

Two years later, Weta had thirty computers, and Jackson and his partner Fran Walsh, who were working on *The Frighteners* (1996), began to wonder what an ambitious project for Weta could be. They thought about a fantasy film, agreeing that the story had to have depth. "Like *The Lord of the Rings*." It needed a sense of reality. "Like *The Lord of the Rings*." And yet have an element of magic. "Like the . . . Hang on, could we do *The Lord of the Rings*?" They assumed the rights were sure to be tied up or unavailable, but made an inquiry nonetheless.

At the time, Jackson and Walsh had a "first look" deal with Miramax; practically anything they wanted to do had to be offered to this studio first. By coincidence or fate, Miramax was busy at that time with *The English Patient* (1996), produced by a guy named Saul Zaentz — who still controlled all rights for *The Lord of the Rings*. Jackson talked to Miramax, Miramax talked to Zaentz, and Zaentz, of course, said . . . "not interested" to Jackson's and Walsh's idea.

Right now, you're probably saying something along the lines of Fred Savage's character in *The Princess Bride*: "You're reading the story wrong!"

In fact, Zaentz had said no to many people who had made inquiries over the years. The producer did not want to be burned again. This was a guy who was used to winning the Oscar for Best Picture, and he once said the only production of his he wasn't satisfied with was that darn animated *Lord of the Rings*.

It would have been the end for Jackson's and Walsh's idea, but they had Miramax interested, and this studio had a trump card to play. You see, *The English Patient* was supposed to be financed by 20th Century Fox, but just as filming was to begin that studio backed out. It was Miramax that stepped in and saved the day. The film went on to win nine Oscars, and Zaentz knew he owed Miramax big-time. After nine months of negotiations, Miramax acquired the rights to make *The Lord of the Rings*, and in 1997 preproduction began on the greatest film adventure in history.

Jackson and Walsh wanted to begin with *The Hobbit* and (assuming that was a success) move on to the *Lord of the Rings*. But Zaentz didn't own all the rights to *The Hobbit*, so Miramax decided to skip it and get right into *The Lord of the Rings*. With no successful prequel, the studio wasn't willing to finance three films right out of the gate; it gave the green light for two. (This sounds familiar, doesn't it?) Not that Miramax's owner, the Walt Disney Company, looked at then as



Peter Jackson has been described as cool as an elf, mad as a wizard, and cuddly as a hobbit. (Ian Smith)

two. To Disney's chief executive officer, Michael Eisner, Miramax was making one film, and he wouldn't allow the studio to spend more than \$75 million on it.

In the past, \$75 million had been a lot of money. (And to most of us it still is.) But as previously mentioned, the film industry was changing, and by the late 1990s nine figures was no longer a monster budget. Indeed, films such as *Titanic* (1997) and *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999) made \$100 million budgets look downright modest. As the *Rings* project progressed, \$75 million began to look woefully inadequate for two films heavily dependent on special effects.

Miramax, under pressure from Disney, had no choice but to ask Jackson to make one two-hour film. When he refused, the project threatened to unravel for everybody. Jackson's agent, Ken Kamins,