

James Cameron on Writing *Avatar* with F.X. Feeney

(A Writtenby.com Exclusive)

Last month, after a screening of *Avatar* at the Writers Guild Theater for an audience of WGA members, James Cameron spoke with F. X. Feeney. Here's an abridged, slightly edited version of their discussion.

F. X. Feeney: The imagery is so spectacular—partway through I was thinking to myself, *This isn't movie making—this guy is dreaming out loud.* And that, come to think of it, may be a good definition of storytelling. But how do YOU define story?

James Cameron: Storytelling is so innate to my process that I don't think of it in those terms. Usually by the time I think "there might be something here," enough to sit down and tell it, I've already got all these story fragments and some urge to go in a certain direction. I'm almost "past" the story by the time I start thinking about it, in a way. After that, it's just structuring it out. A story is always a journey of a character, and the audience usually piggybacks on that character, whoever that character is. Sometimes that breaks down when you have multiple characters and multiple story lines. The first thing I ever wrote was *The Terminator* and there we were following three different narrative lines and they converge at a certain moment in time and space at the end of the first act, and then after that you pretty much follow Sarah with a couple of cutaways to the Terminator. This

doesn't exactly always hold, but for me, it's easiest to write stories that are the journey of a single character.

Feeney: You've said that with *Titanic* you were after a "through the screen" moment—that instant where the person watching the film is no longer outside the picture, but inside the character's heads. In *Titanic*, you felt that moment came when Rose rescues Jack. He's chained to the pipe below decks, and the icy water's coming up, and no one will help her. Are we "through the screen" in that moment because that is *also* when the many story threads suddenly converge?

Cameron: Yeah, because earlier you're bouncing around, you're following a different narrative thread, you're following Jack separately, Rose separately—bouncing around to different characters while the film's taking it's time, coming to a boil. I had a moratorium on watching the film for a long time—I don't know, maybe eight years or something like that—and I finally watched it with my younger kids recently. I hadn't seen it in ages. And I actually felt, right around the time you're saying, when Rose is looking for Jack is when the movie kicks into gear and it's sort of got you by the throat at that point and then it's got you through the end. At that point, you're two hours and 10 minutes into the movie. [LAUGHTER] But why not take your time, to tell a story right? It's a movie, it's not a TV show. The audience can't sit there in the theater and switch channels.

Feeney: David Mamet, writing about story, has said: a character has an intention; once they've either fulfilled that intention or accept that they can't do it, boom, that's when your story ends. I was mulling this a little bit in preparation for our talk and realized there's a moment in *Avatar*, midway through the movie, when Dr. Grace—Sigourney Weaver—says of the soil around the Tree of Voices, “Oh, I would die to get a sample.” And I thought, right! Well, there's your character intention.

Cameron: And as luck would have it, she does.

Feeney: She not only “dies” to get it, and actually fulfills her intention, she gets the sample—but, surprise!—she IS the sample.

Cameron: Yes, she is the sample. That's actually very clever. She is the sample. We don't know exactly what happens to Grace beyond that point—and I'm not saying.

Feeney: I was going to come to this later, but you leave us at such a rich point of departure. The movie starts with the hero's eye opening in closeup, and finishes with his eye opening in closeup as one of the Na'Vi – the same eye opens, but in a new state of being. Do you think the narrative might continue?

Cameron: That was definitely our intention. That's how I pitched it—rather shamelessly—to the studio. I said, “Look, it's going to cost us a fortune to create all these CG assets and characters and everything, but we can use them in other movies, because they'll be free then.” I had

to create a business model. This wasn't just a story pitch; it was a business pitch.

Feeney: Your "own" unobtanium.

Cameron: Yeah, exactly. So -- going beyond the first film was always the intention. I hate the term franchise, but I think the idea of a persistent world—once people have invested in it, and they like characters and like the general environment of a story—once you have these threads coming together, you *can* have continuity over time. I think there's something really cool about that. I've always loved what happened in the *Star Trek* universe. Although I haven't always loved the Lucas universe, I've always loved things within the *Star Wars* movies, and loved the sense of continuity.

Feeney: You said something interesting about the Lucas universe, a few years ago. You were not knocking Lucas at all, but comparing *Star Wars* to the science fiction you were fed upon, growing up—Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, whoever—you argued that science fiction is "about ideas," and that Lucas had lost that thread.

Cameron: No, I meant that he made it kind of the hero cycle. He made it a mythic archetype and there was a joyfulness and a celebration of that, of the energy and the dynamics of that. And that's great, that's wonderful. Unfortunately, what happened was when *Star Wars* came out, all of Hollywood just went that way and *Hollywood* forgot that science fiction historically through the '50's and '60's and '70's up till

Star Wars had been a dystopian kind of genre. Science Fiction was originally about the problems of technology and that unsettling feeling we get as our world changes through technology, into the future. As storytellers, we've lost all that. It just seemed like all of a sudden you couldn't tell *that* story anymore. So *Avatar* was—I suppose you could say is an attempt to have our cake and eat it, too. Do the mythic, heroic story with a sense of destiny and big epic battles and all that, but at the same time have the dystopian, cautionary component in play, too. Have one be the spoonful of sugar to the other.

Feeney: In terms of “hero’s journeys,” there’s a Flying Dutchman on the Internet who has compared *Pocahontas* line by line to the outline of *Avatar*. It’s a good laugh, but at the same time, a primal story is a primal story.

Cameron: I debated having the Colors of the Wind song in *Avatar*, but...
[LAUGHTER] We almost did. We put one at the end.

Feeney: You take a primal story—a little like the way opera composers have a take a story that is well known so that you can try out all kinds of new music, to advance the theme. This feels necessary, in your case. If you had taken a story that was *less* familiar, people might have gotten lost in the wilderness that you create. I want to talk about that.

Cameron: A great part of myth is familiarity. Myth *has* to feel like it has roots in prior art – going back, through traditions of storytelling, going back quite far. In approaching *Avatar*, I thought: “Oh, my god, I’ve got this

horrendous—huge—start-up torque of exposition. You're going to another planet; the guy's a paraplegic; he's got a back story, and what's happening on the planet? They're mining "unobtainium." Unobtainium is a room-temperature super conductor, it floats in a magnetic field. Meantime, they've got this "avatar" program and our hero is going to pass into a link – in hard technical terms, "a psionic link" – and he's going to enter into another body, and through that body into another culture. And people are going to ask, "If you die in that world do you –?" blah, blah.

And when I started to write the script, I was probably 60 pages in before he got into the jungle. So I said, all right, well, this shit ain't workin'. I need to drop back, make the movie much more visual, much less dialogue—pages of dialogue flew across the room—and I completely retold the story in a much more familiar, archetypal way. Still, embedded within that—it's always amusing to me when somebody says, wow, that's just *Dances with Wolves*. Yeah, right, I think: because *Dances with Wolves* took place on another planet where people projected their consciousness into their bodies that were 10 foot tall and blue—but it's like, no. We intentionally wanted to use familiar touchstones of storytelling that were historical, and reflect them through a lens of the future. This way, we could take some of these more difficult concepts, seed them in there, and let people pick

them up along the way. All they would have to trip over would be those ideas, and not the big gestural stuff.

Feeney: Dr. Grace has actually quite a complex destiny based on the simple statement, “I would die to get that sample.” Her deeper intention is to merge with this planet in some way. She succeeds. But then every character is basically fulfilling something, even the Colonel—even though he’s a full-on bully, with that raptor-scar on his noggin—

Cameron: He’s Ahab. He’s “an Ahab character,” absolutely. He’s been scarred by that place psychologically and emotionally. Meanwhile he justifies everything to himself as “I’ve got a mission to do, I’ve got to protect these people, I’ve got to protect these guys. That’s my job, whatever it takes.” In fact, it’s become obsessive for him. That’s very clear, it’s very simple. Again, we all know the Ahab archetype. Grace was actually fun because here’s someone who so wants to understand, is so in love with this place and with this world, especially this sort of plant consciousness that’s she’s dimly aware of, she’s getting this glimmering sense of what this thing can really be—and she gets to merge with it. She gets to merge with the mind of a plant, *as a botanist*. That’s a pretty cool idea.

Feeney: In a way it’s the flip side of the same obsessive Ahab-coin, because she has what might be called a positive death wish and he has a negative version. He says the natives of Pandora won’t win, “Not while I’m breathing.”

Cameron: [CHUCKLES] That can be arranged. ...As Steven Lang [the actor who plays the Colonel] would say, “You think two arrows to the heart is going to take me out? It ain’t over till my DNA is expunged from the universe.” He’s a pretty funny guy if you ever get a chance to meet him. We call him “Slang,” Steven Lang. He’s a very nuanced actor, very chameleonic, almost unrecognizable from role to role – a very accomplished stage actor and well recognized in New York. He understood the power of creating an iconic character. The trick was in *not* trying to push against what the character was, but to push instead *toward* what the character was. “What you see is what you get.” The shot that defines his character is when he’s sitting on the workout bench under the light, and his body is all covered by scars and he has this wry look on his face, looking at the new guy coming in. It’s an image—his character, in a sense, *is* an image. He never changes. He’s a frickin’ rock, there’s no “character arc” for him. He’s the same guy as he’s dying that he was at the get-go. I think that’s okay. I actually had this problem with Leonardo on *Titanic*. I said, “You don’t change; she changes. You go through a lot of stuff and you impart knowledge to her and there’s a transfer of energy from you to her. She’s the character that changes. You’re the pivot.” And he hated that. “I don’t get an arc?” No, you don’t get an arc.

Feeney: You’re doing several things in *Avatar* that feel new. One of them strikes me as a fusion. That is to say, the word “avatar” could mean a

divine being in a human body, but more commonly now, in game-speak, “an avatar” is your representative on a game board. As games have become more narrative-driven, it strikes me that you’re fusing the two forms. By creating a scenario where we can elect where we want to invest our sympathies, so to speak, the viewer may be “gaming the movie” while they’re watching it – trying to “out-think” it.

Cameron: I think you do that for awhile throughout the film, and certainly it was our intention in the Ubisoft game [developed for release in tandem with *Avatar*] that you can pick one side or the other. You can play for the blue team or the green team. But because this movie, and therefore a journey through the eyes of a character—Jake—when he picks a side, my intention is, you pick that side. The question is, can you take an audience of human beings and get them to vote against themselves by the end of the movie? The answer is yes, you can. Everybody cheers for the blue guys, because subconsciously people know the truth of how this movie works, which is that *the Na’vi are human as well*. The Na’vi represent the better aspects of ourselves that we wish we were or hope we’re evolving toward, and the humans in the film represent the more venal, corrupt, aggressive, “entitled” versions of ourselves that we hope that we’re evolving away from. It’s really all about human ideas and human emotions. We’re just reflecting it back again through that mirror of science fiction.

Feeney: There's been a report on CNN about an interesting problem psychiatrists have been having. Apparently some people are so ecstatic in wanting to be Pandorans that they really don't want to come back out and they've have to be kind of talked down. This is not your problem—it seems to be more of a rave review. But it touches on a serious matter: the power of a story.

Cameron: It *is* the ultimate rave review. I think there's a certain degree of fan hyperbole in that report, but to the extent that it may be true, I would say this movie was meant to reacquaint us with the miracle of the natural world here on our *own* planet. We don't know of a planet Pandora. We don't know of any other planet that really has life at this point, so if you really feel that way, talk a walk in the woods on a misty morning or go fishing or go snorkel around on a coral reef in Hawaii or something. That's really what it's about. We live in a society that's progressively moving toward a state of nature deficit disorder and people just need to reconnect, that's all.