

RUNNING HEAD: Disney's Creative Process

Understanding the Disney's Successful Creative Process

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## **Disney's Creative Power**

The way people express themselves in creative matters is an aspect of humanity that distances the human race from other mammals. The creative process must be mastered to be successful in the current world; therefore it is of great importance to business and entertainment communities as well as the population as a whole. One organization that excels in this department is the Walt Disney Company. Ever since Walt Disney started his company it has been delighting the young and the young at heart with innovative, imaginative, and creative varieties of entertainment. Creativity is even featured within the theme parks with entire attractions built around this idea, such as the Journey into Your Imagination ride at EPCOT and the Blue Sky Cellar found at Disney California Adventures. But what exactly makes this company successful? How are they able to be so creative, so often? How are they able to consistently bring forth entertainment that can be found accessible at so many different levels? Just what does the Disney creative process entail and what makes it so profitable?

The first reaction of anyone involved with, or enamored with the Disney Company, would be to turn to the wizards behind the curtain so to speak, the Disney Imagineers. These individuals have been responsible for many of the innovative experiences that can be found throughout the entertainment environments of their theme parks and other experiences. They have designed everything from theme park rides and attractions to a restaurant currently on the premises of the Los Angeles International Airport. They are the keepers of this creative process and have the formula for making it the success it is today. The purpose of this research project is to examine Disney's creative process and attempt to answer the various unanswered questions about the process itself and how the essential driving component of Walt Disney Company's success is creativity

## **The Study of Creativity and Disney**

The need to create and be imaginative can be connected to the basic need of expression. Some do this through words, both spoken and written, others through art work, and still others in less main stream ways. The joke of the starving artist has circulated through cultures for many years, yet without them progress would be halted. Creativity can be seen as part of human evolution (Wullschlaeger, 2009). Ideas, thoughts, and images evolve over time into increasingly creative ways of thinking. However, a select few companies have had the ability to take their creativity and capitalize on it in a way that makes them a household name like the Walt Disney Company.

Robert Sternburg addresses the idea of creativity in his 2006 article *The Nature of Creativity*. He introduces the idea of an investment theory of creativity in which creative people are willing to pursue the ideas that are new, unusual, and out of favor with the general populace in order create a new idea that uses these unpopular ideas in a new and interesting matter (Sternburg, 2006). This idea of creativity and the ability to create new ideas can not be the one thing that makes Disney a successful company which leads to something that Disney does better than any other company; their aspect of storytelling.

Woodside, Sood, and Miller wrote an article in 2008 arguing that brands use storytelling to connect people to their products. This is referred to in the article as consumer storytelling theory. The argument is made that storytelling is an essential form of advertising, but also personifies the brands and makes them part of a consumers' story as well (Woodside, Sood, and Miller, 2008). Through storytelling the brands are integrated as an interesting, essential, and exciting part of a person's life, a specific example being a blog story about occurrences that came about due to, and while wearing, a Versace coat (Woodside, Sood, and Miller, 2008).

Showing a definite connection between storytelling and Disney, David Boje calls Disney a storytelling organization in his postmodern analysis of Disney (1995). Boje turns to storytelling organization theory to support his analysis of Disney's varied and multiple forms of storytelling (Boje, 1995). In referring to a previous article on storytelling organization theory he states that "storytelling organizations exist to tell their collective stories" (Boje, 1995, p. 1000). From this it would seem that his argument is that Disney as a company exists to be a storytelling of various forms, and that their unique forms of creativity are the ways they ensure that their stories reach a variety of individuals (Boje, 1995).

It can be critiqued that the success that Disney has had comes from following the model of classic Hollywood. These steps break down the various aspects of traditional Disney movies successfully (Wasko, 2001, p. 114). There is no question of the power of the Disney Classics that many children have grown up with. This was further illustrated during the casting for the remake of *Alice in Wonderland*. Over a thousand people turned up to be cast in the role of an extra in Plymouth, UK (Anonymous, 2008). Disney inspires creativity and people desire to be a part of the fantasy world that Disney can create.

Although Sarah Kawahara is a choreographer for Disney on Ice, her theory on creativity is relevant on many levels. "You have a predetermined vision of what it should look like and the challenge is to turn that vision into reality" (Stewart, 2008). This brings up the question of is the creative process really just a vision that needs to be made into reality? But how is that vision formed and what causes it to be built? Former CEO of the Walt Disney Company felt that ideas were the most important aspect of growing as a company, "Any one thing can move a company. It's the quality of the idea that counts. I've been surprised how many times over the years little creative ideas have grown into something big" (The Imagineers, 2003, p. 39).

Karen Moltenbrey breaks down the process of creating a virtual Little Mermaid ride for the special edition of the DVD. These steps are the Concept Phase, Story Time, Creating the CG World, and Re-boarding (Moltenbrey, 2006). These steps are a good starting point to understanding Disney's creative process, although there is some modifying that must be done to make them accessible to all areas. A good creative idea is needed to get the concept started, followed by what Disney is known the best for, creating the storyline, then is the technical work which varies due to what medium is being worked in, and the revising step of perfecting the project is final.

In order to understand the true Disney Creative Process it may be crucial to understand some of the great minds behind Walt Disney Imagineering. Marty Sklar, former VP of Imagineering, can be argued as one of the foremost creative minds of the century. He worked with Walt Disney to create Disneyland and has been active in the company ever since. He has an oft quoted way of summing up creativity with the idea of looking at a blank sheet of paper and seeing as both an exciting opportunity because no one has touched it yet or as the scariest thing in the world because no one has touched it (The Imagineers, 1996, p.192). This concept of the spark of inspiration can be seen in many Disney attractions from the song "One Spark" in Journey into Your Imagination to Blizzard Beach. Taking an idea and going with it until something uniquely creative is brought about seems to be the first step in the creative process (The Imagineers, 1996).

Disney has a way of enticing great creative minds to become part of their Imagineering think tank. Tom Fitzgerald, VP of Walt Disney Imagineering, is also a uniquely creative person with a long history with the Walt Disney Company. His strength of creativity has enabled his progress throughout Imagineering due to recognition by Sklar (Entertainment Editors, 2001).

Sometimes the best creative minds may not be found inside Disney at all though. When Pixar was acquired by the Disney Company John Lasseter was appointed principal creative advisor for Walt Disney Imagineering (Cornish Guardian, 2009). Perhaps the key is acknowledging what has come before, and using that to spark what comes next (Block, 2008). This can be illustrated by Lasseter's success while using the same ideas and concepts of personifying inanimate objects, respecting current morals, and telling a touching story that also drove Walt Disney's films. Although if asked what the keys to success are he will say that "You have to get the right people. You have to get the right processes" (Leonard, 2008, para. 7). Yet these right processes have yet to be clearly defined.

There is also the question of what exactly makes Disney's creative process so lucrative. Fall of 2009 showed that Disney is not afraid to change things and can still create reasons for people to visit their parks, even if there is not a new ride debuting (Anonymous, 2008). Things such as the High School Musical 3 Pep Rally, Pixie Hollow, and the Blue Sky Cellar brought many curious guests into the park, yet did not cost as much, or take as long to build, as a new ride would have.

Disney has a unique way of being able to know what their audience desires and wants to see and experience. Although they have been criticized for their unfaithful retellings of fairytales by leaving out the parts that may scare young children, it is these same fairytales that mesmerize young children (Weiss, 2008). Disney softens these fairytales for the children, ensuring that they return. Parents enjoy them because they know that the name Disney means it is safe for their children, and will not entice nightmares or tears. Is this one of the reasons that Disney is so successful?

## **Creative Theories**

Two theories have presented themselves through the literature that can be found important to the study of successful creativity. The first theory is the investment theory of creativity as presented by Sternberg in *The Nature of Creativity* (2006). Sternberg states that creativity requires the following six things: intellectual abilities, knowledge, style of thinking, personality, motivation, and environment (2006). In relation to Disney's successful creative process it can be theorized that they hire the best people that encompass the first four requirements and then provide motivation for creativity and an environment conducive to success.

The second theory presented to help understand the creative success of the Walt Disney Company is the storytelling organization theory as presented by David Boje in 1991. This introduces the idea of organizations as storytellers that present stories in various ways to reach out to various audiences (Boje, 1991). While Boje refers to the company and brand itself as a teller of stories it can be theorized in Disney's case that they are in the business of organizational storytelling, with the manpower, creativity, and money to take the stories they produce and reach a multitude of audiences.

It is possible that Disney's economic success can be linked to their ability to produce extremely creative and immersive storytelling that connects the participant to a story in a multitude of matters. This idea will be explored further in this research project through the research questions and particular methodology.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions will be answered through this research study:

- How has the creative process changed over time?
- What are the steps of the creative process?
- How does Disney ensure financial success with their ventures?
- How can a regular person use Disney's approach to creativity in their daily lives?

## **Methodology**

The methodology to answer these research questions is a dual in-depth interview with two creative minds within the Walt Disney Imagineering division of the Walt Disney Company. The complete list of interview questions can be found in the appendix of this research project. The interviews with both participants were conducted during the same meeting, due to the busy schedules of the Imagineers. The opportunity was presented to interview two Imagineers involved in storytelling and design, Kevin Rafferty and Robert Coltrin in order to gain insight into what they envision as Disney's creative process. The desire was to create a defined set of processes that construct the creative process as well as solve the mystery of Disney's true method for financial success.

This dual in-depth interview took place on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009 at the Disney Imagineering library in Glendale, CA. It was recorded as both a digital file and onto a mini-cassette tape in order to preserve the quotes and integrity of the interview. The interview lasted from between three and four in the afternoon.

### **Conversation With a Creative Duo**

The first point that reached a consensus was that the creative process in Imagineering, and the Walt Disney Company as a whole, revolves around the idea of storytelling. Both Kevin and Robert agreed that storytelling was the main component that pushed both the creativity and success of any project that took place within Imagineering. The ability of Disney to create a unique and immersive experience for the stories was also underlined as an important aspect of the company's ability to be creative.

In reference to the steps of the creative process Kevin described it as having four different parts that, when completed, can effectively tell the story. First a story must emerge that solves a specific need, then the question of feasibility is presented and worked around, next is the design and development stage of the project where ideas are created to fulfill the needs of the story, and finally is the construction and implementation state where the project is built, audio and visual effects are recorded and the project comes into being. While neither Robert nor Kevin said they could distinctly break the steps of the creative process into something so technical these were the four different processes that were agreed upon to be part of the creation of a new attraction for one of the Disney theme parks.

Various things that stuck out as crucial to understanding the success of Disney are the importance of research and the knowledge that everything is always different. No two ideas that will be put into production are necessarily the same, which presents constant challenges for the Imagineers. Also is the reality that they are creating attractions for a variety of audiences, and therefore they must make sure that the stories that are created can be seen and understood in multiple ways.

When proposed with the question of how the creative process has changed over the years the consensus was that it remains the same as when Walt Disney was alive and in charge of the

division. Kevin explained that Walt was a showman and that in Imagineering they were finding new ways to entertain their audiences. Differences today include that there are now more tools to help tell the stories and new ways to immerse the audience in that story. Robert brought up that this could be a challenge as well because the expectations of people are higher in the digital world and Disney must strive to exceed these expectations.

When discussing how Disney maintains a successful presence in their theme parks, various attributing factors were discussed. One overwhelming factor was agreed to be the time taken to create the attractions and the fact that Disney has a group of many minds that dedicate their time to create the best package possible and have a passion for the Disney theme parks. The Disney difference can also be seen in the fact that all the Imagineers know each other and have worked with each other on the various projects and that all work is done in house to ensure a high level of quality control. Disney encourages a definite ownership of ideas in their Imagineers which lead to the creation of their innovative attractions.

The aspect of the consumer was also discussed in relation to the success of Disney. The fact that people love the product that Disney produces leads to its success, and the fact that Disney provides high quality attractions and has a better batting average than the other entertainment companies helps as well. Again the emphasis was on storytelling with the fact that people enjoy good storytelling which is what Disney strives to give their guests. Also, Robert presented the idea that guests do not attend the parks to escape reality but for the reassurance that a world as perfect as the one at the theme parks can be a reality. It was also stated that it's the Imagineer's job to provide guests with opportunities that can not be found elsewhere. This is why people enjoy attending the theme parks and come back time and time again.

In asking how they would recommend people who are trying to be more creative should go about being so, one of the ideas was that it is a different way of thinking. It is also something

that takes a long period of time to perfect. One idea of promoting creativity in everyday life is by turning mundane ideas into story. Unfortunately, it was discussed that in order to be creative a person must be willing to be different and the statement was made that most people do not want to be different because it takes more effort to exceed expectations instead of just meeting them. A particular piece of advice to those wishing to nurture their creative side was to drop the fear and try new things that may otherwise not be attempted.

Specific advice to others who desire to follow in their creative footsteps included learning to be able to answer the question of what you are solving for, how to simplify and communicate an idea effectively, how to present the Big Idea and then take that idea and make it well, and learning that there is always a better way, it just may not have been created yet.

Through this interview the key ideas encompassed was the success of Disney comes from its various ways of using storytelling to draw a consumer into the story of their attraction, movie, or restaurant, as well having the best people who can do the job in the most imaginative way, and the reliance on teamwork to create the best product. The creative process was broken down to start with the story and work forward from the idea that was presented.

### **The Analysis of Successful Creativity**

In conclusion there is a definite importance to the storytelling aspect of creativity that drives the Walt Disney Company. This agrees with Boje's argument of Disney as a storytelling organization (1995). It can be said that with the absence of the ability to tell stories well Disney would not be as successful a company as it is today. Even with the decline in the economy people are still attending the theme parks either as a means of escapism or as a means to reassure themselves that the current turmoil will not continue forever.

Also, the steps of Disney's creative process remain vague, however maybe that is how Disney can be so creative. With the four steps of the story, feasibility, development and design, and construction there is enough room to grow creatively in each step as needed to create the best product. These four steps fit in well with Karen Moltenbrey's break down of the creative process using the Concept Phase, Story Time, Creating the CG World, and Re-boarding (2006). Both methods agree that the creative process comes in four steps, with the first two being the concept and idea stages and the final two being the creation and implementation stages of the project.

Also the idea of creativity presented by Sternburg in 2006 collaborates with what John Lasseter said in 2008 that in order to have successful creativity a company must have the right people for the job. This is mirrored by Kevin and Robert in their discussion about having the best people for the job and the emphasis on teamwork to help inspire creativity. This would present the creative environment needed by Sternburg's investment theory of creativity while the passion for Disney's theme parks would provide the needed motivation.

Areas for future study of Disney could be to examine if storytelling draws people to the theme parks even in hard economic times. Also, an idea presented by the Imagineers during the research would be to examine why people attend the theme parks; is it to escape from their

everyday lives or are they looking for reassurance that things can be reach some sort of perfection?

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## **Interview Questions– Creative Process (Appendix 1)**

- How would you explain the creative process used at Disney?
- How do the old processes of creativity apply to current ideas, trends?
- How has the creative process changed over time?
- What are the steps of the creative process?
- What about Disney's creative process makes them so successful?
- Would you say that Disney is more focused on creativity or the financial success of their projects/ideas?
- How does Disney ensure financial success with their ventures?
- How can a regular person use Disney's approach to creativity in their daily lives?
- What Walt Disney Quote has the most effect on your creative process? (Example: "All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them.")
- How has the recent books on creativity expanded the public's knowledge about how Disney creates their form of magic?
- In what ways do you think you've added to the creative process here at Disney?
- How is creativity essential to the future success of our society?
- A piece of advice for those who are attempting to use their own creativity to be successful either outside of Disney or within the company?