Pixar Phenomenology: The Embodiment of Animation

As a company where embodiment, debate, improvisation and lived experience are as valued as technical prowess, Pixar has much to offer Australian animators as an example of the creative workplace, writes Mark Seton.

Why do bodies matter? As we journey behind the scenes of Pixar Animation Studios (known for Academy Award-winning films such as Toy Story [John Lasseter, 1995], Finding Nemo [Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, 2003] and The Incredibles [Brad Bird, 2004]), I hope you will be persuaded that it is important for animation artists to recognize that their shared and embodied life experiences impact on their creative work. As many of Pixar's staff testify, the valuing of embodiment, improvisation and collaboration is integral to innovative expression and creative problem-solving.

The mantra for which Pixar has attributed its success is 'that story is King'.1 However, it becomes evident from the documented accounts of the artists at Pixar, both on DVD extras and in the recently published official history of Pixar Animation Studios, that their lived or phenomenological experiences powerfully inform both the narrative and technical innovations of their work.

In 2007, Melbourne's Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) hosted an exhibition, Pixar: 20 Years of Animation, that featured a great deal of material from Pixar's animation archives.2 In particular, the exhibited video interviews offered ample evidence that recognitions of, and respect for, embodied experiences, improvisations and collaborations are significant aspects of Pixar's workplace culture.

Yet, from my reading of the prospectuses of much animation training in this country, scant attention is paid explicitly to the primacy of embodiment as a key asset for any aspiring animator. It is understandable that institutions offering training tend to focus on the mastery of digital technologies. But I wonder if apprentice animators in this country are missing out on a nurturing of their own unique senses of embodiment as tools for creating innovative animation? In particular, how are they learning to make experiences of improvisation and collaboration part of their ongoing learning practice?

Therefore, I offer this analysis of the Pixar process, from a phenomenological and complexity theory perspective, hoping to open up a new conversation among staff and students in animation training institutions that would contribute to the enhancement of aspiring animators in Australia.
Even beginnings have beginnings

The people who contributed to the emergence of Pixar didn’t suddenly ‘appear’ fully skilled in the company. The founders of Pixar brought their own positive experiences of prior creative and collaborative work contexts into the emerging working practices of Pixar. John Lasseter, co-founder of Pixar and director of Toy Story and Toy Story 2 (1999), recalls his student days at California Institute of the Arts and the collaborative spirit that he found so inspiring.

We worked really hard but we also had so much fun, and it showed up in our work. We’d goof off, we’d work together, and we’d look at and give feedback on each other’s stuff. And the creativity just sort of overflowed.¹

Another formative experience was drawn from the Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) arm of Lucasfilm (before ILM became an independent company). Lasseter recalls how the ILM team gathered for mandatory daily screenings every morning to contribute to what Lasseter values as collaborative problem-solving. He notes:

The room was always open for discussion, and Dennis [Muren, ILM supervisor on Young Sherlock Holmes (Barry Levinson, 1985)] really listened to everybody. I was amazed by that. It was so different from anything I had experienced before. It moulded me as a director in all the good ways, more than anything my past experiences had taught me not to do.²

Lasseter also believes that his early holiday season work as a live performer at the Disney theme park greatly informed his sense of storytelling and, in particular, comic timing. He learned to improvise and play with the pacing and delivery of his routine, recognizing how the audience’s mood shifted in response, especially when things weren’t going well in the performance. These skills informed his subsequent animation practice:

In animation, you work on your material for such a long time. You come to know it inside out. By the time you’re done making the movie, you will have seen that joke, that line, that drawing, a thousand times, and it will no longer be funny. And a lot of times people will say, it’s not funny anymore, let’s try to make it funny, and in trying to ‘fix’ it, they break it. So I always tell people never to forget the first time something made you laugh.³

JOHN LASSETER

Creative workplaces

In my ongoing research into what contributes to creative and innovative workplaces such as Pixar, I have found insights drawn from complexity theory and contemporary phenomenology very useful in offering an alternative understanding of what really goes on between creative people in organizations on an everyday basis. Practical research by scholars at the Complexity and Management Centre (University of Hertfordshire, UK) demonstrates that, surprisingly, much truly innovative and creative work emerges out of confusion, uncertainty and even conflict – attributes not highly sought after or supported in mainstream management practices. The centre offers this alternative and paradoxical account of what makes for an innovating culture through a perspective known as ‘complex responsive processes’.⁴

This perspective enables an analysis of the processes and reported experiences of Pixar staff that demonstrates how they are not constrained by traditional notions of logical progression, detached objectivity and autonomy (by which innovation is supposed to be produced). Instead, the complex responsive process view of organizational practice understands organizations to be ongoing, emerging and changing patterns of relationships between people. This perspective recognizes and values the primary significance of human beings, as biological and social beings, relating to each other in the medium of symbols (eg. language, images, gestures). The complexity of these relationships is acknowledged in the unpredictable ways in which people produce new meanings with each other as they are, simultaneously, being shaped and changed by these dynamic relationships.⁵ This means that misunderstanding can actually produce new possibilities if people, in their everyday interactions, are willing and able to live with uncertainty, and trust in improvising and collaborating together. So, in the following analysis, I will draw attention to how the staff at Pixar have learned to value embodied experiences and work with creative and collaborative uncertainty.

Valuing embodiment: let’s play!

Recognizing one’s own ongoing embodied experience is crucial to creating animation that impacts on the audiences’ bodies. Lasseter observes:

We are animators from beginning to end. The audience knows that it was not photographed with a real camera. But if you can make them look at it and go, ‘I know it’s not real, but boy it sure feels real!’ – to me, that’s the goal of a Pixar film. Feeling like you can reach up and touch something even though you know it’s not real – that’s part of the entertainment.⁶

Pixar’s commitment to quality storytelling is primarily informed by the animators’ willingness to put their bodies ‘on the line’ – to invest their own embodied experiences and energies in communicating a story to others. In the Pixar exhibition at ACMI, video interviews reveal the animators’ experience that if it doesn’t work at the story level, it won’t work. So everyone is invited to push on the story as hard as possible, including pacing, emotion and how that shapes audience feeling. The result is that there is always a case of ‘rewrite – rewrite – rewrite’ by the story department.⁷

Embodiment is also a crucial tool for testing the story through its various phases. The physical pitching of a story sequence, embodying sound effects, physical dynamics and emotional feeling, creates a space for ‘free for all’ ideas. The Pixar animators are, effectively, telling the story to their friends and working out gags before committing them to animation. In the story pitch, they have to get into character and

¹: THE INCREDIBLES 2: MONSTERS, INC.
²: FINDING NEMO 4: THE INCREDIBLES. ALL IMAGES © DISNEY/PIXAR
be a performer to sell the story to the director. Valuing bodily experiences and modes of expression also greatly informs the shaping of characters. Pixar sculptor Greg Dykstra observes: "Sometimes you think too much about what you're doing while you're doing it — you need to 'let go' and 'feel' through it — capture in 'feeling', often in sculpture — surprise yourself while going through the process. Character is idea, but we give it physical form and it comes 'alive'."

Sometimes a story sequence requires an animator to take on the journey of an actor. A good example is Dory (Ellen DeGeneres) expressing her loss without the company of Nemo's father, Marlin (Albert Brooks), in Finding Nemo. Some of the 'acting' comes from the voice actor, but the animator has to get 'inside' to find the shape and the movement. Animators put themselves "into the moment" using video of themselves to looped audio tracks. This often requires very vulnerable moments for the animator when revealing character through embodied expression. Joe Ranft, who animated Dory for this sequence, reports "there's those moments of isolation when it's all yours — when you excavate what is 'me' that will make it better." In capturing physical experiences that will resonate with audiences as a lived or phenomenological experience — such as the feats of strength in The Incredibles — animator John Kahrs explains: "We use mirrors and video documentation for 3D animation capture ... use it to push shapes and expression ... you might film yourself doing actions 'in character' ... It helps capture the physicality and the physics involved in working with action, weight and power."

However, the Pixar staff have also learnt not to take embodiment for granted. Galyn Susman willingly acknowledges mistakes were made in the commitment to finish Toy Story 2 within Disney's requirements. 'Toy Story 2 took a huge toll on people, an unbelievable toll, but it was also just incredibly exciting'. After nine months of almost nonstop work with a keyboard and a mouse, nearly one in three employees developed a repetitive stress injury. One person was permanently disabled and had to leave the field altogether. Head of production, Sarah McArthur, observed: "Because they didn't hold back people were hurt. We, as a management group, realized we had to really honour the commitment of our crew by protecting them. If we asked they would give. So we had to never again allow ourselves to get in a position where we ever needed to ask." Pixar management responded to this self-made crisis by bringing in a doctor and nurse twice a week and massage therapists every day in order to prevent further repetitive stress injuries. They also engaged a full-time ergonomist who checked that everybody's work stations were set up correctly. Finally, they trained people how to work correctly at their stations.

**Mistakes, collaboration and creativity — the Pixar universe**

Visual effects pioneer Ray Feeney notes, 'Nobody — no company, no individual — does things without making mistakes ... The thing at Pixar is that the mistakes, when understood and found and dealt with, are replaced with something better.' So ongoing experiences of learning, improvising, failing and trying alternatives are built into the working culture. Pixar University emerged out of conversations between Lasseter and Pixar co-founder Ed Catmull, who realized they wanted the artists to learn more about the technology while ensuring the technical artists also learnt more 'about art and sculpting and acting and things like that.' An on-site university was established that would be available for the benefit of the whole company and not just the animators. Randy Nelson, who was appointed to run the program, justifies this approach: "Why are we teaching filmmaking to accountants? Well, if you treat accountants like accountants, they're going to act like accountants. But the potential exists that if you treat everyone in the studio as filmmakers, they have a better chance of responding to the social value of the program was the greatest value of all. You're interacting with people that you wouldn't normally see in the studio in a new, interesting way. This active generation of differing social networks is another crucial feature identified by José Fonseca as necessary for creating working relationships that innovate.

Karen Paik observes that having classes with students of varying levels of experience actually promotes a more easy-going and positive attitude towards their shared production goals. As people become more comfortable learning in front of their peers they come to have a greater respect for being imperfect, making mistakes, and soliciting and sharing advice. Furthermore, this process of learning both encourages creativity and emphasizes the challenge to grow constantly. Pixar animator Bob Peterson believes: "I go in to work every day knowing that I probably 90 percent of everything I create, draw, or think of will be thrown away — by choice. That's just as it should be to make a fine film." According to Randy Nelson:

Failure is basic to creative activities, and error recovery is the best definition we have for what effective training is. You're really trying to teach people what it's like when everything goes well but also, how to get back on track when things fall apart. In an innovative business, you want people who have that experience so that when things are not going well, they have the internal strength to keep going and get to that finished product. Fonseca has noted that while people seek security and order in organizations it is through disorderly processes of conversation and meaning-making (frequently
experienced as misunderstandings) that new, innovative patterns of meaning-making emerge offering new processes and products.\(^*\) But such misunderstandings only result in innovating if there is an accompanying willingness in an organization by everyone involved to live with uncertainty for a time and have trust in each other to see the creative process through.

So embodied experiences and social interactions between all involved at Pixar have proven to be crucial elements in both the successes and rewards of those involved. When it came to the decision to allow the Walt Disney Company to take ownership of Pixar, Catmull told the employees:

*Our number-one priority was protecting the culture that we'd built and the way our people work together. A real creative community is a rare thing, and it is the most important thing for us to hang on to. Our primary job is to make sure that we keep it alive and healthy.*\(^{\text{27}}\)

Hopefully, Australia will nurture its own emerging animators, valuing their embodied experiences, and encouraging them to be playful – and willing to make mistakes as they collaborate and innovate together.

Dr Mark Seton is an Honorary Research Associate in the Department of Performance Studies, University of Sydney, and an independent consultant and lecturer in creative performance and media production practices.

Endnotes
4. ibid, p.46.
5. ibid, p.33.
8. Paik and Iwerks, op. cit., p.29.
10. ibid.
11. ibid.
12. ibid.
14. ibid., p.156.
15. ibid., p.157.
16. ibid.
17. ibid., p.158.
18. ibid.
19. ibid., p.162.
20. ibid.
21. ibid., p.163.
23. ibid.
25. ibid.