

One of the most unique things about this podcast is that I know the founder of every company that advertises on founders, all of them listen to founders, and so that makes building a relationship a lot easier. But I also do this because I only want supporters of the podcast that live and breathe their product. In every case, we share the same obsession for the quality of the products that we make in the businesses that we are building. And so, Eight Sleep is one of the supporters of this episode, and the founder Matteo and I live in the same city. A few months after I started using Eight Sleep, I randomly ran into Matteo at a restaurant, and I was with some friends, and I went over to say hi. When I got back to my table, my friend asked me who I was talking to, and I said, oh, that's Matteo, the founder of Eight Sleep. And my friend replied that, oh, he looks like he gets good sleep. And that's because Matteo is living and breathing his product. I've never had the ability to change the temperature of my bed before I had an Eight Sleep. I had no idea how much that one feature can improve the quality of my sleep. I keep my Eight Sleep ice cold, and it's cold before I get into bed. So I fall asleep faster, and I wake up less during the night. That feature alone is worth 10 times the price. There are very few no-brainer investments in life. An Eight Sleep is one of them. You can get yours by going to eightsleep.com forward slash founders. If you use that link, you get \$150 off. They're shipping all over USA, Canada, the UK, parts of Europe, and Australia. So go to eightsleep.com forward slash founders. And just two more quick things before we jump into this episode on James Cameron. I just listened to this entire episode. I'm actually really proud of it. It's a little over an hour long. I probably spent 50 times that amount reading and researching and living inside the mind of James Cameron. I was absolutely obsessed. I hope you enjoy it. So the first thing I want to tell you about is I've made something that is exclusively for the enthusiasts of founders, for people that completely understand the benefit of this intense studying of the great people and the great work that came before us, and how valuable that is to apply to whatever it is that you're working on. If that is you, I recommend you sign up for the Private Founders AMA Feed. I've been making these short episodes every week based on questions that I get from other members. If you become a member, you'll be able to ask me questions directly. There's a private email address that you get access to, and I read every single one of these emails myself. I don't have an assistant look over them. I read every single one myself. The questions I get from these emails, I turn into short AMA episodes, so it allows other members to learn from questions of other members. And you can also add your name and a link to your website with your question, so that other members can check out what you're working on. That feature alone is worth the investment. So far, I've made 28 episodes. I'm recording the next one tomorrow, and I plan on making several episodes every week. If you consider yourself an enthusiast of Founders Podcast, I highly recommend that you become a member. You can join by using the link that's in the show notes in your podcast player. I also have it at FoundersPodcast.com. And the last thing that I want to tell you about before we jump into this episode, my friend Jeremy just went on Invest Like the Best. You have to listen to this episode. It's episode 336. It's called Special Situations in Private Markets. It's 90 straight minutes of insight after insight. Jeremy's a friend of mine. I spent a lot of time talking to him. He's unbelievably bright, and his episode on Invest Like the Best is one that I'm going to re-listen to many, many times in the future. You can just search for it in whatever podcast player you're listening to this, but I will also leave a link down below. After James Cameron's avatar made \$2.7 billion, the director found the deepest point that exists

in all of the Earth's oceans, and dove to it. When Cameron reached the bottom of the Mariana Trench, he became the first person in history to descend the 6.8 mile distance solo. Since then, others have followed. Most prominently, a private equity titan and former Naval Reserve intelligence officer turned explorer named Victor Vescovo. But Cameron is adamant that none have surpassed him. Vescovo, Cameron told me, claimed that he went deeper, but you can't, so he's basically just making shit up. Vescovo disagrees. I have a different scientific perspective, he told me diplomatically. But even he is a fan of Cameron's films. Like Cameron, Vescovo has made multiple dives to the wreck of the Titanic, and while returning from one of them, he emailed Cameron. I said, I watched Titanic at the Titanic. And he actually replied, yeah, but I made Titanic at the Titanic. It is perhaps illustrative of Cameron's gifts as a filmmaker that even his most determined rivals will admit that Cameron has written and directed some of the most successful films of all time. It would be fair to call him the father of the modern action movie, which he helped invent with his debut, The Terminator, and then reinvent with his second, Aliens. It would be accurate to add that he has directed two of the three top-grossing films in history. But he's also a scientist, a camera that he helped design served as the model for one that is currently on Mars, attached to the Mars rover. And he's an adventurer, and not in the dilaton billionaire sense. When Cameron sets out to do something, it gets done. The man was born

with an explorer's instincts and capacity. The original avatar required the invention of dozens of new technologies, from the cameras Cameron shot with, to the digital effects that he used to transform human actors into animated creatures, to the language those creatures spoke in the film. For the sequel, The Way of Water, Cameron told me he and his team started all over again. They needed new cameras that could shoot underwater and a motion caption system that could collect separate shots from above and below the water and then integrate them into a unified virtual image. They needed new algorithms, new AI, to translate what Cameron shot with what you see. Nothing would work the first time Cameron and the production tried it, or the second are usually the third. Cameron showed me a single effect shot numbered 405. That means there's been 405 versions of this

before it gets to me, he said. Cameron has been working on the movie since 2013. It was due out years ago. The Way of Water was expensive to make. If you ask James Cameron how expensive, he replies, very fucking. But as Cameron worked late into the evening, day after day, solving the infinite problems that The Way of Water continued to present, he seemed to be enjoying himself. I like difficult, he told me. I'm attracted by difficult. Difficult is a fucking magnet for me. I go straight to difficult. And I think it probably goes back to this idea that there's a lot of smart, really gifted, really talented filmmakers out there that just can't do the difficult stuff. So that gives me a tactical edge to do something nobody else has ever seen, because the really gifted people don't fucking want to do it. Cameron and his fifth wife live year round in New Zealand, where they have owned a 5000 acre farm since 2011. In the early days of the pandemic, Cameron and his wife gave up their home in Malibu and became full-time residents here. I asked Cameron if it had been lonely moving halfway around the world. I don't have any friends, so it's okay, he said, with only a hint of a smile. Cameron's Malibu compound was known for its survivalist vibe. Fast cars, a security team trained in fighting wildfires, guns. He had himself trained by one of the best championship shooters in America. He's the guy that taught Keanu Reeves how to be John Wick. I was his

first Hollywood contact. I trained with him for three years, and so I'm a competition grade shooter. At 68 years old, Cameron wakes up at 445 a.m. and often kickboxes in the morning. Cameron is proud

to work at the biggest scale possible. Terminator 2, True Lies, and Titanic were all among the most expensive films ever made at the time of their release. To date, all of his films have made their money back, many of them spectacularly. Self-doubt, in general, is not something Cameron has a lot of experience with. I don't think I'm hardwired with that. I don't know why. Cameron was always the type of person whose confidence preceded his achievements. Confidence preceded his achievements. That is an idea that you and I have discussed on multiple biographies. It's in a lot of these books, the fact that belief comes before ability. That's the exact same idea. Cameron was always the type of person whose confidence preceded his achievements. It was while working as a truck driver in his 20s that Cameron decided to become a filmmaker, and so he taught himself filmmaking. He'd go to the stacks at the library at the University of Southern California, which was home of the vaunted filmmaking program that Cameron couldn't afford. I'd find somebody's 300-

page dissertation on optical printing, Cameron said, and I'd be going through this and I'd think, well, I've got to get this. So I'd pull out the staples and I'd photocopy the entire 300 pages, and then I just kept doing the same thing week after week for about six months. And I'm driving a truck, but I had these binders. I was going through this stuff chapter and verse and making my own notes and all that. I basically gave myself a college education in visual effects and cinematography

while I was driving a truck. The idea for the Terminator came to him in a dream. So did the pivotal scene in his second film, Aliens. Cameron has a rich dream life to this day. I have my own private streaming service that's better than any of that shit that's out there and it runs every night for free, he said. Avatar also originally came to Cameron while he was asleep. I woke up after dreaming of this kind of bioluminescent forest with these trees that kind of look like fiber optic lamps in this river that was glowing bioluminescent particles and kind of purple moss on the ground that lit up when you walked on it. It was all in the dream. I woke up super excited and I actually drew it. So I actually have a drawing. It saved us from about 10 lawsuits. Any successful film, there's always some freak with tinfoil under their wig that thinks that you beam their idea out of their head. And it turned out there were 10 or 11 of them. And so I pointed at this drawing I did when I was 19, when I was going to Fullerton Junior College and said, do you see this? You see the glowing trees? Do you see the glowing lizard that spins around that's orange? Do you see the purple moss? And everybody went away. Zoe Saldana, who starred in the first

Avatar and returns for the second and who also works frequently in the Marvel Universe, pointed out how comparatively unique Cameron's approach is in modern Hollywood. The Marvel franchises are

built by dozens of comic book artists and writers and directors who work together to create these stories. By contrast, Avatar is the result of the vision of a single man. Without Jim's heavy, heavy brain, this would all fall apart. When Cameron moves, he moves fast and favors one side. When I asked him what he'd done to give himself a limp, he looked at me curiously.

I've got one short leg, he said. It doesn't slow me down any though.

Cameron, in his nearly 40 years of filmmaking, has earned a reputation for having a temper.

Some would say he's earned this reputation several times over. On more than one Cameron set, crew members have taken to wearing shirts that read, you can't scare me. I work for Jim Cameron. Cameron is well aware of this. So I looked at it and I was like, all right, why am I getting so upset? And what is that solving? I'm not saying I don't get upset once in a while. I mean, everybody I think is entitled to having a bad day. Whereas before, it might have been once every couple of weeks. Now it's like twice a year. Cameron recalled working with Ron Howard, the famously nice director on the visual effects for Apollo 13. And I just watched what a great guy he was. And I'm like, I'm a total asshole compared to Ron Howard. I have to get in touch with my inner Ron Howard. But despite his famous temper, Cameron has always inspired loyalty. The process of how Cameron builds the Avatar films is complex. I asked if he knew of anyone else working this way. And he laughed. They'd be insane to even try, he said. And I don't mean that we're special. I mean, like if we hadn't made more money than any other movie in history, this is the last fucking thing that I'd want to be doing. Cameron is famous for being able to do any job on a movie set. Some say he can do most jobs better than the people he employs to do them. Cameron disputes this, although mildly. Not better than, he told me. But I'm not just some brain in a bowl, creative type sitting over in a tent someplace saying, yeah, put that over there. It's a curious fact that Cameron has directed only two feature films in the last 25 years. This is a part of the explanation for why Cameron has at times drifted away from filmmaking. He said, there's a certain point where my mind wants to solve problems that are real world problems.

For a while, his career in ocean exploration, which Cameron got serious about after making Titanic, nearly kept him away from directing a film ever again. I didn't get back into making movies for eight years, he told me. I was having too much fun. And when he did decide to return to Hollywood with his idea for the first avatar, Cameron's longtime studio, Fox, almost didn't want to make it. Cameron has mellowed with time and age, but he is still a score settler, a keeper of grudges. And this is what he said when Fox initially passed. And I said, now, just so you know, before your taillights are out of sight, I will be on the phone with Disney, who wants this and will make a deal. And that'll be that. And then whatever happens happens. And you might look like a big dick if it makes a lot of money. In the end, Fox did come back and Cameron made avatar with the studio. But Cameron still remembers an executive at the company who will go unnamed because this is a really negative review. This executive approached Cameron after a pre-release screening of the film and begged the director to shorten it. I said something that I've never said to anybody else in the business, Cameron recalled. I said, I think this movie is going to make all the fucking money. And when it does, it's going to be too late for you to love the film. The time for you to love the movie is today. So I'm not asking you to say something that you don't feel. But just know that I will always know that no matter how complimentary you are about the movie in the future, when it makes all the money. And that's exactly what I said in caps, all the money, not some of the money, all the fucking money. I said, you can't come back to me and compliment the film or chum along and say, look what we did together. You will not be able to do that. And then of course, the film came out and made all the money. I asked Cameron whether he had a theory about why. I don't think I need a theory, he said. I think anybody that's seen the movie knows why. It's a fucking gigantic adventure that's an all-consuming, emotional experience that leaves you rung out by the end of the movie. And it was groundbreaking visually, and it still holds up today. So I don't think I need a theory. After Avatar, Cameron again

walked away for a while. He dove to the Mariana Trench to the deepest point on earth, and there was a period there about a year and a half where I didn't even know if I wanted to make another Avatar film. I knew how all consuming it would be. It basically took over my life for four years. I had no other life for four years making that first film. And I thought, do I really want to do this again? It's the highest grossing film in history. Can't I just tag that base and move on? But the problem was, he still had ideas. He knew, of course, that on some level, he was running out of time. When you get into your mid-60s, you start realizing that the acts could fall at any moment. Maybe it's next week, maybe it's in 30 years. Cameron said that in the end, the answer he landed on was this. I'm a storyteller, and there's stories to be told. I'm not done until the big hook comes out from the side of the curtain. So to me, everything, every idea is a work in progress. The list of things that Cameron has failed at is short, but there are a few destinations that have eluded him. One of them is space, but he's come close. He went to Daniel Golden, who was then the NASA administrator and overseeing the assembly of the International Space Station, and asked if he could go up to the American side of the ISS. They met for a summit. Golden offered Cameron a shuttle flight instead. No ISS, but he'd see the planet from above. He would see space. Golden said the ISS at the moment was too difficult. Cameron thought about it. He said to himself, maybe everything that I've been doing over the last few years leads to this exact moment when the administrator of NASA is willing to make a solid deal to fly me on the space shuttle. But he looked at his heart and he decided no. He would only go to space on his own terms. Are you seeing a theme here with James Cameron? We haven't even gotten to the book yet. He would only go to space on his own terms. I said, I've got to say no, I want to stick to my plan, even if it can't happen. Then Columbia was lost. On February 1st, 2003, the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated, taking with it seven souls. Cameron went to their memorial service, but he never got to go to space. I asked what level of regret he had about this, the fact that he never went. Zero, he said, different life. And he's been on a planet of his own making ever since. I was driving back to my hotel not too long after when the phone rang. It was Cameron wanting to talk again about the shuttle flight that he had turned down. I forgot the punchline to the story Cameron said. The punchline is the shuttle mission that I've refused. It was the Columbia. His voice rose. I fucking saved my own life by choosing the higher path. Okay, so that was a super long excerpt, not from the book that I'm going to talk to you about. This is from this unbelievable long form piece on GQ. I will leave the link down below. It is called The Return of James Cameron, Box Office King, and it was written by Zach Barron. I read this article. It completely took over my life. This episode that you're about to hear, I have never ever worked on an episode longer than this one. I've been in the mind and completely obsessed with James Cameron, starting with this incredible piece in GQ. I don't even know for how many weeks. So I read this piece. I was like, oh my God, I have to learn more about this guy. And so I immediately ordered a biography on him. That biography, which I'll talk to you about today, and I'm going to go over it now. It's called The Futurist, The Life and Films of James Cameron. It was written by Rebecca Keegan, and it was produced right after, the book's about 10 or 12 years old, produced right after the original avatar came out. But what I would do is every night, I'll leave the link down below. You got to read the entire GQ article. It's incredible,

but I would also listen to it. It's 36 minutes long. They use this technology called Audible, and instead of reading, you can listen to the whole thing. I would fall asleep. As I'm reading this biography of James Cameron, every night I would fall asleep listening to this article again, and I'd probably listened to it, I don't know, 10 or 15 times. It's just unbelievably impressive, with not only how he approached his work, but his absolute insistence on building his own world within the world. So I wanted to read the excerpt from that article first, because that's the order that this information on James Cameron was presented to me. And I think there's going to be a few of these things that's going to be repeated throughout the book. But I think it gives you, that overview is going to give you a better introduction into Cameron, and why he is a one of one, an unbelievably unique individual who is unapologetically extreme. That is one of the most important things that I learned about him. And one thing I'm going to take away, and I do think this guy's going to change my approach to my own work, but also reinforce it. So let me jump in, because I got a ton of stuff to talk to you about. I'm just going to go over a brief overview and the introduction real quick. He's a truck driver who directed the highest grossing movie of all time. He then ditched Hollywood to spend a decade of his life exploring the deep ocean and the heights of science. He's a tinker and a dreamer who pioneered tools that revolutionized the way stories are told. Technologies that a generation of filmmakers now rely upon. He spent his adulthood doing things that other people called impossible. As I watched the director work, I became curious about a man who seemed interested only in doing things that were hard. And so when I got to this part, it made me think of one of my personal heroes, Edwin Land. This is exactly what he said. He says, do some interesting science that is all your own. And if it is manifestly important and nearly impossible, it will be fulfilling and maybe even a way to get rich. That sounds a lot like Cameron's quote in the GQ article. He's like, I'm attracted to hard. Hard is like a magnet to me. He says that in 2023 and back in 2009 or 2008 when this book is being written, he's like, Hey, I, this is very curious. I started watching this man and he seemed only interested in doing things that were hard. Edwin Land was only interested in doing things that were hard. Steve Jobs was only interested in doing things that were hard. And when you choose the hard path and you, you put all your effort and focus into it and you were wind up being like you solve the problem, technical problems that you have to solve, and you actually succeeded doing the hard things, other people can't help but respect even the people in his field. There's multiple examples in this book. This is just the first one where other directors who are at the top of their professionals like, no, I come to James to learn. And so we have Peter Jackson here. He's the director of the Lord of the Rings trilogy. And this is what he says, you can't help but come away from spending time with Jim, feeling that you're a little bit stupid. He's got such a sharp mind. He is formidable. This idea of training ourselves and becoming formidable individuals is something that you and I talked about over and over again. I jumped out of my seat when I saw that word in this book. He's got such a sharp mind. He's formidable. Cameron's career has been built on questioning accepted wisdom, believing the power of the individual, his outlook, this, oh my goodness, like goosebumps again, his outlook is that we can take fate in our own hands. I have to read that to you again. This is what gets me so fired up about this guy. Cameron's career has been built on questioning accepted wisdom, believing in the power of the individual, his outlook is that we can take fate in our own hands. Okay, so I just want to pull out a few things from his childhood. It's obvious James Cameron was a builder and a founder from an extremely early age.

He winds up becoming even from like he's like a little kid and him his brother, you know, they love to tinker, they love to build things, they love to experiment. They're constantly making things like go-karts, they make rafts, they make tree houses. He's growing up in Canada before his dad gets relocated by his job to Orange County, California. And I think one story that his mom tells in this book of like a little kid version of James Cameron, you see, oh, this is a founder from day one. Cameron demonstrated a knack for assembling large groups in service of his goals. When her oldest son was about 10, she noticed that his younger siblings and several neighborhood children were streaming into her yard carrying scraps of wood and metal. I said, what are you guys doing with all this junk? Jim said, we're gonna build something. And a couple hours later, the kids had constructed an airplane. Guess who is sitting in it being pulled? His mom said, Cameron was very good at telling people what to do. And so another thing to know about Cameron, I highly likely that he's got a genius level IQ. That's why I took away from this. His mom gets a call when I think he's in like third grade. Or yeah, I think it was the second grade, I was like, oh, we're just going to skip them to grade three. And then he's already skipped one grade, doesn't even get halfway through that. And then she gets another call. He's like, oh, no, like we got to skip this kid again. And so it's going to be no surprise to you, anybody that's intelligent, they're going to read all the time. He started doing this at a young age, he would, he was a voracious reader. And we see this with a lot of like the interesting founders is they were when they were kids, like think Jeff Bezos or think Elon Musk, they were obsessed with reading science fiction. So James Cameron was the same thing, like he would just sit there and read all the time. And so he's doing that from the time he's in elementary school, by the time he gets to high school, like he's winning every single academic prize you could possibly win at school, he wants to becoming the president of the science club, he becomes obsessed with history and studying ancient civilizations, which is funny, because later on in the book, he has this great line, I don't know if I'll cover it or not. But it says something like, I'm an explorer by nature, and I'm just a filmmaker by trade. And then even as far back as high school, we see this development, or the initial development of this like lifelong trade that he has, James is just extremely comfortable going his own way. He never ever felt it necessary to follow the herd, you see that in the way he makes his films, the fact that this guy literally gets to the top of his fresh and is like, yeah, I'm just going to take like an eight year break and dive the tight, the deepest part of the ocean. And maybe never make a film again, just because this is this is what I'm happy to be interested at this moment, not really concerned with what other people think I should be doing. And I think this refusal to just give into the thoughts of other people is like a massive advantage for founders. It says the group think of his peers baffled him, he's in high school at this point. First period meant singing the national anthem and saying the Lord's prayer. In 10th grade, grade Cameron listened to his classmates and felt a surge of defiance. It struck me as this tribal chant. In the middle of all this, he sat down, opened his book and started to read this indifference to the opinions of other people concerning like his behavior, something that continues to this day, something that changed his life when he was a little kid. He becomes fascinated by Jacques Cousteau, who was making all these like underwater documentaries. So I think even by the time he got to high school, he was already scuba certified. He winds up begging his parents to let him get to take like a scuba class at like the local like YMCA. And we start to see something this idea is like, hey, I want, I don't just want to do

scuba. I just don't want to do anything that's just like the normal way. I want the hard way. He is extremely intentional about building himself into a formidable individual. So he says in the scuba class, he learned diving military style with harassment drills in which the instructor pulls off your mask and rips the regulator from your mouth. This harsh training engendered in Cameron, a confidence and resourcefulness that would help him survive two near drowning experiences in his life. So James comes from a family of engineers. His dad is an engineer. His brother goes on to become an engineer. And this is something like I was thinking about my relationship with my own my own son and my daughter for that matter. This is just his dad just does the right thing. Like he's like, listen, I'm going to back you no matter what I personally think. And so the note I was leaving to myself, I was like, going through this, it's like, I really hope I, you know, my son's still young, he's three years old. I hope I'm like this. I hope I'm a dad like this when he's older. So it says Cameron's relationship with his father would strain in his teenage years because his father wanted James to become an engineer. And his dad thought it was a little weird that his son was like obsessed with sci fi and like the stuff that he was reading. He says he didn't understand me very well because I was an art and science fiction and a lot of fantasy. However, this is what I meant about good guy dad. He would provide financial help in Cameron's hungry early years as an inspiring filmmaker tacitly supporting the career choice of his son, no matter how grievous the odds was that his son would succeed good guy dad. And so there is a line from last week's book, last week's podcast on Walt Disney Picasso that I absolutely love. It says all creative individuals build on the works of their predecessors. No one creates in a vacuum. It took seeing a film, another film, we're like, Oh, wait, I might be able to do this for a living. So it says the first time he considered a film as a career was in 1968. I think he'd be around maybe 14 or 16 years old. The time he goes to the movie theater and he sees Stanley Kubrick's classic film, which is 2001 A Space Odyssey. And this is one of my favorite lines in the entire book. It was at that moment that Cameron went from being a fan of movies to wanting to make films himself. What does he do? Not good enough to just see the movie the first time he goes back over and over and over again. He's studying how do how did he do this? He returned to the theater and saw the film several more times trying to understand how Kubrick had managed to pull this off. And right after this, his dad gets transferred to Orange County, California. And most kids like you're in high school. There's no way I think this might even be since like senior year of high school or something like that. And most kids like, Oh, I don't want to move. Like, this is terrible. He knew that Orange County was closer to Hollywood. He already had this idea that he wanted to be a filmmaker. And so his response, teenage high school Jim Cameron's response is very unusual. He says, can we leave tomorrow? And so it's after high school Cameron goes to Fullerton Junior College, which he, which he mentioned earlier, or mentioned the GQ article, right? And there's a couple of things that are really important here. One, everybody, everybody who runs into James Cameron, regardless of what point in his life, they all comment on his intensity. And so this is the first time though, he's like, okay, well, maybe the first step of making becoming a filmmaker is actually becoming a screenwriter. It took just meeting the right group of friends that had similar interests. So it says Cameron was taking 14 credits at Fullerton College by day and then working four to six hours a night

as a precision tool and dye machinist. He has got a bunch of these blue, blue collar jobs that he's got to work while he's going to college time. And he continued to tackle his own creative project on the side, which was writing science fiction stories and drawing. Jim was very intense. He was very bright and full of ideas. He was one of those guys that when you met him, you had the feeling he was going to do things. And so he meets a friend at the same college, just got him Randall Frakes and Frakes shares Cameron's passion for science fiction, for ancient history, for exploration. And Frakes is the first person is like, Hey, why don't you like, you should be writing your own science fiction movies. And so he goes and gets all these scripts, like the original scripts for, for very famous movies like Citizen Kane and Puch Cassidy and Sundance Kid. And he's just like, here, James, take a look at these, like, what, what would, what would be considered well written screenplay, screenplays, and that'll like give you ideas on how to do this. And then you can just get started by doing that. And it's at this point in Cameron's life story where it's like, okay, this is what a high agency person looks like. He's working all the time. He's teaching himself how to write scripts in his spare time. And he's giving himself a graduate level college education, filmmaking education for free or for a couple hundred

bucks. This is high agency personified in his early 20s. Cameron held a series of blue collar jobs. He'd work as a janitor, a truck driver and a machinist on break. So he's, he's driving a truck, like a lunch truck for the school district that he's living by. And on breaks, during the day, when he's driving the truck, right, he curls up in his truck and starts writing, writing screenplays. At night, after a full day, Cameron would go and hang out with friends that had had similar interests. They would talk passionately about movies for hours on end. On Saturdays, that's not enough, right? This is again, this is high agency. Cameron would then go to the library at the University of Southern California and he'd photocopy all these graduate student thesis on esoteric filmmaking subjects. He filled two fat binders with technical papers for the cost of a couple hundred dollars in photocopying. He essentially put himself through a graduate course in visual effects at the top film school in the country without ever meeting a single professor. And so then he's like, okay, well, how do I break into the movie industry? And he does something very smart. Like this is what I do. If I never have been on a job interview my entire life, but if I did, right, I wouldn't just send in a resume, I would send in some kind of demo or some kind of proof of work. And so what he does, he makes this like 12 minute little short film called Exogenesis. And so he takes Exogenesis to this guy named Roger Corman. Roger Corman has come up

in past podcasts because he winds up starting like Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese. He gives all these like legendary directors their first shot in life. So it takes Exogenesis to Roger Corman's company. Roger Corman runs this company called New World Pictures. It's like this B movie, like kind of crappy films that just churn out a bunch of crappy films. So they make money in volume as opposed to quality, right? But it's incredibly important because it says, Cameron was about to land exactly where he needed to be in a Darwinian environment for would-be filmmakers, a place that rewarded smarts and scrappiness and the kind of alpha behavior that he had honed. Why would the Roger Corman school of film? Like why was that the perfect place for a young, enthusiastic, and driven person like James Cameron is at this point in his life? And the author does a fantastic job. Rebecca Kingham does a fantastic job here. She goes, the most successful product of Corman's moviemaking factory had been people. Definitely not his

[Transcript] Founders / #311 James Cameron

movies. Movies suck, right? But why is this important? His low budget productions had launched the careers. Check this out. This is insane. Have launched the careers of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Ron Howard, Jack Nicholson, and many others in Hollywood. Why? Because what he

does is so smart. Corman recruited the young and the eager. He was usually the only person working

at his company over the age of 30. I was giving them training and an opportunity to make a movie that nobody else would give them. You could go from carrying light stands to directing your first picture in less time than it took to graduate from film school. So Cameron starts, he creates this like calling card, this demo of what he's capable of called exogenesis, and that demo gets him hired as a model builder. He's not a screenwriter. He's not a director. He's a model builder, but you've already, I think now you've already gotten to know James Cameron a little bit, right? Do you think he's going to stay a model builder? There's no way in hell this guy, this guy's going to, whatever the fastest path to promotion is, you can be sure that Cameron will find it.

And so that's what we're about to see here. And so what we see next is that James Cameron was James Cameron before he was James Cameron. This is more high agency behavior. He is at the bottom,

like the entry level, bottom of the totem pole. Somebody forgot to let him know that that was the case. Cameron had only been at Corman's for a matter of days, but he was already taking charge.

Listen to this line. He seems constitutionally incapable of doing otherwise. He had a very commanding presence. Even if his position was not running the model shop, he clearly seemed to be running the model shop. Cameron was so eager and the production so consuming that he started sleeping at the model shop. That was where he was when Corman's assistant woke him up at 3am.

Corman had had just fired the art director of the film that they're working on. Did Cameron want to take his place? He had never been an art director and had no idea what was involved in the job. Sure, Cameron said. In a matter of weeks, he had jumped from a model builder on a film to its art director. So that's another main idea, main theme to learn about or learn from. Cameron, he just assumes that he can learn any job. So if you ask him, hey, can you do this? He'll say yes, and then he'll figure out how to do it after. And we see this in the early days of company founders over and over again. The fact that there is some kind of benefit of not knowing what you don't know. Cameron says, there wasn't time for any doubt. We didn't know the 27 reasons why we shouldn't be able to do exactly what we were in the process of doing. There was this blissful ignorance about the process of how films are really made that allowed us to do some pretty damn extraordinary stuff given the time and budget restraints. You come out of this with the feeling that you can do anything. So he's the art director and he's like, you know, I don't think I should be the art director. I think I should be running this entire thing. And the way what's about to happen here is what he discovers is that your mediocrity is my opportunity. So he's watching the director of this movie and he says he wasn't impressed. These guys had no idea what they were doing. I'm watching them just blowing it. They're not getting the shots. They're not getting the performances. It was a light bulb moment for Cameron. I'm thinking I can do that. He cornered Corman, right? He says, hey, I think I should be the second unit director. I will work at night. Again, Cameron made a job for himself. And again, Corman encouraged the enthusiastic young man

and

said, that's a good idea. Start tomorrow. Because of his work on this film, he eventually gets recruited to be a director of this terrible, terrible movie. It's called like Piranha 2 or something like that. And this is really important. Okay, let me read this to you first and I'll read my takeaway from this. On his fifth day at work, Cameron learned that he was fired. His first opportunity to be the main director, right? He lasts five days. Five days. Well, it felt like a career ending mistake, however, was actually just one beginning. The torment Cameron went through over his failed first directing effort would lead him exactly where he needed to be into the dark recesses of his mind. For that is where he found the terminator, which is going to be this massive hit. This is the punchline of this entire section. He was 27 years old, broke and depressed. Now, this is the entire reason I just want to pull down one paragraph. He gets hired to direct, right? Quickly gets fired. He finds himself at 27 years old, broke, depressed, feeling like a loser 15 years from now. He will be at the very top, the very top of the same profession. Excellence is the capacity to take pain. What if he quit here? So the terminator was like one of my favorite movies when I was a kid. But there's a few entire chapters, like the chapters are separated in this book on like what film he's working in. So there's like an unbelievable degree of detail. So if you're really into some of these films, reading the chapters, I would highly recommend. But there's just a few things about the terminator that I want to pull up because I think they're interesting and more widely applicable, just not just to filmmaking. But the aspect, the first thing before you how you can pitch a film, right? You have to write the script. Cameron was not, did not feel like he was a naturally gifted writer. This is the first time he talks about this. When he talks about this his whole life, he finds writing to be torture, but he does it anyways. And I think that's the biggest lesson here. Cameron found writing a lonely and utterly unforgiving process. It is very hard for me to get started and it is very hard for me to stay focused, he said. When he's writing, he tends to bunker himself in working mainly at night and withdrawing from the outside world. He used to tell friends that he'd like to buy the most uncomfortable chair he could find for writing so he would finish as fast as possible just to get out of it. And so he writes this and then he goes around and tries to find, convince a studio to make the movie. There's just one paragraph here, great projects can happen in bad economies. When they're trying to raise money for the Terminator, this is 1982. Unemployments at 10% and interest rates are at 17%. And they still manage to get the deal done. And it's good that they convince people to finance the movie because the movie only Terminator, the original Terminator, right? It only costs \$6 million. It winds up making \$78 million on a \$6 million investment. And we see that James Cameron actually has a lot in common with the Terminator. He has a Terminator like work ethic. He is doing the rewrite. He's rewriting the Terminator script to get ready to film the movie, right? So he's already written it once. He's doing the rewriting. Then he also gets a job. He has no money at this time. So he got to take every opportunity that he could get. He gets a job to write the sequel to Aliens. And I think it's a sequel to Rambo, the movies with Sylvester Stallone. Listen to how he does it. This is what I mean that he has a Terminator like work ethic. This is wild. That meant in a three month period in 1983, he had to write three scripts. Cameron approached this dilemma as a Terminator might. He decided that each script would be 120 pages for a total page count of

360.

He divided this is so wild. He divided the total number of waking hours he had during the three month period by 360 and figured out how many pages per hour he had to write. And I just wrote that many pages per hour, he said. And so it's while he's working on the pre-production for Terminator getting ready to shoot the movie, he winds up meeting another like high quality person. They wanted to becoming partners. This guy named Stan Winston. And so this is James describing the partnership. Stan and I clicked early on because we both respect the artist and he saw one in me and vice versa. And we were both a little crazy and enjoy each other's eccentricities. The work that he did for Cameron in subsequent films would earn Winston three of his four Academy Awards and

would lead to their co-founding a visual effects company called Digital Domain in 1993. If you study the career of George Lucas, I covered him all the way back on episode 35. I'm going to reread that book and do an episode on it again in the future. But this is something that Lucas and Cameron have in common is they were constantly had ideas on how visual effects and things they wanted to do in their films that they couldn't figure out how to do. So their solution was a little insane. They're like, oh, well, I just found my own special effects company. So Lucas famously founded Industrial Light and Magic. Cameron's going to wind up being a customer of theirs. And then James does the same thing when he found Digital Domain with Stan Winston in 1993.

And so once the production on Terminator begins, we see something that was echoed in the GQ piece,

the fact that people call anybody that works with James, they call him the do-it-yourselfer. They all say that he likes being extremely hands-on. And then I've seen him speak in other interviews, because I watched a bunch of interviews, he's like, listen, this is the only way that I can work. It's the way I want to work. Cameron established a hands-on working style that he would take to an extreme in later films. Cameron would be holding the camera, editing the footage, mixing the sound, performing almost every technical and artistic task on the film himself, except acting. Cameron can do almost anything there is to do on a movie set, as well as any specialist and he knows it. So the financial success of Terminator opens up every opportunity that Cameron's going to have after this. He's going to be able to pick and choose what movies he makes. As he continues to have financial success with his films, he eventually is able to wrestle over complete control. He's got final cut. He gets to choose. His whole thing is he's obsessed with controlling all aspects of his work. Before he's able to maneuver himself into a position of complete control, though, he still has to work and he's still young. I think he's like 32 maybe at this time. This is the first time that he actually interacts with people that don't love their work. So he is doing production on the sequel to the very successful movie called Alien. The sequel to Alien that he does is called Aliens. So this is the contrast between somebody like James, who loves his work, being forced to work with other people who just tolerate theirs. They do not love what they do. They just tolerate it. Production on Aliens took place at Pinewood Studios, which is in London. The employees at Pinewood were lifers, locals who viewed their film jobs as they might factory work a paycheck and nothing more. I was shocked to be working with people who simply could not care less about the film they were working on says Cameron.

The Pinewood crew were lazy, insolent and arrogant. I despise them. And so they're both

approaching this was vastly different perspectives. At the time, there was a sense that you don't get to the top of your profession through talent. You get there by paying your dues and putting in your time to the Pinewood veterans. Cameron at 31 years old was an undeserving kid. And so something that Steve Jobs has said previously, that he observed that a players only like working with other a players. We see that here. When he finally wrapped at Pinewood, Cameron stood up to address

them. This has been a long and difficult shoot fraught by many problems. But the one thing that kept me going through it all was the certain knowledge that one day I would drive out of this gate and never come back and that you sorry bastards would still be here. He never did return. So if you're able to see all my notes that I have in this book, I have these like main themes that I keep writing down because they just keep reappearing. And then I when I went back and started thinking about like what I wanted to talk to you about, I would continue to add to them. And so one main idea one main theme in James, the life and career of James Cameron is that he's just willing to let ideas marinate for decades. In many cases, you know, he can't figure out how to make what he wants to do or he has an idea and he doesn't get to actually make that idea like 25 years. In this case, there is 19 years between this idea and the execution. Water and its mysteries would be an abiding source of fascination and creative stimulation for Cameron throughout his life. One that would inspire him to make his most grueling and personal movie. This movie called The Abyss.

The Abyss began as a short story that Cameron wrote when he was 16, when he was devouring Jacques Cousteau's underwater TV documentaries. And so this is something that he's going to work on for his entire life. He loves shooting in water for the precise reason that nobody else likes shooting in water. Let me quote Edwin Land again. Don't do anything that someone else can do.

Hard, the harder something is, the less competition there actually be. I think this is something I see a lot of like entrepreneurs like struggle with. It's like they try to look for like the easy way. I was like, no, that's the exact wrong thing you should be doing. You should be starting to avoid competition at all times. And if something's easy, there's going to be way more people trying to do it. James is like, no, I'm only going after hard because I will literally be the only person out there doing this. I will be the only person standing. I will be a one of one. There will be no competition. While making Avatar, he was also at work on an engineering project designing and building a one man sphere to dive to the Mariana trench. There's a fantastic documentary about this that shows like all of the engineering that went into designing this sphere that he used, the sphere that he used to get to the deepest part in the world's oceans. And he had that idea because he watched this video. The last time humans had gone to the very bottom of the Mariana trench before James Cameron did it was all the way back in 1960. But this sentence tells you a lot about his personality and his approach to work that no one else had bothered to try again in 50 years, did not deter Cameron. It makes the journey irresistible to him. I like doing things I know others can't he says, that's part of what attracts him to shooting movies in water. Nobody likes shooting in water, he says, it's physically taxing, it's frustrating, it's dangerous. But when you have a small team of people as crazy as you are that are good at it, there is a deep satisfaction in both the process of doing it and the resulting footage. So this idea about, I'm constantly attracted to heart, I want to do things other people aren't doing. What is that actually, what does hard look like in this case? The Abyss is a movie that's going to be made in

I think 1989. So he's trying to figure out a couple years before the movie comes out, okay, how am I going to do this, where am I going to shoot it? So they're going and scouting locations all over America and they're scouting out one thing and they see something kind of weird in the distance. And it says in the distance, Jim could see something really intriguing. It was a giant concrete bowl from afar. It looked something, it looked a little like the Roman Coliseum. So he goes over to it. He's like, what the hell is this thing? It's like essentially like an abandoned construction project. What they were trying to make would have been a nuclear reactor's containment

vessel. It was only half finished. And it was 240 feet in diameter with 80 foot tall walls and no entrance. So he parks next to this thing, he's like, okay, I want to check, I want to look at this thing. What is it? Well, how are you going to look at something that has 80 foot walls surrounding it and no entrance? He's like, oh, there's a construction crane right here. The crane that they were using to assemble it was also abandoned. So what does Cameron do? He goes and starts climbing

up on the 110 foot crane. It is raining and there's a ton of wind when he's doing this. And he decides this is exactly where this is the set. This is where I'm going to film the abyss. This is what hard looks like. This is what he means like he's attracted to hard. It would involve pouring thousands of yards of structural concrete, installing enormous filtration systems, and a row of 20,000 heaters to warm the 7.5 million gallons to a comfortable temperature. What they were planning wasn't just the largest underwater set ever built. It was a feat of industrial engineering.

And so the crazy thing is he just built the world's largest underwater set, movie set ever made. He matches this unbelievable initial accomplishment with this insane work ethic and dedication.

I think they call him a few pages later. What is the word? They call him like a maniac.

I think that's, they call him a possessed maniac. Listen to this paragraph. Remember, they're filming underwater. At the end of the day, Cameron had to hang 10 feet under the surface for an hour to adjust to the pressure difference. Never one to waste time. Cameron asked the crew to install a monitor in the control room underwater. Remember, all everything I'm about to describe to you is happening underwater. Never one to waste time Cameron asked the crew to install a monitor

in the control room so he could watch his dailies through the acrylic window while suspended online.

When his neck was sore from his giant helmet, so he's got this helmet that has all these like communication stuff in it, right? He hung upside down and had the crew invert the monitor. It's like hanging upside down like a bat underwater. He asked to patch phone calls from the studio through to his helmet so he could talk to Fox executives while he decompressed underwater.

After a draining out 18 hour day, the few lingering cast and crew members heading home would stop and take one last look in the viewing room window at their director, clinging to the line like a bat on a branch and still at work. I was stunned by Jim's allegiance to the project and the extent of his physical abilities. Jim was there for every minute of it. It was beyond belief his commitment to what we were doing. Another main theme in the life of James Cameron is the important and magical power of compounding. So present day, he's been a filmmaker for over 40 years. Where we're in the story though, he's only a handful of years into his career as a filmmaker. The reason I talk about the compounding nature of Cameron's career that kind of jumps out when you study him is he starts experimenting with CGI with computer graphics all the way back in 1988. The reason I'm bringing this up is because this is when he starts working

with George Lucas' company in industrial light magic. And it said industrial light magic assured Cameron that they could do it. It would take the company nine months, this is 1988, okay? It would take the company nine months to deliver 20 shots. Amazing when you consider that 20 years later on Avatar, Cameron's crew would produce more than 2000 shots in the same time period. Each of them, many orders of magnitude more complex. So in 1988, it takes nine months to make 20 shots. 20 years later, they can do 2000. And I think 20 years after that, it was like 20,000 or maybe even more in that same time period. There is a massive benefit in getting to find your life's work as fast as possible. And then once you're there, just stay in it, all the benefits, all the future technology, all of that's going to compound and accrue to the people that don't quit. And the thing is most people quit is another example of that. So now he's almost 10 years into his movie career. And this is incredible. The existing norms of the movie industry at this point in time, right, are going to be temporarily ignored to the benefit of James Cameron and Arnold Schwarzenegger. So

remember Terminator, I think I'll say \$6 million, \$6.8 something like that to make. So \$6 million made \$78 million in revenue. And so now this company goes and buys a few years later, they pay \$10 million just for the rights, right, just for the rights to make Terminator 2. James Cameron is 35 years old this time. This temporary suspension of like the normal economics of the industry that he happens to be operating in is going to benefit him and Arnold. This is what I mean by that. So these two guys run this company called Carol Co Pictures. It's this independent

production company. And they call James Cameron and they're like, Hey, we just bought the rights for Terminator 2. We want you to write and direct the film. And Cameron was not sure that he wanted

to do a sequel. And they're like, okay, we'll pay you \$6 million. And so it says they offer me a lot of money Cameron says \$6 million to be exact. It turns out I can be bought. So that is in 1989. So you know, be like double that or maybe even triple that today for a 35 year old director. Now that was hilarious winds up, you know, becoming one of the most expensive. I think the budget they have on this movie is like \$100 million. But listen to how what they did for Arnold. So they give James \$6 million. You know how they convinced Arnold to do the movie. These guys gave

Arnold a \$12 million Gulfstream jet to close the deal. That's incredible. And so while I'm reading about how they're making Terminator 2, I stumbled across this like little piece of fun history fact, right? So think about one of the most well known software programs of all time is Photoshop. Well, the crazy thing I discovered in this book is that an early version of what eventually becomes the first version of what will eventually become the commercial product Photoshop is actually the first thing they use it for is to solve a technical problem that James Cameron is having on Terminator 2. This is around 1990. I think this is when it's happening.

Some of the things that Cameron wanted the T1000 Terminator to do was a stretch for industrial light and magic. When the computerized character extended into certain poses, giant black gashes appeared in his shoulders. The ILM industrial light and magic team pulled it off, thanks in part, to a cool new piece of software invented by a 20-something person working there named John Knoll and his brother Thomas, a grad student at the University of Michigan. That software happened to be the very first version of Photoshop, still a few years away from becoming the industry standard graphics editing program.

That's incredible. I went and looked, and I think the developers wind up selling the rights to Photoshop a few years later for, I think, \$35 million. There is something that appears in the book multiple times. I haven't covered yet. I think you already know this, but he has excessively high standards. He's very difficult to work with. This kind of reminding one of my favorite lines when I was reading that chapter on Walt Disney and Picasso last week was that Walt Disney put excellence before any other consideration. I think that applies to James as well. It talks about they had to get this movie made quickly, but that didn't have any effect on James Cameron's level of professionalism. He's known for doing this on multiple things. He shoots a take, and then he has a catchphrase. He would repeat over and over again, and so he says he'd alternate between these two, which is hilarious. That's exactly what I didn't want, or the other one. Perfect. Let's do it again. It says it chafed the T2 crew, some of whom started wearing shirts that said Terminator 3, not with me. That dedication to just making the best thing he could possibly could pays off in the end. Quality will always make you more money, is another line, I think, from the Walt Disney book that I covered last week or the Walt Disney essay, rather. What's fascinating is that I think they pay, they cost like \$100 million to make. The movie makes something like \$500 million. His movies keep having these fantastic financial outcomes, and this is what allows him to get to what he really wants. James Cameron really wants, and what most of the history's greatest founders want. They want the same thing. They want ownership, and they want control. I'm reading about James Cameron. I could easily be reading about James Dyson, or George Lucas. It says, in the spring of 1992, Cameron signed an unusual \$500 million multi-picture domestic distribution deal with Fox. They gave him power to put any movie he wanted into production without Fox's approval, up to a budget of \$70 million, and he retained ownership of his own films. This deal gave Cameron both more control and more responsibility than a director typically enjoys. This is what he said, and this is what inspired him to do so. I had just made Terminator 2 for Carol Coe Studios, and I admired how they rolled, being their own bosses, mavericks and entrepreneurs. I admired how they rolled, being their own bosses, mavericks and entrepreneurs, Cameron says. I'd been fed up with the studio system after Aliens and Abyss, both of which I felt were not released properly. I could now set up a structure which would allow me to call the shots myself. And so after he signs this next deal, the thing he does the following year is he's found his own special effects company. I just love this idea. It's like James Cameron knows that there is a revolution in computer-generated special effects happening, and that one, he wants to play a role, and two, in order to play that role, in order to do so, he decides, hey, the correct move here is to start my own, to found my own special effects company. Cameron wanted to be part of the digital revolution of special effects. I wanted to make sure that as a filmmaker, I was always ahead of the wave and not behind it. To do so, he felt he would need a lab of his own. He was thinking of founding his own special effects company, which they're going to call Digital Domain. This is how they get the funding for it. They raised \$15 million from IBM, which took a 50% stake in the company and provided much of the hardware to get it started. Digital Domain wasn't a hard sell. The guys behind Terminator 2 and Jurassic Park were as promising a team to back in the nascent, this is a very early days, in the nascent digital effects industry as existed.

And then just one more thing I want to pull off in the section, which I think is a good idea, go all in on where you believe the future is, regardless of where it currently is. The company's first bold move would be to wholly embrace digital compositing and not even bother to open an optical department. It was a risky decision at the time. Most of Hollywood was still relying on opticals. They thought that wasn't going to be the case in the future, so they just skipped that part. They went directly to the future. Just go right to the future, I guess, the way to think about what he's doing here. But setting up Digital Domain that way gave the company an almost instantaneous advantage over the established effects houses. And then there's another thing that appears over and over again in the career of James Cameron that I want to point out to you. He's just got intense focus. And so it's like mute the world and then build your own world. Cameron knows a lot about a lot of subjects. He can talk about energy policy. He could talk about helicopter engines. He could talk about the Punic Wars. But one of his rare blind spots is Hollywood gossip. He does not give a damn what is going on inside of his own industry. This is not a man who watches E. And so what they're talking about is, I think this is on true lies, he winds up wanting to hire Tom Arnold. And he didn't know anything about the back, there was some controversy around Tom Arnold. So he gets his phone call from a Fox executive, and they're like, what the hell are you doing? Like they're just so mystified by his choice of casting. Remember, he has control. So he can do whatever he gets to choose the actors that he wants to work with. And so they ask him, they're like, don't you read the papers? Don't you watch TV? And Cameron confessed that, no, that he did not. And so a short while later, we hear from his long-term attorney. And he's like, listen, James is not a guy that I would call and say, let's do lunch. Cameron rarely lunches or parties and applies none of his laser beam focus to the Hollywood power struggles. Jim doesn't call me up and say, what does Spielberg make, which some of my other clients do? He does not think in those terms. And so the note I have on my page is like, this is, this is really like a bullet point. My bullet point, like model of James Cameron, up until my reading up, up until the point of the book, he's like, he likes to focus, he likes to work, he is not motivated, motivated primarily by money, very much like Walt Disney, excellence came first, right? Financial considerations or if it's going to make him money, he's trying to build something great. And with the trust that if he builds something great, he'll make money, but building something great was something that Walt Disney and Cameron put first. And then the last note was that he's just got an inner clock, he's got an inner scorecard. He just wants to focus on the work that he's doing. He's not concerned with pulling his head up and looking around like, what are the directors saying? Or what is everybody else in the industry doing? It's irrelevant to him. And you see this in how he picks his movies. He's trying to figure out like, what am I going to work on next after true lies? And this is where he decides to do Titanic, which at the time becomes, you know, the most financial successful movie of all time. What movie he makes next is decided intuitively based on themes that interest him at the moment and what new technical or dramatic territories he wants to explore. I had a lot of doubts about doing Titanic, he says. Could it be done? I wasn't sure. Could the deep dive filming be done? I don't know. Could we create the technology? I don't know. Would anyone want to see it? While he was ruminating on what to do next, he received a fax from this other guy, this explorer named Sagovitch. And so he's reading Sagovitch's thoughts. And I love this idea because I find this to be true as well. When I listen to podcasts or when I read books that just one line can change

everything. And so he's reading this fax and says, it is sometimes necessary in life to do something extraordinary. In Cameron's mind, that line seemed to glow on the page. Yes, I realize, sometimes you have to do something extraordinary, something crazy. And this is the line I mentioned

earlier. I am an explorer at heart and a filmmaker by trade. And so he looked at creating Titanic, making the movie, not as I'm making a film. I'm going on exploration. I'm going on an odyssey. And then he has this great thing where one of the reasons he wanted to do the film because he's been fantasizing about diving down to the wreck, I think it would cost, I think it was like \$6 million or something like that to develop the technology to do it safe. And I think he went down, you know, maybe a dozen times, maybe even more. And what he realized is like, well, really, we should charge my expedition to the Titanic as a marketing expense. And the studio is like, what are you talking about? And this is actually a genius way to gain attention for the film. And so Cameron says, well, the expedition should be charged to the marketing budget because it's going to attract way more publicity than just trotting out the actors and sending them around for on the talk show circuit. There's this great line in Michael Jordan's autobiography, which I covered back on episode 213, where he says, I focus on the little things, the little things add up to big things. And Cameron did this entire career. You see it in the Titanic, he was a stickler for getting the actual historical details as accurate as possible. There was a degree of obsession and Cameron's dedication to the little details from the ship's stationery down to the white star line stamped ashtrays. He has always been a stickler for the little things. After I put out that episode on Bernard Arnault, I heard from stories from people who listen to the podcast that he's this way to the most minute details in the stores, the businesses that he runs, the hotels, the restaurants that he owns, he focuses on the large picture, the strategy, but he also pays attention to the most minute detail that it would be. Some of the stories I've heard would just shock you if I could repeat them. And they came to mind when I'm reading this section. It's like, oh, this is what Michael Jordan, top of his profession, Bernard Arnault, top of his profession, James Cameron, top of his profession, obsessed with the details, little things add up to big things. Let's go back to this idea that was in that piece by GQ that jumped out at me, where it's like, James is the type of person whose confidence preceded his achievements. It's so important to truly believe in what you're doing to have superhuman levels of confidence, because sometimes you have people on

your own team trying to talk you out of it. He's doing Titanic, right? Titanic, this is before Titanic comes out, is going to be a most financially successful film. And he's got people on his own team on 20th Century Fox, one of the presidents there, comes to James and is trying to instill doubts into James' mind. This is crazy. And this is, if you listen to the early episodes of Founders, I'd have this segment, because it's popped up so many times where I call it critics don't know shit. And what I meant by that is like, these just biographies are just full of people confident in why what you were doing just won't work. And so we see that here, 20th Century Fox president Bill McCannick told Cameron that the film would never see a dime of profit. He suggested that Cameron should not only surrender all his points, meaning his profits on Titanic, but give back half of his points on the next film he did with Fox. This conversation happened in Cameron's living room. McCannick's counteroffer did not go over well. Get the fuck out of my house, Cameron replied.

And I need to make the point that that level of confidence, like sometimes it has to be

externalized even when it's not, you actually don't feel it at the time inside, because this is coming towards the end of the filming. So they're, they're the production, like the actual shooting of Titanic is wrapping up, right? But then he's got to figure out to edit it. It is one of the lowest points of James's life. He's like, just kill me now. But you still have the strength or the belief in what you're doing, even though you feel like shit, to make sure that you don't give into the doubts of other people. He was exhausted and drained. He had enough footage for a four-hour

movie and was wildly over budget and had been told there was zero possibility that the film could make any money. His movie was the laughing stock of Hollywood. Critics don't know shit. The media was attacking him and ridiculing him daily. The Hollywood media, the media that he is right to ignore, is making fun of him because they think this is going to be like another water world, like this, this bust. You spend all this money. Remember, it's about to make more money than anything else. And this is what was happening, right? Right before it's darkest before the dawn. This is great line. The founder of Vans, you know, shoe company, he says, opportunity is a strange beast. It commonly appears after a loss. I don't know why that came to mind when I got to this point, but this is what I was thinking of. He had enough footage for a four-hour movie, was wildly over budget and had been told there was zero possibility that film could make money. His movie was the laughing stock of Hollywood and the media was ridiculing and attacking him daily. I thought to myself, Lord, take me now. He had finished one impossible task only to face another, but that was tomorrow. And then right after this was just this funny interaction he had with Fox's CEO, Rupert Murdoch. In the middle of this terminal, the director ran into the news corporation chairman and CEO, Rupert Murdoch at the studio. I guess I'm not your favorite person at the moment, Cameron said, to the media baron. But the movie is going to be good, he promised. It better be better than good, Murdoch told him. And so what happens, Titanic winds up being number

one for 16 straight weeks and makes almost \$2 billion. Almost makes \$2 billion in the movie. And this is why he's so interesting. He is bent on doing what he wants to do, when he wants to do it, and maintaining absolute control at what would be the apex of his powers as a director. Cameron would step away from feature filmmaking altogether. After Titanic, Cameron took to calling himself the world's busiest unemployed filmmaker. I've got my fuck you money, and I can kind of step away for a while. So as you can already tell from his interviews from this book, if you watch a bunch of video interviews of him too, that is by far his favorite word. These are his words, right? This is how he talks. I got my fuck you money, and I can kind of step away for a while. My career is not going anywhere, and I can do all the cool stuff that I've wanted to do now. And so what does he do when he wants to get away from all the pressure? He does what, this is the weirdest thing, the surprising thing to me is like, I just did a Tiger Woods biography on episode three one, Tiger Woods said the exact same thing that James did. He's like, the only place he could get away from the pressure was by diving deep into the ocean. It's a surprising thing they had in common. For Cameron, peace is found under the ocean. After finishing a movie, he says, I usually go diving first to decompress by literally decompressing. I find the underwater world to be a great anecdote to Hollywood.

Nobody knows, nobody down there knows who you are. That's exactly what Tiger Woods said. And then James adds another level to this, you are just part of the food chain.

And so for the next eight years, he just dedicates himself to becoming an explorer, which is what he always wanted to be. In fact, there was a little like a historical anecdote where James Cameron is actually underwater at the site of the Titanic on 9-11. And so they come to the top, I think he's with another person, I can't remember, and they get to the top and the boat, and they thought it was going to be like a cause for celebration. And they get to the top and they get to the top and everybody's like, swollen and depressed and like, what's going on? And that's when he found out that 9-11 had just happened. And so he's looking back and trying to explain like why he did this at this point in his life. And he says, where are the 21st century's Magellans? More important, where was the spirit of discovery in the regular citizen who had once watched the moon landing and been filled with wonder and a sense of possibility? Exploration is not a luxury. It defines us as a civilization. By 2005, Cameron had devoted seven of his midlife years, potentially a director's most productive, to the discovery of new places and new technology, rather than to making movies. And so eventually he resurfaces, literally, and he's like, all right, I'm going to make Avatar. And this is what I meant. I was like one of the most impressive things about him is that the idea that he'll just let ideas simmer for decades. He may not know how to do it, but he just he keeps, he says, there's another line in the book earlier on where he's like, I'll run out of time before I run out of ideas. So it says at this point, Cameron hadn't released a feature film in over a decade. He had been largely absent from the Hollywood scene, writing in his submarines, filming his documentaries and tinkering and building new filmmaking toys. The director wrote his first treatment for Avatar 12 years before this is 12 years before he actually starts working on it. The only problem with making the movie in 1986 was that it was impossible. The technology did not exist. Again, we see this over and over again.

I know what I want to do. I just don't know how to do it yet. And then he comments on this idea that he just doesn't let ideas die. He doesn't let them go to waste. Cameron jokes that he is like a plains Indian who waste no piece of the buffalo. In his case, it is his ideas that are made of use down to the marrow. Sometimes decades later, he started creating some of the images in Avatar in the 1970s. That's what he was mentioning in the piece where he had these drawings and all these people come out after the Avatar is widely successful. Like you stole the idea from me. He's like, Oh yeah, look at this, dated. I wrote this when I was 19. I had been processing this in my imagination for decades. That is an incredible statement. And so all the way back when he's founding his special effects company, Digital Remain, I think this is 1992, the year before he founds the company, he writes this thing called Digital Manifesto. It's like a 12 page, almost like a white paper outlining like why he's starting Digital Remain and what he thinks is going to happen and really not to focus on specifically what's happening. What is the idea behind what's happening in the book and what the idea that's happening behind the book to me is like, what is obvious to you in your industry that won't be obvious to other people for a decade? This was obvious to him a decade before it was obvious to anybody else. Cameron had written a Digital Manifesto, a passionately argued 13 page document laying out where he expected filmmaking to go in the coming years. In his manifesto, he described something called performance capture. What he's calling performance capture is now known as motion capture. And that's what you see in Avatar. Performance capture in which an actor would don a data suit, sending a stream of information about the actor's physical movements to a workstation. Remember, this is 1992, where it'd be inserted

into a synthetic environment. Artists would then use software to turn the actor's digitized performance into a fantastical character. Cameron was rubbing elbows with the brightest minds and special effects at that point. This was back in 1992. And this is the stuff they were talking about. It all seemed pretty obvious from where we were sitting, he says. To most of Hollywood, though, the possibilities of lifelike CG characters driven by human performances wouldn't be obvious for at least another decade.

That is fascinating to sit here and think about. What is obvious to you in your industry that will not be obvious to other people in that industry for a decade? And can you start working on these things now? And the last chapter in the book is all about the building of Avatar. This is another main theme in the life and career of James Cameron. The fact that he said he feels every idea is a work in progress. He is attracted to hard. I love this line. He says a crew member wrote a set catchphrase on the whiteboard. It's Avatar, dude. Nothing works the first time. And another cool thing about James Cameron is he's all positive some. I love when these people at the top of professions interact with each other, whether it's historical analogy or something that's taken place in recent history. This is where I mentioned earlier how he's willing to share everything he learns. Peter Jackson and Steven Spielberg wound up spending a week using Cameron's equipment, working with his crew, visiting the production. And it says he was helping us get our heads around the equipment. Jim is very generous in the way he shares knowledge and information. He doesn't jealously guard technology and secrets. And then you fast forward like another decade after this book ends. And that's part of the reason that Cameron moved to New Zealand because he uses Jackson Special Effects Company. He was using it to build on Avatar. He's going to use them for, I think, Avatar 3 and Avatar 4 too. It's called Weta. And it's actually headquartered in New Zealand, very close to where Cameron lives. And finally, one of the last pages of the book, there is a sentence that I think is the perfect way to end this conversation, this podcast, this time together that gives you a great indication of James Cameron, the person, and how he approaches his work. James Cameron put on a blue baseball cap with the letters H M F I C printed on it. It stood for head motherfucker in charge. And that is where I'll leave it. I am going to leave the link down below for this book. If you buy it, you'll be supporting the package at the same time. I'm also going to leave the link down for the GQ article. At the top of the GQ article, you'll see they all have audio controls in case you want to listen to it. It's excellent. They did an excellent job on it. Like I said, I was listening to it every night as I went to sleep, as I was working my way through the book and thinking about this podcast. So hope you check out both the GQ article and this book. Absolutely fantastic. Another thing that I hope you check out is if you get on my personal email list, so I will go through, I don't know, I probably have 75 highlights of this book. What I'll go through, and this takes an unbelievable amount of time, is I will go through and try to find like the 10, like my 10 favorite sentences in the book. It's like 10 bullet points that I want to remember from the book. If you want to get on the list, the link is down below. The second thing that I hope you

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