



The Story Behind the Story of Monsters University

The school year officially kicks-off at Monsters University June 21. Long before acceptance letters were even mailed out, the filmmakers up at Pixar Animation Studios were already hard at work. Even before animators begin to perfect Sulley's blue fur or create what seems like a never-ending assortment of colorful scales for a University of diverse monsters, the story team was already busy creating the blueprint for the film.

"We've been in story for about three or four years on 'Monsters University,'" recounts story supervisor Kelsey Mann. Mann oversees a team of storyboard artists whose role it is to visually mock-up drawings of exactly what is happening in a film as the story begins to take shape. Mann describes it as "shadowing" director Dan Scanlon's idea of what he wants for the film, ultimately creating an almost comic book-form of what the finished product will look like.

To get all those details about the look and feel of the film's location and what stories might be found there, the story team starts their research as early as possible. "Half of our job is what we do before we get the script. The other half is executing the storyboarding of that script," Mann describes of the process. Some productions take Pixar writers to the Scottish Highlands, others to the sewers of Paris, others under the sea. This time, Mann and team found themselves back in school. If Monsters University looks or feels at all like your alma mater, that's exactly what they were going for: "We took a lot of trips to different universities and different colleges just to come up with ideas and try to capture the feeling of a place."



Beyond being able to physically build Monsters University from the ground up and establish its appearance, the team's research and personal memories helped inform the emotional experience of the monsters who would be just beginning their first year at scare school. "A lot of what we do is external research, and then we do a lot of internal research where we are just thinking about our own experiences when we went to college. We're talking a lot in the story room about what we went through—how did we feel at that time and what did we think, and we try to bring those true life elements to the script."

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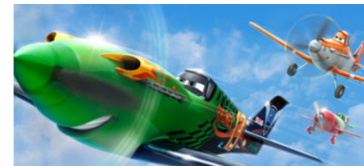
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That “internal” research helped the story team identify what might be going on in the heads of two young monsters just arriving to a new place filled with (literally) scary new classmates. Not-so-spoiler alert: Mike Wazowski and James P. Sullivan weren’t always top scarers at Monsters, Inc., and they got their less-than-smooth start at MU. Though the duo come from a very different, monster-filled world, Mann and team took a decidedly human route with the emotions the two freshman scare students might have felt. “It was great to go back to these characters and see them and be able to imagine them at a younger age. Where did they start from, where did they come from?”

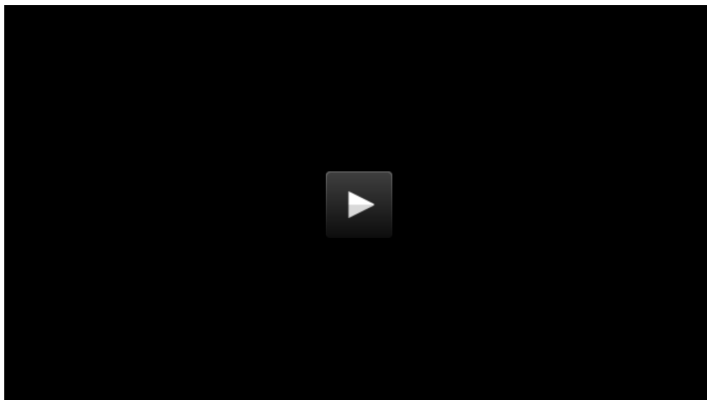
In addition to defining what actually happens in the film—moments, looks, the personalities and arcs of the characters—the story team’s thousands of sketches establish every shot of “Monsters University.” “We did a total of 227,246 drawings, which is a lot,” Mann describes proudly—more than any other Pixar film to date. These drawings are then assembled into a rough draft of the final animated film: “We edit them together and add temp sound effects, temp music, and temp audio and put it up on the big screen and see how the movie is playing.”

Pixar vets like “Monsters, Inc.” director Pete Docter and Chief Creative Officer John Lasseter give feedback in monthly meetings to make sure the story of Mike and Sulley’s start is coming together just right. That means a lot of revising, rewriting, and redrawing. “When you are in story you can’t get married to any drawing because you are just doing them over and over again trying to find the right drawing,” Mann says of the process. But it’s not always back to the drawing board; sometimes the look of a very early storyboard will get a moment exactly right: “There is a scene where Mike is doing these very specific scares, and I remember [director Dan Scanlon] always referring back to the boards and trying to get the feeling of what the boards captured.”

Even the stern Dean Hardscrabble (voiced by Helen Mirren) wasn’t easily pinned down. Writers had to play with different ideas to arrive at what would make a dean of scare-ing... scary. “Dean Hardscrabble was originally a male, and he just came in and did a lot of yelling and screaming and it didn’t really intimidate you. It’s a kind of quiet reserved judgement that really sends the chills up your spine,” Mann says of one of his favorite MU characters.

Years after they first start throwing around ideas, a few story artists are still onboard for the production as filmmakers fine-tune what they want from each character. The ultimate goal, though, is to have crafted a solid plan—that blueprint for the film in feeling, look, and especially heart—to provide the backbone for the finished product. “If we bring a little something of ourselves to it then I think other people can see that and can notice that and they can identify with it more themselves.”

Don’t miss Monsters University when it comes to theaters June 21st! Visit the [Monsters University website](#), and watch the latest trailer:



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