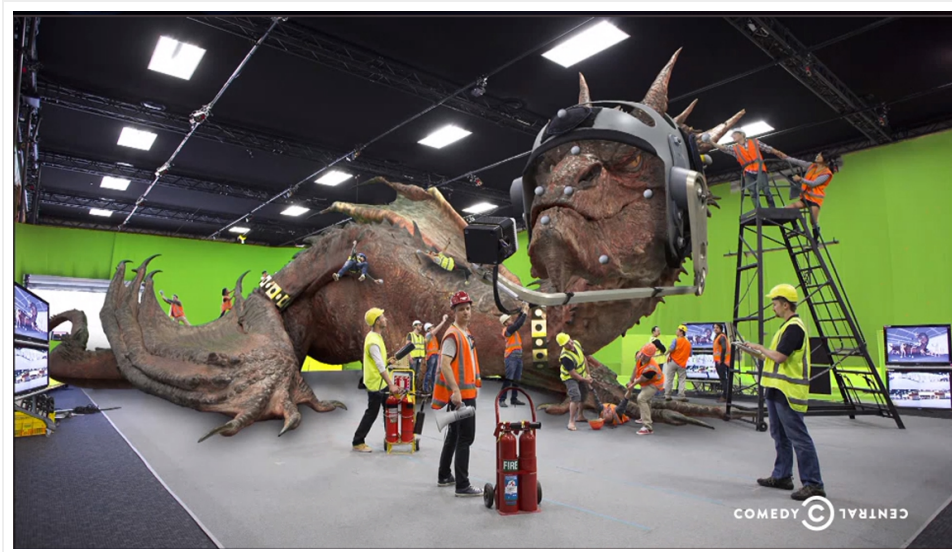


Smaug Versus Colbert

by **Joe Fordham**

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— Smaug in motion capture gear ready for his encounter with comedian Stephen Colbert

Viewers of Comedy Central's satirical news show *The Colbert Report* have long been aware that the series' deadpan Conservative commentator, comedian Stephen Colbert, is a die-hard fan of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Colbert has famously called out filmmaker Peter Jackson on numerous points of Middle-earth lore, and his Tolkien pop-quiz smack-downs with actor and fellow Tolkien fan James Franco are legendary. Jackson and company welcomed the witticisms and scholarly insights by rewarding Colbert with a cameo appearance in *The Desolation of Smaug* as a 'Laketown Spy,' and Colbert reciprocated by emceeing a Hobbit panel at San Diego Comic-Con earlier this summer.

Last Thursday, in the run-up to the North American opening of Jackson's final Middle-earth chapter, *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*, Colbert one-upped every talk show host in town, and amazed audiences worldwide, by inviting the dragon Smaug, mighty guardian of the dwarf kingdom of Erebor, to his Comedy Central studio as a talk show guest.

- [Click here to watch the video if you're outside the USA](#)

While roaming the halls of Weta Digital in preparation for our coverage of *The Battle of the Five Armies* in our upcoming Spring edition, Cinefex caught up with Weta Digital visual effects supervisor Matt Aitken who, with senior visual effects supervisor Joe Letteri, led a small army of artisans responsible for bringing Tolkien's fearsome fire Drake to the small screen.

CINEFEX: So, Matt, how far in advance did you know about Smaug's *Colbert Report* appearance before the broadcast date?

MATT AITKEN: We had a whole two weeks advance notice on that one. I think Peter Jackson was being kind to us, letting us finish the film. From what I gathered, he and Stephen Colbert cooked this thing up between them. And they had the dialog recorded for a few weeks. My understanding is that Benedict was in a sound booth in London doing some final dialog replacement for Smaug quite late in the day. And at the end of that session, they tagged on the voice recording for the *Colbert Report* interview. The way they did it was Stephen telephoned Benedict while he was in the booth, and they recorded the session on an iPhone to give us performance reference video of him recording Smaug's side of the dialog. They essentially ad-libbed the interview and went through it two or three times. I think there was the basis of a script, but there was a lot of ad-libbing going on, as well. I don't think it will ever get seen, but that video footage was gold, seeing Benedict performing and then cracking up between lines.

CINEFEX: I noticed that Smaug was limited to just his head and one hand peeking into Colbert's studio – was that also a mercy call by Pete, to help visual effects?

MATT AITKEN: Well that was a combination of things. It was about how much of Smaug could we practically see in the context of that studio space. We didn't want him to appear too small, by cramming him into that tiny space. We also didn't have time to build a whole studio interior to accommodate all of Smaug's interactions. We just built the part of the stage that you see in the single-shots on Smaug, that was the extent of our digital set.

CINEFEX: You built a digital version of the Colbert studio?

MATT AITKEN: We did. Comedy Central sent us some stills. We digitally modeled some of the props that are sitting on the shelves that Smaug busts through, the kinds of thing that Colbert has collected over the years — he has his Captain America shield, and various other bits and pieces. We included that in the wreckage of where Smaug busts through. We had to have that much built, because he busts his way in, and we had to do some destruction around that. It was a lot of fun to do. And the *Colbert Report* team was great to work with. They are a really great bunch of people.



CINEFEX: How ever did you put all that together, with the animation, in two weeks?

MATT AITKEN: Well, Pete presented it to us the day after we delivered our final shots on *Five Armies*. My other fellow visual effects supervisors, Eric Saindon and Chris White, were already otherwise engaged, and so I got to pick it up. I broke it out into shots. It turned out to be about six minutes of character animation, about 50 shots, and so we just went wide with it. We got all the animators who had been working on Smaug all year and gave them a couple of shots each, and that is how we got it done. They did fantastic work. After rendering *The Hobbit* feature footage in stereo at 48 frames per second, rendering at high definition TV resolution at 24 frames per second was a breeze. The Weta Digital render wall was wide open, so we were able to take over the whole render wall to get it rendered in time. We shipped it at the very last minute, and I was a little bit nervous to see how it played out. But it played out just great, and it seems to have been incredibly well received.

CINEFEX: It certainly did. And we got see a new side to Smaug's personality. I think he's a natural for Hollywood.

MATT AITKEN: Yeah, exactly! We were very pleased it went over so well.

- [Weta Digital](#)
- [The Colbert Report](#)

Thanks to David Gougé, Amy Minty and Alison Branch. *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* photograph copyright © 2012 by Warner Bros. Pictures and courtesy of Weta Digital.

