

Chapter 1

An Interview with Roy E. Disney

In May 2002 I approached Mark Mandelbaum at the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) about publishing a new nonprofit magazine *Computers in Entertainment (CiE)* to cover a wide range of theoretical and practical computer applications in the field of entertainment. Instead of singularly addressing game design, computer graphics, or other specialized areas, the complexity of entertainment nowadays and in the future requires inter-disciplinary technological advances and integrated applications. The magazine offers a broad as well as an in-depth view of computer technology that can be applied to existing entertainment and that can create new genres of entertainment.

The first editorial board meeting was held on March 12, 2003 with Disney Fellow Dr. Alan Kay, Kim Rose, Disney corporate vice president Bob Lambert, and myself at the famous Rotunda restaurant located at the Team Disney building (aka the “Seven Dwarfs Building”) at the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, California (see Fig. 1.1). We discussed the scope of the new magazine, outlined the first issues, and suggested new board members to invite and to interview (among them were Quincy Jones, Seymour Papert, and Roy E. Disney).

In October 2003 the inaugural issue of *ACM Computers in Entertainment* was published with the theme “Educating Kids through Entertainment.” My first interviewee for the magazine was Roy E. Disney, Vice Chairman of The Walt Disney Company at the time of the interview.

In the morning of May 28, 2003, my colleagues Eric Huff, John Michael Ferrari, and Jessica Chavez arrived at the Walt Disney Studios to assist me with the lighting equipment and video camera. I was nervous because it was my first video interview for the magazine, and Roy E. Disney was the top boss at Disney—the company I was working for. My fear subsided when Roy turned out to be very warm, kind, friendly, approachable, and easy to talk to.

The following is the transcript of my video interview with Roy E. Disney held on May 28, 2003 in his office at the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank (see Fig. 1.2):

Newton Lee: Congratulations on your 50 years of achievements in entertainment.

Roy E. Disney: Thank you. It doesn’t seem like 50 years, I promise.

Lee: Based on your half a century of experience, what do you think about educating children through entertainment?

Fig. 1.1 The Team Disney building in Burbank with its iconic dwarf columns was the site of the first editorial board meeting for the ACM Computers in Entertainment magazine



Fig. 1.2 Newton Lee interviews Roy E. Disney for the inaugural issue of the ACM Computers in Entertainment magazine on May 28, 2003



Disney: Well, certainly it's one of the functions of entertainment, I think, is education. But I think you have to be very careful not to pose as an educator when you're an entertainer. I think you have to entertain first, but you have to understand that no matter what you do, there's a subtext. And it can be for good or bad, but it's always there, there's always some lesson to be learned by storytelling. And, so, keeping that at the back of your mind is a good idea.

Lee: Given there is a wonderful children story to tell, how do you decide whether it should be told using traditional animation, like *Lilo & Stitch*, CGI animation, like *Finding Nemo*, or live action movie, like *Spy Kids*?

Disney: That's a really hard question and I think it really is answered by the particular filmmaker as much as anything. I think different artists see

things differently, and one artist may envision the look of a film in a different way from another. We have such an enormous choice now of looks and styles that it really becomes a particular artist's choice, or a producer's choice maybe, as opposed to being generated by the story itself. Sometimes I think *Lilo & Stitch* wouldn't have been as good a movie in 3D as it was in 2D because there was a cartooniness about it, but I'm not sure in the hands of another filmmaker if that would still be true. It's a matter of choice and the choices get wider and wider as time goes by.

Lee: Speaking of computers in entertainment, does a CGI film that strives towards more realistic animation add to the magic and power of animated storytelling?

Disney: We had a sequence in *Fantasia 2000* that involved whales that flew, and it was done in a semi-photorealistic style, but it was about magic. And I think the realistic style actually contributed a great deal because the whales, since they looked so real, appeared to have weight and volume and all of the things that whales have, so the magic when they flew was especially clear. Again, it's a question of style. It's a question of what does the story call for and how realism plays off against fantasy. All the *Matrix* and *X-Men* kind of films that are out right now, for instance, play on that very same thing: they look real, but of course they're not real at all, they're almost completely animated films, in one way of looking at it. You could go back to *Titanic*. You could almost consider *Titanic* an animated film because so much of it was unreal or not filmed in the real world at any rate. So it contributes tremendously, there's such a blurred line right now. I keep wondering why the Academy decided that they needed a separate category for animated films just at a moment when there are a lot of people who couldn't tell you whether a film is animated or not.

Lee: Is there a tradeoff between traditional animation and CGI animation?

Disney: Yes, there are definite tradeoffs; certainly one of the, at least traditionally, looks of a *Toy Story* or a *Finding Nemo* is a kind of a plasticized look. That doesn't have to be what CG films look like, but it's, I think, the public conception of what a CG film looks like. Everything we've done since *Beauty and the Beast*, at Disney, has passed through the computer, so you could probably say that everything we've done for the last twelve or fourteen years is, in a sense, computer graphics. All that means is that we have these wonderful tools at hand and we can make a movie look like anything we choose it to look like. Every time we make a decision about the look of a film, we've got this hugely broad palate to choose from. So I get back to where I started, which is it's an artistic choice that artists need to make. It's not a business decision, I think, unless that one is outrageously expensive and one is very cheap which will never be true for the same kind of quality.

The following day I called Roy's secretary, Monica Elsbury, for a same-day appointment with Disney to thank him for the interview with a small token of appreciation. I gave Roy a set of collectible Disneyland Hong Kong stamps commemorating the opening of the new Disney theme park in Hong Kong. I also showed Roy an article featuring my volunteer work in the summer 1998 issue of *Disney Consumer Product News*. Roy reacted by putting his right hand over his heart and said, "This is wonderful! Volunteering is good for our heart and soul!" When I asked him to join the editorial board of *ACM Computers in Entertainment*, Roy replied, "Yes, of course! I see that my good friends Bran Ferren and Bob Lambert are already on the board. I am more than happy to help." The interview and the inaugural magazine issue were very well received.

Fast forward six years to December 2009: I was saddened as I wrote an "In Memoriam" for the 25th issue of the magazine to offer my condolences to the friends and family of Roy E. Disney who passed away on December 16 at the age of 79. Roy had joined the editorial board of *ACM Computers in Entertainment* in May 2003 and was a strong supporter of the nonprofit magazine. At the time he was Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of The Walt Disney Company and Chairman of Walt Disney Animation. He had begun his career in the entertainment industry in 1953, working as an assistant film editor on the *Dragnet* TV series. He joined The Walt Disney Company in 1954 and served as assistant film editor on motion pictures including *The Living Desert* and *The Vanishing Prairie*, both Academy Award winners. As a writer and production associate, Roy received an Academy Award nomination for his work on the short subject *Mysteries of the Deep* in 1959. In the 1990s, as head of the animation department, he presided over several popular and critically acclaimed projects, including *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Fantasia 2000* (1999), a sequel to the 1940 animated classic *Fantasia* produced by Walt Disney. Away from his work, Roy was an active philanthropist, supporting the California Institute of the Arts, a school founded by his father, Roy O. Disney, and his uncle, Walt Disney. Roy E. Disney is truly missed by all of us.

Newton Lee



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