

What Can Indie Filmmakers Learn from Pixar's Story Development Process?



With one of the best critical and commercial records in movie-making history, there are a lot of [things Pixar does right](#). One of their greatest strengths is their ability to consistently craft great stories. So what's the Pixar story development process like, and what can we as independent filmmakers learn from it? As part of a 5 part interview, Mary Coleman, a Pixar senior development executive, shares details about how it all comes together -- revealing some surprising and enlightening things:

For example, the fact that the story is always seen as a work in progress:

"[W]e keep improving the story well into production, which is painful in animation. Making changes is expensive and laborious. But we'll keep at it if the story's not right yet. And we've never once gone into full production with it locked."

That comes after 3-4 years of active work developing the script, with a full year dedicated to outlining:

"In that first year you're pitching twenty minute overviews of the story, getting feedback, and rethinking it. We often spend a whole year in outlining before going to a first draft. A lot of time laying that foundation."

The feedback given for the first draft leads to a second draft, which begins a series of “visual rough drafts”:

“[A] team of story artists begin drawing out the movie, like [a] comic book.

Then the comic book becomes like a flip book when the drawings are scanned in and edited together to make our “reels”. It’s a visual rough draft of the whole thing, so if your movie’s an hour and a half long your reels are too.”

Now, you might think that once you start getting into visual rough drafts you are getting close to having a finished script. Instead, a full 2-3 years are spent going back and forth between the “reels” and new drafts of the written script, a process Coleman says may result in an average of 8 visual rough drafts and many more written drafts. This culminates with the movie going into production.

The takeaway?

Don’t skimp time on your outline -- Try as many versions as you can before going for that first rough draft. This is where you figure out the heart of the story. You're still going to have to write a lot of drafts, but if you figure out what you're ultimately trying to communicate, it will make those subsequent drafts easier to problem-solve and improve.

Keep the visual story in mind -- Once you start working with drafts, start thinking about the story as images in real time, feeling out the beats and rhythms and letting what you learn inform your subsequent written drafts. Coleman says that at a certain point it's all part of the same process, visual drafts meshing with written drafts and vice versa, and as visual storytellers we have to take that same attitude to heart.

Don’t be afraid to see the story as always being a work in progress -- With today’s technology making it easier and easier to mix pre-production with production with post-production, use that to your advantage. For example, edit your footage as you're shooting, seeing what can be improved while still in production. Don't be afraid to let your actors' performances suggest different possibilities within the story, it's all just memory files, so keep the camera rolling and let them try different takes.

As Indie/DIY filmmakers we're never going to be able to compete with the budget of a studio like Pixar, but with time on our side we can certainly learn from the care, work, and attention that is taken to develop these stories when crafting our own.

For the full interview covering the story development process [click here](#), and for a more visual behind-the-scenes look check out Koo's [previous post about John Lasseter](#). What’s your takeaway?