INTERVIEW WITH PETER DE SÈVE

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MODERATED BY ALEX WONG

Peter de Seve (b. 1958) is a character designer best known for his work on the *Ice Age* series of films (2002-2012) and *Robots* (2005) for Blue Sky Studios, *Hop* (2011) for Illumination Entertainment, and as his numerous *New Yorker* covers.

AW: Could you go into how you started working with animation studios?

PD: I'll give you background on that whole thing. I was, let's see, after graduating Parsons—I went to Parsons for a BFA in Illustration. From high school, I thought I was going to be a comic book artist. I thought I'd be drawing Spider-Man. The fact is, I never ever finished a comic strip. I loved drawing, and I soon found out that what attracted me was editorial illustration. So I went to gear my work and be quite affected by the kind of work that was being done for newspapers and magazines, especially the op-ed section of the Times. That was the heyday of op-ed pieces when people were doing really interesting stand-alone commentary—with visuals. So that was very interesting. And that kind of aimed me towards doing magazines and books and newspapers. There's a reason I'm giving you all this background. After I graduated in 1980, I worked the next 12-15 years just doing magazines and books. That was my career. It was a pretty good one. It grew organically, and I was pretty busy. I figured that's just what I would do. And then at one point, I illustrated something called *Finn McCoul* with a company called Rabbit Ears. It wasn't exactly animation. It was more like an animatic. I did about 150 watercolors of this Irish folktale. Some of them complex, a lot of them very, very simple—it almost killed me. It was a form of sort of proto-primitive animation. The camera would move across the images and there would be background music and a narrator. I did that, and it was cool, it was something new...although it was very hard for me because it was such a big project, it was very worthwhile.

AW: When was that project?

PD: I would say ’91, ’92.

AW: Was that after you started doing covers with *The New Yorker*?

PD: Concurrent. I’ll pull out *Finn McCoul* and check the dates. But the *New Yorker*, my first cover was in ’93. But as a result of *Finn McCoul*, I got a call from a guy at Disney, a producer, his name is Roy Conli[1]. He asked me if I’d be interested in doing designs for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. He had just begun there, so he wasn’t part of the old studio system and was thinking outside of the box and was inviting someone outside of the system—it was sort of unusual.

AW: Was that a surprise?

PD: It was a surprise. I never planned on getting into animation. It was the same thing, I never planned on getting into *The New Yorker* either. I thought, “Only animators do animation, and only *New Yorker* artists do *New Yorker* covers”—and once you do one, you are one. I’m looking at this…’93 is when I did *Finn McCoul*—they made a book of it as well in ’95.

AW: Can you still get *Finn McCoul*?

PD: You can, I’m looking at it on Amazon right here…you can get it for like $30. I have not showed my children the original video—I keep meaning to do that. But it’s on VHS, and there’s no way to play VHS. But I think they’ve since converted it to DVD.

AW: That would be great to check out.

PD: Yeah…I’m sure you could see images from it somewhere. Maybe on my website? Nah, not on my website, probably. But anyway, Roy asked me if I would do designs on *Hunchback*. I said of course. I went out there for a couple weeks, out to LA, and I did do a lot of drawings for it. Really, I came in a little late in the process, and they…I don’t think I made any real headway with the designs…they were still very Disney. You know they had their Disney look. But it was the beginning of something for me because after that, Dreamworks…I just came into animation at a very interesting time…you could still smell Katzenberg’s cologne, he had just left…and I had no idea who he was…but he was gone…Jeffrey just left…you just missed him kind of thing. And he went

[1] Roy Conli is a producer who previously produced *Tangled* (2010), *Treasure Planet* (2002), and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) for Disney.

on to start this place called DreamWorks. They called me soon after. In fact, there's a funny story, because Katzenberg called me and asked if I wanted to work on *Prince of Egypt*. And I said no..."God I'd love to, but I don't really feel like I'd be that good for it...it seems kind of earthbound, and I don't really connect to it" or whatever the hell I was saying. I was just trying to be honest.

AW: Were you concerned with the story?

PD: It was the story. It was the Biblical aspect. It just didn't appeal to me. The Biblical thing, having been brought up in a fairly religious setting, I resisted it. I went to Catholic school. It just didn't speak to me. And 15 minutes later I got a call, a secretary said, "I have Steven Spielberg on the phone." It was crazy. I have to say, does Spielberg know my work? I doubt it. You know, did he then? I think they had a list of people that they were very wisely taking the reigns calling individually, personally, to project that kind of image. "We've got to get people and the best way to get people is to call, we'll just call them up." It was very effective. I was very flattered. And I told Spielberg the same thing, though, I said "Of course I want to work for you, but I only want to do my best work, and I have a feeling that I just don't think it's going to be a good fit...for me."

AW: And was this right after you did *Hunchback*, the first film you did characters for?

PD: Yeah.

AW: So they were basing it off of that? And your prior illustration work?

PD: It's a good question. My name was probably in the wind. Animation is a very small society. You know...it's a very small world...And Katzenberg I'm sure made it his business to plug into the network and find whoever was available who they could bring on. Anyway, I didn't say no to Spielberg. He said, "No, you got it wrong, it's gonna be great, it's actually gonna be fun...it's gonna be an adventure, it's gonna have humor." I was like, "Okay." And I did that. I worked on that for a while. And I did some pretty good work on it, and you know what? It wasn't a good fit. I stayed on it...I was probably one of the very first designers hired at Dreamworks. I was there when the halls were empty. I was there when there was a small group of us, getting this movie together. And it was in this anonymous corporate black building in LA. It was before Dreamworks was Dreamworks. So it was an interesting time. And you know, the shorter version of that is I did fine work for it, there were other artists who came on who were willing to live there. And I was in New York, and it really required being there.

AW: So you were based in New York and traveling for a few weeks at a time?

PD: I had no intention of living in LA. I was determined to do as much work through FedEx as I could. And I did. Ever since *Hunchback*, I've had a film project. I don't think I've gone very long without one.

AW: So you can work all from New York? Do you fly out for meetings or anything?

PD: Occasionally I'll fly out. With Disney I would fly out for a week here, a few days here. You know, kind of in the cube and go to meetings and do drawings there. But I was always more productive here anyway. I worked on *Tarzan* and did some stuff. Uhh, *Bug's Life*, *Finding Nemo* I did a lot of stuff for. But all that led to *Ice Age*, which was done by a little studio in Weschester in Harrison, actually[2]. And it was their first movie. That ended up giving me a toehold... it allowed me to contribute designs in a deeper, fuller way than I ever had. Previously I would get the story and character descriptions and talk with the director on the phone. And I would do my versions of the characters, and there would be back and forth on that and I would refine and focus based on directors' notes. You know, it's the usual process. But at a certain point it would be like, "All right, see ya." And then two years later I would see the movie and I would try to guess what I contributed. This was for everything but *Ice Age*. *Ice Age* was a different story because it was here in New York, about an hour from where I live. And so it wasn't my plan, but I eventually melted into the pipeline, and became part of the process in a deeper way than I ever had. Beyond just doing the drawings, I started to art-direct sculpting of the characters, and beyond that, the modeling of the characters in the computer. And further even, being part of conversations—meetings on the length of the hair and texture of the skin and the level of reflection on that skin, and how wet should that nose be? All this insane stuff that is what makes computer animated films so interesting and so tedious, too. So much detail—it's mind-boggling.

AW: Before *Ice Age*, you would mainly be doing drawings. Would you be doing turnarounds of the characters? And at a certain point it would just go off to all the modelers and shaders and you weren't involved in that before?

PD: Yes, exactly. Yeah, all the other projects were fun, but it was the first time I actually became...you know, all those years you count up. All those years up until I started to work on *Ice Age*, 19 years out of school...all those years I had

[2] Blue Sky Studios is an animation studio based in Greenwich, CT, and is responsible for producing the *Ice Age* series (2002-2012), as well as *Robots* (2005), *Horton Hears a Who!* (2008), and *Rio* (2011).

been working in my own studio...connected to a network of friends by telephone who were also illustrators, but only by phone. So this was the first time where I was able to work in a studio, something I never thought I would like.

AW: Is part of that the location? It was a lot more convenient for you so you were able to check in all the time.

PD: Yeah, it was sort of chicken and the egg. The more I was there the more I was needed... I sort of became part of the fabric of the studio while still remaining, as I do today, retaining my independent status. I'm still a freelance illustrator, so I can work for whomever I like. But I have the deepest attachment of all my clients with Blue Sky. I have an office there at the center, but it was really interesting and in a way a real breath of fresh air for me to be part of something, a culture, and to be part of...these artists were much younger, and they're very talented, brave, experimenters, and that's something I never was. So it exposed me and continues to expose me to stuff that I might never have been exposed to otherwise, like sculpting and using color and even painting in Photoshop, none of these things I do particularly well, but I do them better than I would have. So I just went on a long, long track, and I have no idea if any of what I said answers any of the questions you have prepared...

AW: That was a great overview of everything that has happened in your career so far in terms of animation. I was wondering if you could go over your process a little bit... How do you ultimately pull the character out of the bag, how do you go about creating a character?

PD: It begins with the script, or if the script isn't done, there's at least a treatment or a sense of who the characters are. I'll get a list of the main characters, and maybe a list of the secondaries, and what I like to do is agree with whomever I'm working with that what I'm going to do for the first pass, which will be roughly...and when I say a pass, that's the period from our kickoff and when we speak again...I'll do 10 drawings of each character. I've taken in what you've said about the tone of the movie and everything, but I'm just gonna do a scattershot and see what hits. They're not gonna be all similar, they're gonna be all over the place. And this way, we might get something a little unpredictable. And so I do that, I do a scattershot. And based on that, hopefully we have a springboard for the next part of the conversation...which is...you know what, there's something about this guy I really like or at least his body. But his face here, I want you to lean more towards that because graphically

that's more what I'm thinking...or personality wise, this guy looks too arrogant and we want to have more naïveté or whatever. So you start to hone in...and so based on those notes I'll take what I've learned about what they've said about these other drawings and I'll try to do a pass that's a little more focused where I pay attention to those notes and trying to implement them.

AW: In the beginning do you like loose instructions? Or a list of every attribute that the character should have?

PD: They tell me whatever they can about the character as they see him. They don't exactly say, "Oh I see him as..." they don't go into too much detail because wisely they don't want to lead the witness. They are coming to me for a fresh view. I think in the beginning the reason I want to do the scatter shot, I want to offer them things they haven't thought of...because you don't always know. Sometimes you do that little doodle and you think...oh crap, that's him. It's not what I was picturing, but I could see that guy. And then you embrace that character. And suddenly the director shows the drawings to the writers who are still busily working on the thing, and they're like yeah with the length of that neck, like with Sid...you know they had no idea what he would look like, and neither did I. So I did a whole scattershot of drawings, there's this one little doodle and the director looked at that and said, "I think that's him." Sid the Sloth. And we went back to that drawing for like two years as we produced this character. But based on that, it starts to have a ripple effect. The writers start to write for that guy. They start to picture him. And the voice, like John Leguizamo, the reason he started to "talk like this" with that overbite, the lisp, was because he saw those two big teeth in the front. And that suggested a way that he would do the voice. The first time I see animation for that character was a test of Sid falling down the side, the wall of a cliff, and because of his shape—he's bouncing on his head on his butt on his tail, all because of the silhouette I gave him, the design. And so it becomes a cohesive thing that happens that starts to affect every aspect.

AW: So have you experienced rewrites from your design?

PD: Yeah. There have been big and small changes from the design. The idea is you know to do a character; I will put him in a context, a vignette, a situation. In *Ice Age 2*, I don't know if you ever saw it, but the Mammoth has a girlfriend in that one. And she's brought up by possums. So I did this drawing of her two little brother possums, hanging by their tail asleep on the branch, and her

hanging there by her tail asleep on the branch, from the tree branch reaching down to the ground. That exact scene is in the movie.

AW: And that wouldn't have been there without your experimental drawing.

PD: No. And in *Ice Age 3*. Yeah, there's a drawing I did of Buck in the third movie. He's kind of an Indiana Jones, Crocodile Dundee weasel. And I did a drawing of him coming up out of the water like Martin Sheen from Apocalypse now, and they wrote that in as well. So it becomes a lot more organic. That's something, that's a result of being embedded in the process. I mean it can happen if you're removed from the studio, but there's a lot more back and forth when you're part of the process.

AW: Yeah, and just with those last two examples that you gave I remember flipping through Tom Bancroft's character designing book[3] which you were actually interviewed in, and that was one of the little tidbits you went over. Your advice was to put your characters in a new situation or to give them an unexpected emotion, and you'll be able to learn something from that hopefully.

PD: Oh yeah yeah yeah, I had forgotten about that, that book. Yeah I think what I said was, "Don't just do your character in his expected emotions, he should be able to do anything." And so if you have a villain who is always glowering, do a drawing of him dancing and laughing. You know, because there might be that scene where he goes against character. He should be able to do that. If your character is well-rounded. It just makes them richer.

AW: Is there a difference between approaching characters you make for animated films and those for *The New Yorker* or a magazine?

PD: Yeah, they have come to inform each other—what I learned. But with animation, you have to...you can cheat in one angle in an illustration, you can do a drawing and say he looks fantastic at this angle. But in computer animation particularly, you have to think more sculpturally. You have to be able to defend your design from all angles, you know. I don't know if you've seen my blog[4] or not...I just posted two things.

AW: Oh yeah, I just saw your elephant sculpture.

PD: Yeah there's that, and then I just posted a drawing. Oh yeah, the elephant sculpture is where I talk about cheating the angle. I just posted another drawing that I think would make a fun sculpture. But yeah, it's the elephant one

[3] Creating Characters with Personality (2006, Watson-Guptill).

where I talk about being able to cheat with a drawing, but having to be kept honest with a sculpture.

AW: And this character is originally from the cover of one of your books—the compilation of your work[5].

PD: Yeah, in fact it's originally an editorial illustration.

AW: And then is the other, I just clicked on your blog right now, is the one that would be a fun character the dragon?

PD: Yeah, it would make a fun sculpture I think.

AW: So the main difference is the characters have to be able to turn around and move and be seen from every angle in animation.

PD: Yeah, they have to be functional. They have to be able to touch their nose with their hand. There's just certain things that you have to keep in mind, because they're going to have to do everything in that movie, they're not going to just be in that one pose like they would in illustration.

AW: So at some point at some studios would you just draw an initial design and other people would figure out how to create the character from every angle?

PD: Yes. To answer your question, I've done some projects where I've just done some inspirational designs, and some poor bastard would have to do the heavy lifting of turnarounds and stuff like that. The most recent example of that is for a movie called *Arthur Christmas*[6]. That came out in November. I didn't do so much in the way of turnarounds for them. They didn't have the budget to keep me on beyond the inspirational drawings so they have somebody doing that work in-house and would occasionally send me a sculpt and I made notes over the sculpt. But after that they were on their own...they did their own thing...for better or worse.

AW: So you've worked with a lot of studios, and I was wondering if you could speak to the different styles and vibes of the studios and their approaches and what worked for you.

PD: I think the biggest difference I think, and I think it's starting to change somewhat, but it used to be that the character designer did the character

[4] http://peterdeseve.blogspot.com/
[5] *A Sketchy Past: The Art of Peter de Seve* (2010, Editions Akileos.)
[6] *Arthur Christmas* was released by Aardman Animations and Sony Pictures Animation in 2011.

design, and then it was handed to an animator who would redesign it so it could be animated, and then it would go to a sculptor and it would be this game of telephone, where the facts get changed from one person to the next, and to some extent studios still work like that, but it's changing. I think with *Ice Age*, I think what we did with *Ice Age* was very unique, and having a character designer take care of the characters and shepherd the characters through the whole process, and I don't think that had really happened before as far as I know, strangely enough. I could be wrong, but I think that notion has started to seep in to other studios, and to great effect. I mean, Nico Marlet[7] is one of the best designers in the world. He's been DreamWorks' secret weapon for years. And for a long time he would just do designs, and then some bastardized version of them would end up in the movie. He could never convince Jeffrey that these were animatable, 3D things. They weren't just starting points, they could be the finished product. Anyway, every now and then a character would sneak through, but it wasn't until *Kung Fu Panda* where they saw how brilliant it could look if it were fully animated. And that's why *Kung Fu Panda* looked so great, because it's pure Nico. He's a character designer. He ended up art directing the sculpts and everything else. And same with *How to Train Your Dragon*.

AW: Would you change anything about the animation industry?

PD: It's been my own personal battle, and obviously it's dripping with self-interest, but I believe that the character designer provides one of the most important elements in the film, right up there with voice actors, and voice actors get millions of dollars. And the character designers provide the face of the film, they really get the look of the actors and they are responsible for 90% of the appeal of the film. The audience has to relate to those characters and love those characters, so the character designer is providing a very valuable service. And it's only recently that I've been able get a credit now that is very far north on the list. It used to be with the caterers, and now I'm at least for *Ice Age* right after the composer. And I think that's right. In terms of the core people responsible for the film, you know among the writer, director, producer etc, the character designer is right up there in terms of the biggest finger print in the film. So what I would change would be the level or recognition. Although for *Ice Age* I think I'm treated very well at least in terms of the credit. I think we should make more money. We should have a bigger piece of the action, which we don't, but that's the other thing we don't.

[7] Nico Marlet is a character designer best known for his work on *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) and *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010).

AW: I hear you're a Frank Frazzetta fan, I think I got that from another interview that you had or I read it.

PD: I was an obsessive Frazzetta[8] fan when I was in high school, and the bug never really went away. And when I was old enough to afford them, I started to buy sketches. So I've got a nice collection of about 10 little watercolor studies, and pen and ink drawings.

AW: Do you try to emulate his spirit that's in his work? Or what draws you to him?

PD: He's part of this species of illustrators that I've always reacted to in a pretty passionate way. He was really the first one that really hit me in this way. There's this tribe of artists who draw from their head and from their imagination and have them anchor in reality—one foot in reality and one in fantasy…basically make the fantastic believable. There are a lot of artists that do that for me. Frazetta is one of them. There are so many. If you go to my blog you'll see them. Thomas Rollinson, and I'm looking around my studio, Winsor McCay, John Peniel to a certain extent. There's a million of them. This guy named Carlos Niñe, did I say Heinrick Clay? Perfect example. He's from the 1920's, but he has the same kind of juice in his line that Frazetta had but he predates him by a good 50 years. If you look on my blog and you go back to some very old posts, you might find some posts I did called "On My Wall" that I did and I think I threw up some of the pictures that I own of these artists.

AW: I actually saw the Winsor McCay still that you have, which is exciting. I know you have to go. Is there any last tidbit that you would like to leave with? Any advice?

PD: I would say, my advice, it's usually the same, it's…I'm seeing a lot of young artists all the time and there are more than ever. And they all seem to want to go into animation and game design, there is first of all drawing, drawing, drawing…you gotta have the drawing. And don't expect Photoshop or Illustrator to make them more impressive. You gotta have that as a foundation. Also I think that there is a sameness that's a synthetic sameness that I see in a lot of portfolios because they are coloring their stuff in Photoshop, or at least they are coloring in such a way that is antiseptic…they shouldn't completely forego traditional materials…I'm not being an old fogey here…I'm saying there is something about the random physicality of the pencil on paper and pain

[8] Frank Frazzetta was an artist best known for his science-fiction illustrations and film posters.

on board that you can't – ah, maybe you can get it digitally – but most people don't. There's a lot of very chilly, very snappy shiny glossy stuff out there that looks the same. There's a sameness.

AW: And it's getting old

PD: I think so. I think so. And it sometimes will homogenize, there might be a unique drawing under there, but it feels like all the rest when it has that slick Photoshop on it in. Mix it up, that's what I'm saying.