PIXAR
STORYTELLING

RULES FOR EFFECTIVE STORYTELLING
BASED ON PIXAR'S GREATEST FILMS

BY DEAN MOVSHOVITZ

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dean Movshovitz graduated from Tel Aviv University's Film and Television Department, majoring in Screenwriting. After his studies he served as Director of Film and Media at Israel's Office for Cultural Affairs in North America, at the Consulate General of Israel In New York. He won his first screenwriting award in Israel at sixteen, for a short comedy script. Dean wrote about cinema for Taste of Cinema and the Tel Aviv Cinematheque Magazine and has lectured widely about Israeli cinema during his tenure at the consulate. He has moderated filmmaker Q & A panels at Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Film Forum, Jacob Burns Film Center and many more organizations. His previous collaboration with Bloop Animation has been covered by The A.V. Club, Daily Dot and other sources.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Pixar is the rare case of a studio becoming a distinct cinematic voice: loved by audiences, critics and filmmakers alike. One of the main reasons for its success is the storytelling choices it favors and promotes. As much as Pixar's films are known for their rich fictional worlds, glorious visuals and original plots, it is their uncanny ability to move audiences deeply that astonishes us with every new film the studio releases, as grownups to tear up right next to their children. Pixar chooses stories and develops them in ways that are extremely satisfying and affecting. Despite taking us to vastly different worlds with each film, Pixar's approach to storytelling is consistent. These storytelling constants are what we will explore here.

This e-book will examine Pixar's storytelling techniques. A deep look into the studio's films reveals certain repeated patterns. Some are universal and obvious to any budding screenwriter, in which case Pixar's exemplary use of these techniques can serve as a beacon. Some of the more idiosyncratic patterns of storytelling may illuminate the secret behind the studio's success. This book will examine Pixar's films and uncover the mechanisms and patterns that make them work so well.

One note to take into consideration: This book will focus only on Pixar's storytelling techniques and will neglect a myriad of other storytelling options that have proven successful, rich and moving. Despite the many risks Pixar takes and its dedication to endow each of its films with a rare amount of heart and integrity, the studio still makes big-budget, family-friendly films that appeal to the masses. These movies are the focus of this work. That being said, I firmly believe that each of the patterns discussed here will prove useful to any project—whether it's short or feature length, live action or animated, aimed toward Hollywood, Sundance or Cannes.

Feel free to discuss and contend the ideas and techniques presented here either at the Bloop forums (www.bloopanimation.com/forums), or on twitter - @mdean317.

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CHOOSING AN IDEA

"Everything that made that giant tree is already contained inside this tiny little seed. All it needs is some time, a little bit of sunshine and rain, and voilá!"

- Flik

Mother Lodes – Choosing Ideas That Have a LOT of Potential

Choosing an idea for your film is a bit like selecting where to set up a gold mine. Some places will offer you a few nuggets, and in others you'll hit the mother lode. Both starting points can be the basis for a great story—those nuggets are still gold—but "mother lodes," relatable ideas that offer many levels of clear drama and narrative options, tend to be easier to develop and more accessible to audiences.

Clearly, Pixar goes for the mother lodes. Part of the studio's success comes from its ability to recognize and develop strong, engaging ideas, which usually come with powerful, built in emotional weight. These ideas evoke a rich exotic world (monsters, toys, superheroes) that offers many possibilities for imaginative set pieces, visual richness and original scenes. More impor-

tantly, these ideas contain tremendous physical and emotional stakes, which makes them immediately enticing and accessible.

Leaving the Comfort Zone. More Discomfort = More Story

How do you shape a story idea to have emotional stakes? Most good stories revolve around watching a character struggle outside of its comfort zone. Pixar continually figures out what a protagonist wants most—and then throws the exact opposite at them. This state of discomfort is gold for writers for a couple of reasons.

On a narrative level, it simply creates scenes. It gives you, as a writer, immediate material to work with. If you're writing about a rat trying to cook in a sewer it might be cute and even original, but not necessarily interesting or dramatic. But if you're writing about a rat trying to cook in a gourmet restaurant, narrative questions immediately arise: How does he get in? How can he do it on a regular basis? What happens when someone sees him? What happens when his dishes turn out great? All of those lead to story strands that can be explored and harvested. All it took was placing a character in the most challenging setting it could be.

On a different, deeper level, your idea must force your characters to go through an emotional journey. An uncomfortable character is compelled to work hard to get back to its comfort zone, just like we would in real life. This desire propels actions, decisions and emotions, which are the meat of your story's inner narrative. *Toy Story*'s concept of "toys are actually alive" is immediately an exciting one that offers many narrative possibilities and a rich world to explore. It isn't until the concept evolves into "favorite toy gets replaced by a newer, shinier toy," that emotional stakes are introduced.

In *Toy Story*, Buzz Lightyear's arrival completely upends Woody's cherished and seemingly natural status as Andy's favorite toy. Woody's reactions to this event end up sending him on a wild adventure that leads him to extremely uncomfortable situations: lost by his owner and trapped in Sid's basement. Buzz's popularity is the worst thing that could have happened to

Woody, who has always been complacent about his role as leader among Andy's toys. This event also forces Woody to face many hard emotional truths. He realizes Andy's love cannot be taken for granted and that he might someday grow tired of Woody. Woody's struggle to keep his friends as they shun him and the fear he experience when Andy drives off without him and Buzz, both come from deep emotional distress. These fears receive a distorted physical manifestation in Sid's abused toys. At the end of the movie, while the toys are again nervous about Andy's birthday, Woody is calmer. He turns to Buzz and says: "What could be worse than you?" He feels stronger and more confident of his role in Andy's life after his ordeal with Buzz (though the arrival of a puppy does surprise both of them).

This discomfort is more than just bad luck or a worst-case scenario. It is a catalyst that our hero must react to and deal with, and in the best movies, grow and change. Discomfort isn't always rooted in a negative development either: Wall-E's peaceful routine is upended by Eve's arrival. While it's great that he's no longer alone, Wall-E must now devise ways to win over Eve's heart, or risk missing this opportunity to fulfill his dreams, possibly the last chance he'll get. If he fails, he'll be worse off than he was before. Eve's arrival makes Wall-E's life more challenging, and definitely less comfortable than they were.

In order to truly disturb a character, you must create a weakness or fear that you can tap into. This is why Pixar creates an existing problem in each protagonist's world.

A Character and World That Vie for Adventure – The Existing Flaw

As most of us go about our lives, working, dating, socializing, we tend to ignore things that are bothering us. Maybe it's a relationship we don't quite understand, a loss we haven't properly mourned or a part of ourselves we haven't quite accepted. This is what makes us human, and it is what will make your characters compelling.

Ideally, even before the gears of the plot start to turn, there should be a problem in your protagonist's life or world. In Monsters Inc., Waternoose complains that there is an electric shortage because children don't scare as easily as they used to. In *Finding Nemo*, Marlin dotes on his son, suffocating him and denying him any sense of independence. This Flaw is nowhere sharper drawn than in *Wall-E*, where our entire planet is decrepit. Of course the Flaw can be subtler than these examples. It could be Carl's broken heart and sense of purposelessness in *Up*.

Once you found the Existing Flaw in you core idea, craft a story that pushes it to the extreme. The overprotective Marlin loses his son. The heartbroken Carl is about to lose his last connection to his life with Ellie (the house). Whatever the Existing Flaw, it must be clearly related to the plot you have crafted for your protagonist. The more these two work in tandem, the higher the emotional stakes will be and the more invested your audience will be.

Economy: How Every Moment in Ratatouille Stems from Its Core Idea

Pixar's films find the heart of their stories and never stray from them. Once they find the emotional core—the Flaw and the plot that infringes on it—they make sure every development and every character are closely connected to this main narrative undertow.

Let's take a closer look at *Ratatouille*. Even before we meet Remy we are introduced to the exuberant chef Gusteau and snooty critic Anton Ego. They clash over Gusteau's statement that "Anyone can cook." This prologue may seem extraneous. It doesn't have any actual bearing on Remy's adventures and the movie's events would be clear without it. It is important, because it sets up the thematic core of the film and also the movie's real antagonist, Anton Ego.

When we meet Remy he is a torn individual. He is a rat but is averse to rats' way of living: stealing, eating garbage indiscriminately and living by strict rules in packs. He is drawn to what he considers human living—creat-

ing, enjoying exciting flavors, individuality and curiosity. Remy's desires are at extreme odds with who (and what) he is.

The screenwriters of the film go out of their way to show us why this is a problem. We see how Remy's curiosity gets him in trouble, whether he is struck by a lightning bolt trying to cook a mushroom or getting shot at by an old lady when he reads her cookbook and steals her food. His father is also a problem. He chastises Remy for his passion, mocks him and pressures him to stick to the rats' ways. Every element discussed here pertains to Remy's predicament. The old woman is the first instance of rejection by the human world. His father symbolizes rejection from the rat world. Emile, his brother, is a friend, but a contrast against which Remy's peculiarities stand out. Gusteau is set up as Remy's sole mentor and guide.

At the end of the first act, after Remy's food excursions get the rat colony discovered and force all of them to relocate, Remy loses the group. He finds himself using Gusteau's book as a lifeboat, standing in front of a fork in the road. Yes, this is the sewer system and Remy must gamble which path to choose to find his friends and family. On a deeper level, this prolonged moment is Remy's decision about himself: Will he follow his human side or his rat side? Even this small, physical, throwaway moment is used again to tap into the core idea of the story—Remy's split identity. It is no coincidence that Remy's choice leads him to Gusteau's restaurant in Paris.

These elements will continue to appear throughout the film as often as possible. Some in major ways, such as the sequence when Remy first enters the kitchen to fix the soup, yet has to avoid being seen, burned, stepped on or cooked. It is a perfect, dialogue-less presentation of the dangers he faces, and it's delivered as an action scene. Even Remy's casual wave to a human biker that causes the surprised man to crash is part of the core idea. On the other hand, when Remy starts allowing a growing group of rat friends to steal from the Gusteau's, we see how Remy is still drawn to his rat community. Remy cannot reconcile the two sides of his personality

The core thematic question of *Ratatouille* is "Can this rat become a gourmet cook?" The first act shows all the reasons why he can and why he can't.

Every scene that follows is an escalation of those reasons, with the answer swinging like a pendulum from "Yes, look at Remy and Linguini cooking together and becoming friends" to "No, no matter how talented he is, Remy will never be accepted as a cook on his own because he does not belong among humans, who will never accept him." This is economy. Everything in your screenplay should relate to your core idea, to your main conflict, even the supporting characters. Consider Linguini. He is the negative copy of Remy. He is the son of acclaimed chef Gusteau, but can't cook and no one expects him to, because of his awkward demeanor. When he surprises them (with Remy's help) he gets a chance thanks to Gusteau's credo. Colette serves as Gusteau's spokeswomen in the kitchen and as a mentor to Linguini. When they become close, Linguini dismisses Remy in favor of his romance with Colette—a powerful moment of human rejection that almost makes Remy give up on his dream.

Skinner is the opposite of Colette. He despises Linguini, partially because of his fear that Linguini will inherit the restaurant, but mostly because he refuses to believe that this silly boy can cook—a negative echo of the core idea. Skinner is also the first person to acknowledge Remy's existence and talents. He offers another, different, threat from the human world. He doesn't want to destroy Remy, but instead to enslave him and use him to concoct a demeaning line of frozen food products using Gusteau's name. Even the rest of the cooks in the kitchen are fleshed out in a short monologue by Colette describing their various exciting backgrounds. She describes them as "pirates"—something Remy can relate to. This scene once again reinforces Gusteau's credo and the validity of Remy's dreams.

This brings us to two additional important characters in *Ratatouille*: Gusteau and Anton Ego, the Angel and Devil of this piece. It's almost as if these two dialectic paragons made a bet on whether anyone can cook and used Remy as a test case. Gusteau constantly whispers principles, encouragements and guidance in Remy's ear, while Ego uses his power to put pressure on Skinner, Linguini and the cooks, threatening them with ridicule and embarrassment. These characters are also echoes of Remy's torn personality.

Gusteau believes in him and eggs him on in his journey. Ego, in turn, is the last and highest hurdle Remy will have to pass. If Remy can impress Ego enough with his cooking and to be accepted as a cook, then his problems are over. The Flaw he had at the beginning of the film will be resolved, he will find his place in the world and reach self-acceptance. Some of these ideas are stated flat out in the film, some are insinuated, such as in the film's prologue.

All of these elements are put in place to set up the film's final act, when Ego comes in to dine. Linguini shares his secret with the cooks who all leave him. Only Remy is left in the kitchen to cook during the dinner rush. When Remy's father sees Linguini coming to Remy's aid and understands the dangers Remy puts himself in to pursue his passion, he is moved. He puts the rat colony at Remy's disposal, leading to the potent visual of hundreds of rats running the kitchen during the dinner rush. This moment serves as a resolution to Remy's relationship with his father and the rat world; he is accepted by them. And clearly, it demonstrates that rats can cook. Colette returns, accepts the situation and for the first time works together with Remy, thus resolving the tension in the Remy-Linguini-Colette triangle. The only open thread is Ego.

Remy chooses the dish to serve him, the titular Ratatouille, and makes it with Colette. In one of the film's most memorable moments, the dish sends Ego back to his childhood, to an innocence he had before he developed his snooty ideals. He insists to talk to the chef. This time Linguini and Colette give Remy his dues and introduce him to Ego after the restaurant closes. In Ego's glowing review he writes:

"In the past, I have made no secret of my disdain for Chef Gusteau's famous motto: Anyone can cook. But I realize, only now do I truly understand what he meant. Not everyone can become a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere."

That seals the deal. Gusteau has won the argument—anyone can cook. Once Ego is on board, and after his father's help and acceptance, Remy can now reconcile the two parts of his personality. This is clearly evidenced in the film's closing moments, when Remy regales this tale to his rat friends before

being called into the kitchen by Colette to serve Ego, the owner of this new restaurant. Of course the dish is Ego's favorite, Ratatouille.

SUMMARY

Every moment in *Ratatouille* evolved out of the core idea. The same should be true for any story you write. Once you have a good idea, such as the ones discussed in the first part of this chapter, treat it as a seed that you must sprout into story. Let it grow, step by step, hewing close to its core. What isn't part of this essence, this seed, probably shouldn't be part of your story and should be pruned mercilessly.

Uncomfortable characters are so appealing because we all like feeling comfortable. And once our cushy existence is taken from us, we need to reconcile these new circumstances with who we are and what we have lost. This desire creates scenes and conflicts for you characters and story. Pixar's characters go to great lengths to retrieve what they lost. Watching them react to their new circumstances, fighting and growing, is what makes Pixar's films so moving and enjoyable. From an extremely nervous father, a small fish who crosses an enormous ocean to learn how to let his son live; to a superhero stuck inside the most mundane of lives; to a reclusive, heartbroken old man who must take responsibility over an innocent child; to an aspiring monster that just isn't scary—Pixar excels in putting characters in the worst place possible for them.

In Inside Out

Clearly, *Inside Out* has a "mother lode" of an idea. Choosing to set the film inside our heads immediately offers a myriad of options for unique characters and set pieces. It is a wildly original idea that is very appealing. Who wouldn't want to see what makes them tick? The emotional stakes are also practically built in: This world is a person's mind and heart, and its collapse would mean the destruction of that person.

Discomfort attacks Joy, the film's protagonist, from two fronts. First, she is pushed outside of her familiar spot in headquarters into an uncharted world, where she is threatened and vulnerable. (She could be forgotten or

turned into an abstract thought.) On an emotional level, she must also cooperate with Sadness, whom she has never accepted or understood. Discomfort is also thrown at Riley, the person in whose mind the film takes place. She moves with her parents to a different city and without Joy in headquarters, she can't feel happiness. As a matter fact, the collapse of Riley's mindscape is an apt metaphor for what discomfort should do to your characters. Your story should threaten to destroy their Islands of Personality, and they must protect them or create new ones.

The Existing Flaw is hinted at very early on in *Inside Out*. Headquarters has a problem: They don't know the purpose of one of their core members, Sadness. Joy obsessively works to keep Riley constantly happy, ignoring and even removing Sadness, even though she knows she has a role in Riley's psyche: "I'm not actually sure what she does." When audiences hear that line, somewhere in the back of their heads they know that by the end of the film, Sadness's purpose will be discovered and it will be meaningful.

Do It Yourself: *What is the core idea of your story? Does it offer many possibilities for dramatic moments? Does it impart strong, specific emotional discomfort to your protagonist? Do you mine this discomfort to create scenes and movements that affect your characters emotionally? What is the Flaw in your fictional universe? Is it closely related to the plot you constructed? Do they mutually enhance and enrich each other? Do all of your characters, narrative decisions, scenes and themes pertain to your core idea? Are you constantly exploring and expanding the seed of your story as it progresses? Have you branched off in directions that aren't part of your core idea?*

THANKS FOR CHECKING OUT THIS SAMPLE!

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