

Oh Yes, There Will Be “FLESH AND BLOOD”

Written by Abbie Bernstein

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The audio recording studio in Santa Monica, California doesn't look like the kind of place where SAW's Jigsaw threatens his victims. It's clean, comfortable, brightly lit, with a saltwater fish tank in the reception area and nary a bloodstain, serrated edge or even grimy tile in sight. However, this is where Tobin Bell's voice tracks for his character John Kramer/Jigsaw are being recorded for SAW II: FLESH AND BLOOD, the second installment in Zombie Studios and Konami's video-game series (out today for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3; see screens, concept art and an adults-only trailer below) based on the film franchise.

Bell takes a break from uttering ominous dialogue into the digital microphone and steps out of the sound booth to talk with Fango about his second stint voicing a SAW game. This time, he says, his perennial screen villain will have more a visual presence. “You're going to see more of me,” Bell says of FLESH AND BLOOD. “In the first game, you heard a lot of John Kramer a.k.a. Jigsaw's voice. You'll actually see him in this game. I'm an animated figure. I've seen the visuals of how they've captured my likeness, which are very accurate. Some of the artwork of the locations is just amazing, and the alleyways and tunnels and rooms are pretty striking. I think fans will really enjoy it. There are 50 or 60 choices you can make [during the game], but there are multiple endings that the player can experience.”



There haven't been any major changes to his character between the films and the games, Bell adds. “The timeline in this [game] is somewhere between the first and second movies—closer to SAW II—so that's not generally a problem. Nor has it ever been, because although there are seven different movies, the timeline of John Kramer is not the seven years it has taken us to do the films. It's compressed into two or three years, so his voice remains pretty much the same.”

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SAW II: FLESH AND BLOOD does, however, contain narrative twists that will add to the lore for faithful SAW filmgoers, Bell reveals. “There’s something very interesting going on between SAW and SAW,” he hints. “I don’t think it’s something that’s been revealed yet to most SAW fans, and frankly, I’m not going to reveal it in this conversation. I haven’t even talked to the Konami people about it. So there will be some surprises during this [regarding] SAW II that didn’t happen in the original. Some of what has been written and that we’ve recorded is very much in harmony with Jigsaw’s tone during the films, and Jigsaw makes it very clear to each of the people who are in the situations they’re in why they’re there and what they need to do to get out.”



Much of the SAW films’ impact has relied on its traps, and Bell says that gamers can expect new displays of fiendishness this time around. “They’re different than in the first SAW game, and in the films in many respects. The people at Zombie who developed the game have pretty rich imaginations as far as the traps go. I’ve seen sketches of three of them, and they’re pretty remarkable.”

Bell is loath to spoil FLESH AND BLOOD for its prospective players, but he’ll say that his favorite trap was in the original SAW game. “There’s an iron maiden in that; we’re not going to have it in [the sequel]. The iron maiden in the first game is pretty surprising, and I think the fans who have played the game enjoy that one.” And while the actor has played the first SAW game, he’s not the primary video-gamer in the Bell household. “My 15-year-old son and his friends have played it more than me, so I don’t know exactly what my numbers are. He’s getting good at it, and I think he’s going to get better.”

If fans make FLESH AND BLOOD successful enough to warrant a third SAW game, Bell has some story ideas. “I want to talk to Zombie about something that happened between SAW and SAW II that nobody knows. I thought it might be interesting to introduce it in the games rather than in the storyline of the films.”

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In a telephone follow-up with Bell and Zombie’s John E. Williamson, the SAW games’ producer and one of its designers (pictured above with the actor), further differences between FLESH AND BLOOD and its predecessor are touched on. “We listened to the fans and adjusted some things that needed tweaking, like combat,” Williamson explains, “and others we kept the same, but expanded on them. We made the combat more visceral, more action-based and quicker. In the first game, we tried to make it all about choice and options. This time around, a lot of the times when you go into battle, it’s puzzle-based. You may not be able to defeat your opponent directly, but Jigsaw will have given you some clues on how best to get rid of this person who is now in your way. And sometimes you need to use your environment, sometimes it’s multistage, where you learn from what you’ve done in the past, and sometimes it’s direct combat—but most of the time, it’s more puzzle-based. We also have a brand-new animation team. The animation responds a lot quicker now, and everything should flow a lot better.”



SAW creators Leigh Whannell and James Wan were very much involved with the creation of the first SAW game, Williamson adds. “They flew up to Seattle, we went down to LA, we met them at Comic-Con. We spent a lot of time going over what SAW meant and how it got to be where it is—the essence of SAW. We also worked really closely with Tobin, and I was very happy to do that, just because he made some adjustments to the script to make sure it felt true to his character he has created over the years. And then, of course, the producers at Lionsgate and Twisted Pictures would review everything we sent them and gave us advice and tweaks to

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make sure, again, that we stayed true to the franchise.”

“I would like to have been a fly on the wall in that conversation that you had with Leigh and James about the origins and meaning of the SAW films,” Bell muses. “Maybe I’ll try to have that same conversation with them. It must have been very interesting.”



“Oh, it was,” Williamson assures. “They were very passionate about their franchise, very proud of it. It was interesting to go back that far and see what they would like to do with a medium that allows a longer narrative. A movie is restricted to that 90-minute time frame, but game can be in the eight-, 12-, 20-hour frame.”

“Since the beginning of the franchise,” Bell notes, “and I’m sure they talked about this some in the development of the game, they’ve come up with some rich concepts, which have set the SAW saga apart from some of the other horror films out there—things like appreciating your blessings and survival of the fittest—and every once in awhile, one of these concepts will come bouncing out. Another example would be the treatment of the terminally ill by the medical community. So I think that’s what has enriched the films and will continue to help the story in the game—including the whole idea of people creating certain karma—and I know this was important in the way you developed the game. People [have things they’ve done in the past] and then they have to live with that until they work it out.”

Looking back on the voice recording for FLESH AND BLOOD, Bell says that ultimately, “We worked for a couple of days, I’d say, just on tweaking the character and relationships and the moments in the game. Sometimes we’d get them close to right the first time around. Then we’d talk about it a little bit and try it a different way. I haven’t had a chance to see the entire finished game, but I did see some sections of it, and it plays out very true to the ideas of the films. The fact that SAW is a puzzle and doesn’t develop in a linear way is important to John—remaining true to that—and I think we did. And then, of course, we jumped from the first SAW game to

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FLESH AND BLOOD game, [which] has these great fighting mechanics and combat systems that John designed.”



There are different satisfactions to be found in voice acting than in onscreen performing, Bell observes. “I really like doing voice work. I love being in an audio studio. I’ve done a fair amount of it, both in commercials and narration work. It’s focused. It’s between you and the microphone and there are no other distractions, so you really get an opportunity to try things different ways, try different pacing, and you can do it quickly and efficiently. I like that.”

Some see John Kramer/Jigsaw as a psychopathic sadist; others see him as a brilliant antihero. Bell believes many labels fit the character. “The man is multifaceted. He’s a philosopher, he’s extremely well-read, he’s interested in the human condition, he’s interested in politics, he’s interested in power and how things work and industry and corporations; he’s a technician. There’s a motive for [his actions]. A lot of us, we have complaints about things in the world and do nothing about them. He doesn’t do nothing about it. Whether you agree with what he does or not is something else entirely, but the man lives on a frontier of his own, and he is committed. I wouldn’t do what he does, but he does what he does with a mind to dealing with the reasons he thinks the world is going to hell in a handbasket, because people who have everything appreciate nothing.”

Bell, of course, will also be seen on big (and dimensional) screens next Friday when SAW 3D, billed as the final installment of the franchise, hits theaters from Lionsgate. When asked exactly how final this one really is, Bell replies, “What I do, I do on the screen. I’m not the person who determines the fate of this franchise. There are others who do that. They say that this is the final chapter and I take them at their word on that, and I frankly think it’s a fitting way to wrap it up, because SAW 3D ties up a number of things that people have wondered about for a long time. As you know, Cary Elwes is back and we find out what happened to [his character] Dr. Gordon, which fans have wondered about for a long time. So I can’t answer that question conclusively for you—only the people who make these films can answer it.”

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There is, of course, the possibility that *SAW* may live on as a series of further video games, and Bell seems enthusiastic about the prospect. “I believe the games might be a good way to [continue to expand the mythology]. *SAW* has captured the imagination of young people and middle-aged people worldwide. There has been no limitation to the number of fans, whether in Japan or Brazil or Spain or the UK; I spent two hours yesterday talking to people in Scotland and Ireland and Wales who are extremely passionate about the *SAW* story. So I think the game offers an opportunity. Video games as a medium are extremely powerful for those who love to play them. Media is moving so fast, and it’s exciting that you can jump from something on a 60-foot screen in a theater to continuing that experience in another medium. They work very nicely together. I’ve had lots of great experiences on the *SAW* franchise, and then having an opportunity to work with Konami, with such a great group of people, on the games has also been a rich experience.”

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