

PIXAR ANIMATION STUDIOS AND DISABLED PERSONAGES. CASE STUDY: FINDING NEMO

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ABSTRACT

Many of the different characters that appear in the computer animated movies of Pixar Animation Studios are personages. From a dramaturgical point of view, these can be linked with the concept of *Archetype*. The same types of personages appear in all times and in all cultures. The universal patterns make it possible for the experience to be shared in different histories. These patterns do not identify concrete idiosyncrasies, but they function as a temporary development in a story for the purpose of enriching of it. Another way of interpreting the personages of a narrative history is to consider them as complementary facets of the main character (the hero). As the history develops, the characteristics of these personages modify the personality of the future hero. The aim of this work is to analyze the influence of these complementary personages in the transformation of the main character and examine whether the presence of a disability is used to obtain this transformation. As we will see, not only do we find personages whose disability affects the development of the protagonist, but others that simply fulfill other secondary functions. The base of the presented study are the seven first full-length films produced by Pixar, but we will center on the particular case of *Finding Nemo*.

Keywords: Computer Animation, Pixar Animation Studios, Dramaturgy

1 A METHODE: THE TRIP OF THE HERO

Christopher Vogler [33] related the mythical structures and their mechanisms to the art of writing narrative works and scripts, after studying the proposals of Joseph Campbell [2], and Carl Gustav Jung [13, 14, 15]. To do so, he divided the theoretical trip of the fiction hero in twelve stages and enumerated up to seven archetypes.

According to Vogler, most histories are composed of a few structural elements that we also find in universal myths, in stories, in movies, and even in sleep. In them, the hero, generally the protagonist, leaves their daily environment to embark on a journey that will lead them through a world full of challenges. It can be a real trip, with a clear destination and definite purpose, or it can be an interior trip, which can take place in the mind, heart or spirit. In any case, the hero ends up suffering changes, and growing throughout.

There are twelve stages that compose this trip:

- *The Ordinary World*: the first stage when the hero appears in their daily environment and their ordinary world.
- *The Call to Adventure*: the second stage when the hero will generally face a problem and an adventure will appear before them.
- *The Rejection of the Adventure*: the third stage when frequently the hero refuses the call to action.
- *The Meeting with the Mentor*: the fourth stage when the personage of the mentor appears.
- *The Passage of the First Threshold*: the fifth stage when the hero begins the adventure.
- *Tests, Allied Forces, Enemies*: the sixth stage when new challenges are revealed

and at the same time the hero is presented with new allies and hostile enemies.

- *The Approach to the Deepest Cave*: the seventh stage when the hero prepares a strategy for the definitive moment and gets rid of the last impediments before continuing.
- *The Odyssey or the Calvary*: the eighth stage when the hero directly faces what they are most afraid of and begins a tough, battle that could result in their own death.
- *The Reward (Obtaining the Sword)*: the ninth stage when, having survived battle against death, the hero takes possession of the reward. For example, the sought-after sword or treasure.
- *The Return of Comeback*: the tenth stage when the hero suffers the consequences of their clash with the forces of evil and for obtaining the reward.
- *The Resurrection*: the eleventh stage when the hero is facing the second big moment of difficulty, where again they risk losing their life and must overcome once again.
- *The Comeback with the Elixir*: the twelfth and last stage when the hero returns to the ordinary world with the obtained treasure. This ends the trip of the hero.

All these stages are parts of a scheme that modifies particular details according to the history and does not need to adhere to the order with rigor. It is possible that some stages can be suppressed without affecting the history. These stages can be divided into three dramatic acts (so the development of the history occurs in three parts, where the first part occurs before the target of the protagonist is known by the spectator):

- First act: the first five stages (1 to 5).
- Second act: the next four stages (6 to 9).
- Third act: the last three stages (10 to 12).

During the hero's trip, different personages can become present. Their mission can link with the concept of *Archetype*, which Carl Gustav Jung [13] uses avoiding the models of personality that are repeated from remote times and that suppose a heredity shared for every human being. The same author sums this up under the concept of *Unconscious Group*.

The universality of the patterns and personages makes it possible for the experience to be shared in different histories, but these are not necessarily concrete idiosyncrasies that have to be supported from beginning to end. Rather, they are functions

that develop temporarily inside a story for the purpose of enriching the history. Also, we can interpret these complementary patterns as facets of the hero's personality, which may affect what he or she learns and what their values are.

There are seven common archetypes:

- The *Hero* is someone capable of sacrificing their own needs for the sake of others. The word hero comes from the Greek root word that means to protect and serve. Generally, we tend to identify with the hero because he or she tends to have a combination of qualities and skills. The hero is framed within a history, and inside this narrative is where the personage learns and grows.
- The *Mentor* is the personage who helps or instructs the hero. "Mentor" comes to us from Homer [12]. In the *Odyssey*, the personage called *Mentor* helps *Telemac* in the course of his trip. Joseph Campbell [2] defines it as the *wise elder* or *wise oldster* in reference to the personage who teaches, protects and provides certain gifts to the hero. Vladimir Propp [29] defines this type of personage as the *donor*, in relation of the act of providing a gift or of offering something to the hero.
- The *Threshold Guardian* is one of the first obstacles the hero finds in their adventure. Generally, they are neither the antagonist of the history nor the principal malefactor, although they constitute a threat that the hero, if he or she interprets it well, can overcome.
- The *Herald*, in a strict sense, is the person who has a message. In Greece and Rome, they were the manager of dispensing the orders of the ruling classes, of making the proclamations and of declaring the war.
- The *Changeable Figure* is a personage difficult to identify because they make a show of their name. Their appearance and characteristics change when we examine them closely. In fact, the hero may find them a changeable and variable personage who possesses two faces. The changeable figure develops the function of introducing doubt and the suspense in the history. Often, this figure is the love of the hero.
- The *Shade* is the antagonist personage, the enemy, the malefactor. The shade challenges the hero and is a worthy opponent to fight.
- The *Trickster* is the personage who captures the energies of wickedness and

desire for change. A buffoon, a clown, or a comical follower are all clear examples, and develop the function of a comical mitigation.

2 THE TRIP OF THE HERO IN THE FULL-LENGTH FILMS OF PIXAR (1995-2006)

Leaving aside shorts films or publicity productions, there have been seven computer-animated full-length films produced by Pixar Animation Studios (an independent producer before being acquired by Walt Disney Company in 2006 [8, 27, 28]):

- *Toy Story* (1995) of John Lasseter [9, 20, 31].
- *A Bug's Life* (1998) of John Lasseter and Andrew Stanton [1, 17].
- *Toy Story 2* (1999) of John Lasseter, Ash Brannon and Lee Unkrich [32].
- *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) of Pete Docter, David Silverman and Lee Unkrich [21, 25].
- *Finding Nemo* (2003) of Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich [5, 10].
- *The Incredibles* (2004) of Brad Bird [4, 30].
- *Cars* (2006) of John Lasseter and Joe Ranft [3, 34].

All these scripts continue, undoubtedly and despite particular exceptions or absences of certain stages and archetypes, the closed method of the trip of the hero. To summarize:

In *Toy Story*, in the room of a child called *Andy* (the first stage, the ordinary world), a rag doll with rope, a cowboy called *Woody* (the hero), is the favorite toy. The arrival of a new plastic space ranger doll with many gadgets, *Buzz Lightyear* (the herald and the changeable figure at the same time), causes *Woody* to mistrust him, although in the beginning this is not of importance. After a fight, the two toys get lost in a petrol station and end up in the hands of *Sid* (the shade), *Andy's* evil neighbor. The mutant toys of *Sid* help *Woody* and *Buzz Lightyear* avoid a fatal ending (eighth stage, the odyssey), and both manage to return to their owner (twelfth and last stage, the comeback with the elixir) after having overcome new troubles (tenth and eleventh stages, the way of comeback and the resurrection).

In *A Bug's Life*, in an anthill (the first stage, the ordinary world), the threat of a few grasshoppers led by the perverse *Hopper* (the shade), forces the ant *Flik* (the hero, but also the culprit of the above

mentioned threat after having lost the meal that they were giving the grasshoppers) to go on a journey in search of help (fifth stage, the passage of the first threshold). After finding a small metropolis created out of human garbage (sixth stage, tests, allied forces, enemies), the protagonist knows a few artist insects (the slickers) which he confuses as potential warriors. They do not notice the confusion either and go to the anthill. Despite the misunderstanding, they help *Flik*, the princess *Atta* (the changeable figure) and the other ants defeat the tyrants.

In *Toy Story 2*, *Woody* (the hero once again) is kidnapped by a collector called *Al* (the herald) after trying to rescue the doll penguin *Wheezy* from a home-made flea market where *Andy's* mother left him. At *Al's* home, he meets another dolls, *Pete*, the horse *Bullseye* and *Jessie* (the changeable figure). *Buzz Lightyear*, *Mr. Potato Head*, *Slinky*, *Hamm* and *Rex* (the friends of *Woody*) go out in search of him, but once they find him *Woody* decides to remain with his new relatives, even though he is soon cheated and persuaded by one of them, *Pete*. *Al* takes them to the airport to travel to Japan. Nevertheless, *Woody*, with the help of his friends again, manages to escape the plane (eighth stage, the odyssey) and they all return to *Andy's* room, this time also in company of *Bullseye* and *Jessie*.

In *Monsters, Inc.*, the monster *Sully* (the hero) and his best friend, the monster *Mike* (the slicker), are employed at a factory that scares children in the real world in order to gather their screams, which are used for energy. One day, a girl called *Boo* (the herald) crosses one of the many doors that serve to connect these two realities and ends up inside the monsters world. The girl is discovered by *Sully*, who calls on *Mike* to help him return her to her home. As both try to arrange the situation, the monster *Randall* (the shade) puts many impediments in their way. Finally, the girl is returned to her world (ninth stage, the reward) and *Sully* comes up with the idea of gathering the guffaws and laughter of the children for energy instead of their screams of fear.

In *Finding Nemo*, *Marlin* (the hero) is a clown fish who lives with his son *Nemo* in a coral reef (the first stage, the ordinary world). One day, *Nemo* is captured by a scuba-diving dentist, and *Marlin* must go on a long journey to find him and bring him home. He is accompanied part of the way by a blue fish called *Dory* (the slicker). Meanwhile, *Nemo* meets a few new friends in the fishbowl where he has been deposited. After finding *Nemo* and returning home (tenth stage, the way of comeback), a fishing ship catches *Dory* along with other fishes in its nets (eleventh stage, the resurrection). *Nemo* decides to help them and is successful, despite his fathers' doubts.

In *The Incredibles*, *Bob Parr/Mr. Incredible* (the hero) is a superhero who does not adapt himself well to a new reality (the first stage, the

ordinary world) in which resolving the problems of humanity is completely prohibited. After receiving a request to fight a dangerous machine on a faraway island, he goes to see *Edna Moda* (perhaps, the mentor) who arranged his old supersuit and now makes a new one for him. On the island, it turns out that *Buddy Pine/Syndrome* (the shade) has set a trap for *Mr. Incredible*. But with the help of his wife, *Helen Parr/Elastigirl*, and two of his sons, *Dashiell* and *Violet*, who also have superpowers, they foil the plan. Back at home, *Mr. Incredible* sees *Syndrome* kidnapping his smallest son *Jack-Jack* (eleventh stage, the resurrection), but *Jack-Jack* uses his superpowers to escape and the evil *Syndrome* is finally defeated.

In *Cars*, *Lightning McQueen* (the hero) is a very ambitious race car that tries to win the Piston Cup. After a draw with two of his opponents, *Chick Hicks* and *The King*, a new race is necessary to find the Piston Cup winner. But in the trip to the next circuit, the protagonist becomes lost in a village called Radiator Springs where he is forced to remain. There, he meets a few very particular cars (sixth stage, tests, allied forces, enemies). After coexisting with them and experiencing many vicissitudes, he gains some new values and changes his perception on the competition. Finally, in the tiebreak race, he allows *Chick Hicks* to win and helps *The King* to the finish line.

3 DISABILITY IN THE FULL-LENGTH FILMS OF PIXAR (1995-2006)

Disability can be seen essentially as a limitation provoked by a physical or mental impediment that prevents certain activities being carried out. According to the World Health Organization [36], this concept can affect the functions of the body as follows:

- The physiological functions of the systems of the body, including psychological.
- The structures of the body, including anatomical parts such as organs and other components.
- Damages or problems in the function or structure of the body, such as significant deviations or loss.
- Activity, including the execution of a task or an action on the part of an individual.
- The participation in a certain situation.
- Limitations to activity.
- Restrictions of participation in an activity.
- Exogenous factors that constitute the physical or social manner and the attitude with which the people live their lives.

Departing from the WHO point of view and understanding that many of the personages in the computer animated full-length films of Pixar Animation Studios are animals or objects with human behaviors, attributions or qualities, here we find characters with all kinds of disabilities. But these do not always coincide with the personages' model archetypes (which we indicate with "Ø"), which are necessary for the quest of the hero.

In *Toy Story*, *Woody* (the hero) is a cowboy doll with only a voice box and a missing gun, while *Buzz Lightyear* (the herald and the changeable figure at the same time) is a plastic space ranger with a multiphrase voice simulator, a laser light, and wings with light indicators, as well as many other gadgets. Although, *Buzz* eventually realizes he is a toy and cannot fly, his characterization at first shows up what *Woody* lacks. When *Buzz* finds out about his real existence, he loses an arm after rushing through a gap from the top of a few stairs. The arm is reattached to the body by the *mutant toys* (the guards of the threshold) of evil *Sid*. *Sid* often experimented on them and caused them to suffer all kinds of disorders. The concept of disability is also tackled through other characters such as *Mr. Potato Head* (Ø or perhaps a slicker), who is constantly losing his extra pieces and becomes a bad-tempered toy; *Rex* (Ø or perhaps also a slicker), the plastic dinosaur with extremely short arms; *R.C.* (Ø), the remote control car who runs out of batteries; and, the *soldier of green plastic* (Ø) that is trodden accidentally by *Andy's* mother.

In *A Bug's Life*, the *queen* of the ants (Ø) is older and has to open the way for the princess *Atta*. The perverse grasshopper *Hopper* (the shade) has a scar on the right side of the face that crosses over his eye. His brother (Ø), perhaps because of *Hopper's* attitude, seems to have some psychological shortcomings. Also, some of the members of the other insects seem to have had mishaps or end up with some disability. For example, the ladybug *Francis* (one of the slickers) breaks a foot, while the caterpillar *Heimlich* (another of the slickers) grows wings that are only very small.

In *Toy Story 2*, *Woody* (the hero) breaks his arm, and *Andy's* mother relegates him to a high shelf of the room where he is forgotten with the doll penguin *Wheezy* (Ø), who has a broken squeaker. Nevertheless, *Woody* will recover his extremity, thanks to the restorer hired by *Al*, and *Wheezy* recovers his voice. Other personages who appear in *Toy Story* have similar treatment.

In *Monsters, Inc.* there is an interesting paradox: certain monsters are not right in their work because they are not fierce enough. Also, what would be considered a physical shortcoming for a human being becomes a virtue. An example is the monster *Mike* (the slicker): he has only one eye but he is

considered very lucky physically. The same way, the *Yeti* (Ø) makes himself up like an exiled and almost ridiculous monster. On the other hand, the malignant monster *Randall* (the shade) is a simple lizard.

Finding Nemo is the movie from Pixar Animation Studios that most directly tackles the topic of disability. The small clown fish *Nemo* (perhaps, the herald, and also the hero when in the fishbowl, as we can see after) has a fin that has not developed, and *Dory* (the slicker) forgets everything after a few minutes. In parallel, we can find other fishes with different disabilities: the small fishes in the school, *Pearl* (Ø) and *Sheldon* (Ø), or some fishes in the fishbowl, *Gill* (Ø) and *Deb* (Ø). Also we can find some humans as the niece of the dentist, *Darla* (Ø), who have not anything in common with *Marlin* (the hero), but they are related with *Nemo*. Additionally, there are “extras” without any relevancy in the history with certain disabilities as *Mr. Johannsen* (Ø) or *Blenny* (Ø).

In *The Incredibles* there is a paradox similar to that of *Monsters, Inc.* in that the powers of the superheroes are seen poorly by society and are prohibited. The same people to whom *Mr. Incredible* had saved now denounce him. His children, *Dashiell* (Ø) and *Violet* (Ø), also have the same problem and, in turn, *Syndrome* (the shade) also lacks his super-powers and must design certain robot prototypes in their place. The movie is the first one that bases its history on human beings, and it presents other disabilities, for example, the glasses that *Edna Moda* (perhaps, the mentor) must use to be able to see well.

In *Cars*, the inhabitants of *Radiator Springs* present the most obvious features. The most paradigmatic case perhaps is *Mater* (one of the slickers), whose suspension is a little rusty and whose crusty cabin has seen better times. Also *Lizzie* deserves to be mentioned because she is an old car with four cylinders and four times (Ø) because of his higher and higher absence of memory.

With all the compiled information, and without having come to an exhaustive detail, we can draw the following graph (Figure 1) to see the quantity of disabled personages not justified by the story in the full-length films of Pixar.

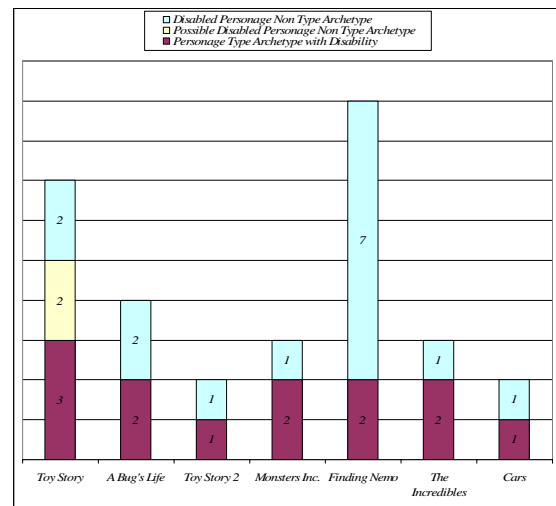


Figure 1: Quantity of disabled personages in the full-length films of Pixar (1995-2006)

4 CASE STUDY: FINDING NEMO

As we have pointed out, in *Finding Nemo* the disability is very present and is related to some personages who work like archetypes of the principal history: for example, *Nemo* (perhaps, the herald) and *Dory* (the slicker). But in the movie, the history starring *Nemo* works in parallel in that by making the hero paper it provokes the many other disabled personages who, in the history of his father (principal plot), would not have any function, to have it in this one parallel.

This way, we meet their friends of the school *Pearl* and *Sheldon*. The first is an octopus that has a smaller tentacle and who black stained spear when it is scared and the second is a seahorse who likes to ride for the reef, but who is always the last one to come in because his constant sneezes throw him behind. In another stage, in the fishbowl, we find *Gill* and *Deb*. The first is a moorish idol fish, who has a few scars in the face and in the right fin after landing on the dentist's set of instruments after frustrated attempts to escape and the second is a pitch white and black damsel who thinks its own reflection, in the crystal is its twin sister who always accompanies it. In the same way, we also have *Darla*, the niece of the dentist, who wears corrective devices on her teeth.

Some of these disabled personages work as archetypes in the *Nemo* history although, once again, they do not all such a function. For example, *Pearl* and *Sheldon*. *Gill*, *Deb* and *Darla* would work as the mentors, trickster and shade respectively.

We can also find other disabled personages, such as *Mr. Johannsen*, the turbot grumbler, who detests the children of the reef because they play in his sand courtyard, but who can never manage to

catch them because he only has eyes in a side, or *Blenny*, the small fish who does not manage to dominate his fears, especially of sharks although after the final credits of the movie we see eating up to a fish abysmal toad.

With this information, and without having come to an exhaustive detail, we can draw the following graph (Figure 2) to see the quantity of disabled personages not justified by the Nemo story.

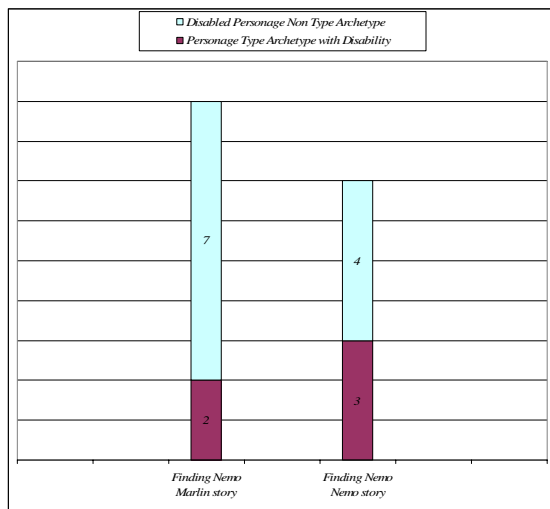


Figure 2: Quantity of disabled personages in the stories of *Finding Nemo*

5 CONCLUSIONS

In all the full-length films of Pixar Animation Studios between 1995 and 2006, the presence of disabled personages does not affect personal development of the hero, but in a great number of cases it influences changes in the hero's behavior.

Even at *Finding Nemo* where there is a clear plot in parallel starring by *Nemo* (the archetype herald for the protagonist or hero, *Marlin*, of the principal plot), this one also is employed with this type of personages.

Their presence may be also be the result of other intentions, such as an effort to be politically correct, the personages' appearance of different race, or other intentions associated with avoiding the personage's concept type or "clichés".

This study of the direct impact on the spectator of personages that reflect human disabilities can be extended to other periods of production by Pixar & Disney, for example *Ratatouille* (2007) of Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava; *WALL·E* (2008) of Andrew Stanton; *Up* (2009) of Pete Docter and Bob Peterson; or to other full-length films by other production companies such as Pacific Data Images & DreamWorks SKG, Blue Sky Studios & Twentieth Century Fox.

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