



PRESS COVERAGE



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An Insider's Look at the Animation Industry with the VES Honoree and Animation Pioneer.

As John Lasseter stepped to the podium to accept the Georges Méliès Award for Pioneering and Artistic Excellence from the Visual Effects Society in February, he couldn't resist reflecting on his initial steps through the Walt Disney company — steps that launched him to this point in his career. He explained to the crowd, “[Disney had been] the place I dreamed of working my entire life ... but when I got there, it was a little disappointing in that it felt like they were doing the same thing over and over — it had all reached a plateau.”



Lasseter said his search for something more began that very day. He quickly realized the potential role computer animation might play in achieving that goal after being impressed by some tests for Disney's *Tron*. He realized his friend and future business partner Ed Catmull felt the same way, and off they went — first moving on to the seminal creative laboratory at Lucas Film, and then launching Pixar.



Prior to accepting his VES Award, John Lasseter discusses the state of the animation industry with Millimeter Senior Editor Michael Goldman.

Photo: Tony Donaldson/tdphoto.com

His comments were particularly ironic, coming on the heels of the announcement that soon he would be taking over as Chief Creative Officer at the Walt Disney animation studios following the merger of Pixar with Disney. Now, as his industry honored him, Lasseter stood poised to achieve his goal of bringing “something more” back to Disney. “We started this vision of taking artists and computer scientists and having them work side by side in collaboration,” he explained. “That is the foundation that made Pixar.”

As the VES fete proceeded, and Lasseter was showered by good-humored accolades, largely from the voice actors he has directed over the years in Pixar films, the elite of the visual effects industry in attendance clearly understood they were paying homage to a man who had played a crucial role in fundamentally altering the tools, techniques, and financial health of their industry. Indeed, although he rejected some of the more hyperbolic accolades of the evening (When described as the next Walt Disney, he said, “I have a hard enough time being John Lasseter.”), and repeatedly insisted that Catmull deserved much of the credit for his success (“The guy practically invented computer graphics,” he says.), Lasseter grudgingly accepted the mantle of “pioneer” on Pixar's behalf when he sat down for an exclusive interview with *Millimeter* shortly before receiving his award.



“On one level, when you are called upon to get an award like this, it’s later in your career, and in that sense, this seems kind of weird because I still feel like I’m at the beginning of my career,” he says. “But the feeling of being a pioneer is something that has been with us from the beginning at Pixar. Working with Ed Catmull, working with Dennis Muren early on [at pre-Pixar Lucas Film] — back then, everyone was breaking new ground. That’s part of what people live for at Pixar. They get asked to figure out how to do things, and then they do it. We live for those challenges. But, I’ll tell you, being a pioneer at Pixar is tremendously hard work.”



John Lasseter and actress Bonnie Hunt celebrate his George Méliès Award. Hunt led a parade of actors to the podium to praise Lasseter, who directed Pixar’s newest film, Cars.

Photo: Alberto Rodriguez © Berliner Studio/BEImages

Now, Lasseter plans to bring that work ethic, as well as what he calls “the Pixar culture,” to Disney’s animation program. More specifics than that — such as what Disney’s 2D moviemaking plans might be, the future of the *Toy Story* franchise, and what role he might play in those projects — were off limits, since details of the Pixar-Disney merger were not yet finalized at press time. “The one thing I can say about Disney is there are so many amazing talented artists over there, and it will be real nice to get to work with them,” Lasseter says. He did, however, talk extensively about his views and concerns regarding the direction of the animation industry overall.

Lasseter first noted the fact that, as a longtime animator, he was receiving his honor from a visual effects organization. He calls this part of the blurring of the line between visual effects and animation in the feature film world.

“Especially this year,” he adds, “when you see the amazing work of [*Star Wars: Episode III — Revenge of the Sith*] or when you look at *King Kong* — tell me that’s not animation,” he says. “Specifically, that kind of personality in *Kong* — that’s character animation. [In a live-action movie], they call that a special effect, but it’s also great animation, great personality in that big ape. The only difference is that they are combining it with live action. The only other real difference is that animation for visual effects usually tends to want to look like it was photographed with a real camera, so that the audience can sit there and think the whole thing is real. In a Pixar film, from the very beginning, we have always wanted to make sure the audience knows that this is not a real world, that these are cartoons. The audience understands that, but then, within that world, what they see is believable. For our films, I always use the word ‘believable,’ not ‘realistic.’ But the skills and requirements for doing animation and visual effects are very similar.”



*Dean Wright, visual effects supervisor on *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, discusses the adventure of awards season during the VES cocktail party.*

Photo: Tony Donaldson/tdphoto.com

Those Unglamorous Issues

In seeing Pixar crank out huge volumes of computer animation in the last decade, however, Lasseter remains concerned about an issue he first discussed with Millimeter back in November 1998 (see digitalcontentproducer.com for the full story), as he was co-directing *A Bug’s Life* with Andrew Stanton. That concern: how best to preserve and archive reams of digital data created during production of a CG film. In 1998, he said, “Companies that don’t address these issues will eventually bid farewell to old data.”



Eight years later, he says that some companies have done just that, and he is therefore still worried about the archival issue. Furthermore, he says he expects Disney, Pixar, and the rest of the industry will need to be concerned with it for many years to come.

“We had an incident [while creating the 10-year anniversary DVD for *Toy Story*] not long ago,” he recalls. “We did not want to create the DVD from film negative. Instead, we wanted to take it from the direct digital data, which is the way we have been doing it since *A Bug’s Life*. So we went to all our backup tapes and found that, for some of them, there were technical problems, and [for] about 30 percent of the movie, we did not have the frames. It was not backed up properly. Therefore, we had to resurrect it by essentially doing digital archeology. We resurrected the operating system we used in that time, 1995, and got the files that way — the animation files, shader files, lighting files, and all that stuff, and then, we had to re-render all those shots. It was really challenging, but we had to do it to have a [pristine] digital copy of the movie.



King Kong visual effects supervisor Joe Letteri celebrates that film’s three VES awards.
Photo: Alberto Rodriguez © Berliner Studio/BEImages

“It’s something we have to think about looking ahead because digital operating systems change, and it’s the issue of backward compatibility versus moving forward. To make truly tremendous advances, you don’t want to be weighed down by backward compatibility. But, as soon as you do that, you make all your [old digital content] obsolete. For some time, we’ve had what we call our digital backlot where, basically, every model we ever built for any of our films, theoretically, we can bring back again. But the problem is, any time that we try to do that, we are at a new level of our operating system, so we have to go back and do something to translate it all up to the new level. That’s a huge challenge for our industry. Everyone working in the digital medium is dealing with this digital obsolescence issue. Basically, it doesn’t take long before your digital files become completely obsolete. We are very concerned about this, and we are trying to [find ways to] preserve high-resolution digital information of each of our films for future formats.”

Lasseter adds that this problem can never be completely solved in the sense that each facility and studio, and each project, for that matter, has different requirements, meaning there can never be industry standards for the size, resolution, format, and nature of digital files used in CG films.

“At Pixar, we write our own software, and no one can do that for us,” he explains. “Everybody might use [Alias] Maya, but we all have special plug-ins and special ways we do things. Every place is different, and every project is different. Even at Pixar — the style of the imagery required for what [director] Brad Bird wanted for *The Incredibles* was a simple comic book style; whereas, in *Cars* [the upcoming Pixar film directed by Lasseter], the level of detail is about 100 times more than anything we have ever done, because this story required it. The story takes place on an old highway — Route 66. We needed things to look like they had been there a long time. Things age. Paint is peeling. There are cracks in the asphalt; grass is growing between the cracks. That’s what I call the ‘patina.’ At Pixar, the patina is really important, and in this movie, it was really challenging. That means we have to keep our technology cutting-edge, and make it do something different than what we had done before.”

In his 1998 chat with *Millimeter*, Lasseter also expressed impatience over the then slow rollout of digital cinema for consistent and pristine exhibition of his films to the moviegoing public. Eight years later, that impatience has not abated.



(L-R) Eric Saindon, Christian Rivers, and Joe Letteri show off the VES awards they won (with Eileen Moran, not pictured) for Outstanding Visual Effects in a Visual Effects Driven Motion Picture—King Kong. Photo: Tony Donaldson/tdphoto.com

“In 1998, the quality of the release prints on *Bug’s Life* were horrible, quite frankly,” Lasseter says. “The color was different than what we created at Pixar. Since then, I think the labs, fearing their world was slipping away from them, have stepped up and created much higher-quality release prints nowadays. It’s unbelievable, really, the difference. They are much better, which is good because it has been extremely slow getting digital cinema into theaters. But I really want to know that someone sitting in a digital theater in Iowa, in a city that generally does not get ‘A’ quality 35mm prints, will see, three weeks after my film comes out, a pristine version of my movie, without any scratches, without hair in the gate, without jumping frames or any of that.

“I understand the reasons it has taken so long — the cost of the projectors, how to share the costs, and the fact that there have been no real standards until recently. But I think [the industry] has gotten over that stage. There will be both 4K and 2K projectors, and the standards will work for both, and the cost is coming down now. They are figuring out distribution better because of all that, and so I do think you will now see an acceleration of more and more digital theaters happening.”



VES Executive Director Eric Roth welcomes the assembled throng to the fourth annual VES Awards. Photo: Alberto Rodriguez © Berliner Studio/BEImages

Healthy Industry

Lasseter takes over Disney’s animation empire at a time in which smaller studios are cropping up and attempting to produce their own CG fare, often independent of any major-studio financing. While one might think Lasseter would be concerned about such competition, he is, instead, pleased to see growth in an industry he has helped nurture for many years.

“I really want a healthy animation industry,” he says. “If a family goes to a theater and sees an animated film they really love, the next time an animated film comes out, they want to do it again. If they see a lousy movie, the next time an animated film comes out, they might think it’s a waste of time and money because they didn’t have a good time last time. The same goes for the studios. If their animated films don’t do well, they get nervous about committing to the cost of animation and supporting all those people in the studio, and they start to close things down. Then you have all these really talented people out of work, and the studios can’t support them, and we suddenly lose all these people from our industry. I don’t want that to happen. I want there to be more studios out there. I’d love to see low-budget [CG movies]. There are lots of weekends in a year, and you never have two animated films opening the same weekend, and it’s extremely rare for two animated films to compete directly against one another. So I don’t think of [those independent studios] as competitors. It’s much better for all of us if we all do well.”



(L-R) Dennis Muren with Pablo Helman and Marshall Krasser, who won (along with Sandra Scott, not pictured) the VES award for Best Single Visual Effect of the Year for a sequence from War of the Worlds.
Photo: Tony Donaldson/tdphoto.com

Despite his CG pedigree, Lasseter emphasizes this hopeful outlook extends to 2D animated films, as well, and ironically, he concedes Pixar's success over the years may have hurt that artform.

"The saddest thing about the success we had at Pixar is that people seem to think that audiences only want to watch 3D computer animation, and are not interested in 2D hand-drawn animation, clay animation, and puppet animation," he says. "I always felt that 2D animation became the scapegoat for bad storytelling. I mean, you never hear someone who made a bad live-action film say, 'Well, I'm never going to use that camera again, or that film stock.' That would be ludicrous. Look at the work of [Japanese director] Hayao Miyazaki [who directed *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle*]. All three films nominated for the animated film Oscar this year are 2D. ... So don't tell me people aren't interested in 2D animation."



Photo: Tony Donaldson/tdphoto.com

Talking with Jim Morris

Former Lucas Digital and current Pixar producer Jim Morris, one of the founding members and guiding forces of the Visual Effects Society, is particularly pleased by the growth of the VES and the visual effects industry from the time he agreed to join the organization's first provisional board several years ago. "I think the past 10 or 15 years have seen dramatic change in the visual effects industry," he tells *Millimeter*. "The growth has been explosive. If you take a look at the movies that were released in the last year, it's hard to find even one that did not have some visual effects or animation in them. And the big studio pictures have a huge amount of fantastic work in them. That's a pretty fundamental change that has affected the entire cinema industry."