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[HEAD OF ANIMATION, DNEG](#)

Andrew Gordon, the man behind some of Pixar's most iconic characters, discusses his 20-plus years of experience working alongside legends and his move to DNEG.

A passion for animation and computing landed Andrew Gordon a job at Pixar just after the release of *Toy Story*, the first of many mega-hits for the studio. From here, he helped bring some of the studio's most famous characters to life: *Toy Story 2*'s Prospector, Mike from *Monsters, Inc.* and Edna Mode, *The Incredibles*' fashion designer. Today, Andrew has taken his experience from Pixar to DNEG, where he heads up the London VFX studio's feature animation team.

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Chris Nichols So, Andrew, I'm going to confess to you that unfortunately, I missed your talk because there was a lot of stuff going on.

Andrew Gordon That's fine.

Chris Nichols So you are going to help me recap your talk, and give an opportunity for people to listen to this to be able to catch up and find out what's going on. So, tell us about yourself, like the origin story. That's something that I think people really want to know about, how did you get into doing what you're doing?

Andrew Gordon Yeah, sure. I got into being interested in animation almost backwards from how people get into it now. My parents one day showed up with an old RadioShack computer called a Tandy 1000.

Chris Nichols I had the same one.

Andrew Gordon You did?

Chris Nichols The Tandy 1000 HX, I think it was.

Andrew Gordon That's amazing. Yeah, it had 16 colours.

Chris Nichols Yup.

Andrew Gordon If you bought it from the right place, it came with a game and my game was Kings Quest 3, by Sierra On-Line.

Chris Nichols Oh my god, yes, I had that same game and then I played the Space Quest games.

Andrew Gordon Yes.

Chris Nichols And Police Quest.

Andrew Gordon Exactly. So I was totally into the narratives in these games, and the characters, and the piloting them around. So I ended up buying a programme, way back in those days, I think it was the only paint programme you could buy for a Tandy, called DPaint, Deluxe Paint.

Chris Nichols Right, yes.

Andrew Gordon And I started to just tinker around with painting in the back of the boxes of these games and trying to figure out what computer graphics were all

about. My guidance counsellor said, "Well, if you want to learn computer graphics you have to learn how to programme, so you have to go to school for programming." And I thought, "Oh, that's not what I want to do."

So I ultimately learned a lot about the computer side first, working around the Tri-state area of New York, New Jersey, at places like Intelligent Light, and Sony. There was a Sony that had nice computers and my brother, Steve, used to take me up to where he worked up at IBM because-

Chris Nichols Where in New York? In the-

Andrew Gordon I lived in a place called Hartsdale, New York, and then we moved to New Jersey to-

Chris Nichols Okay, because I lived in Chappaqua, New York around that time.

Andrew Gordon Oh, really?

Chris Nichols Yeah, so we were just kind of around the same place in the same time and using the same computers, that's amazing.

Andrew Gordon Yeah, exactly. So ultimately I hit a wall with the Tandy, and so there was another computer, the Amiga.

Chris Nichols Oh, yeah, there you go.

Andrew Gordon The Amiga was like a supercomputer at that time.

Chris Nichols Mm-hmm (affirmative), had a lot more colors on it.

Andrew Gordon Oh, so many more colors, and so many more programmes, and there was animation programmes and you could do 3D rendering like on Imagine and all these, Turbo Silver, if people remember that stuff. And I just became fascinated with things like that. I wanted to go to school for computer graphics, and the only schools around my neighborhood were a place called William Patterson, and also Pratt in New York in Brooklyn had a computer graphics programme.

So, I applied, I got into Pratt but ultimately I couldn't go, it was too expensive. So I went to William Patterson, I went there for about two years and did a lot of fun stuff. And then I realised that I kind of was going about it backwards, that the computer graphics part was important but I really wanted to animate, be an animator. And every time I would read things, there was not much on the internet at this time, no online schools, nothing.

- Andrew Gordon It was like, "Learn how to animate on paper." So I went to a school named Van Arts, Vancouver School of Animation where I learned how to animate on paper, and just did-
- Chris Nichols So, onion skinning right there?
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, yeah, literally on a disc, and I went there for maybe three to six months, I forgot, and then right when I was ... Oddly the school was closing, there was some things going on with the school, they had to reopen. But there was a recruiter that came up from Warner Brothers. I think everybody in the school wanted to work for Warner Brothers, even the teachers got in line with their portfolios.
- I managed to slip in under the radar with basically an assignment that I did that was basically a flour sack piece of animation. And the guy, Keith Baxter said, "Hey, you're the only guy that animated a story, we'll teach you how to draw, we just want to know if you can have ideas and if you have storytelling ability." So that's how I got into Warner Brothers, and I was there for about two and a half years and got a little bit bored, and it was a dream of mine to always go work for Pixar.
- Chris Nichols Of course.
- Andrew Gordon But, Pixar at that time was working on Toy Story One and a Half, it wasn't even Toy Story 2, it was a direct to video sequel, and also a movie called A Bug's Life. So I applied for Toy Story 1.2 or 2, and they rejected me, they just said, "Ah, your stuff is too cartoony, we're not really looking for that." So I thought, "All right, well-
- Chris Nichols Were you still doing traditional animation or were you starting to do CG more?
- Andrew Gordon I was mostly a CG animator at Warner Brothers. I wasn't good enough in 2D to be among these titans that were there, and they were so good, and I have to say, I just didn't have enough training. I went in there and I started trying to draw the model sheets of the Looney Tunes, and it was hard, you know?
- Chris Nichols Yeah.
- Andrew Gordon So I adapted much better to the computer.
- Chris Nichols Got it.

Andrew Gordon We worked on a movie called Marvin the Martian in the Third Dimension.

Chris Nichols Oh, right, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Andrew Gordon And then basically I didn't get into Pixar at that time, so I applied to Dreamworks, was doing Shrek with the Propellerhead guys, it was like motion capture back in those days. They were doing Hercules, there was people doing Toes and Tails team, Dinosaur was being worked on.

So I was about to take a job, and I got a call from Pixar because they had seen a little test I did with a little bug character, and they said, "We are working on a movie called A Bug's Life. Would you want to come up?" And that was kind of how I snuck in under the gate of animators that they were hiring, and I was maybe one of the last ones that got hired for that movie.

Chris Nichols Wow. So what were you doing on A Bug's Life? That's a classic.

Andrew Gordon Oh gosh, A Bug's Life. I will say that showing up to Pixar and then getting on their software, which was totally proprietary, and seeing comparatively how many controls, like we had at Warner Brothers, on say Softimage, they had almost 1000, "avars" is what they called them.

I was kind of overwhelmed by how much stuff there was. So that was really intimidating, and being among people like Doug Sweetland, and Mark Oftedal, and Glenn McQueen, and John Kahrs, all these people that were just unbelievable.

Chris Nichols Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andrew Gordon It was a great period of learning, I worked on a lot of stuff, the scene with the mosquito drinking a blood drop, and the guys coming out of the fog. It was a really great experience, it was a good first movie.

Chris Nichols Yeah, that's awesome.

Andrew Gordon Yeah.

Chris Nichols How long were you on that? I mean, because these movies were running for quite a few times, right?

Andrew Gordon I was on that movie for at least a year, and then I got put onto Toy Story 2 after it had gotten blown up. Back in those days, you worked on every movie, like you just worked on the one movie, you went right to the next

one. So, right after that movie, I went onto Toy Story 2, which was kind of cool because Toy Story was such a big influence and so it was cool to start, you open up Woody and Buzz and you're like, "Oh, all right, here we go."

Chris Nichols Oh, yeah. I'm sure.

Andrew Gordon So I worked on a character called the Prospector, mostly.

Chris Nichols Oh, right.

Andrew Gordon Yeah, yeah that was a lot of fun. So, after Toy Story 2, they put me on early on a movie, on Monsters Incorporated.

Chris Nichols Kelsey Grammar did the voice of the Prospector.

Andrew Gordon That's right, yeah, yeah. I met him years later, and I was like, "Hey, I worked on a character you did, the Prospector." And he goes, "I always get put on the villains and they never live." So he was nice. But on Monsters is where I really started to learn about leading a character, they wanted me to lead this character named Mike Wazowski.

Chris Nichols Oh, famous, yeah.

Andrew Gordon And it was kind of easy because I was from New Jersey and New York and it was almost like animating a relative or my buddies in high schools or something. So I kind of based the acting off of that, the gestures, the way that he moved around because it felt like he was somebody I grew up with.

Chris Nichols Yeah.

Andrew Gordon Yeah.

Chris Nichols Yeah, that's great, that's great. I mean, so Pixar really does that, they really basically make sure that one animator takes control of one character and that character becomes completely driven by that person, right?

Andrew Gordon Well, ironically, they don't want to do that as much. They were against the idea of character leads. So on that movie, they tried it, but mostly the word was character buddy, "You're the character buddy on this." Which means that you worked with a rigger, and then you're testing out the characters controls, and personality, but naturally the lead will kind of show up in production or even in pre-production and you'll be like, "Wow, this is to go-to person for"

Chris Nichols That character.

Andrew Gordon For that character.

Chris Nichols Right.

Andrew Gordon So that is organically how it works at that place, it's less about leads, "I'm the lead on this character, I'm the lead." You end up naturally being a lead, it's a lot less political, maybe.

Chris Nichols Sure.

Andrew Gordon Yeah.

Chris Nichols Sure, okay. Yeah, that's fair, that's fair. So obviously, these are all the classic Pixar films, you had different roles, what are some of the other films you had worked on?

Finding Nemo

Andrew Gordon Well, after Monsters I went on to Finding Nemo, and the cool thing about that was that for "research" we had to learn to understand fish locomotion, and so I became a diver, an open water diver, that is one of the things that I love to do now, is understanding fish locomotion, and they would bring in people from Berkeley and they would talk about the fins moved. And that would affect the behaviour of the fish because I think that they really wanted the feeling that these characters were carving through the water and that there was believable locomotion and I think that we all nerded out on that. And we studied it and kind of geeked out on how fish move and it was, again, another place where I felt like, "Wow, I'm really learning something." And the years were going back, that must have been at least already five years in. And then-

Chris Nichols It must have been a challenge-

Andrew Gordon Four years in, yeah.

Chris Nichols Yeah, it must have been a challenge to really figure out because obviously when you do a character like Mike Wazowski or even some of the ants, they still have arms and legs, right? And with fish, they don't, so-

Andrew Gordon Yeah, it's a fish, a head.

Chris Nichols It's just a head, but the fins do express themselves, and figuring out to give personality to something that you don't think of a having a personality, like fins, must have been a challenge?

Andrew Gordon Well, it was totally a challenge, and I think that what was nice about it though was that you didn't have to worry about inverse kinematics and contacts as much. Sometimes they would grab something, or a fish would be laying on a rock or something. But I think the challenge was, how do you make it feel like they're in the water and there's the viscosity of the water, and there's the surge and swell that affects how they swim, and how do you tie a fish movement into a gesture? So that was really great, I mean, if you think about it, in those days they were picking projects on purpose that were going to look good in computer graphics, right?

Chris Nichols Right.

Andrew Gordon Bugs, toys, fish, right? So it wasn't like now, where it's basically, the sky's the limit, I think. So with fish though, it was really just amazing, something as simple as a fish fin moving, we would have this control called ray delay, and so while the, I guess, pec fin is moving, if one of the spines of the pec moves, then the other ones are delayed, and it just makes it look like a beautiful motion.

Chris Nichols Like a fan, yeah.

Andrew Gordon Something simple like that was like, "Oh, thank god." So it took months and months just to build the fin packages for those characters.

Chris Nichols Oh my god, yeah.

Andrew Gordon I think maybe even a year. So it was, again, to get that realism, and that's the fun thing, that's the interesting thing about even now when I'm working outside of the Pixar bubble is that you don't have as much of that. Those controls, all those hundreds of controls, there's a reason why they're there, and it's a lot simpler outside in many ways. Unless you're working on some VFX type stuff where you've got hundreds and hundreds of muscles and stuff.

- Chris Nichols Yeah, it's interesting. But yeah, that's a fascinating thing, it was a great movie. Obviously narrative, going back to you thinking about your games, right? The Kings Quest games narrative is something that seems very interesting to you, like combining computer graphics and narrative, and obviously, Pixar at the time and even today, is very, very strong with narrative, right?
- Andrew Gordon Yeah.
- Chris Nichols And you convey that narrative through the animation, through the story.
- Andrew Gordon Well, when you work there, you're almost marinated in it whether you like it or not, in story, in all these sayings like, "Story is king." And the idea that they really think long and hard about what the theme is. But also what is the connection to the director to that movie? Andrew Stanton, I can't speak for Andrew, but I think it had a lot to do with him having a kid at the time, and watching them go to school and, "Are they okay?" I'm dealing with that now with my daughter taking the bus in London and I'm wondering if she's going to get home okay, and you could make a whole movie around that theme or that idea that people can relate to.
- Chris Nichols Sure, yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. It's a hard thing when your kids are getting older, and I'm totally empathetic to that character when my daughter does karate and I'm worried she's going to get hurt, you know?
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, yeah.
- Chris Nichols So, as a parent, it's very ... And it's funny because now going back I had seen that film since I've had a kid, and then it means a whole different thing now, you know?
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, yeah, no doubt.
- Chris Nichols Yeah.
- Andrew Gordon It is funny, yeah, when you're working on these films, a lot of the times people will ask me, "Were they trying to hit the four quadrants or is it a four ..." And I don't think so, as much as it was just a bunch of filmmakers that wanted to make movies that they would think are cool, that they wanted to make. That were maybe not like a lot of the movies that were coming out at that time. So it's kind of interesting, that part of it.
- Chris Nichols Absolutely, absolutely. Okay, so after Nemo, what was the next thing that happened to you?

Andrew Gordon Well then next after Nemo it was like a big shakeup, Brad Bird came up and he was a new director for Pixar and everybody was excited about the movie Iron Giant. I remember animators going to see it while we were at Pixar and everybody being blown away, and so the thought of him coming up to do a movie, The Incredibles, was unreal. I loved working with Brad because he really was an animator at heart, and he was so specific about notes and he had a direct line to the Nine Old Men working with Milt Kahl and Frank and Ollie.

So it was like going to dailies every day, it was like school, and you would hear these amazing stories about not just what was the point of the scene or why you weren't getting this point, but, "This is why this needs to happen and here is a background for that." So half of the fun was just hearing Brad rant about his thoughts on film making and design, and it again was when you're at a job and you're thinking, "Ah, okay, things are going good."

Andrew Gordon Again here somebody comes along and he pushes the bar, right? So again, blocking styles changed, people were not doing the old school layered method of Pixar blocking. They were trying this pose to pose method much more like 2D animation. You had other people coming up that he knew that were more of 2D animators.

So people were definitely raising their games, and the people that were from my generation were learning from them, and they were learning from us. So it was a great time, and I worked mostly on Edna Mode, the costume designer, and that was fun. I did a bunch of scenes where she's walking into the house and she's walking with Bob, so it was fun.

Chris Nichols That must have been a character.

Andrew Gordon Yeah.

Chris Nichols You seem to have these very iconic characters that you build on, very specific kind of, they're strong personalities, very comedic.

Andrew Gordon Well I mean, obviously I'm not the only one working on it, it's just-

Chris Nichols I know, but that does seem to be the ones that you remember.

Andrew Gordon Well, I mean, it's really funny because-

Chris Nichols Is there a lot of comedy in your life?

- Andrew Gordon Well, I mean, I grew up in a family of, definitely, drama. I have two brothers, my brother Steve and my brother Kenny, they definitely were always a source of comedy, and also I was the typical little brother. I was always having to fight for everything, but they were also kind of protective over me.
- I had entertainment-like relatives that were in kind of the business of doing weddings, and singing, and dancing. So we had a very colorful family on the East Coast. So I think that definitely weighed into it, you take the experiences that you see on the street and from life and then you try to put it into your work, you know?
- Chris Nichols Yeah, absolutely.
- Andrew Gordon And I think the best animators, they have that ability, to kind of look at something and then caricature it, or the essence and spark of something, you know?
- Chris Nichols Yeah, did you ever try to act out the characters personally? Is that-
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, that was part of the process. The planning process and I don't mean to sound like an old-fogey, but I mean if you look at the way that they did Snow White and Cinderella, they shot live-action for all that. So reference is nothing new for animators, animators usually almost always will shoot a reference of themselves or even other people. I would always act out the scene in front of a little camera.
- Andrew Gordon Funny story actually, we used to have, when we were working on the Silicon Graphics computers, everybody had a camera on their box, and I really thought it was important and I pushed for it. But one of the things that we used to be able to do was to log in to the person's camera and see the person through the camera. So there was a lot of good opportunities for pranks.
- There was this one animator that we would log into his computer and we would call his phone, and then every time he was just about to reach it, we would hang up. So we could see when he was going to look away from the phone because it didn't tell you who was calling. Oh god, we used to record that, and then we would play it in dailies, it was a lot of fun.
- Chris Nichols Okay, yes, Pixar tends to do some silly stuff, silly stuff-
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, there was a lot of silly stuff, I mean, a lot of silly, fun and games. I think that ultimately it was in the service of, and hopefully, it will end up in

the movie, where the fun that you have will somehow make its way into the film. And I think that there's no doubt that there were times when you wondered whether you had a job or not, or if you were at the local watering hole. But I think that that was one of the most memorable times is that kind of camaraderie, and that foolishness, you know?

Chris Nichols Yeah, absolutely.

Andrew Gordon Yeah.

Chris Nichols All right. So after you were on The Incredibles, what were some of the other things you worked on?

Andrew Gordon I think after The Incredibles I want to say I went right on to Ratatouille, and Ratatouille I was on it very early in pre-production when the movie was just starting, and working with Jan Pinkava, and the movie was very different. The characters walked around on two legs and it was a different story, and then during that movie, as would happen I think about half the time, they would change out the director, or the story would change. And at that time, the story just wasn't kind of getting to where they wanted it, and so Brad Bird was asked to come on and then everything started to change and I stayed on that movie until the end. In the very beginning, I was developing a character named Django and then by the end, I was working on mostly the character Linguini. So it was an amazing time as well just because it was kind of interesting to see a movie pivot and completely be thrown upside down and then all the pieces sort of land into place.

Andrew Gordon It really ended up working out, I thought it was a really good movie, and we had to learn how to saute, and study the rat locomotion, and really again, push the polish level and the acting level. I think even to this day it stands out as being one of the better-acted films in animation.

Chris Nichols Right, but it's really good, it's really good. It's one of my favourites, for sure.

Andrew Gordon Oh, cool.

Chris Nichols I don't know if you worked on, I'm blanking on the one, the one that's in space?

Andrew Gordon Wall-E?

Chris Nichols Wall-E, thank you.

- Andrew Gordon I only worked on two shots.
- Chris Nichols Okay.
- Andrew Gordon The one where the guy's got the straw, and the straws coming out of the cup, and then he falls down the ... I just wanted to touch that movie because it was so amazing.
- Chris Nichols But I do remember seeing the behind the scenes of Wall-E and I think there's this common like you just mentioned in Ratatouille, common with a lot of Pixar films is that they had very different endings. They changed that movie a lot, right?
- Andrew Gordon Yeah.
- Chris Nichols So something that I think is very impressive with Pixar is that they are not afraid to throw everything away and try because it's just not working, they don't want to risk failure, they'd rather do it right the first time and not say, "Well, we've got this far so we just have to finish it." Right?
- Andrew Gordon I think there's a truth to that. I had a 7-month internship with Ed Catmull, who was the founder of Pixar, which was a highlight of my time there, and he used to say that if a director wasn't willing to blow up the film, then they would usually not make it through because they were, in essence, holding on to something that was maybe precious, or got a laugh what have you. And there was almost a period of the film that had to have this kind of crisis, "Do we blow it up?" Moment and I think it happened a lot on those movies, and it worked out on most of them, and some it didn't. But I think that that's a luxury when you're able to blow up a movie because it's expensive. And Pixar's track record was probably the thing that protected them, and the idea that if they had a bunch of failures before that, and they kept blowing it up and then not working, they would say, "Don't do that," but I think that they really got used to questioning, and asking, "Is this the best movie we can make? Does this ending work? And does it play?"
- Andrew Gordon And I think that that was this kind of brain-story-trust type of mentality of people really commenting on each other's movies and pushing each other in the storytelling aspects of it that made a lot of those movies really turn out great.
- Chris Nichols Yeah. And I remember I was working on Tron: Legacy, and Joe was telling us, he's like, "Yeah, I have to go present Tron to the head creatives at Pixar because it's a Disney franchise." And they want to torture test it with those

guys who weren't afraid to tell you, "This isn't working, throw that away, do this." So it was really interesting to hear if you go through that process at Pixar, that's the ultimate one that's going to let you know how good you are and not be afraid to say, "That's not working, throw it away."

Andrew Gordon It is, it's-

Chris Nichols No matter how far you are along, you know?

Finding the spirit of the note

Andrew Gordon It's hard. There was a saying, it used to be, it was called the spirit of the note, "What's the spirit of the note?" Which was that you had to take all these notes and then almost have a digestive period for them. And then sort of think about it and then think about, "Well, what is the prescription to make that better?" Or not necessarily to hit the exact note that somebody said, but what are they saying on a larger level? And I thought that was really interesting because for an animator it's a little a different because you're in dailies, you're getting notes and it's like, "This arm doesn't feel physical." Or, "I don't buy that gesture." Story is like, you're looking at it from 10 thousand feet and it's so much more difficult in some ways. So I never really had to deal with that on that level, but I could imagine how difficult it is to kind of take notes, especially if it's on your film, it's personal, you know?

Chris Nichols Yeah. I think it's an important one, I think I might have told this story on the podcast before. But I'm going to say it again as a reminder, I had a discussion with one of my supervisors and he came from ArtsCenter, right? So he was a big car guy, and he did a lot of design on car work, and he was giving me his talk about how, "When working with my artists, you have to teach them how to craft something and then keep crafting and crafting, and crafting until it looks perfect." And I told him, "Well, that's a really interesting perspective, but I went to architecture school. So in architecture school, if it ain't working, just throw it away and start over."

They basically will tear your design apart where there's nothing left and you have to start over from scratch. So, that taught me, you just mentioned, not to take things so preciously. Things aren't precious, and be able to be okay with starting over doesn't mean ... You've learned a huge lesson and it's okay to start from zero again. You know?

Andrew Gordon Yeah, I totally agree with you. I think that sometimes I would save my work as a security blanket, I'd be like, "Well I have it, at least I have it there." And then I would just blow up everything and try everything over. And nine times out of-

Chris Nichols But you knew it was there.

Andrew Gordon I knew it was there in case I had to go back to it, but nine times out of 10, doing it over was better. It would go faster, you had already animated, and I think that's good.

Chris Nichols Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Okay, so let's see, where were we? We were at Ratatouille.

Andrew Gordon Yeah, Ratatouille. I'm starting to forget now what came after that. I think that as I said, I think I touched a little bit of Wall-E, I started working on shorts. I was a supervising animator on "Presto" with Doug Sweetland, which was a great thing to work on just because Doug was, at the time I started, kind of one of the more cartoony animators. And also he was one of the people that could do some work that most people weren't doing, it was so different from any computer graphics at that time. So I wanted to understand his thinking and I loved working with him on Presto pushing the cartoonyness that I had kind of loved doing at Warner Brothers.

Chris Nichols That's one of my favourites, it's so funny.

Andrew Gordon Oh, Doug did such a great job at that film.

Chris Nichols Yeah.

Andrew Gordon So, that film went great-

Chris Nichols Did you work with Esdras Varagnolo?

Andrew Gordon Who?

Chris Nichols Esdras.

Andrew Gordon That name sounds familiar.

Chris Nichols He was more on the lighting side, he wasn't an animator.

Andrew Gordon Yeah, sure.

- Chris Nichols Yeah, yeah, yeah. He worked on that.
- Andrew Gordon It was a fun one to work on just because it was different, and also taking on that type of a role was cool, just supervising as opposed to directing animation or at least being on shots, you know?
- Chris Nichols Right.
- Andrew Gordon I also, after that, went on to, I believe that's when a lot of the sequels started to come through, I think we started working on Toy Story 3, and that was a cool thing to work on. But it was different characters, more realism, more polish. It was an amazing film, at that time too I was also teaching the internship a lot and then trying to teach, and a lot of animators at Pixar at that time were going out there and teaching at places like the Academy of Art.
- We would go every Thursday and the great thing is, is that a lot of those people still are at Pixar and are lead animators and have become these giants. The truth is that you teach the students and they become the master, and it's totally true.
- Chris Nichols Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. There's a friend of mine and I knew him as an intern, we hired him as an intern, but now he's VFX suping big movies. So it's really great to see that, and it's very different. It makes me want to make sure I continue to do that and educate people and mentor them in a lot of ways. What do you think about being a mentor? How did that suit you, in that mentorship role?
- Andrew Gordon Well, I think that for people that want to lead, that are interested in becoming some sort of a lead, teaching is a great way in because you get to stand in front of a class, you get to prepare your thoughts. You get to understand how to communicate to people and how to give direction, basically. And listening in to all these years and years of dailies and seeing every single director do it, you pick up things.
- So I really enjoyed it, I had a good, at least, 10, 12 years solid of the Academy of Art. I helped start the CCA Animation Programme, I helped open up a school across the street from Pixar. I did a lot of classes, and then I kind of burnt out a little bit on it, I had gotten to the point where I was like, "Okay."
- Chris Nichols The hours were too much?

- Andrew Gordon Well, it was just, I just felt like I was doing a lot of teaching and I wasn't doing as much creative stuff. So the balance wasn't there, so I didn't stop teaching, I still love teaching, and I'm still doing it. But I just slowed down from it a little bit, but I love mentoring. I taught the internship at Pixar four times, and so many amazing animators came out of that that are just incredible, it blows me away. So-
- Chris Nichols How does the internship programme work?
- Andrew Gordon Well, the internship, I don't know if it's the same as when I was there. I think it was about a 12 week programme where you look for the best animators out there and we put them through, I should say they put them through a programme where you just start with something simple like a Luxo, or even a Lifesaver Hole, and then it goes to a Luxo lamp, and then it goes from that to a walk cycle, and a pantomime, and an acting test.
- We were also trying to push group projects where we would get a bunch of scenes together and actually light them and talk to the director of the movie and I would bring all the interns in with Lee Unkrich and he would give us feedback on the whole sequence. Immersing them in going to the Ferry Building and drawing and then taking those drawings and then putting them into poses, and then starting to animate within those poses. So we were just having so much fun doing that and I was trying to push, and push, and push. I also pushed things culturally, I wanted the animators to have a sense of camaraderie, so we used to have them do tasks and make them dress up in outfits.
- Andrew Gordon And I think some people would call that hazing, but I would say that it wasn't I think that it was more of kind of getting them to be tight, it was also for people to see, "Oh, these are the interns." And for people to come up to them and say hello to them and for them to feel special, you know?
- Chris Nichols Yeah, that's pretty cool, that's pretty cool.
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, it was great.
- Chris Nichols All right. So at some point obviously you finished your work on Toy Story 3, and then how long did you stay at Pixar?
- Andrew Gordon Well I mean, I worked on Monsters University as directing animator, I worked on a couple of television specials-
- Chris Nichols As an animation director on that?

- Andrew Gordon Yeah, a directing animator, I was the directing animator on a thing called Toy Story That Time Forgot. I did a lot of promo direction on things like these little tool kit things where we would make a bunch of scenes that marketing could use, or a little short that I did for The Good Dinosaur. So I did a lot of things and I thoroughly loved working at Pixar, and I was there for 20 years.
- Chris Nichols 20 years, god.
- Andrew Gordon At 10 years you get a bronze Buzz statue, and then at 20 you get a Woody statue. So I got my Woody statue and I thought it was maybe a good time for a couple of reasons to go. One was that I was just getting a little bit itchy to kind of see what was out there and see if I had the chops to maybe direct something. Or maybe I could lead something on a larger level, so I ended up going to a place called DNEG, and they do visual effects, and they have a feature animation unit on the very top floor in London, and I also wanted to bring my kids and my family on an adventure and say, "Let's try out Europe."
- So I did that and while I was going there I got an offer to go to Paris and to co-direct on a Minions movie. I was there for about five or so months, it wasn't a really good fit creatively. So I decided to go back to London and that's where I am now, at DNEG and trying to kind of foster a creative environment and trying to get the animation unit up there. So we're working on a movie for Disney called Ron's Gone Wrong and we're also working on a lot of tests for a lot of films that are upcoming.
- Chris Nichols Sure, okay. How long have you been there now?
- Andrew Gordon I've been there at least a year.
- Chris Nichols Okay.
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, I've been there about a year, I've been out of Pixar now for a year and nine months or so.
- Chris Nichols Got it, okay.
- Andrew Gordon Yeah.
- Chris Nichols So DNEG is starting their own feature animation area, and that's what you're focused on, you're not doing it for visual effects...

- Andrew Gordon No, no, no. It's a one-stop-shop for feature animation to kind of do the backend more of the production, if somebody like a Netflix, they have their own story and then they would do the production part of it, at DNEG. I'm the head of animation, I was also interested in doing it because I felt like there had to be more places than just New York, LA, Vancouver. What about London? It's such a great city, how cool would it be to have a feature animation in London? And for animators to feel like they didn't have to bounce around so much, where they could actually work at a place where they're doing constant features.
- So that was one of the interests, and also to see if the culture could be created, could it be repeated, what was happening at a place like Pixar? Could you have camaraderie? Could you have that kind of lightning in a bottle? So I'm very interested in that, in the creative culture and supporting the animator, and the diversity of animators and making sure there's more opportunities for everybody to kind of get in the mix.
- Chris Nichols Yeah. Well, I'm sure you've already, in what we've been talking about so far, you've given us a lot of information about what was in your talk that you were just giving yesterday. It was yesterday, right?
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- Chris Nichols So, what are some of the other things people might be able to-
- Andrew Gordon Well, I talked about in that talk a lot about storytelling. That's one of the things that I've become more and more interested in, is the structure of a story and how that structure kind of helps people even in business, if you're making a keynote presentation, how you can actually tell a good story. So I went through the idea of kind of breaking down a film and showing how you get on board with a character. Like what they call a prologue, a moment where you're seeing something happen to a character that is emotional, that kind of connects you to them.
- So no matter what they do in the film you'll still be on that journey because of what happened to them, and I went through that. We also went through simple story structures, the idea of kind of this whole improve story structure of, "Once upon a time, and then every day until one day, and this and that, and because of this, until finally ..." It's basically like a simple story structure that you can use for a lot of things. We went through that, that was-
- Chris Nichols That was interesting, there was a guy last year who for THU, his name is Josh Scherr, he's one of the people who I-

Andrew Gordon Oh yeah, I know Josh.

Chris Nichols You do?

Andrew Gordon Yeah, I know him very well, he's such a good buddy of mine, he's an amazing artist and I think he does a lot of writing now.

Chris Nichols He's writing and directing, I think he's working on The Last of Us II, and he was talking about-

Andrew Gordon Naughty Dog, right?

Chris Nichols Yeah.

Andrew Gordon Yeah.

Chris Nichols And Uncharted, but he gave a very similar thing to tell people to tell stories, like what you're saying I was like, "Oh, that sounds like Josh's thing." Which is very important, it's obviously a very common thing, but people need to understand how story is. And what I loved about Josh's talk is what he did is, it was all about story, and first he gave the synopsis of the story and then he says, "Let me give you an example." And then he told the story of his own life using the same narrative structure.

Andrew Gordon That's so cool.

Chris Nichols It was such a great thing. So yeah, story is very important. But I think that for those people who are listening, help break it down, how does this start? There's phases to the story that I think people really need to know.

The importance of story

Andrew Gordon Well, I mean, I think it starts off with a character that is usually pretty happy and they're in their life and they're doing what they love, and something is usually not right. There's something wrong in the world or in the character or something, a flaw you could say, right?

Chris Nichols Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andrew Gordon And then something happens to that character that makes them go on, in many cases, a journey. If you use the kind of example of Up, which ironically I didn't get to work on, which I loved watching because I get to watch it as an audience member. But if you look at it, you see this guy go through this huge experience of meeting his wife and them growing old together, and then she dies. And he has this big problem of never taking her on this trip they wanted to go on so, and this was taught to me by Ronnie Del Carmen who was the head of story and the co-director on that movie.

I was sitting in this story meeting one day, excuse me, a story lecture one day and we were listening to somebody talk about what they thought the theme was of that movie and I leaned over to Ronnie and I said, "Is that true, what he said? Is the theme of Up life and death?" And he said, "No, it's not, it's not life and death. Life and death is too binary, it's too black and white. Life isn't that simple. It's more about regret, that's much more of a story engine." Is what he was saying, is that you could really focus a lot around what those ideas are about regret, and they create scenarios.

Andrew Gordon So that it drives the story forward, it drives his belief system forward, it drives how he does things, and that's character, right?

Chris Nichols Right.

Andrew Gordon The choices he makes in the movie are based off of his beliefs. Then once you see that and you kind of go through life and you see what life is like for him then, this is kind of like your once upon a time area. You get to hear, and every day is that moment where you're seeing his everyday life, right?

Chris Nichols Right.

Andrew Gordon And the until one day is, I guess, Robert McKee calls it the inciting incident.

Chris Nichols Uh-huh (affirmative).

Andrew Gordon That's where something happens to force this character, it's stakes so that they have to go into action, right?

Chris Nichols Right.

Andrew Gordon Luke Skywalker in the Star Wars, it's when he finds his family dead, he comes home and the place is burning, he refuses to go before that right?

It's the Joseph Campbell stuff, so the once upon a time is that moment where he goes from the ordinary world into the extraordinary world. Usually, in a Pixar film, it's literally from muted colours to bright, amazing colours and it's an act break, and the way the camera moves is also mirroring that.

So, these are all things, ironically, that I learned a lot later in life because when I was at Pixar, you did your job. You did your animator job, which was shots, and you weren't always looking at it from that level. And I'm fascinated more by that now, and I kind of dig in, and that's what I'm much more interested in now is telling the kind of larger story.

Andrew Gordon The middle act of the movie is more about throwing obstacles in front of your character so that it forces them to change the way they believe things. I think I use an example of if you have somebody that's really closed-minded, and you send them a bunch of links, they're not going to change their views because you sent them a bunch of links, right?

Chris Nichols Sure.

Andrew Gordon It would take them the huge experience of living through it to really kind of change their view on things, and I think in a good second act of a movie, you're throwing obstacles in front of the character that are also changing their perspective. Like throwing rocks at them and kind of beating them up, I guess, so that by the time it's at the end of that second act, they've been beaten up and they're alone, and they're stripped of everything they used to believe. And then that third act is proving that they changed through a giant, almost like a push-off moment of, now you've proven to the audience that they're different.

So I went through that in the talk a little bit, and I think it's totally common knowledge for people, and I think that it's more of how you look at it. And I think that you could read screenwriting books, you could read books about theme. But I think you have to do it, you have to start making stuff and failing in order to really understand it, you know?

Chris Nichols Yeah. I think it's a really good thing to learn because we are so used to that structure, even subconsciously, you know?

Andrew Gordon Yeah, it's built-in.

Chris Nichols It's built-in, right? So it's like if things deviate from it ... I always joke about it, well, I love Godard films, but I like them because I see how he breaks things that are standard, right? So he's constantly breaking things, it

almost makes you more conscious of how much you rely on that structure to feel like-

Andrew Gordon Well, if there's not enough structure it's almost like a dream or something, there's no I guess links to things and it doesn't go anywhere. It's like when you have a dream. And if there's too much structure you kind of see through it. So I think it's kind of like a balancing act, you know?

Chris Nichols Right, yeah.

Andrew Gordon I remember hearing, again another quote, which was, "You don't want to give the audience four and you want to give them two plus two." Which is like, you want your audience to try to kind of figure it out along the way because they're constantly trying to figure things out and if you are ahead of the character in the audience, you get bored, and if you're behind, you're confused. So you have to be learning things right as the character's learning them, you know?

Chris Nichols Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's a great analogy, I like that, not four, two plus two.

Andrew Gordon Yeah.

Chris Nichols That's good, that's really good. Well, that's interesting, that's interesting, so we're some of the lessons that these people would learn besides obviously the story structure, that they-

Andrew Gordon Well I also talked a little bit about how to receive and get feedback, the types of notes that people get. A lot of the times when you get a note, or especially when you're giving notes, you have to have a feeling of how to give good notes. When people give notes that are like, "That's crap." Or, "Do it over." Or, "I don't know, try something different." That doesn't help, and I think that I've learned that you have to be positive. You have to say things like, "Yes, and." That classic saying of, "Or maybe we can try this." Or, "What if this happened?" Or, "Wouldn't it be funny if they did this?" And then just try it.

I think that it's so important to kind of have a way of talking to people so that they don't lose confidence. That's the worse thing I remember, even as an animator, you would think that you were just failing and you're just doing terrible work and you would spin round and round. More often than not the more I suffered, the better the work was in the end. If it was really easy, and some people can do it easy, but any time it was super simple the work would just be, "Eh, it was all right."

- Andrew Gordon But when you struggled and you went round and round, and you blew things up and you raced around your head and you got sleepless nights, then you would have a moment where you got it. So I feel like there's that saying, "Pain is temporary, film is forever." There is some truth to that, it's like you almost want to have it be hard sometimes. It's not on purpose, and some people are just geniuses and they just start getting it, but I always found it hard, and I think that's okay.
- Chris Nichols I agree. If I go through that experience I'm similar to you, if it's too easy then I question whether it's the good version or not, or am I just taking it for granted, right? But if I fail, then the struggle makes me more confident that the version I'm doing is going to be the better version. So there's a confidence and you feel good about it, if I do something really well the first time, there's always doubt that there might have been something better.
- Andrew Gordon I totally agree, and I have a lot of thoughts about culture of a place and what the culture should be. I think the culture of a healthy place is the trust, of giving people that trust so that they can try and fail and then not ringing the bell like, "Oh no, everything's terrible, we need to change this and that." I think that is the worst environment that you could have is not giving the people the time to figure stuff out and the support, and the idea of growing the talent. And giving them the tools they need to be great artists, and I think that that was one of the things that I loved at Pixar was that you really did have a feeling like, "Okay, I can keep trying this, and maybe I won't get it, but I know that I'm going to get the support collectively." Like, "I have back up."
- Chris Nichols Yeah. But I think, and correct me if I'm wrong, but what you're also implying is that it's not just about giving direction, direction or like, "Do exactly this." What you're doing is you're allowing them to do a lot of it on their own, right?
- Andrew Gordon Yes.
- Chris Nichols So that then there's a sense of ownership that that person has on the work that they're doing.
- Andrew Gordon Mm-hmm (affirmative),
- Chris Nichols You could just sit there behind it and hold their hands and do exactly what you wanted, but that's not going to accomplish what you want out of that person, right?

- Andrew Gordon No, no, absolutely. You have to be clear enough to give good notes and they have to show as often and as early as possible to get that feedback. And I think that it is inspiring them or trusting them, and making sure that they're moving forward and not just stagnating, or inspiring them. Because a lot of times animators or artists in general, if they got too many notes, they'll start to get tired of the changes.
- So the director has to be really careful or anybody giving direction has to be careful about over-noting, and it being super clear and giving them that kind of essence that the note is clear. And then even on the artist side, if you don't understand it, well then asking questions, taking notes, really understanding what they have to get right, you know?
- Chris Nichols Yeah, that's amazing. I mean, I actually enjoy different styles of direction. Sometimes I think my architecture background likes being slapped around a little bit, sometimes that inspires me. Some people it defeats, but to me, it inspires me. But then at the same time, Kevin Mack was an amazing person at giving notes when I worked with him. I worked on a movie that I wasn't too happy with the movie, I think I haven't even seen it, called Ghost Rider. But I loved-
- Andrew Gordon It's a classic.
- Chris Nichols I loved Kevin's ability or the way in which he would give notes. So you would present something to him in dailies and first thing he would do is just talk about how cool everything was, and how everything was, and then you would have felt really good and he goes, "Okay, just a couple things we need to do." And he would just give you a couple notes, just enough to like, "Oh yeah, I can totally do that and it's still going to be amazing." Or whatever, and basically he could have just said, "Do this, do this, do this and see you later." And then you're like, "Well, all right."
- Andrew Gordon That's awesome. Those are the type of people that you want to work for, and I mean, some people believe three notes.
- Chris Nichols Three notes?
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, like I remember hearing that even though that's very hard. But the idea of saying what is working, being balanced in the notes, I think that's so good. Like you start good, you give the bulk of the notes, and then you end like, "Great, looks good, keep going." It's just enough to keep the artist like, "All right, I'm excited, I want to make these fixes." If everybody did their work without notes or help, it wouldn't be very good.

Chris Nichols I think the other thing that Kevin used to go as well, and I always remember it because I used to sit there. I was so impressed with him, what he always did at the end of every single person, he always said thank you, always said thank you. So I remember at that time, I was sort of aspiring to be a supervisor and I did end up becoming a supervisor, but I always remember that because I was like, "I am looking at what he's doing, and he's going to be my model of how I want to supervise." Right?

Andrew Gordon Yeah, that's amazing. I agree with you, saying thank you is so important, and just acknowledging how hard the work is.

Chris Nichols Yeah.

Andrew Gordon Yeah.

Chris Nichols Yeah, and I think you're not going to leave dailies feeling bad, you're going to feel great, and you're still going to do all the notes.

Andrew Gordon Exactly.

Chris Nichols Right?

Andrew Gordon I mean, there's no reason why people need to yell at people or get upset. I think that that's terrible, and I've heard stories about that and people can get frustrated, I understand that. But these famous Hollywood stories of people cursing, I don't think I could take that, you know?

Chris Nichols Yeah.

Andrew Gordon Which leads me to the culture. I also talked a little bit about the culture of at least the place that I had worked at for quite a while, which was important to me. The idea of pushing on the culture, and the idea of making it fun, making it open, feeling like you're having a good time at work. I think that there obviously is a line of how much fun you can have, and there's been a lot of things lately about, not being maybe too specific, but just knowing where the line is.

But I learned a lot both at Pixar and now I've learned even more being out of Pixar about what is okay, and what is right. I think I made some mistakes sometimes when I was in Pixar back in the days just because of how things were run. And I've learned so much about how to make different choices about just how you speak to people sometimes, or maybe this isn't an appropriate thing to do at work. It's so different when you're a manager and you see it from another side.

- Andrew Gordon But I used to have an office at Pixar, which there was a secret room, we used to have so much fun where we would make our environment fun, and something that you would think of what an animation studio was. I had this one place called the Lucky Seven Lounge where we made it into a casino and people would come visit.
- Chris Nichols Yeah, it's famous.
- Andrew Gordon Yeah, there was a lot of fun in doing that, but it was always the asking for forgiveness. We would never ask for permission because there's no way anybody would let us do it, so all those places and all of that stuff happened because people just went and did it. And if they got a slap on the wrist later it was because, "okay, maybe this is a little much." But I think that's the kind of stuff that I really think makes a great studio is those little things. Those little moments where people can have fun at work and there's camaraderie, and you feel like it sometimes doesn't feel like a job.
- Chris Nichols Yeah, and it's so important in anything that's creative, right? Creative people sort of need an inspiration and an outlet, they can't work in cubicles and just do the nine to five. It's not just about that, not just about sitting around, just moving vertices around. Like you have to have some motivation, some inspiration so that you have a sense of joy with you as you're doing your job, and you're going to get that through some distractions.
- Andrew Gordon Well, it's true. I think that I've been really trying to push for those types of things where I'm currently working, is little things, even something to have a little bit of privacy, dividers, or encouraging people to talk about what they love, or making sure that people go out and see movies and that they're not feeling like they're clocking in, like you said. I think that's so important to getting good work and inspiring people.
- Chris Nichols Yeah, absolutely.
- Andrew Gordon I mean, we're working on cartoons, kind of, yeah?
- Chris Nichols Yup.
- Andrew Gordon Yeah.
- Chris Nichols I remember actually, I was reading Ed Catmull's book, I forgot the name of the book-

- Andrew Gordon Creativity, Inc.?
- Chris Nichols Creativity Inc., yes. And it was specifically about his first day, during the acquisition of Disney and Pixar and all that stuff, and they were going to visit Disney studios, and they walked by the desks, and all the desks were completely clean, and they were all sort of taken aback by that, it was like, "This isn't a very creative ..." And then they were told later that they told everyone to clean up their desks because they were going to be there, Ed was like, "That's the opposite of what I wanted." You know?
- Andrew Gordon Yeah.
- Chris Nichols And it was a very interesting sort of perspective, I was like, "Yeah, yeah."
- Andrew Gordon I remember, I used to work at a grocery store, every time the owner would come buy they would clean the grocery stores so that it was spotless, and it really wasn't like that all the time. But I think there was a sense of, at least in the days that I was at Pixar, of messing it up a bit. And I think that the old Pixar was very, very kind of, let's just say the fire marshal wouldn't have approved of it, you know?
- Chris Nichols Sure.
- Andrew Gordon It was a lot of people's cubicles were, everybody was trying to outdo each other, and I think that when we first moved into Pixar in Emeryville, it was a beautiful building. It was a gorgeous, very pristine, but immediately we were trying to kind of mess it up and create that kind of personalization. And nobody was saying no, I think that they weren't exactly always happy with some of the things that happened. But I think that it just started to grow, and grow, and grow, and I think that culture also grew to the rest of the company where all the other departments were like, "Oh, well if animation's doing it, why can we do it?"
- So I believe in that, I think that that's a good thing for culture. I think that obviously there is a line of what's right and what's wrong. But I think that it just makes for a place that feels creative, and hopefully, it comes out on the screen.
- Chris Nichols Yeah, well I know it does, I can sense it, I can sense the idea that Pixar is tight creatively in all those amazing things that they do.
- Andrew Gordon Mm-hmm (affirmative).

- Chris Nichols So, that's really, really great. We're actually over an hour, which is perfect. But you did mention before we go, you did mention just before we started recording that you actually had a podcast that you were doing there, right?
- Andrew Gordon Yeah. I used to have a podcast. We actually set it up as kind of a joke, it was called Spline Doctors, and I used to interview mostly all the artists and directors inside the studio, in the Lucky Seven Lounge, or I would even get time in the recording booth and I would do interviews with ... They're still floating around the internet somewhere, I think. I interviewed Brad Bird and Pete Docter, and Andrew and Darla, and Ed Catmull, and gosh, everybody. We got a lot of great people, even Richard Williams came by one time, so that was a time where I was really just so inspired by doing that.
- I felt like it was just something, that again, nobody asked me to do, or nobody even said I could do it. When it started to get like, "Hey, you can't do that without asking somebody." Then I just thought. "Eh, I don't know if it feels the same now." I mean, I understand that it's a big company.
- Andrew Gordon But one day I want to do something similar. I think what you're doing is great and I can't wait to listen to all of these now that I know about your podcast.
- Chris Nichols Yeah. Well, thank you so much. Listen, Andrew, thank you so much for doing this, thank you for coming to THU, hopefully, you're having a good time.
- Andrew Gordon It's an amazing event. I think it's kind of underground, it's so cool. Well no, maybe not now, but I think it's so creative and I love it.
- Chris Nichols Yeah, definitely. Culturally it has the same essence of some of the things that you've been talking about, people just making stuff everywhere. So that's really cool.
- Andrew Gordon Well, thank you so much for having me.
- Chris Nichols Thank you.