

'Just okay is not good enough.'

Disney Pixar's Supervising Animator Mark Walsh

Mark Walsh, Supervising Animator at Pixar Animation Studios, just loves his job. And every single soul at the sold-out Cinekid seminar understands why. Especially after his energetic, insightful and very comical enlightenment of the working methods at Pixar, in particular concerning the making of *Ratatouille*. Impressive how strong and vital the creative energy of this company is. 'It's all about improvement and never settling for anything less than an A.'

A decisive encounter brought Mark Walsh to Pixar. He and the father of a friend had an innocent talk about *Toy Story* (1995) that had just come out. Walsh babbled on about all the things they could have done better, not realising he was talking to no one other but Ed Catmull, the president of Pixar. Note that Pixar was not yet the success story it is now. Everybody expected them to be bought up by Disney in no time. But being barely graduated at the well-known CalArts, founded by Walt Disney, there was no way he would get into this animation giant's company and Pixar seemed like a nice place to start.

It was *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) that made Mark Walsh fall for animation. Here he had for the first time the experience that while being fully aware to be watching an animated character nevertheless being completely convinced it is a real person. This was in particular the case in the scene where the beast, who had been working hard to become a good person, is on the verge of killing the villain. In a few simple shots he goes from being angry to realising what he is doing and letting the guy go. It totally blew Walsh away.

The first Pixar film he worked on was *A Bug's Life* (1998). Until the company decided to bring out a film every year he worked on all of the movies: *Toy Story 2* (1999), *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *The Incredibles* (2004). Since then he is updated on the developments of the other films and welcome to comment on them whenever he wants. At *Ratatouille* (2007) he was Supervising Animator, someone who works directly with the animators, clarifying the director's notes and ensuring the drawing and movement is what the director wants. He also does the casting of the animators: they have to make the movement believable but for that they also have to act. It is important to cast the animators in roles that they are good at.

As most people know *Ratatouille* is about a young rat called Rémy who dreams of becoming a top chef in a top restaurant in Paris. His family doesn't understand this at all, as of course most humans don't accept at all. Rémy finds himself torn between his calling and passion in life and his existence as a rat.

CUTE

A cute idea, everybody at Pixar thought. Unfortunately people generally don't have cute associations with rats. Walsh illustrates this very clearly by showing a picture of a rat in a

very dirty toilet bowl that would probably freak even the biggest animal lover out. In the stage of character development the most important concern was to avoid just this. The trick was to find a midway between a 'human in a rat suit', which presented no creative challenge at all, and a true-to-nature rat.

Endless drawing, sketching and testing, as shown by Walsh, led to a specific style of moving for Rémy. In the end he walked on two legs but a little bend over, to accentuate that rats do everything with their noses, and Rémy in particular. His front paws were bend and put before his face, the elbows kept to his body. So he looked a little bit like a baby, but also like a rat. Walsh emphasizes that in animation everything you see is a choice: there has been thought about and deliberated on the colour of every piece of clothing and every form and movement. He shows a few tests with different voices, trying to find the most appropriate one.

The same intense approach was used to capture Paris, the city where the story takes place. People from the department of production design went to the city of lights and filmed the streets and locations from the perspective of a rat: very low to the ground. The idea was to not present the cliché Paris. It was the first time Pixar made a story that was taking place in another culture. It was not supposed to be an Americanised view on the French.

An example of how extensively everything is reflected on is that they even looked at the French way of speaking. They studied images of French comics to learn how their mouths move. Walsh shows the French star Louis de Funès (his biggest successes were in the sixties) who talks at an impressive tempo and with quite definite lip movements. How literally these were used on the character Skinner, the little and mean new boss of Gusteau's, becomes clear when both images are shown after each other. The French talk a little bit in the front of their mouth, as the characters in *Ratatouille* do.

NEW DIRECTOR

During the period of research and development the relationship between Pixar and Disney was problematic, so it looked like *Ratatouille* was going to be the very first production that wasn't distributed and marketed by Disney. Therefore the pressure to make a masterpiece was enormous. Being unable to make the plot work, director Jan Pinkava withdrew himself from the project, although the whole thing was his idea. Pixar is a director-driven company; directors get all the creative freedom to make a film on his own terms. If the results aren't satisfying, Pixar indicates where the problems are and leaves it to the director to find his own solutions. At first Brad Bird, from *The Iron Giant* (1999) and *The Incredibles*, was asked to join the project but he completely took over in the end. With only a short period to go before production started this was quite an assignment. He knew all about the project though, because he was part of the group of counsellors that discuss all the movies in development on a regular basis.

In Pinkava's story the so by Rémy admired cook Auguste Gusteau was still alive. He is the typical victim of his own success. Instead of cooking at his cheered restaurant he

concentrates on franchising his formulae, which makes him very rich as well as unhappy. It's all about money now and he loses his passion for food. Skinner, the new chef, is not creative at all and runs the kitchen like a business. The mouse Rémy was only a side character, although an important one because his love of food and gastronomy is so contagious that Gusteau finds his own passion again.

Kill your darlings

An oversight with all the characters Pinkava developed, almost 30, gives an idea of what the problem was. According to Walsh all of them were funny and interesting, but there were just too many voices for one movie. Instead of for one, there was material for several films. Of course it is a luxurious position to be in, but, as the cliché says: nothing is more difficult than killing your darlings. This didn't go for Pinkava alone, also for all the people involved. They worked on these figures for years, giving them all kinds of characteristics and even a soul. Walsh shows some interesting examples of this. When Bird arrived at the scene and told the crew only 8 figures could stay, everybody was very upset. Some even decided to stop participating in the project and moved on to other projects at the studios. Others thought the reasoning of Bird through and decided he might have a point.

Walsh shows the film poster of *Billy Elliott* (2000) that tells the essence of the film in one image: a boy in a boxing outfit surrounded by girls in tutus, the boy who doesn't fit in. Bird brought *Ratatouille* back to the premise that a rat doesn't belong in a kitchen. Yes, a rat being around food is not very far fetched, but for a restaurant a rat in the kitchen means death. This conflict between the believable and unbelievable is where it should be about, according to Bird. This meant the rat itself was worked on again. A specialist in rat anatomy was consulted. Just like earlier with *Finding Nemo* the expert was thrilled finally somebody was interested in their work. The creative department started studying footage of rats and copying it. The whole animation style was redone and the old model was thrown away. Even a new voice was found.

A lot of Pixar films have gone through this process, making drastic and courageous changes after it becomes clear that the film is not living up to his expectations. But sometimes good ideas that are lost pop up again later. An example is from an earlier version of *Monsters, Inc.* (2001). Originally this was about a girl and a monster that were unable to communicate. In a point of view shot from the one you hear the other uttering incomprehensible sounds, as is the other way around in the counter-shot. The storyline was totally changed because of the Disney production *Lilo & Stitch* (2002) that was being developed at the same time and also was centred on a girl and a monster. The idea of the gibberish though was used in *Ratatouille*. Early in the film Rémy's craziness of cooking leads to the exposure of the whole rat herd that lives between the floor of an old lady's house. In this hilarious scene both she and Rémy hear each other make strange noises they don't understand.

The big amount of rats in this scene is by the way done with the Massive-software that is developed for the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Walsh emphasises that, just with al CGI, it

still costs a lot of time to construct a crowd. Computer animation does fill in the spaces between all the different positions of a model but if you don't adjust the movements they look just like the ones of a robot.

A lot of what Pixar's secret is, has become clear already. 'We make mistakes all the time the difference is: we don't give up on them. We change it over and over again until it does work. We always want to improve ourselves and everybody involved is contributing to that by giving recommendations and comments all the time.'

Another factor is the splendid building Pixar resides in. The (techno)logical department resides in the left wing and the creative one in the right wing: just the way the brain is set up. In the middle is everything from sanitary and cafeterias to meeting rooms so everybody meets each other all the time. The walls at the creative department are covered with colourful paraphernalia and instead of office cubicles people work in little wooden cottages. Much more fun and much cheaper on top of that.

A question by an audience member brings Walsh on an interesting recent discussion: where will future animation take us? He really hopes that the preoccupation with making everything as realistic as can be is over soon. It is dry and not imaginative. And there is already live action, so what's the fuss? Aren't characterisations much more fun? And as Bird has once said why not just buy an orange instead of making one for millions of dollars out of dog's shit.

After handing out quite some autographs, Walsh also was interviewed at the Medialab, the 1200 square metres hall where children amongst others can make their own animations, under the guidance of professionals. If he was a child, he would be hanging out there all day, he says. After he made a drawing of the rat a smart girl in the audience asks for whom he made it? Of course he answers: it's for you. On the question why he made *Ratatouille* he answers: just because of the fun! His advice to the children: do what you are good at and what you like. It definitely worked for him.

This seminar took place at Friday 24 October and was organised in cooperation with NIAf (Netherlands Institute for Animation Film).

Moderator: Hans Walther (director of live action and animation (Café de Wereld) as well as journalist on everything around animation)