

game changers | thought leaders | rule breakers | style makers

COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 35

EXPAND
YOUR MIND,
CREATE THE
FUTURE

FIND OUT HOW

page 4

STEVEN
SPIELBERG
FROM INTERN
TO ICON

Sir
**Richard
Branson**

NEVER MIND THE

BOLLOCKS

WHAT DO SNEAKER CHAMPIONSHIPS, PIXAR &
NEW YORK FASHION WEEK HAVE IN COMMON?

NOTHING, OTHER THAN THEY'RE ALL IN THIS ISSUE.



From CREATIVE TRANSPARENCY to EXTREME candour, we uncover the greatest life and business LEARNINGS from the masterminds who walk the halls at the WORLD'S LEADING film studio.

INTERVIEWS CARITA RIZZO WORDS CARITA RIZZO + MIRIAM RAPHAEL

When it comes to animated film, Pixar is the gold standard. With Ed Catmull and John Lasseter at the helm as president and chief creative officer respectively, the animation film studio has released 17 feature films since 1995 – among them *Toy Story* and its sequels, *Monsters Inc.*, *Wall-E* and *Inside Out* – with an average worldwide gross of US\$593 million per film. Their most recent release, currently in cinemas, is *Finding Dory*, the much-anticipated follow-up to 2003's billion-dollar blockbuster, *Finding Nemo*.

It goes without saying that 15 Academy Awards, 11 Grammy Awards and seven Golden Globes are no fluke. With every story, character and world created in-house, Pixar credits a culture of collective creativity for its successes. What is perhaps even more remarkable, in an industry where staff turnover is par for the course, is that many of the company's employees have remained on board for long over a decade. But while everyone's voice is heard at Pixar, and sharing ideas is encouraged, movie-making here is not for the faint of heart.

To celebrate the release of *Finding Dory*, we went behind-the-scenes to uncover eight of Pixar's finest lessons in creativity, patience and beyond.



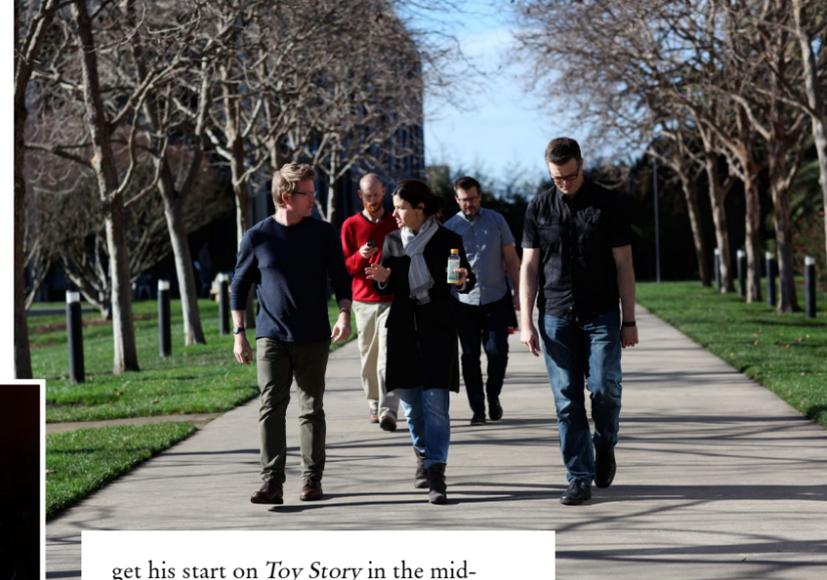
PLAY NICE AND WIN JOBS

Pixar has a notoriously long interview process, subjecting potential recruits to an eight-hour day of conversations with current employees. "The reason why they're so long is because we don't hire by the project," reveals Jason Deamer, an "obsessive compulsive doodler" and the character art director on *Finding Dory*. "We're going to bring someone into the family, so we want to decide as a group that everyone's into this person working with us."

Andrew Stanton, director of both *Finding Nemo* and *Finding Dory*, vehemently agrees.

"The thing you're always guaranteed is, they're going to be great at whatever they do. So it really all comes down to, like, are we going to hate being hitched to each other for four years? Because you spend four years with these people, the biggest agenda is, 'Can I work with you? Can I work with you? Can I work with you?'"

In fact, in an environment where every candidate is extremely talented, being amiable often trumps the candidate's skillset. Jason, who had borrowed US\$70,000 to pay for art school and was "starving to death" as a freelance illustrator when his student loan repayments kicked in, was lucky to



get his start on *Toy Story* in the mid-'90s. With a friend working at Pixar, 21-year-old Jason put his hand up for a haphazard gig earning US\$100 a day to move furniture around the Pixar studios. He was eventually offered a job as a desk PA, fetching coffee and the like, when someone noticed his incessant doodling of faces on coffee cups.

"The first step of getting any job is expressing interest in it, so I planted the seed in their minds that I wanted to get into the art department one day," he recalls. "There's nothing more appealing

In an ENVIRONMENT where every candidate is extremely TALENTED, being amiable often trumps the candidate's SKILLSET.

than someone younger than you, who admires what you do, and actually wants to do it. You're always inclined to hire people you like to be around."

And while Jason skipped the interview step, the company's lengthy recruitment process does benefit the successful

candidate, explains animator Alan Barillaro.

"There's nothing better than walking into a company, and kind of knowing everybody before you've even started, and you've gotten a great sense of what they do, and how they feel about it."

CREATIVE TRANSPARENCY GOES FROM TOP TO BOTTOM

Pixar's creativity gushes down from the highest echelons, confirms Production Designer Steve Pilcher. "It's all about creating a great film, and that starts at the top with John [Lasseter]," he says. "So when you come in every day, you look forward to the excitement of creating

new things, and pushing the bar, and trying to do something that maybe no one's seen and something that's better than what they might expect."

Every Pixar film goes through an intensive process of iteration, testing, and further iteration, with both senior and junior staffers aware of where the project is at, because you can never have too many creative voices airing opinions on a project. According to Lindsey Collins, the producer of *Wall-E* and *Finding Dory*, at the peak of a film, every single person involved (which was 280 in the case of *Finding Dory*) will have an intimate understanding of the storyline and potential challenges.

"The fact that a PA can sit there and speak with great authority about a very specific job they're doing, and how it fits into the larger beast, is a very rare thing in the movie industry," says Lindsey. "They can tell you what the sequence is about. What time of day it is. Where it is in the script. What's been hard about it. What they're still questioning about how solid it is, or if it's probably going to go in for a rewrite... Usually it's like three people who know that. I think we're very transparent about it all." >





EMBRACE EXTREME CANDOUR

From its earliest days, the Pixar creative culture was built around a model of extreme openness. “We were very frank with each other,” says Andrew of his relationship with the four men who led and edited the 1995 production of *Toy Story*.

“And it wasn’t mean-spirited. And it wasn’t trying to win. It was just you felt so safe and trusting that you could say, ‘It still doesn’t feel right to me.’”

Now known as the ‘Pixar Braintrust’, this peer-to-peer forum has been formalised into a larger, more fluid group of directors, writers and heads of story who provide in-depth feedback on a project over a two-hour give-and-take session. None of their advice is mandatory; it’s always up to a film’s director and team to decide what to do with the advice. In Andrew’s description of the innovative management tool, if Pixar is a hospital and the movies its patients, then the Braintrust is made up of its trusted doctors.

“The harsh truth is, sometimes what’s best for the movie isn’t what’s best for an individual or even a department,” admits Andrew. “It’s kind of like somebody has to suffer or hold back or just like sit down for a little while and step out of the game for it to move forward.”

As Ed Catmull, president of Pixar, says in his book, *Creativity Inc.*, “Believe me, you don’t want to be at a company where there is more candor

in the hallways than in the rooms where fundamental ideas or policy are being hashed out. The best inoculation against this fate? Seek out people who are willing to level with you, and when you find them, hold them close. I don’t care who it is, the janitor or the intern or one of your most-trusted lieutenants: if they can help you do that, they should be at the table.”

DON’T MAKE IT PERSONAL

Being faced with harsh truths about your creative output is, quite frankly, tough. But according to Alan, who directed Pixar’s latest short, *Piper*, “it’s difficult, but it’s necessary and we all believe in it.” The way the

Braintrust is structured means that the film – not the filmmaker – is under the microscope.

But what the process requires in return from employees is an ability to create work at their highest level

without being too precious about it – this means leaving egos at the door.

“You can get just so much higher standing on other people’s shoulders than you can all by yourself,” says Jason. “It’s almost like a Zen concept. You have to care enough to do a good job, but then don’t care so much that you get your feelings hurt when they don’t like it. That’s like this line you have to tread. Because you can’t not



care at all because then you wouldn’t do it. But you can’t be so wrapped up and attached to it that if someone says they don’t like it, that you’re going to go home and cry.”

Steve agrees: “You have to invest emotionally to create anything, but you have to be a little indifferent to the changes.”

Lindsey and Andrew joke about this step. “Andrew loves feedback,” laughs Lindsey, with Andrew adding, “It’s turned me bitter and alcoholic, and I was already bitter and alcoholic.”

PATIENCE REALLY IS A VIRTUE

On average, each Pixar film takes four years of production. But if something doesn’t feel right, the process can take as long as seven or eight years. Andrew explains there is no cutting corners, even if it would get the product out faster. “There’s no fast way to figure out the story,” he says.

It was the same for *Finding Dory* when, two years into the film, Andrew presented it to Disney (which bought Pixar in 2006 for a cool US\$7.4 billion).

“And you just know no matter how good it’s going right now, something is [always] going to happen – somehow the story’s not going to work. And it happened with us. We thought the movie was going great two years ago, and we showed it at Disney, and they’re like, ‘I don’t get it’. And we’re like, ‘Oh no’. Then we went back and we had to really realise, we were close but not that close. And we had to adjust a tonne of things. Now, I can’t imagine not having fixed that. But at that time, it looked fine to me.”



This mentality applies not only to overall film projects but also each person’s individual creations, with Jason admitting that even his animations are hit and miss. “Sometimes the first time you show [colleagues], they’re like, ‘That’s it!’ But then I’ve also worked on the same character for like four straight months and started to doubt whether I would ever be able to get something the director liked.”

“Our standards are so high,” adds Andrew. “I think there’s a lot of places where somebody would finally have just made it. And we’re just like, ‘no!’ There’s nobody pickier. There’s so many times I’ve watched a movie going, ‘Pixar would never...’”

An OBSESSIVE, compulsive quality is more the UNIVERSAL TALENT than one DISCIPLINE.

GIVE YOUR EVERYTHING... AND THEN SOME

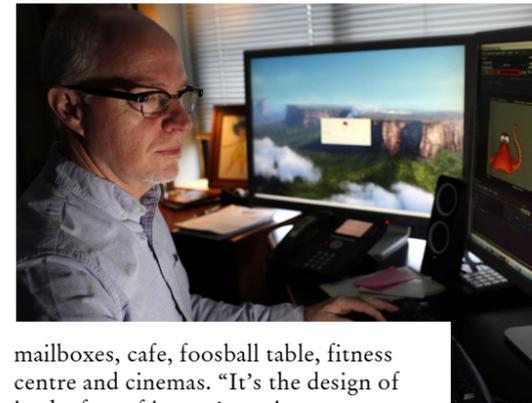
When Jason joined Pixar, he quickly realised he was surrounded by animation’s crème de la crème. “It’s a very specialised environment,” he says. “People are so great at one particular thing.” But he recently made another observation: his colleagues apply the

same amount of discipline to everything they do, even outside of filmmaking. “We had this battle of the bands. And 17 bands entered, which was shocking,” he says. “But what really surprised me was when they

got up there, they were all really, really good. Maybe the common thread with all these people [at Pixar] is that when they do something, they obsess on it. An obsessive, compulsive quality is more the universal talent than one discipline.”

BUILD FOR CONVERSATIONS

With its soccer field, Olympic-sized swimming pool, cereal bar, hidden speakeasy bar and wildflower meadow, the sprawling 22-acre Pixar Campus in Emeryville, California, is what animators’ dreams are made of... actually, the dreams of anyone who has to work in an office. Envisioned by then-Pixar chairman Steve Jobs back in 1999, the huge atrium at its centre was created to encourage serendipitous meet-ups between staff, who by the nature of their work, might tend to isolate themselves. “You run into everybody, honestly,” says Lindsey of the airline hangar-sized hub, which houses a reception, employee



mailboxes, cafe, foosball table, fitness centre and cinemas. “It’s the design of it, the fate of it, you’re going to run into the six people you need to say something to, you’re like, ‘Oh, so glad I ran into you.’ It’s pretty phenomenal that actually still happens.”

THE LEARNING NEVER STOPS

Forget the usual professional development programs (yawn!) – at the famed Pixar University, staff can take on the equivalent of a BA in fine arts and filmmaking, and are able to take time out of their work to attend. Employees – whether they’re directors or security guards – choose from a packed curriculum filled with drawing, screenwriting and colour classes, not to mention improv and sculpture.

“I think the fact that it feels like a school keeps us in this learning environment,” says Alan.

“It always feels great to have a sense that it’s okay to keep learning and to keep trying new things. It becomes less of a job and more of an experience that you’re going through.”

