

SAY HALO TO MY LITTLE FRIEND THE WARTHOG

Underneath the skin of this futuristic film prop is a One Ten Land Rover. Fraser Barsby visited the set in London to see how on earth they did it

PHOTOS: SIMON LEE



written a script for Jackson's Halo movie, the project fell into limbo. This is where Peter Cooper, writer and director of this new film, steps in. Peter is a huge fan of Halo and spent many years waiting for a film adaptation. Frustrated by the delay, producer Nicola Instone and he brought together fans with film-industry expertise to get his own fan film made.

Fan films can slip through a loophole when it comes to the legal side of who owns the rights to a franchise: so long as the film is released only online and is non-profit-making, it can be done.

When we meet with Peter, he's busy on the set of the new film Operation Chastity at Uxbridge RAF base, but he spares us a few minutes to talk about the Warthog.



The gaming version of the Warthog



Keeping an eye on the action

'In the real world the Warthog is an impossible vehicle,' Peter says. 'It's ridiculously large: three metres wide and more than six metres long. Even building one based on a Hummer would be too small.'

Standing next to the thing, it doesn't look small to me. Not only does it have an imposing presence on the set, but it looks extremely capable. It stands quite tall and this height is exaggerated by the exposed suspension.

On closer inspection you can see the spacer struts under the coils, while the repositioning of the dampers gives about four more inches of lift. The film industry is all about illusion and it's only when you get close to the Warthog that you see it's made of spare parts.

On a trip to Tunisia a while ago, I toured the sets of the Star Wars films. Even here they dress a set with whatever's to hand: old TVs, washing machine parts and toys make up the 'futuristic technology'.

The same applies to the Warthog, especially in the cockpit, where parts from radio-controlled helicopters and old stereos are fixed to the dash. But the attention to detail is incredible and the finished look is very convincing.

The original donor vehicle was an A-reg One Ten station wagon that had failed its MoT. Peter negotiated with the scrapyard on the price, agreeing to buy the rolling chassis for £400 and offering all the panels back to the scrapyard.

Nevertheless, the Warthog is the most expensive prop on the film and, as is common with low-budget productions, much of the cost has come out of Peter's own pocket. As a result, he's actually the registered keeper.

When I ask if he parks it on his drive, he laughs: 'I'd like nothing better than to have it parked in London for everyone to see. I'd tell them "Yep. That's mine. I drive a Warthog. Move along!"'

In reality, it's on SORN and kept in a lock-up. But it does beg the question - is it road-legal? 'I don't think it ever would be,' says Peter. 'I wish it were, but there are so many angles - not to mention the front tusks - that make it potentially lethal. However, if it were, I'd have to get the registration WAR740G...'

To find out more about the build of the vehicle, I caught up with chief fabricator and project co-ordinator Daniel Carey-George, who spent

two years building the vehicle up from the bare chassis. Although the engine bay is surrounded by a steel main frame, everything is mounted to the chassis or firewall. To gain clearance at the front, Dan trimmed the cooling fan's plastic blades, and remounted the radiator vertically. This meant the engine bay could be narrower and taper at the front to suit the styling of the Warthog.

Even though the Warthog is smaller than the 'real' thing, it's still all in proportion. So the front winch has been cut around the radiator, to ensure that it's still fitted to the proportions of the Warthog design.

The water reservoir was remounted, too, as this had lost its normal mounts when the standard bodywork was removed.

The bulkhead has been cut down and reduced in height by nearly eight inches. The steering wheel column was moved further into the firewall, with new brackets and mounting holes cut. The air filter housing has been cut from its mounts and re-welded as low as possible. I also notice quite a bit of chassis patching around the radiator, probably due to some rot.

I ask Dan how close the Warthog is to being road-legal. 'This is very tricky,' he admits. 'I've always told Peter it could be done, but to do so would be a job in itself. When building it, I used road-legal lights all round with this in mind. The dash still houses the standard speedo for the same reason.'

Although the wheels are covered by the body, they are very exposed, so they'd need separate covers for an MoT and seatbelts would need to be fitted. The windscreen isn't made out of safety glass, so that would need solving.

The only things the vehicle doesn't have are mirrors or indicators, although these would be fairly easy to fix. 'I'd use motor cycle units, which are generally a bit more stylish than car ones,' says Dan. 'But, let's face it, the tusks at the front would have to go.'

Looking at the vehicle, it's immediately obvious that much bigger wheels could be fitted. But Dan, says they spent as much as could be allocated for the tyres, as new rims were also needed.

'We wanted balloon tyres - really knobby ones, which get more expensive as they get chunkier. There's ample turning clearance now so, if the budget had allowed, we could have gone bigger. I did try to flip the wheels [fit them inside-out in order to increase the tracking and width of the vehicle], but sadly the rims fouled the brakes. That would have looked brilliant if it had worked.'



On-board controls haven't changed much in 400 years



My other car's a Centurion tank



Dirty movie: the crew apply mud



Now, that's what we call a patina



Fraser wonders: 'What's my motivation?'



War is hell: touching up the cast's make-up



Hmmm. Winch hook looks a bit flimsy

IT'S ONLY WHEN YOU GET CLOSE TO THE WARTHOG THAT YOU SEE IT'S MADE OF SPARE PARTS

WHAT IS HALO

If you're like me and never actually grew up, you'll have played Halo on an Xbox 360 games console. If not, here's a quick intro... The story of Halo revolves around a super soldier - the Master Chief - as he travels the universe in the war against the Covenant - an alien race determined to wipe out humanity. Playing the game involves a great deal of shooting and blowing up stuff with the help of marines and cool war machines, such as the Warthog. Halo is massive in gaming terms and the latest game in the series, Halo Reach, will probably set new records. To put it into perspective, Halo 3 made more than \$300 million in the first week of its release.



Dan shows me how the bodywork of the Warthog was constructed around a steel subframe with a thin ply skin riveted on. This was then coated in a glassfibre gel-coat, as well as glassfibre matting on the inner areas. Panel details were added with a small router, although the vehicle's military nature meant that less work was required to give it a smooth finish.

Kings Langley Land Rover did its bit by shoehorning in a custom-built battery tray under the bonnet, as well as a lawnmower fuel tank. It also lifted the suspension and sorted out the brakes.

Even in the movie world it's not all plain sailing when working on a Land Rover. 'A greater budget on the donor vehicle would have saved a lot of time, as rusted bolts and knackered radiators can be very frustrating,' explains Dan. 'You want to be spending your time being creative, not patching holes and heating up seized bolts.'

Dan admits that with so much added weight from the steel frame, the ride does suffer. Being open top and looking like a beach buggy, you'd expect it to be a bit lively, but it's quite the opposite. The normally aspirated diesel doesn't have much grunt and steering is virtually non-existent.

Dan tells me that Land Rovers are a popular choice to use as base vehicles for the movie business: 'The engines are pretty strong, they're easy to strip down and the mechanicals can be repaired with ease. The older vehicles can be driven in a very basic form, with no complicated electrics to go wrong. They're perfect for turning into something special.'

Dan's proud of the machine he's created and, despite it looking a little crude up close, I'm amazed how convincing it is as a film prop. Fans will love it. There's so much passion being put into this project by cast and crew. So it's fitting that the centrepiece of the movie is one that has a huge fan base of its own.

Log on to operationchastity.com for updates on the film's progress. It's due for release by the end of the year. **LRO**



The UNSC commandos swing into action



'Armour' is just ply and glassfibre



One of these buttons starts the Warthog. The other is self-destruct



I love the smell of Warthog in the morning...

Suspension is lifted by four inches with spacer blocks under the springs



THE BUILD



Dirty and scary - and so's the Warthog

