

OFF

THE



CHART

Tom Holland takes adventuring to the next level in videogame adaptation **Uncharted, which has had a long and arduous journey to the screen. Total Film meets the film's cast and director to find out how a pitch for a young James Bond evolved into an unexpected origin story.**

WORDS JACK SHEPHERD

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Tom Holland was mid-swing on *Spider-Man: Homecoming* when a PlayStation was craftily snuck into his trailer. There had been a handful of delays on the superhero set and Holland's thumbs were being twiddled dry out of boredom, but when the actor retired that day, a surprise new console was waiting to keep those hands busy. A few games were bundled in, but only one stood out: *Uncharted: A Thief's End*, the fourth instalment in the swashbuckling, Indiana Jones-esque series.

"I don't know if that was [Sony Pictures chairman] Tom Rothman planting a seed early on, but I played that game and loved it," an excited Holland tells *Total Film*, finally able to discuss the long-gestated film at length.

However, despite Holland being initially won over by *Uncharted's* cinematic qualities, there was no indication that he would be the right man to bring Nathan Drake – a wise-cracking, adventure-seeking hero with an appetite for treasure – to the big screen. "It never occurred to me that I could play him," he continues, pointing out the character's age, mid-thirties. That all changed after a pitch meeting – just not one initially linked to *Uncharted*.

"I had a meeting, after or during *Spider-Man 2* [Far From Home], with Sony to pitch this idea of a young Bond film that I'd come up with," Holland explains. "It was the origin story of James Bond. It didn't really make sense. It didn't work. It was the dream of a young kid, and I don't think the Bond estate were particularly interested.

"But the idea of a young Bond film sparked this idea, in turn, that you could do a Nathan Drake story as an



origin story, rather than as an addition to the games. And that opened a conversation, and we started to discuss if I could play this role. After meeting with various directors and scriptwriters and storyboard artists, we made the decision that I was going to be Drake. And here we are now."

Indeed, here we are now, a few weeks out from *Uncharted* reaching cinemas. Yet, Holland's story begins towards the end of this adaptation's long, winding road to cinemas.

Instead, we have to look back to the late noughties – when David O. Russell was first pinned to direct *Uncharted* and Mark Wahlberg was set to play the lead role – to truly appreciate how long this journey has been.

"I've been attached for so long, at one point I was playing Nathan Drake, and now I'm playing [older mentor figure] Sully," Wahlberg says over the phone from Los Angeles. Russell's initial vision was "drastically different" to the final film, Wahlberg says, not going into specifics. "But I think definitely, by taking the time to figure out the tone, they've made the best version of the film," he adds.

After Russell left the project to direct *Silver Linings Playbook*, Wahlberg soon followed, and Neil Burger – who, at the time, had just finished *Limitless* – was put in the directing chair. He then withdrew to helm *Divergent*, with *Horrible Bosses'* Seth Gordon coming on board, only to leave a year later

Tom Holland plays the iconic Nathan Drake in *Uncharted*.



MARK WAHLBERG

Do you have a history with the games?

I played it just to kind of check it out, but I'm not a big videogame guy. I just felt like it was so cinematic. It felt much more like a big, giant, adventure movie than any other videogame I've ever seen or played.

How would you describe Sully and Nate's relationship in this movie?

There's not a lot of trust there. Nate's pretty smart, and he knows that Sully is scamming everyone he meets. So it's interesting how it plays out, and having to earn each other's trust and respect.

Production temporarily shut down due to the pandemic. Did your approach to filming change at all after such a prolonged break?

Of course. I'm always living a monk's type of existence in that, I get up, I work out, I prepare for my work, I go to work, I come back to the hotel, and I just stay in the hotel anyway.

But the world has changed so drastically, and I don't know if it'll ever go back to normal, because, you don't only have to worry about doing your job, you have to worry about everybody being safe, and that was the most important thing.

But I always kind of have the same approach. I'm not sightseeing in the city, and going off to restaurants and all that stuff, all too much.

Would you be keen to head back into the world of *Uncharted*?

Look, the audience will decide if they love the movie, and if they want to make another one. I always go into everything that I'm doing as: "OK, I'm playing this part, and then as soon as I'm done with that, I'm off in search of the next thing."

But, if there was a massive demand for it, and people want to see it, and we can make it better than the first one, then that's worth having a discussion about, for sure.

You've been in a few franchises, but never a Marvel or DC movie. Would you be keen to appear in one of those?

I just take one project at a time. I've been working on *The Six Billion Dollar Man* for quite a while, which is also an uphill battle. But that one's much more grounded. It's a guy who appears to be a regular guy, who just happens to be scientifically enhanced to be able to do some incredible things. But are you asking if I would have the courage to walk out of my trailer in a cape or a costume?

Go on, would you?

I don't know. It would depend - and if Marty was directing it. **JACK SHEPHERD**

for *Baywatch*. Shawn Levy eventually entered negotiations to direct in 2016, and a year later Holland was cast as the younger Nathan Drake. Another year passed and Levy departed to take on *Free Guy*. Dan Trachtenberg and Travis Knight came and went in quick succession, with *Venom*'s Ruben Fleischer finally taking *Uncharted* into production in 2020.

"I don't want to say anybody else didn't deliver on the material," Wahlberg - who rejoined the project in late 2019 - says when asked why Fleischer succeeded where so many others had failed. "The other ones didn't pan out for various reasons. But ultimately, it's a big thing for the studio. It's up to them to get to ➔





SOPHIA ALI

Do you have a history with the games?

I had never played them. Both of my brothers are really into gaming. I'd seen them play it before, in passing. But then I played it when I got the part, and I was really pleasantly surprised. I really, really enjoyed my time playing it. And I don't play games very often. I'm not a gamer.

How did you go about making Chloe your own, rather than just borrowing from the games?

It was actually easy because there's so much of Chloe that I physically cannot do [laughs]. Because she is such a physical badass. She can fight. She can do crazy tricks I've never seen. There's so much about her that was limited by the fact that I'm human. And that was helpful, in a lot of ways.

As far as character development, I tried my hardest to make her my own version of Chloe from the game. I knew that I could do that by simply trying to be her. I wasn't going to be able to encapsulate all of her or the character from the game. I was going to sneak in some parts.

Did you have to get into shape for this?

I trained more than I ever have for anything. I'd actually never trained for anything [laughs]. When we shut down before Covid, it gave us some more time. It was a break, and the whole time I was working out every day. And then when we got there for rehearsals, there were some times that I'd be working out for six hours a day, between training, rehearsals, and in the gym.

How would you describe your character's relationship with Nathan Drake?

Chloe doesn't trust anyone, and especially as she's just meeting Nathan, she's definitely going to be tentative. And she's so fiercely independent. She doesn't need anyone. You're not going to catch her kissing ass, that's for sure.

Was there anything you did where you were just like, "Wow, this is insane"?

There were sets that were built that were very extraordinary. When I was a kid and I wanted to be an actor, I had an idea of what it would be like to make a big blockbuster movie. And it was exactly that. Everything's greenscreen nowadays, but it wasn't.

They had really gone in and intricately designed these massive sets. For the catacombs, they built massive 10-foot urns; they had a ship that was suspended 30 feet in the air; it had every intricate detail along the boat, to some moss on the side of it.

It's so detailed. It felt so real in the moment. It blows my mind.

JACK SHEPHERD

→ a place where they're comfortable with the script, and then Ruben came in, and he really had a great take on the material."

Holland agrees. "Some of [the directors] came in, and had ideas that we didn't like, that just didn't fit the characters, and we had to move on to other people," he says. "We took inspiration from everyone. There were very different variations of Drake, and very different variations of Sully. Some people preferred to make the game, some people wanted to make it completely different to the game. It was an interesting process – one that I wouldn't like to be in again. It's quite stressful looking for a director."

Fleischer, for his part, says landing *Uncharted* was partly down to his long-standing relationship with the studio, the director having just finished back-to-back work on *Venom* and the *Zombieland* sequel for Sony. In fact, Fleischer was first publicly attached to *Uncharted* in early January 2020, with principal photography starting mid-March that same year. "I was firing on all cylinders from a production standpoint," he says,

speaking to *Total Film* while in the final stages of post-production on the movie. "I was just really in the rhythm of making movies."

Everything "snapped into place in a great way" when the first scenes were shot in Berlin – and after a decade of development hell, *Uncharted* was finally in front of cameras. And then, just two days later, Covid struck. "It got completely turned on its head," Fleischer says. The set was shut down and everyone went home – but no-one, it seems, stopped working.

For his part, Holland started beefing up, working out and drinking "two or three" protein shakes a day, hoping to match Wahlberg's physique. While Peter Parker's still a high-schooler, Nathan Drake's an old-school action hero, and Holland needed the body to match.

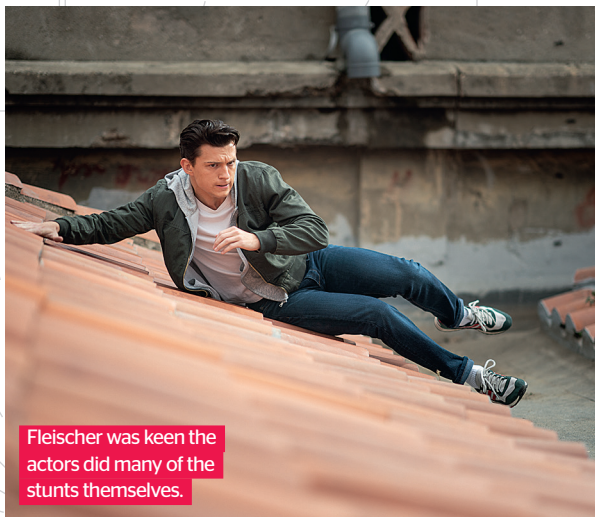
"Drake is the hero of the story in his own right, whereas Peter Parker is the hero of the story because he's Spider-Man," he says. "So playing Nathan Drake – he's got a little bit of swagger to him. He's supposed to be cool and collected and dangerous at times. And it was difficult, because playing



Mark Wahlberg plays Drake's future-BFF Sully.



Sophia Ali joins the expedition as fellow adventurer Chloe Frazer.



Fleischer was keen the actors did many of the stunts themselves.



someone who's very awkward comes very naturally, because I am quite an awkward person. But playing someone who's really cool and handsome and well-travelled is a little bit left-field for me. I just felt very self-conscious at the beginning."

Meanwhile, Fleischer found himself with more time to prepare for the shoot. "It was strangely very helpful because I was brought on last-minute, and so I didn't have nearly the prep that I would have preferred. I was doing everything at once: working on the script; casting; designing the action sequences; all that simultaneously. Being able to have time to just take stock, and really dig in, it only made the movie better."

Three months later, cameras were back up and rolling thanks to Germany's efforts locking down early and slowing the spread of the virus. Holland's hard work was soon paying off, his confidence growing – partly thanks to Wahlberg's presence. "As soon as Mark came to set, I spent the first couple of weeks – not copying him, but just following in his footsteps," he says. "And I gained confidence from that."

transitioning from playing the story's central hero to the mentor role, he's not worried in the slightest. "It was fun, because now I'm playing the old, slick guy," he says. "I don't have to be hanging off of planes and cliffs and all that stuff. I can be barking orders from the helicopter. And obviously, Nathan really knows his stuff, but Sully's introducing him to that world."

"It was fun to watch Tom take on another persona, and to have that swagger and confidence," Fleischer says. "It's a slow build in the film, but he certainly achieved it by the end of the story. And I think that audiences will be really excited to see him at the centre of a new franchise, and bringing to life all these other aspects of the character. He's very endearing and funny, but I think that this is just a really bold, strong performance."

Like *Indiana Jones*, *Romancing The Stone* and *National Treasure* – three movies referenced frequently by everyone involved – *Uncharted* promises to be a globe-trotting adventure. "That was one of the aspects of *Raiders* [Of The Lost Ark] that I always loved the

IT'S A CLASSIC PAIRING THAT MAKES FOR A REALLY FUN ADVENTURE'

RUBEN FLEISCHER

Holland and Wahlberg's characters' relationship is a central part of the movie. In the games, Nathan and Sully are old friends, and the film will explore the origins of their friendship. "The [new screenwriters] had done a really good job of focusing more on Sully and Nathan's origin story," Wahlberg says. "You see them feeling each other out, with Sully obviously trying to pull something over anybody and everybody."

"You have a pairing of a young, wet-behind-the-ears, very excited [newcomer], with an older, grumpier, seen-it-all, been-there-done-that, experienced guy," says Fleischer. "It's a classic pairing that makes for a really fun adventure, and a great relationship to follow. The dynamic is very specific as well. A lot of the humour that we were able to find was through the scriptwriting process, and then also on set with the actors. The banter between the two of them is my favourite part of the film. The dynamic, and the fraternal relationship, is, to me, reminiscent of the best buddy-action movies."

And, if you were wondering whether Wahlberg felt apprehension about

most, going to these exotic places," Fleischer says. "Our movie takes place on three continents: New York, Europe, and then the South Pacific. It truly delivers on that expansive, global feel and look and scale."

NEW TERRITORY

Those cinematic touchstones and that elusive *Indiana Jones* feel were only part of the inspiration, as Fleischer – self-described as not being a "huge gamer" – wanted to give *Uncharted* a modern feel. "[Uncharted] has a higher scale of action, or certainly a more contemporary version," he says. "The scale of action is on par with – or at least aspires to be on par with – *Mission: Impossible* and *Bond*, and that scale of modern action film."

The results speak for themselves. The trailer features a set piece that sees Drake hanging out the end of a cargo plane, clearly inspired by a similar action scene in the third *Uncharted* game. "I mean, the script was ridiculous. It was mad," says Holland. "These action sequences... I've

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➤ done a lot of action sequences, and I've been a part of this action world for quite a long time now. And *Uncharted* is by far the hardest film I've ever made. It was brutal."

Holland's co-star, Sophia Ali, who plays fellow fortune hunter Chloe Frazer, agrees. "This is my first action film. I had no idea what to expect," she says. "I've done a few minor stunts throughout my career, and this is a very stunt-heavy movie. I definitely had bruises all over my body. Nothing that I didn't want to do. I absolutely loved the challenge. But Tom is right: it was a challenge."

"I think the reason Tom and Sophia said it was tough was because they did so much of it themselves," Fleischer says. "I always feel like action is better when you can see the actors' faces in the middle of it. We were lucky enough to have incredibly capable, trained, athletic, young actors at the centre of our films. They trained for the role, and prepared for the action, and then were able to be at the middle of it all."

"When you're falling out the back of a plane, or doing some other incredible stunts – like, Tom was suspended from a wire four storeys off the ground of this lobby for the auction scene; he was dangling – it looks incredible, because he's at the centre of it. They definitely had to do work to sell that reality." (When *TF* puts it to Wahlberg that the others said the shoot was brutal, he replies: "They're young – try doing it at 50.")

LEVELLING UP

With so much action, and such a talented cast – Antonio Banderas also joins as a mysterious villain – there's one question on everyone's lips: can *Uncharted* break the videogame adaptation curse? Can *Uncharted* deliver where *Warcraft* or *Assassin's Creed* or *Super Mario Bros.* have not? The key, Holland thinks, is that *Uncharted* will borrow tone-wise from the games – with particular emphasis on the more grounded fourth game – rather than pulling stories directly from the source material.

"It's definitely a separate thing," he says. "We're borrowing the IP, we're borrowing the characters. In the first three games, which I've now played, you're dealing with paranormal stuff at times. We really wanted to make this something that kids might believe is real. I'd love for young kids to leave the theatre and go, 'I wonder if Nathan





Antonio Banderas is also on a quest for treasure.



Shaken or stirred? *Uncharted* began as Holland's pitch for a young James Bond film.

Drake's out there, looking for treasure right now?' Because I remember when I was a kid, these were my favourite types of films – the swashbuckling films with humour and fun and adventure, travelling the world. I've always been obsessed with seeing parts of the world I've never seen before. Obviously, there are aspects of the film that are totally ridiculous, but they're ridiculous in the best way possible, and for the right reasons."

Fleischer singles out the "grounded, modern reality" of his film, agreeing with Holland that – despite the first game seeing a cursed statue turn humans into mutants, and the second having a magic tree whose sap gives the drinker inhuman powers – you won't be finding any supernatural stories here. "Not to say that it couldn't exist in future instalments, but it doesn't exist in this one," he says. "It pulls from all the games, whether it's the attitude, the humour, the action, the characters. They're not just specific to any one of the games. It's a combination of them all."

"It's very cinematic," Holland adds. "When you watch it in the games,

true. I wanted him to look out in wonder, and enjoy a change in his life."

Sully will similarly be the same-but-different when compared to the games. "He's definitely still after more in life, and quietly trying to recruit Nate," says Wahlberg. "He knows that Nate has some information that would be helpful to him in his next job."

Fleischer breaks down the story further: "It's a classic hero's journey where he's plucked out of somewhat obscurity, and goes on this global adventure. There's a connection to Sully, and that relationship is essential. Chloe is definitely unlike anyone he's ever met before. He can experience the way of a fellow treasure hunter, but also a potential love interest and/or adversary. And there's an emotional connection at the centre of the film, which is his relationship to his brother, who went missing in his life. And in part, this is the quest beyond just to find the treasure – but also to find his brother."

Ah, Drake's brother, Sam, a character who only appeared in the fourth game. There's no word on

'DRAKE IS YOUNG. HE'S WIDE-EYED. HE'S AN ADVENTURER'

TOM HOLLAND

it's easy to see how that should go in a film. There are aspects of the game that we've taken inspiration from. But at heart, this is an origin story. For fans that have played the games, they're definitely getting something new. And for people that have never played the games, it's an origin story. So they don't need to have understood the history or the past of the games to get this film."

By staying removed from the games and telling an origin story, Holland was also free to give a new interpretation of Drake. "I was lucky in a sense that I was playing a Nathan Drake that no one's really seen before," he says. "I didn't have to try to marry the character to the games all that much. My dad, when he was 21, is very different to how he was when he was 35. I felt like I had creative freedom to put my own spin on it. And my own spin, in this case, was to have a little fun. Drake is young. He's wide-eyed. He's an adventurer. And he goes on this adventure that's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and also a dream come

casting, or whether Sam will even appear in the movie, and the cast are silent when he's brought up. Fleischer's instead more open to talking about Nathan and Sully's adversary, an original character for the movies played by Banderas. "He's dealing with this legacy of his family, and the burden of their wealth and their history," Fleischer says. "There's a component of the story that's been unresolved for 500 years. So he's on a parallel quest to find the missing treasure. And there's also a very overbearing family that he has to navigate. There is a lot of dimension to him, and certainly opportunities for empathy. But that being said, he is willing to do whatever it takes at all cost to preserve his family's treasure, and it doesn't really matter to him who gets in the way."

"When you have such strong heroes in Mark and Tom, you need somebody who can hold the screen, and have the same dramatic weight as those two pretty formidable stars. And so getting Antonio was really, really important to me. Even though the character was Spanish, I really felt we needed

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➤ somebody with that pedigree, and I'm thrilled that I was able to work with him, and that he has what he has, and does what he does, which is to completely blow people away with his performance. Having Antonio was essential to the film. That was one of my components as a director that I feel really proud of – bringing somebody on like him who just has an instant gravitas and weight on screen.”

A complicated villain, the search for a long-lost brother, and a globe-hopping adventure; that sounds like the recipe for a proper popcorn flick. But will there be gold at the end of this adventure? Should the box office deliver, then there's room for sequels.

“I really believe in the project,”

Holland says. “I believe in the work we've done. I'm very proud of how hard everyone worked. We also made this film at the height of Covid. I know Tom Cruise loves to say that he brought the film industry back, but he forgot about this little film called *Uncharted* that was shooting four months before he was.

'JUST A JOYFUL, FUN, GLOBETROTTING ADVENTURE'

RUBEN FLEISCHER

So, I'm just very proud of what we've done. And if we were lucky enough to do it again, it would be really exciting. We've only scratched the surface of what Drake and Sully can do.”

Fleischer would also be keen on returning to the world of *Uncharted*: “That would be a dream. There's so much of the world to explore. There's so many hidden treasures to be found. I think the games do a great job of that, and collectively, Tom, Mark, and myself would be thrilled to continue the adventures of these characters.”

Before we jump ahead to a sequel, though, *Uncharted* needs to be a success in itself. And Fleischer believes that, like a mysterious PlayStation arriving just when it needs to, *Uncharted* is heading to cinemas at the perfect time. “That's all I want it to be: just purely fun for an audience,” he says. “Just a joyful, fun, globetrotting adventure that has a little bit of something for everybody. I don't think you'll be disappointed.” Let's hope that, at the end of this long journey, there's treasure to be found.

UNCHARTED OPENS ON 11 FEBRUARY.



UNCHARTED

GAME PLAN

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NATHAN DRAKE'S PLAYABLE ADVENTURES...

UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE 2007

Adventurer Nathan Drake goes on the hunt for the treasure of El Dorado (with the help of companions Elena Fisher and Victor 'Sully' Sullivan), in a game praised for its blockbuster-film scope.

Metacritic score: 88

UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES 2009

In the sequel, Drake's on the hunt for the wish-granting Cintamani Stone, teaming up with Fisher, Sully and Chloe Frazer.

This time, there's a rival mercenary gang, led by Zoran Lazarević. GamesRadar called it "brilliant".

Metacritic score: 96

UNCHARTED 3: DRAKE'S DECEPTION 2011

Taking cues from *Lawrence Of Arabia*, the third game in the series sees him head out to the desert in search of the hidden city, Iram of the Pillars, and flashes back to reveal Sully and Nate's first meeting. A sinking ship and disintegrating plane feature in the top set-pieces.

Metacritic score: 92

UNCHARTED: GOLDEN ABYSS 2011

Set some years before *Drake's Fortune*, this prequel lacked some of the cinematic sweep the series is known for, and didn't add a huge amount of depth to the protagonist, as he uncovers the history of a secret Spanish sect. Card game *Fight For Fortune* also landed on the Vita.

Metacritic score: 80

UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END 2016

Just when Drake thinks he's out, they pull him back in, as Nathan and his brother Sam go in search of pirate treasure in Madagascar. The game was intended as Nathan's swansong, and, fittingly, was celebrated for its open world sections, cinematic visuals and emotionally nuanced narrative.

Metacritic score: 93

UNCHARTED: THE LOST LEGACY 2017

A standalone expansion to *A Thief's End*, this was the first game to *not* feature Nathan Drake. Instead it's led by Chloe Frazer and Nadine Ross, who are on a mission to find the Tusk of Ganesh. The storyline and visuals were praised, while the shift in perspective offered something fresh for a 10-year-old series.

Metacritic score: 84

Filming of *Uncharted* was split between Germany and sunny Spain.