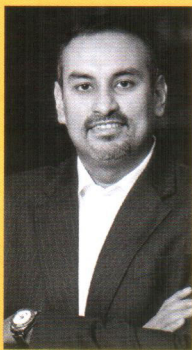
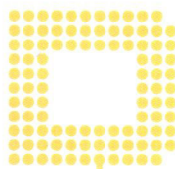


# THE VISUAL EFFECTS GUY



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Namit Malhotra is a busy man. Business for his company Prime Focus has multiplied since its merger with the British company Double Negative and their big Oscar moment this year. In 2016 alone, they're dressing up at least 10 big-budget Hollywood releases, including the upcoming *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. In an industry now thriving on VFX-pumped superheroes and monsters, Prime Focus is prime real estate. Malhotra tells *GQ* about how it all started in a garage in suburban Mumbai.



**Double Negative won its third Oscar this year for *Ex Machina*, after *Inception* and *Interstellar*. Proud moment?**

Yeah, everybody expected the big movies like *Star Wars*, or maybe even *The Revenant* to win. *Ex Machina* was an unexpected, low-budget contender. That makes it special.

**From being just one of the VFX vendors on James Cameron's *Avatar* to this: It's been quite a journey for Prime Focus.**

*Avatar* led to *Clash of the Titans* in 2010. We did a 2D to 3D conversion in a record six weeks, but many in Hollywood were critical. And then *Gravity* (2013) – the best-looking 3D movie – happened. Everyone went, “We can’t believe the guys who did *Clash* did *Gravity*! And it was done in India!” That broke the glass ceiling.

**Do you feel that VFX has suddenly become a big deal?**

Actually VFX is more like when you see creatures and watch destruction, or a big storm or a fire blazing through the forest or creatures flying in the air. Special effects are required to show things that are not visible. All that authentic intergalactic travel on *Interstellar*? Would be impossible

without VFX. It’s about making the physics of a visual believable. Like architecture. Take, for example, a destruction scene with a giant creature emerging from water, while a building falls into it. Someone imagines this, and then experts step in: A creature specialist, a destruction specialist, a water specialist for the building and creature’s interaction with water. Basically, technology has reached a place where whatever you imagine, you can bring to life.

**There’s a bunch of studios involved with VFX and 3D conversion in India now. Yet, some have compared it to the back-office ‘outsourced’ business in other tech-driven industries.**

That probably comes from others in the field who haven’t succeeded. We are a film-making savvy country. There’s a culture of watching movies. It helps that we speak English and that the Indian IT infrastructure is really strong. But really, no film-maker wants to take their prized vision to a cheaper location. They want the greatest movie experience ever. Just like you want the latest iPhone, even though it provides the same technology as a cheaper device. We’ve tried to combine our advantages



with strong R&D centres in the West. Somewhat like Apple's 'Designed in California, Assembled in China' model.

### What first got you interested in this craft?

I was young and impressionable when *Jurassic Park* (1993) came out. My favourite film until then had been *Agneepath* (1990). After watching *Jurassic Park*, I was left wondering: "How did they even think of bringing dinosaurs into a park?" The notion that someone could imagine something like this – let alone make it happen – was very intriguing.

### So, you were always interested in the film industry?

My grandfather, a cinematographer, shot the first coloured movie, *Jhansi Ki Rani*. My father's last movie as film producer was *Shahenshah* with Mr. [Amitabh] Bachchan. I always wanted to be a film-maker. And this isn't far from it. It's a great experience being part of two highly regarded industries – Hollywood and Bollywood. This is better than if I had made three movies in India as a film-maker.

### How did VFX happen?

It started with a computer graphics course, where I made Mickey Mouse walk across the screen. But I was a poor student. There, I met Merzen, Prakash and Huzefa – then my teachers, now my collaborators. We started Prime Focus in 1995: Just four guys in a garage. And now we've got 8,000 people worldwide producing some of the biggest and best work the world sees.

### Quite like Apple. But it couldn't all have been smooth sailing.

For the first 10 years, we only saw huge success. In 2008-2009, the recession hit. Business fell apart in Hollywood.

I bought some companies there and their pain got inflicted upon us. We went through a rough patch. The experience taught me that you've got to prepare for the hard parts, while the journey is good. No entrepreneur can predict when, how or why the rough patch hits. Now I see business in five-year cycles. Every five years, you have to completely reinvent yourself. Kind of like we did. About five years ago, I went to Hollywood and started from scratch again.

### But before all that, you busted your chops in Bollywood.

We started off editing TV serials. Then designed show montages for MTV and Channel V, and did music videos, like the "Jalwa" series. It was really edgy design work which, oddly enough, seems far superior to what's on TV today. Movies only happened in 2002-2003. We created stylized titles for *Devdas* and *Darna Mana Hai*. And digitally processed Harry Baweja's *Qayamat*, Asia's first such processed movie.

The breakthrough came two years later with Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Black*. We digitized and colour-treated every frame post-production. It looked outstanding and the industry took notice.

In the early Noughties, tacky was the name of the game. Visual effects were used in an almost gimmicky way. You know it's not working, but there's probably someone believing in it. Eventually, it's not our place to tell someone that what they are doing is wrong.

Yet, lately there have been a few good ones, like *Baahubali*; and *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo* and *Bajirao Mastani*, both of which were Prime Focus' projects.

[To be honest] VFX is a relatively new development here. The two Seventies' movies – *Star Wars* in the US and *Sholay* in India – pushed Bollywood and Hollywood into different orbits. Forty years later, *Star Wars* became *Avatar*, while *Sholay* became *Prem Ratan...* We've not transitioned from narrative-based storytelling. *Bajirao Mastani*, for instance, is a great attempt at creating a never-been-done-before experience. Next time, though, when they try to portray the love story of a warrior, maybe the war would be a bigger part of the film than the love story.

### Do you find it ironic that so much VFX happens in India, but doesn't reflect in our films? What will it take for a *Krishhh* to match an *Avengers*?

VFX is not magic. It is a lot of smart, hard-working people working long hours, creatively collaborating and delivering. No one in Bollywood is considering this time and effort. Matching the aesthetic level and scale of the West will take time. But it's happening. Indian film-makers are realizing all kids want to watch *Star Wars* and *Iron Man* no matter where they live. *Bajirao Mastani* and maybe even *Baahubali* are great efforts, but visual effects are still the weakest departments on both projects. If we could solve these constraints, budgetary and otherwise, they could come closer to a more epic movie – like *Gladiator*.

### After merging your Hollywood-facing business with Double Negative, you are now also expanding your Mumbai campus. What's next for Prime Focus?

There will be about 1,500 high-end specialists stationed in Mumbai for all crucial aspects of VFX and animation. It will be a resource pool that can be used internationally or domestically.

In the world of FX, augmented reality, digital humans – like a 'real' Shah Rukh Khan or Amitabh Bachchan – and virtual reality are the next big things. We are looking at virtual reality. But what is more important is to gauge how people will interact with VR. Where will this demand come from?

For instance, I didn't know 3D was going to happen. We were just there, ready for it. I don't speculate. I just know change happens and I keep my door open. When you start predicting the future, you take away from the creativity of what is actually happening. ©



A still from *The Legend of Tarzan*; (previous page) *Ex Machina*