Pixar’s Storytelling ‘Secret’

Pixar has released thirteen movies. Each has opened as the #1 film at the box office. Pixar movies have grossed $7.5B worldwide, an average $577M per title. This is by far the highest per movie average of any studio in Hollywood history.

More numbers: Pixar films have garnered 26 Academy Awards, 7 Golden Globes, and 3 Grammy Awards

Still more numbers: 7 of Pixar’s 12 films are in the IMDB Top 250 Movies of all time.

What this means is Pixar has somehow managed to create and produce thirteen movies that are both unparalleled in their box office performance and critical success.

How do they do it?

We did an exclusive interview with Mary Coleman, the head of Pixar’s story department. She walked us through the Pixar process:

- **Initial Pitch**: “John Lasseter chooses a director and that director is asked to come up with three totally different ideas – different worlds, different characters. Then John chooses the one he feels has the most promise for Pixar.”

- **Research**: “We spend a lot of time in research delving into whatever the world is and digging into whatever character we’re exploring, laying a foundation… In that period as well we’re really trying to articulate what is the heart of the story, what is the theme we want to communicate.”

- **Outline**: “Then we start doing very rough outlines and we present those to the Brain Trust. What’s unique is it’s your filmmaking peers giving you feedback.”

- **Ongoing Pitches**: “We’re pitching the twenty minute version of the story and getting feedback from John and the other directors.”

- **Reels**: “A roughly sketched hand-drawn version of the movie. It’s almost like a comic book as flip book. You get to see how it’s all going to come together in a very rough form.”

- **Table Readings**: “We learn a lot from table readings. We don’t always use professional actors for those, sometimes we use in-house people just to get a sense of where we are with the draft.”
• First Draft: “We spend a lot of time outlining, sometimes up to a year before we get through a first-draft.”

• Second Draft: “While writing the second draft, we usually start with what we call ‘boarding the story’ which is where the story artists start doing panels, sketches of the beats visually.”

• Real Time Reels: “We see the second draft of the screenplay up on the screen in these sketchy reels and we get to look at the movie as a whole. If the movie’s going to be an hour and a half long, those reels are an hour and a half, so you get a real sense of the shape of the story.”

The aspects of story development noted above are not so much programmatic as organic. That is outlining, pitching, reels, table readings, and writing the first draft evolve on an ad hoc basis depending upon the creative team’s needs. In the end, it involves a lot of writing and rewriting, multiple outlines, multiple drafts, multiple reels:

We’ll take a whole year to get to a first draft… We put it up on reels an average of eight times and that’s eight visual rough drafts of the movie. But that means we’re writing more than eight drafts of the script, many more than that, but in terms of sitting together and watching reels on the screen, we do that an average of eight times.

Even once the script is supposedly ‘locked,’ the story-crafting process does not end:

We keep improving the story well into production which is hard in animation because it’s expensive and laborious. Making changes is really hard and frustrating. But we’ll keep at it if the story’s not right yet.

That’s the actual process. But in terms of an underlying philosophy, does Pixar have a story-crafting formula?

“Make it up each time as they go along”

In the October 17, 2011 issue of The New Yorker, there is an article on Andrew Stanton called “Second-Act Twist,” detailing his move into live-action directing. In the article there is an anecdote from screenwriter Michael Arndt who was brought into Pixar to write Toy Story 3 (Coleman was responsible for surfacing Arndt: “I enjoy saying that we found him before Little Miss Sunshine was released. We hired him based on the script, not on the success of the movie.”). Arndt says of his arrival at Pixar:

“I thought they must have some foolproof system, some big Pixar story machine, but they actually just make it up each time as they go along. Pete Docter’s analogy is ‘Everybody holds hands and jumps out of the airplane with the promise that they’ll build a parachute before they hit the ground.’”
We shared this quote with Coleman and here is her response:

It’s funny because I get calls from fellow executives down in Hollywood asking for the secret recipe. What’s the magic formula? And I always say it’s really hard work and committing a lot of time and energy, there’s no quick formula for getting it right. We keep going back to the drawing board, put it up, look at it, put it all away and start over. We’re willing to do that over and over and over again.

So as we have seen Pixar has an actual process of developing a script. Plus there is an obsession with getting the story right, a commitment to as much time and work as necessary to accomplish that goal. But aren’t there any underlying story principles at Pixar? Here is what Coleman said:

Really the way we think about story goes back to Aristotle. It’s not like we’re inventing something shockingly new, but rather we rely on the deep foundations of good storytelling. It goes to Joseph Campbell, it goes to myth, it goes to a love of literature and great stories. The kind of storytelling we focus on could be the foundation of novels or plays or children’s books, it’s really about what’s at the heart of the story.

Drilling down a bit further, Coleman said this:

In some ways our movies are traditional in the sense there are certain conventions of storytelling like a Protagonist having an arc, of something having been gained or learned by the end. We’re not really out there and experimental in those ways... If you look at all of our movies, you can see there’s a Protagonist who starts with a flaw, that goes on a journey, and comes out the other end a better person... or rat... or fish.

Some of the usual narrative suspects: Aristotle, Campbell, Protagonist arc, hero’s journey. These are precepts Hollywood story development folks traffic in all the time. So what gives? Is there something Pixar does which sets it apart and explains their success?

The secret of storytelling

Pixar has a passion for story. They believe in the singularity of vision that derives from their directors. They embrace the concept of workshopping a story through outlines, pitching, reels, table reading and multiple drafts, all benefiting from the feedback of the Brain Trust. They respect their approach to come up with and produce a great movie even if it takes on average four years. All of that is part of their story-crafting process.

But there is something else. At the very end of our conversation with Coleman, we asked her what in Pixar’s view makes a good story. Her answer: “Coming from the heart... telling it from the heart.”
There you go.

Through many years of analyzing Pixar movies and studying what they say publicly about their movies, if there is a key to the way they approach storytelling, it is this: With Pixar, it all starts with character.

That is underscored in numerous articles about Pixar including this one here.

Stanton went on to write and direct the Oscar-winning "Finding Nemo," released in 2003. He often thought about the little trash-compactor character he and Docter came up with over lunch in 1994.

"I remember this half-baked character of a robot being left on Earth and not being turned off. That’s about the extent of it," Stanton says. "All we had was a sad, lonely character, and that’s where we just kind of left it.

"I never forgot him. I immediately cared about him. So to have something just on the conceit to be that strong, I knew there was something there."

Stanton’s personal connection to the movie Wall-E was primarily with the “sad, lonely character,” a little trash compactor alone on the Earth: “I immediately cared about him.” It was that emotional resonance that kept Stanton coming back to the character time and time again until eventually he co-wrote and directed the movie.

The most fundamental aspect of Pixar movies is that they are character-based stories. Every choice they make – from the decision to green light the project to the articulation of the specific story universe to themes to plot – derives from and is driven by the characters.

Six character-based dynamics in Pixar movies

“Character-based stories” is not just some convenient sounding screenwriting catch phrase, rather it speaks to the core of what Pixar is about and is reflected in six narrative dynamics that are present in abundance in their movies. They are:

• Small Story / Substantial Saga
• Special Subculture
• Strange Sojourners
• Separation
• Sentimentality
• Surprise

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Each of these dynamics finds its expression in Pixar movies originating in the story’s characters. They are not artifices laid upon stories arbitrarily by the film’s creators, but rather emerge organically from within the story universe through the life-experiences, belief systems and world views of the characters.

If you are interested in learning more about Pixar’s storytelling success, enroll now in the 1-week online class Pixar and the Craft of Storytelling. In it, we will explore each of these six dynamics noted above.

Once you learn the essence of each, you can use them in your own stories, and give them a little bit of Pixar magic.