world at points along the way so that I could understand their work more clearly and carry forward the visual intent into the final grade."

"Andrea [Chlebak] has tremendous eyeballs. She's got the best eyes in the business," says Shawn Walsh, visual effects producer at Image Engine. "I have absolutely nothing but glowing things to say about Digital Film Central. Absolutely everything they did, every process that they brought to the table, every suggestion was always with the most technically astute and high-end solution in mind."

Walsh and his colleague, visual effects supervisor Peter Muzyers, had started brainstorming about *Elysium* while working with Blomkamp on *District 9*. They intended to do as much as possible with the Image Engine team of up to 250 VFX artists. But as the film came together, they delegated subsets of work to others, like Method Studios, who created the Civil Cooperation Bureau data wall and Jodie Foster's connection to earth; and Moving Picture Company, who de-

signed the Carlyle shuttle crash.

The weapon design for the heist scene was created only two storeys above Central, at The Embassy Visual Effects. Winston Helgason, VFX producer and president of The Embassy, had worked with Neill Blomkamp on *District 9*. The Embassy invented new technology to create the shield that antagonist Kruger wears during his fight with Matt Damon.

"The creation of the shield effect was the biggest research and development effect for us," says Helgason, who emphasizes that with the exception of the scenes shot in Mexico, *Elysium* is a homegrown film for Vancouver.

Paul Sharpe, owner of Sharpe Sound Studios in North Vancouver, was self-

confident about landing the project.

"Our sound mixing facility in Vancouver is geared toward feature film making and we had known the sound designer Craig Burkey for many years," he says. "It helps showcase the city and show that we are capable of turning in quality product."

That self-confidence is echoed by Central.

"There were a lot of skeptics in L.A. who said it couldn't be done [in Vancouver]," says Trounce. But he hopes this film converts them.

"People who traditionally might have shot their movie in Vancouver and not even thought about keeping the project there for post may have seen *Elysium* and who's behind it and

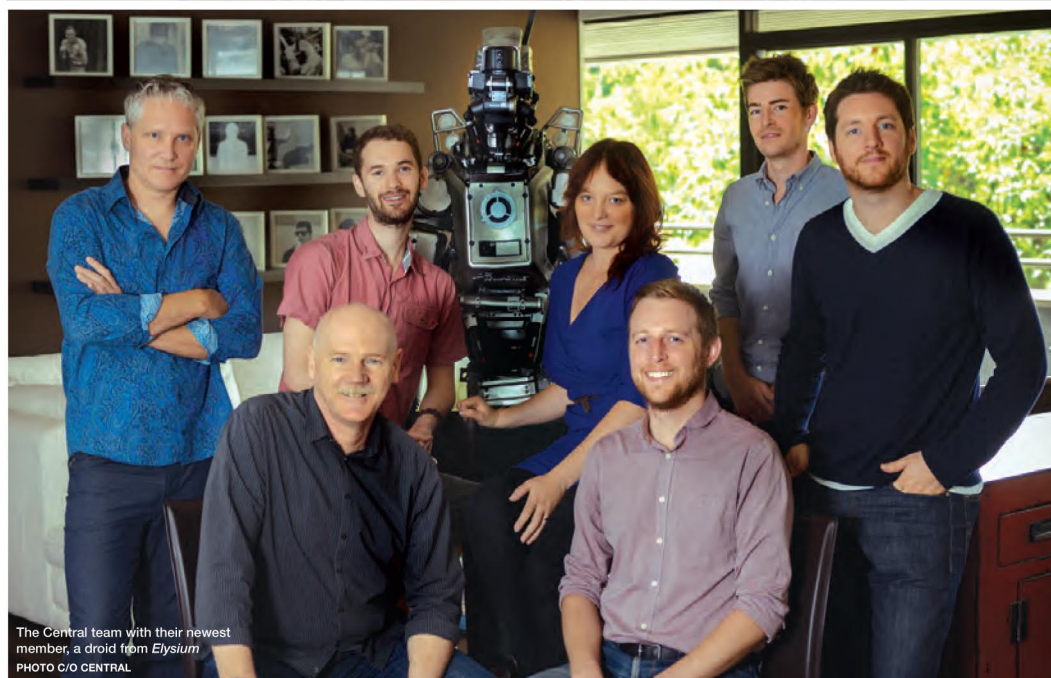
then kind of think 'huh, that was really cool, why not do that, next time.'"

Chlebak agrees. "The sheer product of *Elysium* is a proof that we can absolutely finish a film, which should, you could hope, be something that would draw productions to stay here."

"*Elysium*, at least in my view, is very much a high water-mark for visual effects in the city," says Walsh. "Seeing the work get done at such a high quality level, working so well with other vendors, in a non-competitive way, in a community-feel where everybody was trying to do the best for the movie and accomplishing all of that from a base in Vancouver, is a huge accomplishment." ■



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The Central team with their newest member, a droid from *Elysium*
PHOTO C/O CENTRAL