

The Digital Auteur: Branding Identity on the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD

Robert Alan Brookey & Robert Westerfelhaus

*Recently, Pixar and Disney parted ways, severing a very profitable partnership. The authors of this study argue that this business split is anticipated in and facilitated by the extra textual features included with DVD releases of Pixar films. To illustrate, the authors examine extra features accompanying Pixar's DVD release of *Monsters, Inc.* This examination identifies how Pixar strategically excluded Disney from such material while at the same time positioning itself as a corporate auteur capable of delivering high quality family friendly entertainment of the kind for which Disney has been famous. This study thus highlights the commercial implications of DVD extra text.*

Keywords: DVD; Pixar; Disney; Auteur

On November 4, 2003 the video/DVD release of the film *Finding Nemo*, a computer animated collaboration between Disney and Pixar Animation Studios, set a new sales record for the retail home video market, selling 8 million units during the first day of its release. This new record was not surprising; after all, *Finding Nemo* was the breakout hit of the 2003 summer season, generating almost \$340 million in box office receipts (Business Data for *Finding Nemo*, 2003). *Finding Nemo* was not only one of the biggest grossing movies of 2003, but it also outgrossed Disney's most successful animated feature film to date, *The Lion King*. Given *Finding Nemo*'s stellar sales, one would expect that Disney and Pixar would be celebrating their profitable collaboration. Instead, the success of *Finding Nemo* brought heightened public attention to the two studios' unhappy business relationship. Indeed, even before its DVD release, while

Robert Alan Brookey is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, Northern Illinois University. Robert Westerfelhaus is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, College of Charleston. Correspondence to: Robert Alan Brookey, Department of Communication, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA. Tel: 815 753-7128. Email: rbrookey@niu.edu. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2004 conference of the Carolinas Communication Association, where it was recognized with the Ray Camp Award for top research paper. The authors wish to thank Dan Canary and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

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Finding Nemo was setting records at the box office, Pixar's CEO, Steve Jobs, was making the rounds of other major studios in search of a new business partner (Holson, 2003). In addition, as Brett Sporich (2003) reported at that time, 'Early revenue figures for [the DVD release of] "Nemo" will be critical indicators as to whether Disney can deliver what Pixar chief Steve Jobs is looking for in a distribution and funding partner' (p. 1).

Pixar's relationship with Disney was not always acrimonious. In 1991, Pixar signed a deal with Disney to produce three feature length animated films, and it was out of this agreement that *Toy Story*, Pixar's first feature film, was developed. Although it is difficult to imagine today, given the success of Pixar's films as well as other computer animated features such as *Shrek* and *Ice Age*, but at the time of *Toy Story*'s release a full-length computer animated feature was considered a risky proposition, and it was believed that Disney had the most to lose in this joint business venture (King, 1995). However, *Toy Story* proved to be an enormous success, both critically and commercially, and on the basis of that success Pixar and Disney entered into a new five-picture development deal. It made good business sense for the fledging animation company to align itself with Disney; Disney's brand name functioned as a stamp of approval, signifying that this new form of animation met the same standards of excellence and wholesomeness in family entertainment associated with Disney. So it is easy to understand why at that time Pixar CEO Steve Jobs (1997) would wax rhapsodically about Disney in his company's annual report:

Once we had decided that our best long-term strategy was to have a partner, our first choice by far was Disney. They are, quite simply, the best. Disney invented the feature animated film art form with *Snow White* in 1937 and has produced more than 30 animated features since then. They are the number one studio in the world, with an over 20 percent box office market share in 1996, and they dominate the home video market as well. It's also important that we have a relationship with Disney that goes back 10 years. They were there at our side as an invaluable mentor when we made *Toy Story*. We like working with these guys. (p. 1)

When the two studios signed their deal, Disney certainly brought more to the table in the way of name recognition, distribution networks and ancillary marketing networks than did Pixar, so it is not surprising that the agreement assured Disney would be rewarded accordingly. The agreement stipulated that both studios would share production costs and profits, but Disney would receive an additional distribution fee off the top of the gross receipts. In essence, this fee meant that revenues for Pixar's films were split 60/40, with Disney receiving the larger share. To put the point more bluntly, with all other costs and revenues being equal, Disney makes more money from a Pixar film than does Pixar itself. In the years that would follow, however, Pixar Animation Studios would prove itself a profitable partner for Disney; indeed, *A Bug's Life*, *Toy Story 2*, and *Monsters, Inc.* collectively generated more than \$1 billion in profits. In fact, when Disney CEO Michael Eisner met with stockholders in February of 2002, the success of *Monsters, Inc.* was one of the few bright spots in an otherwise dismal fiscal report (Furman, 2002).

By 2003, however, it was clear that what had once been acceptable to Pixar was no longer so, and Jobs no longer liked working with the 'guys' at Disney. In addition to

growing contractual conflicts, the Disney brand was dropping in value. Indeed, Disney's image as a source of family entertainment was under attack by socially conservative political and religious organizations that claimed that the company no longer embraced 'family values'. In fact, boycotts against the company had been organized by the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention (Catholic League, 2000). Apart from these public relations problems, Disney was slowly phasing out its animation studios, cutting back sharply on the very type of film production that made had the company famous. In 1999, Disney employed 2,220 people in its animation division, but by 2004 that number had dropped to 600, and the company had closed animations studios in Paris, Tokyo and Orlando ('Despite Troubled CEO', 2004).

Motivated in part by these closures, Roy Disney, head of the animation division and nephew of the company founder Walt Disney, resigned from the Disney board on December 1, 2003 (Gavin, 2003). Upon his resignation, Disney (the only remaining member of the Disney family to be actively involved in the company) issued a three-page letter in which he claimed the company's image had been tarnished and CEO Michael Eisner had taken the company off its course. In the months that would follow, he would mount a 'Save Disney' campaign, rallying Disney stockholders to remove Eisner and restore the company's persona as a purveyor of family friendly entertainment ('Disney Shareholders Put Pressure,' 2004). Shortly after Roy Disney's departure, Pixar also split from Disney. After the financial markets had closed on January 29, 2004, Jobs announced that Pixar's contract with Disney would be allowed to expire in 2005, and that he was seeking new partnerships for his animation studio (Rose, 2004).

For the alert viewer, evidence of this rift between Pixar and Disney could be found prior to their public parting in an unexpected place: the extra features accompanying the DVD release of *Monsters, Inc.* The *Monsters, Inc.* DVD contains many extra features that introduce the viewer to Pixar Animation Studios, its employees, and its animation process. Although these features are marketed to consumers as adding entertainment value to the DVD version of the film, we will argue they do much more. Specifically, we contend the DVD allows Pixar to present itself not only as a purveyor of family entertainment, but also positions the studio as a media brand recognizably independent of Disney. Furthermore, we argue Pixar accomplishes this by appropriating the persona that was once distinctively Disney's: positioning itself as a family-friendly company with a commitment to family entertainment.

The paper continues the ongoing theoretical exploration of the DVD as a new communication product that collapses primary and secondary media texts into a single commercial unit. As Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus (2002) have noted, the inclusion of 'extra text' features on the DVD has changed the intertextual relationship between entertainment products and their means of promotion:

Primary and secondary texts are usually physically distinct from one another and are often read at different times, creating an intertextual relationship that is marked by both temporal and physical distance. However, by including such distinct but interrelated texts in a self-contained package, the DVD turns this intertextual relationship into an intratextual relationship. Thus, the DVD is perhaps the ultimate example of

media-industry synergy, in which the promotion of a media product is collapsed into the product itself. (p. 93)

This synergistic blending presents scholars with new critical challenges. We extend the critical engagement of the DVD and its various extra text features through our examination of the DVD version of *Monsters, Inc.* We begin our study with a discussion of auteur theory that ties the evolution of this theory to the current market-driven construction of the creative personae. We then discuss the commercial exploitation of the auteur personae and point out how DVD extra textual materials contribute to that exploitation. Next, we offer an analysis of the extra textual features included on the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD in which we examine how these features serve to construct Pixar's auteur persona in such a way as to promote Pixar's business interests.

The Auteur Persona

Auteur theory was introduced by French film critics in the 1950s, who viewed cinematic texts as the artistic expressions of their directors, whom they termed auteurs. These critics argued that an auteur's signature was distinguished by his or her distinctive style, and that critics should examine a director's entire oeuvre in order to identify his/her unique stylistic expressions. Andrew Sarris (1963) is credited with theorizing the auteur to better accommodate the study of American film, offering in the process a framework with which to rank American directors with respect to their auteur status. His theory equated style with personality, and he argued that a film's 'interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material' (p. 7). The role of the film critic then is to divine this personality from the style of the director's films, and in this critical move the persona of the auteur emerges. The auteur persona is thus the product of and is reflected in a body of work (oeuvre) stamped with the imprint of an original creative genius.

Auteur theory as originally conceived embraced modernist notions about the relationship between art and the artistic agent as author. Consequently, auteur theory fell out of favor when postmodernist critics began to challenge and critique the concept of authorship. Michel Foucault (1977), for example, argued that authorship was not merely a signature of artistry, but was also used to establish texts as property. With the emergence of copyright laws and the expansion of the publication industry, the construct of authorship was used to value and sell texts. Informed by Foucault's argument, many film scholars began to examine how auteurism served the same commercial function. Jeffery Chown (1988), for example, argued that Francis Ford Coppola's auteur status had as much to do with his strategic ability to navigate and exploit the Hollywood studio system as it did with his body of work. From the postmodern perspective, the auteur persona is not so much the natural product of an oeuvre as it is the construction of a marketable identity. Or, as Timothy Corrigan (2003) has observed:

The industrial utility of auteurism from the late 1960s to the early 1970s had much to do with the waning of the American studio system and the subsequent need to find new ways to mark a movie other than with a studio's signature ... If, in conjunction with the so-called international art cinema of the sixties and seventies, the auteur had

been absorbed as a phantom presence within a text, he or she has rematerialized in the eighties and nineties as a commercial performance of the business of being an auteur. (pp. 96–98)

When it came to the ‘business of being an auteur’, Walt Disney set the benchmark. Admittedly, Walt Disney was the creative force behind many of his company’s projects, but he also recognized the commercial value of marketing himself as that creative force. For example, prior to opening Disneyland, Disney struck a deal with ABC to air a weekly television show with him as the host. Later the show would move to NBC, where it would become the perennially popular *The Wonderful World of Disney*. The show would continue to be hosted by Disney until his death in 1966. Disney used this show to beam his carefully constructed auteur persona into American households, and in doing so display his creativity at work. For example, one episode would allow Disney to discuss his vision for Disney World, while another would show him acting through the storyboard of an animated feature as it was being developed. Disney carefully cultivated his image as the leader of a company that could be depended upon to provide wholesome family entertainment. In fact, Disney cultivated an image of himself as ‘Uncle Walt’, and the Disney brand became intimately linked with Walt Disney’s avuncular persona (Capodagli & Jackson, 1999).

Although Disney passed away almost 40 years ago, he still serves as an object lesson regarding the commercial value of marketing the auteur persona. In fact, the current structure of the film industry has created a need to invest directors with this persona, and to do so quickly. As Peter Bart and Peter Guber (2002) point out, the destruction of the old studio system resulted in a significant power shift in the film industry in which talent agents and agencies assumed a larger role in the planning and development of film production. Agencies will often try to ‘package’ a production; that is, when a producer wants to sign a particular actor for a film, the agency representing that actor will also require the producer to hire other talent whom they represent, including screenwriters and directors. Given this practice, it is in the interests of agencies to raise the profile of their talent pool as quickly as possible, or more to the point, turn their directors into auteurs. Indeed, as Virginia Wright Wexman (2003) observes, ‘the Hollywood industry has become increasingly concerned with marketing directors as salable commodities’ (p. 1). The auteur persona thus serves a commercial function within the contemporary film industry, one that must be economically and efficiently constructed if it is to prove profitable. In the next section, we will show how DVD technology provides those who make and market films the means for the controlled construction of such a persona.

The DVD Auteur

In the same year that the DVD version of *Monsters, Inc.* was released, *ABC’s World News Tonight* reported on what it referred to as the DVD revolution. At the time of the report, according to ABC, 43% of American homes possessed a DVD player, making it the fastest selling consumer electronic device since the black and white television (Rooney, 2002). Furthermore, the DVD had expanded the home video market into a \$25 billion

business. In fact, the release of Pixar's *Finding Nemo* illustrated this expansion as Bob Tourtellotte (2003) reported: "Nemo's" one-day sales figure would total \$156 million, which would be a massive weekend box office debut for a movie. That only underscores the fact that amid the booming DVD market, the home entertainment groups of Hollywood's major studios are pumping up profits' (p. 1). In a special issue of *TV Guide*, devoted to the 'must have' DVDs for the 2002 holiday shopping season, the appeal of the DVD was summarized thus:

Ten years ago DVDs and DVD players were futuristic curiosities; now they're standard issue for anyone who wants their home entertainment to come with crystalline picture quality and sound. But it's no longer enough to own any old version of your favorite movies and TV shows—you've got to score the definitive package with the best commentaries, outtakes, making-of documentaries, screenplays, storyboards, behind-the-scenes interviews and surprise hidden extra. ('The 50 DVDs', 2002, p. 21)

Indeed, these extras have made DVDs appealing to both the consumers who buy and rent them, and to the studios that produce them.

The extra features found on most DVDs were actually introduced by a technology that preceded the DVD: the laser disc. Laser discs, however, never developed into anything other than a niche market format, and by the late 1990s they were in use in only about 2 million households (Korman, 1998). One prominent reason for this lack of consumer enthusiasm for laser disc technology was the high cost of the players. In addition, software costs could also be prohibitively expensive for the average consumer. Consequently, titles for laser discs were limited and often reflected the tastes of videophiles and film aficionados willing to pay the extra costs associated with that technology. In fact, one of the major distributors of laser discs was the *Criterion Collection*, a company that describes itself as 'dedicated to gathering the greatest films from around the world and publishing them in editions that offer the highest technical quality and award-winning, original supplements' ('Our Mission', n.d.).¹

Therefore, the extra features that constitute a part of the DVD's appeal can be traced back to a product originally designed for an affluent and film savvy audience. The relatively inexpensive DVD format has expanded this audience significantly. In an article entitled 'Everyone's a Film Geek Now', *New York Times* cultural critic Elvis Mitchell (2003), describes how the DVD has brought about this expansion:

For the movie industry, the DVD has become so important that the tail now appears to be wagging the dog. The studios—and the rest of us—have realized that nothing they put on screen will ever go away again. As a result, features that were created to appeal to connoisseurs, and that were once available on large, unwieldy and expensive laser discs, are now routinely enjoyed by mass-market film fans. The esoterica of film culture, formerly consumed by a moneyed geek elite, is now aimed directly at—and snapped up by—the broader public. (p. 1)

In other words, the DVD is a format that reaches a mass audience, ensuring a ready audience for the ancillary features they include.

If the film industry has a commercial need to construct auteurs, then DVD extra features provide valuable real estate on which that construction can occur. For example,

when the DVD of *Thelma and Louise* was released, director Ridley ('Director', 2002) offered his own take on why the format is so popular. According to Scott, today's consumers are interested not only in films themselves but also in the process of film making, and thanks to DVD extra text features 'audiences have now gotten into the editing room with film makers and stars', which Scott claims has 'demystified the filmmaking process' (p. 2A). The DVD provides a platform for an auteur to discuss explicitly the artistic choices made, articulate the defining features of his/her distinctive style, and in this way assert his/her creative persona. New Line Cinema has even developed a marketing strategy around this supposed demystification, a brand of DVD trademarked *infinifilm*, which invites the consumer to 'go beyond the movie'. Mike Mulvihill (2003), New Line Home Entertainment Vice President, describes *infinifilm* on the studio's web page:

Each *infinifilm* DVD title contains original content that explores the theme of the movie with the goal being to enhance the appreciation of the film by giving viewers a greater understanding of the film's subject matter in an entertaining way, all presented within the context of the film. (p. 1)

In fact, *infinifilm* offers to take the viewer 'behind-the-scenes' to learn about a film from the very people involved in its making. Implicit in New Line's market strategy is the idea of the auteur persona, that there is some creative personality behind the camera, and *infinifilm* offers to bring the viewer closer to the purported author of that artistry.

In this way, the DVD actually presents the auteur to the viewer, and this presentation can also serve a generative function. In other words, the DVD extra text can be used to invent an auteur. If the auteur persona is suppose to reflect the style expressed in an oeuvre, then it is interesting to note how DVD extra text can help to confer auteur status on directors who have no oeuvre. On the *American Beauty* DVD, first time film director Sam Mendes is not only featured on the running commentary, but he is allowed to comment on the storyboards for the entire movie. In addition, the DVD contains interviews with actors Annette Benning and Kevin Spacey, and producer Steven Spielberg, all of whom extol Mendes' abilities as a director. Moving from the sublime to the absurd, on the *Charlie's Angels* DVD, an extra textual feature introduces the viewer to the film's director, McG. Prior to *Charlie's Angels*, McG's oeuvre consisted of music videos, a fact that does not dissuade Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz and Lucy Lu from claiming that McG's excitement and vision was instrumental to the production of *Charlie's Angels*. In other words, these first time directors, albeit of very different films, are constructed as creatively powerful artistic personalities, and thus they are invested with the authoritative personae of auteurs. If the film industry needs to turn out auteurs quickly, then there is little time for a body of work to emerge. DVD extra features, however, allow for the immediate construction of an auteur, with the persona emerging from the features included on the DVD version of a film. In this way, DVDs commercially benefit from, and facilitate, the commercial construct of auteur personae.

Although the current literature on the DVD acknowledges the importance of the auteur, the critical engagement of the concept is rather limited. For example, Deborah

and Mark Parker (2004) observe how the DVD, and more specifically the commentary tracks found on them, provide new insight into the intentions of film directors: 'By its very nature, the DVD commentary track enforces a heightened attention to intricacies of intention as it plays out over the course of the film. Directorial comment returns again and again to questions of intention that are local and technical, and the discussion has an unusual immediacy and density' (p. 20). While Parker and Parker do not mention it directly, their criticism seems rooted in auteur theory, and reproduces some of the same modernist assumptions that informed early approaches to autuerism. Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2002) discuss auteur theory directly, albeit briefly, in their analysis of the *Fight Club* DVD. Their approach acknowledges the commercial uses of the auteur, when they argue that the supposed intentions voiced in the commentaries operate to privilege preferred readings while discounting others. However, neither of these articles specifically examines how DVD features can be used to construct a commercially marketable (and/or critically acclaimed) auteur persona.

We suggest that the construction of a commercially marketable auteur persona takes place on the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD. Pixar had produced only three feature films prior to *Monsters, Inc.*; and while this is three more than either Mendez or McG, it hardly constitutes an extensive body of work (particularly given that one of the films was a sequel). Yet, as we noted, there are important commercial interests served by the establishment of an auteur persona, and Pixar's commercial interests were very specific. If the studio wanted to break from Disney, it needed to establish itself as a brand name that was recognizably independent from the Disney brand. To do this, Pixar invested itself with a persona imbued with those qualities associated in the viewing public's mind with a family friendly film making studio, qualities once viewed as belonging exclusively to Disney. In the analysis that follows, we will examine the construct of that auteur persona on the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD, a construction that occurs in two phases. First, Pixar establishes its identity as a 'family', one in which creative talent is a collaborative process. Second, Pixar asserts that its signature style incorporates 'fun' with an attention to quality entertainment. In this manner, Pixar attempts to establish its identity as an independent studio, but one that reflects the values once associated with the Disney brand.

The Pixar Family

Monsters, Inc. was Pixar's fourth full-length animated feature, and its fourth collaboration with Disney studios. The premise of the film is imaginative, yet simple: it draws on the common fear that children have about monsters hiding in their closets. In *Monsters, Inc.*, these monsters are real, and they occupy an alternative world in which the main power source is extracted from the screams of children. For that reason, the practice of jumping out of closets has become a major industry in the monster's world, and has produced a company, appropriately called 'Monsters, Incorporated', whose corporate slogan is, 'We scare because we care'. One of the company's most valued employees is Sully, who has proven himself especially effective at inducing screams from the children who live behind the closet doors of the human world. Sully,

however, is unsuccessful in scaring a young girl named Boo, who follows Sully back through the closet door and into the monsters' world. Interestingly, monsters believe human children are highly toxic, and for this reason they are thus afraid of the very children whom they attempt to scare. The film follows the adventures of Sully, and his monster friend Mike, as they try to sneak Boo back into the human world.

We have chosen to examine the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD because it occupies a unique historical place where the emergence of the DVD technology and the corporate tensions between Pixar and Disney converge. Although Pixar had released three films prior to *Monsters, Inc.*, this DVD was its first 'Special Edition' release (History, 2002). Consequently, this DVD includes more extra features than were available in the first DVD versions of Pixar's first three films: *Toy Story*,² *A Bug's Life*,³ and *Toy Story 2*.⁴ Furthermore, *Monsters, Inc.* was Pixar's first break-out hit, setting a new box office record for animated films by generating \$100 million in revenues in 10 days. The DVD also set records and became the best selling DVD for 2002. In other words, *Monsters, Inc.* was not only Pixar's first big box office hit, but it was also the studio's first DVD hit as well, and these successes motivated Pixar to reconsider its relationship with Disney.

The *Monsters, Inc.* DVD release consists of two discs. The first contains the actual film and other standard features, such as the running commentaries, scene selections and trailers for future releases. The second disc contains additional special features including outtakes, deleted scenes, and short documentaries on the computer animation process. What is excluded and included in these features is quite telling. Although billed as Pixar's business and creative partner, Disney's presence is minimal, relegated for the most part to those features that promote other Pixar and Disney products. This is rather surprising, given that only a few years earlier Jobs (1997) was trumpeting the commercial value of Disney's name in the family film market. Included are features that celebrate Pixar's technological prowess and depict the fun and familial working atmosphere in which Pixar films are purportedly created.

The extra text features on the second disc are so complex that when the disc is put in the player, it automatically opens with an introduction from Pete Doctor, the film's director, co-directors Lee Unkrich and David Silverman, and producer Darla Anderson, who offer to guide the viewer through the additional material. They point out how the extra text on the DVD has been divided into two 'worlds'. These 'worlds' serve as the disc interface, and are demarcated by doors labeled 'human world' and 'monster world', which lead to two different areas on the disc. These doors, of course, play off the major plot device of the film, and while the human world is devoted to typically 'behind-the-scenes' material, the monster world is made up of deleted scenes, outtakes and extra animation. The 'monster world' area is geared to children, while the 'human world', with its detailed discussion of computers and software, is aimed toward adults. While the stated purpose of this introduction is to explain the DVD's complex design, it also serves to articulate Pixar's presence. Each of these individuals steps out from behind a door, resembling the closet doors from the film, and in this way they each seem to emerge from behind the scenery. When these people introduce themselves, they also explain their role and their contribution to *Monsters, Inc.*, emphasizing that these *are* the people behind the scenes.

The fact that Peter Doctor, the director, does not introduce the DVD by himself (he is joined by two co-directors and the producer) reflects how Pixar as a corporate auteur prefers to be constructed as a collaborative auteur. The group introduction suggests that the creative force behind *Monsters, Inc.* cannot be traced back to an individual; instead the film is depicted as being the product of a collaborative creative effort. This approach solves a significant problem for Pixar in their attempt to model themselves in the image of the Disney brand. While Disney had Walt, there is no person named Pixar; Pixar is a company name, not a surname. As a result, the studio faced a challenge in advantageously positioning itself within the family film market that Disney had dominated for so long. In the absence of a likable and recognizable answer to the iconic Uncle Walt, Pixar constructed a creative persona in which the studio is depicted as a congenially collaborative collective, with no one person dominating the creative and commercial processes in the way Disney once dominated the studio that still bears his name (Zipes, 1995).

The running commentary highlights this collaborative effort, and includes voiceovers by four of the people involved in the film's production: Doctor, Unkrich and executive producers John Lasseter and Andrew Stanton. In their discussion of the film, the emphasis throughout is on congenial and collaborative teamwork, not individual achievement. Indeed, variations of the second person plural pronoun—we, us, our—are pervasive throughout the commentary. For example, Lasseter claims 'we set up at Pixar a working environment ... it doesn't matter whose idea it is, truly the best idea is the one that we all automatically go, "Oh, that's it"'. In a gesture of camaraderie, Unkrich gives Lasseter credit for fostering a 'collaborative spirit' at Pixar, and creating a 'great environment' in which to work. In fact, Unkrich states that he feels lucky working with such a talented group of people. The ostensibly collaborative nature of Pixar's film making process, and the easy camaraderie that the commentators claim is characteristic of their working relationship with one another, is further illustrated by a phone call placed by Doctor to Daniel Gerson (co-author of the screenplay), when Doctor claims to be stumped at one point in the running commentary regarding a decision about the storyline. (Gerson conveniently picks up the phone after only one ring.)

To emphasize and illustrate the collaborative nature of Pixar's approach to film making, the *Monsters, Inc.* extra text dwells at some length upon the way the studio would have its audience believe it solves animation problems. In several segments in the 'human world' area of the DVD, various Pixar employees discuss how such problems are solved collectively. For example, Lasseter remarks that every story developed at Pixar creates a challenge in that 'there is something in the story ... we don't know how to do', while Doctor explains that each new Pixar production tries to 'push the envelope technically', and Silverman notes that the problems Pixar encounters in trying to do so are often solved in a matter of days. One obstacle in the making of *Monsters, Inc.* involved animating the fur on the monsters as well as the clothes worn by the human characters in the film. As Jobs and Unkrich explain, the problem required a new software package, so the people at Pixar engineered a new program that made both hair and cloth move dynamically. Behind a door labeled 'Animation' there

are several links to segments that demonstrate how this software was developed, and how the Pixar employees overcame various problems. Several employees are introduced in this segment, including 'Supervising Technical Director' Thomas Porter; 'Simulation and Effects Supervisors' Michael Fong, Steve May, and Mark Henne; 'Modeling Artists' Tim Milliron and Cuido Quaroni; 'Supervising Animator' Glenn McQueen, and 'Simulation and Effects Supervisor' Galyn Susman. McQueen and Susman highlight the value of Pixar's collaborative efforts when they discuss how a new software program required a new department. As Susman explains, talent was combined from different departments so that the resulting new 'Shots Department' enjoyed a diverse set of talents and skills that could address the unique animation problems presented by *Monsters, Inc.* Thus, it is suggested, Pixar functions as well as it does because its employees cooperate in collaboratively seeking to solve problems and create innovative solutions. As Lasseter remarks, 'the people' are what make Pixar special. What emerges from such extra text features is a strong sense that the process of invention at Pixar is indeed a collective effort.

Pixar, then, defines itself in terms of an auteur conceived of as a collegial corporate entity, rather than as an individual creator of the kind to which the French first gave the label auteur. Or as Lasseter puts it, at Pixar 'you can't have individual ownership of ideas ... because by the time you are done, it is everybody's idea'. Not only does this discursive move allow Pixar to invest itself with a cohesive, creative identity, but it also fits in very nicely with both the commercial realities of popular film production and the familial values of Pixar's target audience. In fact, this representation of Pixar as a group of cooperative, collaborative people is augmented by the numerous references to family that occur on the DVD. Almost everyone represented on the DVD wears a wedding band, conspicuously signifying that they are married; and it is notable how often these wedding bands appear in the frame. Pixar employees also mention their marriages, even while discussing seemingly unrelated subjects. For example, when discussing *Monsters, Inc.* merchandise, character designer Ricky Veya Nierva claims that he likes to sleep with one of the larger stuffed toys; but when he does so, he reports, 'my wife gets mad at me'.

The people at Pixar are also represented as parents. In fact, children of Pixar employees were used in making the film, and these children appear many times on the DVD. Most notably, the voice of Boo, the lead child character in the film, belongs to Mary Gibbs, who is the daughter of Bob Gibbs, one of the story artists. Other voices used in the film also belong to the children of Pixar employees; indeed, at one point in the running commentary there is a comical discussion regarding how the various Pixar employees coached their own children to scream. These same children are then shown recording their screams in the 'Monsters are Real' segment. In this segment, Lasseter explains how the premise of the film evolved from the idea that children imagine that monsters are hiding in their closets, to the narrative concept that monsters are actually afraid of children. The segment is punctuated with footage of these children voicing screams for the film, and various individuals joking about how 'kids are scary'. Stanton concurs, then adds, 'but I'm a parent'. In another example, Doctor mentions that he videotaped his own child crying, in order to portray Boo as realistically as possible,

right down to the 'snot' dripping from her nose. Although this is seemingly a small detail, paying attention to it is likely to resonate with parents who take their children to Pixar films, rent Pixar videos and DVDs, and buy toys and other ancillaries. There are many other similar moments on the DVD where such efforts to relate to parental experience are explicit.

On the running commentary, Unkrich discusses a scene in which Sully accidentally scares Boo, a scene he describes as 'really critical for Sully's character', of which he says:

We really wanted to put him through the ringer. Just like when you have kids, and say you are taking them out of the car and you bump their head on the doorframe. You feel really bad about it. Something really bad happened, and it's your fault, and all you want to do at that moment is take it back. We wanted Sully to feel those powerful feelings.

Here Unkrich speaks from his own experience as a parent, and in doing so suggests that this experience informed how the scene was developed and produced. Doctor makes a similar observation when he discusses a scene where Sully has to say goodbye to Boo, and the emotions he wanted the scene to evoke: 'I have kids and some day those kids are going to grow-up and they are going to leave. And that's really sad and it's beautiful. It's part of life, and I think it's something that people relate to'. Doctor, therefore, frames the scene so that it will connect with parents on the same emotional level, and like Unkrich, he inserts his own experience into the process, suggesting that it is an emotion he has also felt.

These comments emphasize that Pixar is not only a family in the collaborative sense, but that the employees at Pixar are also family people who can be looked to as trusted purveyors of family entertainment. They also invest Pixar with an identity: the studio is a collaborative, creative company, populated with people who understand what it is like to be a parent. If Pixar as a corporate entity could not connect with consumers as a member of their families, as 'Uncle Walt' did, it could do the next best thing: present itself as a friendly studio family, one that shares similar experiences as, and empathizes with the emotions of, other families. Thus, rather than joining your family, as Disney did on his weekly television show, Pixar through the extra text included on the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD invites viewers to join its family. With Pixar's identity established as a familial auteur, the next step is to invest that persona with a signature style. Pixar does this by demonstrating that they are a purveyor of fun, quality entertainment.

The Signature of Fun and Quality

Perhaps the one DVD feature that most clearly articulates Pixar's signature style is the 'Pixar Fun Factory' tour. This tour is actually hidden as an 'Easter egg' on the DVD, but it is also featured very prominently on the DVD interface.⁵ The tour of Pixar Animation Studios begins with Lasseter, who also identifies himself as the director of other Pixar films, welcoming the viewer to the 'brand new studio', which he promises has 'lots of cool things'. As we have already noted, Lasseter claims 'the people' are what make Pixar special and, if they 'are having fun making the movie, it will appear on the screen'. If the tour is any indication, the employees at Pixar appear to have a great deal of fun while

working. Employees are shown playing miniature golf and foosball, singing in a karaoke lounge, riding scooters around the studio, and playing with a pet chimpanzee. There is footage of a paper airplane contest in the atrium area of the new studio, and employee offices are decorated in themes such as the 'Tiki Lounge' and the 'Love Lounge', where employees don fezzes and 3-D glasses. When the tour reaches Lasseter's own office, he points to a bookshelf packed with toys, which he claims to love. Many of the toys are dolls and other merchandise associated with Pixar films. Lasseter claims that while 'we have a lot of fun at Pixar ... our main passion is our work.' And central to this work is a focus on storytelling; as Lasseter puts it, 'Story is the most important thing in our films. Always has been, always will be'.

Indeed, Pixar is represented as a place where fun and work meld, which is an idea expressed in the very title of the tour that identifies the studio as a factory that produces fun. Other segments on the DVD represent fun and work operating as a synecdoche within the context of Pixar Animation Studios. For example, an extra text segment labeled 'Toys' shows Lasseter, Doctor, Unkrich and Nierva playing with the toys based on the *Monster, Inc.* characters. Lasseter states 'animators are inherently kids who have never grown up, so making sure the toys are really good, and really cool, and fun to play with is a more important part of the animation process'. In other words, playing with toys is regarded as legitimate work at Pixar, and as Lasseter notes, such play is part of the process of ensuring the quality of the studio's films and ancillary products, which are designed to foster family fun. That the segment shows Pixar employees playing with *Monsters, Inc.* merchandise reveals that this type of fun is also regarded as legitimate within the studio's workplace/playspace.

This fun/work synecdoche is highlighted in segments of the DVD that illustrate how the *Monsters, Inc.* story was developed. In a segment titled 'Story is King', Silverman rides up to the camera on a scooter, and notes that story development is a complex process important to the success of Pixar. Bob Peterson, the story supervisor, is then introduced, and he explains how storyboards are pitched to the employees to determine if a scene works. It is important to note, at this point, that Walt Disney is credited with originating the storyboard process, a process he demonstrated on television segments that would later appear as special features on laser disc releases of Disney films (Capodagli & Jackson, 1999). However, Pixar has put its own imprint on the storyboard process. In fact, Peterson claims that at Pixar storyboarding is really 'stoREboarding' (the verbal emphasis is his, the written interpretation ours) because the scene will be continually reworked, and he reiterates the phrase: 'Story is King'. To illustrate further the importance of the story at Pixar, a 'Story Pitch' segment shows Peterson dramatically acting out a storyboarded scene for a very responsive group of Pixar employees, who seem to be enjoying themselves in the process. In other words, a great deal of work goes into the story, but the process of obtaining feedback and improving the story is both entertaining and fun, and, of course, congenial.

In addition to emphasizing Pixar's attention to story detail, the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD extra text also points out the degree to which Pixar pays close attention to animation detail as well. The running commentary highlights the studio's technological prowess by pointing out animation successes and detail to attention likely to be overlooked by

an untutored audience. Examples of such include the film's richly realized cityscape, the way that a character's fingers indent a chair, the irregular glow of candlelight, the rendering of a realistic trash pile, and the million animated hairs of Sully's fur that seem to move naturally. It is this perfectionist attention to detail that Pixar would have us believe sets the studio apart from its competitors; as Lasseter is fond of putting it: 'We sand the underside of the drawers'. The animation process is invested with a sense of fun as employees are shown participating in a variety of activities, including acting out scenes and working with toy models in order to bring the animation to life. Even the final product of this work is framed in a playful context. One scene on the DVD shows a screening for Pixar employees, with Unkrich parading in front of the audience in a snorkel, diving goggles and fins.

Key themes emerge on the DVD that serve to establish and reinforce Pixar's signature style. If the extra text features are to be believed, a Pixar film is distinguished by a signature of quality manifest in attention to the narrative and the little details of the animation. The theme of fun is also central to the construction of Pixar's auteur persona, and given that Pixar produces animated features aimed at a family audience, this sense of fun is an important marketing tool. The scene of executives playing with the *Monsters, Inc.* toys suggests that Pixar not only understands fun, but also knows what type of fun appeals to family audiences. In other words, the *Monsters, Inc.* extra text not only positions Pixar as the film's auteur, but also invests the studio's signature style with qualities that should appeal to consumers of family entertainment.

Brand New Brand

Interestingly, although Disney is a co-producer of *Monsters, Inc.*, the DVD extra text reveals little about the collaboration between Pixar and Disney. Disney does have a small presence on the DVD; the first disc starts with trailers for the DVD release of *Beauty and Beast*, *Lilo and Stitch*, and other Disney films. The 'Sneak Peaks' segment on the first disk also includes trailers for both Disney films and Disney/Pixar co-productions. However, when Pixar employees are discussing *Monsters, Inc.* or Pixar Animation Studios, their relationship with Disney is conspicuously absent. This is a rather interesting omission, given Disney's commercial ties to *Monsters, Inc.* as well as other Pixar films. Indeed, the Disney name and Disney products are featured prominently on the packaging of the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD, as well as in the film's opening credits, which read, 'Disney Pictures presents a Pixar Animated Studios picture'. We contend that this omission both reflects, and serves as a response to, problems in the business relationship that ties Pixar to Disney.

As with other products, media entities have brand names, and these names are associated with a particular type of content. A great deal of hard work and many financial resources go into fostering and maintaining such associations. This investment makes commercial sense. As Michael Wolf (1999) notes, 'Consumers like the endorsement of a company name they recognize, but the new offerings of the brand have to fill a need or supply a distinct pleasure of their own' (p. 226). Wolf identifies Disney as an example of a successful media brand, a name that is easily associated with a distinct type of

media: family entertainment. As we noted earlier, it was this brand identity that attracted Pixar to Disney. Indeed, the familial atmosphere of Walt Disney Studios was one to which television audiences once felt themselves privy every Sunday evening. Walt Disney strove to depict his company as a family and himself as its genial head in order to better market his films to family audiences.

The same commercial impulses that drove Disney's familial depiction of himself informs the way the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD extra text portrays Pixar as a family friendly studio. Pixar, as a commercial studio, is the author of *Monsters, Inc.* The commercially constructed auteur that emerges on the DVD is one imbued with familiar familial qualities. Pixar depicts itself as a studio concerned with quality entertainment, an auteur that understands fun, and understands particularly the type of fun families enjoy. And of course, Pixar understands families because the studio functions as a family and the Pixar employees are themselves family people. In other words, the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD extra text not only constructs Pixar as an auteur, but does so in such a way as to establish the studio as a recognizable brand name that signifies family entertainment. In this way, Pixar was able to stake a claim on territory once dominated by Disney: animated feature film.

At this point, it should be clear how the DVD fits into the commercial equation. As we noted at the beginning of the paper, the success of the *Finding Nemo* DVD would influence the future of the Pixar/Disney association. The success of that DVD clearly indicated that Disney's distribution network can move Pixar's products; and given the sales record that was set, it seems that Disney can move those products quite well. Yet, this record was not solely due to Disney's ability to place products in the hands of consumers; Pixar delivered a good product, and with the success of its other film offerings, the studio had established a track record of producing critically acclaimed and commercially successful films. Because of this track record, many other studios were naturally interested in talking with Jobs. But in order for Pixar Animation Studios to discontinue its association with Disney, it needed to brand itself as a name that signifies quality family entertainment. As we have demonstrated, the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD extra text goes along way toward establishing Pixar as an identifiable entity apart from Disney, and one that could easily occupy the same lucrative niche that Disney had dominated for so long. In fact, when he announced Pixar's split from Disney, Jobs made a proclamation that speaks to this purpose directly: 'Jobs declared Pixar has become the "most trusted name in animation" and ripped Disney's last few animated features as "bombs"' (McCarthy, 2004, p. 1b). The *Monsters, Inc.* DVD extra text we have looked at seems both to anticipate and facilitate the split between the two studios.

Conclusion

Although Jobs sounded bitter in his assessment of Disney's animated offerings, he also was correct; Disney had dropped some bombs. The most noted was the animated feature *Treasure Planet*, which only generated \$38 million at the box office while carrying a \$140 million price tag ('Business Data for *Treasure Planet*', 2002). Disney's most recent animated feature, *Home on the Range*, did not fair much better. The film,

with an estimated production cost of \$110 million, generated only \$50 million at the box office ('Business Data for *Home on the Range*', 2004). The DVDs for these films also indicate the decaying status of Disney's animation production. *Treasure Planet* DVD contains a special feature on 'Disney's Animation Magic', hosted by Roy Disney. His presence on this DVD, given that his departure from Disney followed the DVD's release by a matter of months, is an ironic comment on the future of animation at the company. On the *Home on the Range* DVD, Disney's animation talent has been put out to pasture—quite literally. Much of the footage for the special features was shot at a dude ranch in Arizona, and not at the Disney animation studios. It is rather poignant to watch these animators setting around a campfire discussing the quality of the project, which for some may represent the last work they do for Disney.⁶

These DVDs are in stark contrast to the production values and celebratory nature of the recent Pixar DVD releases, but then, Pixar had something to celebrate. In fact, the *Finding Nemo* DVD extra text features, apart from some unusual items such as a virtual aquarium and an underwater documentary, are similar to those found on the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD. Indeed, while Sporich (2003) argued that the sales figure for the *Finding Nemo* DVD release would be a strong indicator of the continued collaboration of Disney and Pixar, he might have been better advised to actually watch the DVD. In common with the extra text material we have examined for this study, those accompanying *Finding Nemo* celebrate Pixar's technological prowess, emphasize the attention given to narrative details, and highlight the studio's fun, family friendly culture. This continuation of themes found in the extra features on other Pixar DVDs enables the studio to construct itself as a consistent brand, one with which families can be comfortable. Interestingly, as was the case with the *Monsters, Inc.* extra text, any mention of Disney is conspicuously absent. Indeed, during the running commentary Pixar's business relationship with Disney is ignored even as the Disney castle and name fill the screen just before the film opens.

Clearly the DVD is more than another ancillary product, and therefore presents media critics with many new challenges. Unlike VHS tape, which simply recycled films for the home market, usually with very little if any additional material, the DVD makes it possible for film makers to include a wealth of additional material when they release their films for the home market. Such extra textual materials add to, comment upon, and sometimes offer alternative versions of the films they accompany. Through the interactive qualities of DVD technology, these materials and their films are tied to one another in unprecedented ways. The DVD, then, is not simply another means of disseminating films, but is rather a new kind of artifact, one comprised of numerous interrelated texts. As such, it demands serious and sustained critical scrutiny. This scrutiny will require new approaches to media and film criticism, as well as a reassessment of established theories.

We offer our analysis as an example of how this reassessment might proceed in critical practice. Given that the DVD emerged as a commercial product, we thought it wise to approach the new technology from a commercial perspective. We believe that the DVD can be understood from this perspective, and maintain that it is critically judicious to analyze how extra text constructs auteurs and how these constructions

serve commercial interests. As we have pointed out, the extra text accompanying the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD is used to position Pixar in relation to its audience and to its larger business partner, attempting to foster a close connection with the former while distancing itself from the latter. This critical investigation should not stop here, however. We have certainly not exhausted the concept of the auteur as a critical construct where the DVD is concerned. In addition, more needs to be done as well in charting the intratextual relationships of DVD extra texts with one another, and the intertextual relationships that these have with a wide range of other texts, ranging from old-fashioned print to cutting-edge electronic media. Indeed, given the rapid development of various interconnected technologies, such relationships are bound to become increasingly commonplace, thus requiring critics to examine multiple artifacts and their relationships with one another. Although questions remain unanswered and many more will present themselves, one thing seems sure, the DVD revolution is far from over, and the critical challenges it presents have just begun.

As for Pixar, their latest feature film, *The Incredibles*, opened on November 5, 2004 to rave reviews, and topped the weekend box office with an impressive \$70 million in gross receipts ('Business Data for *The Incredibles*', 2004). Although the film is another Disney/Pixar collaboration, the circumstances attending its release and success highlight rather than downplay the distance between the two companies. For example, as Brian Belmont (2004) observes in his review of *The Incredibles*:

Ironically, Pixar has taken a cue from their soon-to-be former partners. The upstart's movies are reminiscent of early Disney, utilizing many of the same groundbreaking characteristics that Walt & Co. exhibited in its formative years. Early classics like 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', 'Pinocchio' and 'Cinderella' were spectacular, character-driven gems, ignited by eye-popping graphics and sweeping tales of adventure and romance. Recent Pixarless Disney outings like 'The Emperor's New Groove', 'Brother Bear' and 'Treasure Planet'? Not so much. Disney seems to have lost its Midas touch. (p. 8)

If Pixar's purpose was to portray itself as a brand distinct from Disney, and in the process to capture the animated film market that Disney once dominated, Pixar has clearly enjoyed some initial success in doing so. If the discourse on the *Monsters' Inc.* DVD was part of their strategy in accomplishing these two goals, as we have argued, then it is also clear that this and other Pixar DVD releases serve a commercial communicative function far greater than the mere delivery of home video versions of Pixar films. This commercial function is certainly not limited to Pixar DVDs, nor is it the only communication function facilitated by DVD technology and the synergistic connections it makes possible. Communication scholars are well advised, and well situated, to continue critical engagement with, and theoretical exploration of the many communicative implications of the DVD.

Notes

- [1] Walt Disney, again, serves as a case in point, as many of the laser disc release of Disney films would contain segments from his television show as extra features.

- [2] The DVD version of *Toy Story*, released March 20, 2001 (the film was released 1995), includes the Academy Award-winning Pixar animation short, *Tin Toy*, the inclusion of which provides yet another opportunity for Pixar to demonstrate its animation excellence. This version also has a feature allowing consumers to view the film with English, French or Spanish subtitles. The sale of this DVD version was discontinued on May 1, 2003, in keeping with the Disney tradition of removing videos and DVDS from the market, and placing them in 'the vault' for a decade. This practice creates a sense of urgency on the part of interested consumers as the date approaches when videos and DVDs will be withdrawn, and it helps to spark future demand when video/DVDs versions of favorite films are re-released. In addition to the DVD version just described, Disney/Pixar also put together the now unavailable *The Ultimate Toy Box* (Collector's Edition) DVD, which includes *Toy Story* and its sequel (released October 17, 2000), which includes such extra text features as commentary by John Lasseter et al., background information and behind the scenes insights, interviews, hidden jokes, etc. A more modest *Toy Story & Toy Story 2 (2 Pack)* was also released October 17, 2000. *Toy Story* is also one of the featured in the *Disney/Pixar DVD Three-Pack (Toy Story/A Bug's Life/Toy Story 2)*, released October 30, 2001. Clearly, DVD technology has encouraged studios to produce and distribute different packages of their films (with different features, and in varying combinations with other studio films). This presents quite a challenge to scholars wishing to be comprehensive and consumers wanting complete DVD collections of their favorite films.
- [3] The modest extra text features accompanying the original *A Bug's Life* DVD release (April 20, 1999; a Disney Gold Classic Edition was released August 1, 2000; the film itself was released in 1998) include two sets of 'outtakes' that mimic the kind of comical outtakes many non-animation films include as they run end credits. Also included is the Academy Award-winning Pixar animation short, *Geri's Game*. A more expansive two disk DVD version of *A Bug's Life* (Collector's Edition) was released November 23, 1999. A later Collector's Edition version was released May 27, 2003. Highlights of the many extra text features of this version include: commentary by director John Lasseter, co-director/co-writer Andrew Stanton, and supervising film editor Lee Unkrich; activity games based upon the film; *Geri's Game*; background and behind-the-scenes material; and deleted sequences.
- [4] The DVD version of *Toy Story 2* (released March 20, 2001; the film was released in 1999) includes the Academy Award-nominated animation short, *Luxo Jr.*, as well as supposed outtakes. Like the DVD for *Toy Story*, this DVD was pulled from distribution May 1, 2003.
- [5] An 'Easter Egg' refers to a special feature that is hidden in the interface of the DVD. The viewer can activate the feature by highlighting an area on the interface. In the case of the *Monsters Inc. DVD*, the Easter Egg is hidden on a rail inside the 'Human World'.
- [6] It has been speculated that *Home on the Range* will be one of Disney's last 2D animated features. Writing for Slate, Joe McGovern and Ed Gonzalez (2004) offer this assessment: 'Costing an estimated \$110 million, *Home on the Range* is reportedly the swan song of its studio's in-house 2D division, which perhaps is not as sad as it sounds—credit to their history, but even the best in the business got to know when to fold 'em' (p.1).

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