

# Animation pioneer Pixar marks 25 years

July 2 2011, by Romain Raynaldy

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Giant reproductions of the lamp and the ball that appeared in the animated short "Luxo Jr" in front of the entrance of the main building of Pixar's headquarters in Emeryville, California. Pixar, a pioneer of computer animation that has made a dozen profitable feature films and become one of the most successful studios on the planet, is celebrating its 25th birthday.

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Born in the early 1980s as George Lucas's computer graphics division, the company took off after it was purchased by Apple founder Steve Jobs in 1986 and christened "Pixar."

That year, the hopping desk lamp and ball, heroes of Pixar's first film -- the short "Luxo Jr" -- lit the way toward a new generation of features

entirely composed of computer graphics.

"The combination of changing technology and artistic creation gave something that had never been done before," said Ed Catmull, one of the company's founders and now president of Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios.

"The movie-telling was an extension of creative technology."

He compares the company's emergence to the advent of Disney, which showed a previous generation the potential of cartoons and purchased Pixar in 2006.

"It's like the early days of Disney, when filmmaking was brand new and animation was brand new, it was a technical revolution," Catmull told AFP.

"People don't think about that today because it happened so long ago. But Walt was always bringing the newest technology."

In 1995, Pixar scored big with "Toy Story," the first feature-length film composed entirely of computer-generated graphics.

The animated feature tracing the adventures of a toy cowboy and spaceman dazzled viewers and critics alike, bringing in more than \$350 million worldwide.

"'Toy Story' was the first CG film where the audience was no longer aware that they were watching computer-generated images, they just wanted to know what happens to Woody and Buzz Lightyear," said Tom Sito, a former Disney and Dreamworks animator who now teaches at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"Other pioneering [computer animation](#) studios were made up of engineers and [research scientists](#) trying to be amateur artists, along with a few professional artists struggling to learn computer programming.

"Pixar adopted a system of building a top-quality technical engineering division and a top quality creative team, and kept their duties separate. This way, each could accomplish the tasks they were best at," he continued.

The strategy paid off, as Pixar cranked out a string of hits, including two more Toy Story installments, "Monsters, Inc" (2001), "Finding Nemo" (2003), "Cars" (2006), "Ratatouille" (2007), "Wall-E" (2008) and "Up" (2009).

The movies have raked in some \$6.5 billion and 26 Academy awards, taking their place alongside Disney's library of classic family [films](#).

Pixar's location in Emeryville, a suburb of San Francisco far from the Hollywood Hills, reflects its success, with employees performing Tai Chi in spacious new gardens framed by sleek modern buildings.

A casual atmosphere prevails, with John Lasseter -- who has been with the company since its Lucas days and is now the creative director of [Pixar](#) and Disney -- sporting a Hawaiian shirt and sneakers as he mingled with animators.

Catmull said Pixar's success is less a matter of perfection than relentless self-criticism.

"We had some projects in which we realized that they were not working, so we threw away what we got and restarted... We had failures like many others, we just don't release them," he said.

"Sometimes people confuse the goal of making a film with making a great film. And the goal is not to make a film. The goal is to make a film that actually connects with people."

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