

# Red Alert



Ember and Wade: a steamy romance?



Elemental City is a happening place to be, it seems.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Light My Fire

**Elemental's** Peter Sohn on making his most personal Pixar movie



Concept art for the two characters and the city.



"FIRST OF ALL, NOTHING ABOUT this movie was easy," Peter Sohn, the longtime Pixar creative, tells an audience. Someone has just asked about how *The Good Dinosaur's* director incorporated political themes into *Elemental*, his new animation about Ember – a shopkeeper's daughter made of fire – falling in love with a city inspector, Wade, who's made of water. The two live in the wonderfully colourful Elemental City, but because of their clashing elemental natures they do not normally mix.

"The themes of the film are very personal for me," Sohn continues. "My experiences of growing up in New York and some of the xenophobia that my parents and I faced were all issues that were personal, all things that I, to this day, struggle with. But that's on the darker side. This movie is meant to be a very hopeful one."

For Sohn, whose parents moved from Korea to New York City before he was born, almost everything about *Elemental* is based on some personal truth. He likens the overly emotional Wade to himself and the fiery spirit of Ember to his Italian-American wife. At one point in the movie, Ember's grandmother tells her that

she must "marry fire", which is lifted directly from Sohn's own grandmother telling him to "marry Korean". Yet this story of romance and family is told in perhaps the most abstract way possible – through a funny, technically ambitious animated romance that features zero humans.

"I don't have any experience of pulling a personal story in any other way," he tells Red Alert later. "It's not an autobiography, but there is this general feeling I was trying to chase. And once I talked to a team about that, everyone found their hook into the concepts in their own lives. And all of a sudden, we're building something that is its own thing."





Leah Lewis and Mamoudou Athie voice the characters.

Even among Pixar's large filmography, *Elemental* stands on its own. Sohn points out how some people have drawn comparisons to *Inside Out*, though that's not entirely accurate. He lists a few inspirations: for the love story, there was *Moonstruck*; for an immigration scene, there was *The Godfather Part II*; and for aspects of Elemental City, there was the way Paris is presented in *Amelie*.

"The Venn diagram that I can see [between *Elemental* and *Inside Out*] is that it's just not humans, you're anthropomorphising something," he says. "As a minority, I've always loved those types of movies because it wasn't about race in that way. It was always about something that you could universally connect to. This idea of trying to make something that's truthful and authentic, and trying to find something that's worthy of animating and pushing the technology, is Pixar."

Visual effects supervisor Sanjay Bakshi says that when *Elemental* was initially pitched, it "seemed impossible" to actually make. One of the central problems was how Sohn wanted the elements to just *be* – for instance, there's no

## “I was naive... I didn't realise how difficult it would be”

wood or coal source for Ember's flame, she just *is* fire. The same goes for characters made of water, air, and earth.

"Pixar people are crazy nerds," Sohn says. "They are perfectionists and they get excited about challenges. I was excited about this for those same reasons, but I was naive, I didn't realise how difficult it would be."

One aspect that was particularly tricky to figure out was the way the water characters inwardly reflect light. In some tests, they were constantly changing colour depending on their surroundings. The animators also tried putting realistic eyes on their creations; Sohn says that test footage "could make a good horror movie".

The challenges of *Elemental* were so tough that the pipeline of work that Pixar normally goes through had to fundamentally change. "Pause on a frame and any of these characters

look weird, the characters look wonky," Sohn says. "They look better in motion. You can't say that about Buzz [Lightyear] or [Cars character] Mater. They're just perfect-looking because they're hard materials. These are simulated things that are constantly moving."

### BAD ELEMENTS

Because of these abstract characters, some of the narrative ideas went too far. For instance, at one stage, the elements were going to travel through the ground and under the core of the Earth. "People did not know what was going on... it became this science fiction thing," Sohn says. Those aspects were eventually toned down. "There's still some narrative risk, but at the same time, everyone at Pixar was so supportive – they were all trying to discover what the film needed to be."

In the end, with the help of a team of Pixar's finest creatives, Sohn managed to make a personal film that stays grounded instead of going up in flames. **JS**

*Elemental* is in cinemas from 16 June.

**▶ SCI-FACT!** You may recognise the voice of Wade: Mamoudou Athie played Ian Malcolm's ally Ramsay Cole in *Jurassic World Dominion*.