



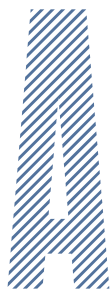
DAN LEVINE,  
SHAWN LEVY,  
DAN COHEN

# A RELAY RACE TO THE TOP

**ENDURANCE, PERSISTENCE AND THE FULL COLLABORATION  
OF ITS PARTNERS KEEPS 21 LAPS RUNNING.**

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY KREMER JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY



A photo in the office of 21 Laps captures what the company's founder, Shawn Levy, calls a moment of seismic shift. In the picture, Levy poses with 21 Laps partners Dan Cohen and Dan Levine, with the majestic setting of Telluride, Colorado, behind them. It was September 2016, and the three producers were in town to premiere their latest feature at the storied film festival.

A case study in the improbable, *Arrival* became emblematic of 21 Laps in a variety of ways. While exploring possible projects with Eric Heisserer, the horror screenwriter turned 21 Laps on to an award-winning sci-fi novella called *Story of Your Life* by Ted Chiang. The story was complex, astounding, heart-wrenching—and very, very tough to work out as a movie. But 21 Laps believed.

"We took it out as a pitch. To this day, I say it's the best pitch I've ever taken out. And it didn't sell," Cohen recalls.

Heisserer remained committed, writing the script on spec without any guarantee it would ever be shot. At the same time, 21 Laps was meeting with a Canadian filmmaker named Denis Villeneuve. When Levy and the Dans (as they are referred to by their coworkers, who are collectively known as Lapsters) asked what Villeneuve wanted, he replied, "I've been dreaming of doing sci-fi since I was a child." But he had never worked anywhere near the vicinity of that ballpark.

"I wanted to make sure that the first time I stepped into it, it would be for something special. I was looking for something that would bring something new to the genre. And *Arrival* was that," Villeneuve says. "It was one of the most beautiful cinematic gifts I received in my life."

Villeneuve describes how he worked closely with both Dans



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throughout development, mostly with Levine during the shoot, then more with Levy in postproduction.

"It was like a kind of relay. They pass each other the baton," Villeneuve says. "They were very open-minded, flexible, generous producers that gave me everything to fulfill the vision I had."

The pitch that no one wanted based on a sci-fi story that felt cinematically improbable that became a movie directed by a filmmaker with no sci-fi experience premiered to standing ovations at the 2016 Venice Film Festival, opening the way for Villeneuve to confidently conquer sci-fi blockbuster territory with *Blade Runner 2049* and *Dune*.

But that wasn't the only thing that 21 Laps had to celebrate in 2016.

First, some backstory: 21 Laps launched as a company in 2005. The Dans joined the team within a week of each other in 2010. Levine had shepherded the likes of *Cloverfield*, *Fight Club* and *LA Confidential* at Paramount and New Regency while Cohen was a creative exec at Sidney Kimmel Entertainment. As of 2016, 21 Laps' credits included *Reel Steel*, *Date Night*, *The Spectacular Now*, the *Night at the Museum* franchise and many more—successes all, but all feature films. The company had never traversed TV territory.

That is, until the day they decided to produce a series that had been passed on by others. The writer-directors of the series were a pair of brothers who'd done a few shorts, one feature, and a handful of TV episodes, but had never run a show. Who was going to bet on them, much less on a kid-led series that wasn't kid-friendly?

21 Laps, that's who.

Matt and Ross Duffer may have been taking a risk as well, putting their baby into the hands of a company with no TV experience, but they trusted their collective gut. "It was very clear to us that they completely

understood our vision, but just as importantly, they weren't at all afraid of our lack of experience," they recall. "Unlike other production companies, 21 Laps supported us as both showrunners and directors."

Throughout the crash course in TV production, the Duffers relied on Levy

to help them navigate studio politics, growing budgets, unexpected success, and Hollywood in general while connecting the brothers with invaluable collaborators including editor Dean Zimmerman, postproduction supervisor Rand Geiger, sound designer Craig Henighan and colorist Skip Kimball. "The show would simply not be what it is without them," the brothers say.

*Stranger Things* debuted on Netflix on July 15, 2016. Six weeks later, Cohen, Levine and Levy posed for that photo on a sunny Colorado day, a critically acclaimed film in one hand, a boundary-busting TV series in the other. Each represented a new genre for the company, and neither was directed by Levy—who up till then had been the company's brand, for all intents and purposes. Things looked good. But would it last?

Fast-forward to 2024. The company's limited series adaptation of *All the Light We Cannot See* debuted to big numbers on Netflix and has garnered a slew of top award nominations. But the road to such accolades was bumpy.

Everyone at 21 Laps had fallen in love with Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, but the screen rights were tied up for years. Yet again, 21 Laps kept the fires of passion and persistence burning. When the rights became available, it was mostly because other companies were convinced that the book could never be a film. 21 Laps won by pitching the adaptation as a limited series. Their TV prowess was almost unquestionable at this point, and Netflix was on board as an enthusiastic partner.

Bela Bajaria, chief content officer at Netflix, is proud of the diversity of projects they've produced with 21 Laps, from *All the Light* to *Unsolved Mysteries* to the forthcoming Susanne Bier-directed limited series *Perfect*



Denis Villeneuve, Dan Levine, Dan Cohen, Eric Heisserer and Ted Chiang on set of *Arrival*.

*Couple* starring Nicole Kidman and Liev Schreiber, features like *The Adam Project*, and, of course, *Stranger Things*.

"We both have the same end goal. We want to make something great that audiences love," Bajaria says. "Because they really care about the creative aspects and are very

detail-oriented doing the work, they've attracted top talent in front of and behind the camera. They have a strong sense of material and create a supportive environment for talent and creatives. If you think about being that prolific in TV and film, it's a hard thing to actually do and to do it so well."

At press time, 21 Laps had kicked off production on the final season of *Stranger Things*, was filming the Netflix documentary *Extraterrestrial*, and had just wrapped production on both *Deadpool 3* and *Perfect Couple*. To juggle it all, the division of labor among the company's three principals isn't as separate as one might presume.

"It doesn't really matter to us who's the point person on which. The way we collaborate is constantly shifting," Levy says. For example: Levine and Levy were in Budapest and France shooting *All the Light* while Cohen was in New Orleans shooting *Boogeyman*, and all three were working from wherever they were on the development of *Never Let Go*.

"We always joke that our dream scenario is for nobody to be in the office because everyone's on set, in the edit room, or on the scoring stage, doing what we love, which is making things," Levy adds.

The office is filled with talented Lapsters aplenty. Development coordinator Max Gains connected with 21 Laps when he was an assistant at Paramount. There he worked closely with Cohen and 21 Laps' senior VP of film and TV, Becca Edelman, on the film *Love and Monsters*.

"I knew they were great at their jobs and did the nitty-gritty work," Gains says. "Dan Cohen was always looking for ways to push the ball down the field. He never cared about the optics, and at the end of the day always did what was best for the movie."

Edelman joined the team in 2017 as a “baby creative executive,” coming up from being an assistant. “I had everything to learn. Shawn, Dan, Dan, and Emily (Morris) showed me the ropes inch by inch, meeting by meeting, project by project,” says Edelman, basking in the glow of having wrapped *Perfect Couple*. “My North Star has evolved to be crafting content that is smart but also fun and accessible.”

Emily Morris started as Levine’s assistant and is now executive vice president of film and television. “21 Laps has always been the place to find unique ways into human stories, whether it’s sci-fi or romantic comedy or horror or adventure. I’ve been empowered along the way to take risks and fight for the stories I believe in, and the way the entire team supports each other has really facilitated that,” Morris says.

Director of development Moera Ainai arrived at 21 Laps as an assistant in 2019, fresh out of the agency world. “I honestly still didn’t know exactly what a producer’s job entailed,” she says. “I fell in love with how close to the creative you are in every

step of this job, from a kernel of an idea through development and production all the way through release.”

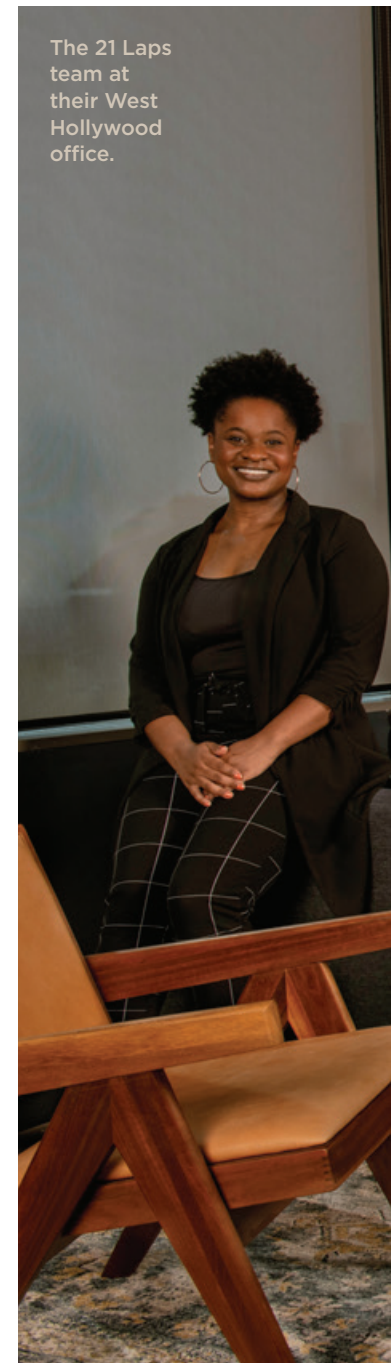
Cohen’s assistant Jacqueline Rosso relishes that 21 Laps assistants get to do first passes on notes, flag new talent, hunt down intel and even bring in projects of their own. It’s all been invaluable for a budding producer like her. “The access and visibility that my boss and coworkers have provided me has been the ultimate master class in producing,” Rosso says.

Years ago, during a panel discussion about *Arrival* just after its release, Levine said, “Sometimes producing is sticking your face in the fan blade.” He shies away from the gruesome metaphor now, but the sentiment remains the same: putting it all on the line and never turning away from how hard it might get to get your babies on screen. Thirteen years into their partnership, Cohen, Levine and Levy show no signs of stopping.

We caught up with the 21 Laps principals to pick their brains and explore their unique chemistry.



The 21 Laps team at their West Hollywood office.



### HOW HAVE YOU FOUND THE RIGHT PEOPLE FOR THE 21 LAPS TEAM?

**Dan Cohen:** Everyone contributes in a different way, but the alchemy is positive and humanist, and the things we make reflect that. Culturally, we’re in a place of trusting and helping one another and going from there.

**Shawn Levy:** Everybody at 21 Laps reads. Everybody at 21 Laps does notes. And no one opinion is inherently more valuable than anyone else’s. We don’t need shared taste. We need shared values, shared emotionality and shared work ethic. So we interview a lot of people and interview them rigorously.

It’s a little bit like casting. When I’m direct-

ing, I’m feeling something in that actor that tells me they have something I want that is singular to them. That’s how we hire not only our executives, but our assistants. We hire assistants not because we think they’ll be great at assisting, but also because we think they’re going to make great future junior executives.

**Dan Levine:** When I was brought in to run the company, I thought, “I’m going to put my stamp on this company and mold it.” Then I found out Shawn had hired this young CE a week before me, and I was privately annoyed. I was like, “Couldn’t I have hired that person? Who is this person?” I have to give Shawn a lot of credit for that because Dan became my

“SO MANY PEOPLE WORK AT COMPANIES WHERE THE PRESUMPTION IS YOU SERVE THE BOSS, YOU’RE INVISIBLE, AND YOU SHOULD BE CONTENT WITH THAT INVISIBILITY. BUT IF YOU WORK ON SOMETHING HERE, I SEE YOU AND I’M GOING TO REWARD YOU. I’M GOING TO SHARE IT WITH THE WORLD.” **SHAWN LEVY**



soulmate. We have the exact same taste in movies. We share that love of the game.

**Cohen:** I've never worked for a studio, but Dan worked on *Fight Club* and *LA Confidential* and *Heat* at Regency and on amazing movies at Paramount. His studio experience has been such a resource for me, let alone just being someone who's still as passionate day-to-day as he is. It's shown me that passion is a weapon. Passion's a tiebreaker.

The journey is long. You want to bring on someone who's great and who shares the passion and sees the endgame. Then the family grows and grows.

Another key for me has always been, who is your day-to-day studio executive? Because that person is going to fight battles for you on behalf of the movie that you never see, the way that we fight battles every day on behalf of the creative and the creator.

**Levy:** We don't view the studio or the network as the enemy. We recognize that it only gets made through collaboration with the people who represent the money, and it is a privilege for someone to give you money to make something that you love. We don't forget that. We adopt the collaborative stance, not an antagonistic stance.

#### WHAT QUALITIES ARE KEY TO THE PROJECTS THAT 21 LAPS IS LOOKING FOR, WHETHER FILM OR TV?

**Cohen:** I'm always attracted to what we don't have or what we aren't doing. During what I'll call the dark years of Trump and COVID, I was obsessed with finding inspirational true stories as an antidote to what was the day-to-day. It brought us into sports and music and legal trials and the Civil War—stories that made me ask, "Why wasn't this in our high school history books?"

We also talk a lot about the erotic thriller or these '90s dramedies that don't exist anymore. We're always trying to find big tentpole stuff or midbudget genre films that can overperform and attract top talent, but we're also always attracted to "the other." I'm on a never-ending quest to find the exact intersection of something commercial but truly unique and independent.

**Levy:** We're working on *Deadpool 3* and *Stranger Things*, and we're developing *Star Wars* together with Lucasfilm—all global-scale IP. But 21 Laps was built on original storytelling. There was nothing on paper that announced *Stranger Things* as a hit. Same thing with *Free Guy*, *Night at the Museum*, *Adam Project*, or smaller movies like *Spectacular Now*. While it's fun to play in the sandbox of IP, we're never gonna stop chasing new voices, new filmmakers and great material, even if it doesn't make sense on paper.

We're going to pursue passion, not calculus.

The humanism of the stories is a North Star principle. It can be genre, it can be comedy, it can be drama, it can be a television film. We work for theatrical studios, and we work for streamers. We make television and movies, and we love the gamut of storytelling. But we're always looking for that resonant humanistic theme at the center. That, if anything, is the unifying trait of all 21 Laps stories.

#### ARE THERE SIMILARITIES TO THE WAYS YOU DEVELOP AND PRODUCE FILM AND TV PROJECTS? HOW DO YOU NAVIGATE EACH FORMAT?

**Levy:** We love the cohesion of our film and television departments. Everybody at 21 Laps is allowed and encouraged to work on everything.

**Levine:** They're basically long stories and short stories. They feel the same to us when we're making them. I remember on the set of *All the Light We Cannot See*, we kept saying, "the movie, the movie, the movie," and had to remember that it was a limited series. But it doesn't matter. In terms of the lessons we've learned, they're the same. It's just how do you tell a story with how much runway you have.

**Levy:** When we get books, scripts, articles, ideas or pitches, we gut check: What is the narrative arc that this idea wants? If it's TV development, so be it; or movies, so be it. It goes back to where we started: We are betting on talent that we love and believe in regardless of format.

Like every producer reading this article, our dream is to have a director or showrunner who helps us sleep well at night, who does their job so well that we are there to support and be additive, not to be a crisis solver.

#### HOW DOES FINANCING IMPACT THE DECISIONS YOU MAKE, WHETHER IT'S A FILM OR TV PROJECT?

**Levy:** We like being fiscally responsible. We don't forget that it's a privilege to get someone else's money to do a thing we love.

**Cohen:** It never doesn't feel like a miracle when it happens. Each time I'm like, "Holy shit, this happened, we got it there."

**Levine:** I don't think we have ever gone over budget. In fact, it drives you crazy when you have money left over.

**Levy:** That's both obnoxious but true to admit. We promptly funnel all those savings into the effects and music.

**Levine:** Line producers are trained to squirrel away some

money, but I always give them a speech: “I don’t want to find out that you saved us a million for post. I don’t want it for post. Give the director those extra days they’ve been asking for.”

**Levy:** At the end of the day, we will always have been a director-founded company. We love and empower directors. Whether they’re big-time veterans or first-timers, we’re going to protect the sanctity of the director. So arming them with the resources they need is really important to us.

**Levine:** We work with a lot of new filmmakers, and Shawn loves mentoring them and getting them together to teach them some key things before they head out to production. That’s an incredible resource to have and the directors love it.

**HOW ARE YOU ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF MENTORSHIP FOR NEW PRODUCERS?**

**Levine:** There’s certainly no industry-wide, systematic apprenticeship for creative producers. You’re really thrown in the deep end.



COURTESY OF NETFLIX

Shawn Levy with Matt and Ross Duffer on the set of *Stranger Things*.



**Levy:** It's why we have an ongoing internship program here at 21 Labs. It's why we all take every opportunity to speak at our alma maters or film schools that we didn't go to.

**Levine:** And have our assistants come to set and watch. I remember being an exec and not being invited to set, let alone being an assistant invited to set. We love to pass the baton and get all our rising execs on set. The more we can hand off to them and watch them grow is a dream for us.

**Cohen:** We brought my amazing assistant Jacqueline to Vancouver when we were making a Lionsgate movie. She's setting a million meetings and reading all these drafts and watching the dailies. But to then come on our stages and watch, ask questions, meet people, and be given that immediate context that frankly I didn't get until I was almost 30 on the set of *Spectacular Now*—I could see the impact it had on her.

**Levy:** I think people blossom quickly here because everyone is invited in on every conversation. You want to read the script that your colleagues are talking about? Read it, talk about it, share your voice and your opinion.

I've always believed if you hunt and gather, guess what—I'm going to happily give you money and credit. So many people work at companies where the presumption is you serve the boss, you're invisible, and you should be content with that invisibility. But if you work on something here, I see you and I'm going to reward you. I'm going to share it with the world.

**Cohen:** I think most people in Shawn's position as a director of a company are either overly involved or non-existent. Shawn will get in the weeds and help us. He's always there to read a draft, watch a cut, see the table read, or watch dailies, especially early on in case there's something amiss. But he also gives us the autonomy to grow and run something. From that comes true partnership and trust.

**Levine:** Somehow, producing is the least glamorous job of them all. You sort of get lost in the mix, yet we're the ones that are on it from beginning to end, whether it's five, seven, 10 or 11 years. There's not a lot of glory to it sometimes.

**Levy:** And because you're very often the one receiving the least attention and glory, you goddamn better well love it. Lucky for us, we do.

## THE COMPANY IS SUCCESSFUL. YOU'RE IN HIGH DEMAND. IS IT EASIER TO TAKE RISKS?

**Levine:** I don't think it's easier. If we're really passionate about something that people don't see as the current trend they're looking for, we can push things through. But I think we're in a time more than ever when IP rules all. It's always a balance of giving the studios and streamers what they need, but sliding in some of the ones we think they're gonna want in three to five years. Having done that successfully several times now, people trust us more. But we don't abuse that trust.

**Cohen:** It might be easier for us to get a property we want than it was several years ago. But it's harder to get it made than it was then in terms of the output of the industry. It's getting more risk-averse than before even though there's more and more opportunity with different ways to go—like you can make a miniseries out of something that would have been a movie before.

We only want to take on stuff that we really think that we can make. It's five years of work to get it made and another year-plus to go into production and then post to see the release. I always ask, "Do I want to spend five to 10 years getting this made? And if it's a show, do I want to spend five to 10 years making it a success?" We want to be sure we love it before we step in.

**Levy:** It's an interesting dichotomy that there's this proliferation of supposed content needs, yet it is increasingly hard to get a green light on something original and deemed risky. And yet without taking those big swings, the industry will become less interesting and will therefore eventually wither. I don't know the solution to that, other than every time we are able to make a *Free Guy* or an *Adam Project* or a *Stranger Things*—huge hits with original storytelling—it hopefully reaffirms the possibility of that. But there's no question that it is increasingly hard to get shows and movies based on nothing but new ideas. What is the solution? Sheer tenacity.

**Cohen:** When something original and unique doesn't work, that core genre is penalized. I feel like it's obvious that audiences want to look at a trailer or a poster and say, "I've never seen anything like that before." I don't know why there isn't an appetite from anyone besides storytellers for that.

**Levine:** But it's also a big opportunity. When everyone's looking one way, we have dared to look the other. No one was looking for emotional sci-fi and yet with *Stranger Things* and *Arrival* suddenly that became a

big genre. I don't think there's a solve other than to deliver hits to our studios, the streamers, the people that pay us to deliver hits for them. We would love a big piece of IP to land in our lap. But also, our job is when no one's thinking of a type of story that's gone neglected, let's bring it back, or do something no one's thinking of.

**Levy:** The way the company is flourishing is exactly what we dreamed of a decade-plus ago. We've done it largely by just coming to work every day—not looking for the “ataboys!” No one ever gifted us IP; no one ever handed us anything. We're just going to do it step by step, show by show, movie by movie. ■

Dan Cohen, Dan Levine and Shawn Levy at the 2016 Telluride Film Festival.

PHOTO BY TRACEY DURNING