

Production



[John Lasseter](#), the director of *A Bug's Life*, at the Austin Film Festival in October 2011.

Development

During the summer of 1994, Pixar's story department began turning their thoughts to their next film.^[6] The storyline for *A Bug's Life* originated from a lunchtime conversation between [John Lasseter](#), [Andrew Stanton](#), [Pete Docter](#), and [Joe Ranft](#), the studio's head story team; other films such as *Monsters, Inc.* and *Finding Nemo* were also conceived at this lunch.^[7] Lasseter and his story team had already been drawn to the idea of insects serving as characters. Like toys, insects were within the reach of computer animation back then, due to their relatively simple surfaces. Stanton and Ranft wondered whether they could find a starting point in Aesop's fable *The Ant and the Grasshopper*.^[7] [Walt Disney](#) had produced his own version with a cheerier ending decades earlier in the 1934 short film *The Grasshopper and the Ants*. In addition, [Walt Disney Feature Animation](#) (now **Walt Disney Animation Studios**) had considered producing a film in the late-1980s entitled *Army Ants*, that centered around a pacifist ant living in a militaristic colony, but this never fully

materialized.^[8]

As Stanton and Ranft discussed the adaptation, they rattled off scenarios and storylines springing from their premise.^[7] Lasseter liked the idea and offered some suggestions. The concept simmered until early-1995, when the story team began work on the second film in earnest.^[7] During an early test screening for *Toy Story* in San Rafael in June 1995, they pitched the film to Disney CEO Michael Eisner. Eisner thought the idea was fine and they submitted a treatment to Disney in early-July under the title *Bugs*.^[7] Disney approved the treatment and gave notice on July 7 that it was exercising the option of a second film under the original 1991 agreement between Disney and Pixar.^[9] Lasseter assigned the co-director job to Stanton; both worked well together and had similar sensibilities. Lasseter had realized that working on a computer-animated feature as a sole-director was dangerous while the production of *Toy Story* was in process.^[9] In addition, Lasseter believed that it would relieve stress and that the role would groom Stanton for having his own position as a lead director.^[10]

Writing

In *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, a grasshopper squanders the spring and summer months on singing while the ants put food away for the winter; when winter comes, the hungry grasshopper begs the ants for food, but the ants turn him away.^[7] Andrew Stanton and Joe Ranft hit on the notion that the grasshopper could just take the food.^{[7][11]} After Stanton had completed a draft of the script, he came to doubt one of the story's main pillars – that the Circus Bugs that had come to the colony to cheat the ants would instead stay and fight.^[10] He thought the Circus Bugs were unlikable characters as liars and that it was unrealistic for them to undergo a complete personality change. Also, no particularly good reason existed for Circus Bugs to stay with the ant colony during the second act.^[12] Although the film was already far along, Stanton concluded that the story needed a different approach.^[10]

Stanton took one of the early circus bug characters, Red the red ant, and changed him into the character Flik.^[12] The Circus Bugs, no longer out to cheat the colony, would be embroiled in a comic misunderstanding as to why Flik was recruiting them. Lasseter

agreed with this new approach, and comedy writers Donald McEnery and Bob Shaw spent a few months working on further polishing with Stanton.^[13] The characters "Tuck and Roll" were inspired by a drawing that Stanton did of two bugs fighting when he was in the second grade.^[11] Lasseter had come to envision the film as an [epic](#) in the tradition of [David Lean's](#) 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*.^{[12][14]}

Casting

The voice cast was heavy with television [situation-comedy](#) stars of the time: Flik was voiced by [Dave Foley](#) (from *NewsRadio*), Princess Atta was voiced by [Julia Louis-Dreyfus](#) (from *Seinfeld*), Molt was voiced by [Richard Kind](#) (from *Spin City*), Slim was voiced by [David Hyde Pierce](#) (from *Frasier*) and Dim was voiced by [Brad Garrett](#) (from *Everybody Loves Raymond*). [Joe Ranft](#), member of Pixar's story team, played Heimlich the caterpillar at the suggestion of Lasseter's wife, Nancy, who had heard him playing the character on a scratch vocal track.^[15]

Several of the film's voice actors would voice characters in later Pixar films: Foley returned for *Monsters University*, Kind for *Cars*, *Cars 2*, *Toy Story 3*, and *Inside Out*; and Garrett for *Finding Nemo* and *Ratatouille*.

The casting of Hopper, the film's villain, proved problematic.

Lasseter's top choice was [Robert De Niro](#), who repeatedly turned the part down, as did a succession of other actors.^[15] [Kevin Spacey](#) met John Lasseter at the [1995 Academy Awards](#) and Lasseter asked Spacey if he would be interested in doing the voice of Hopper. Spacey was delighted and signed on immediately.^[12]

Art design and animation

It was more difficult for animators during the production of *A Bug's Life* than that of *Toy Story*, as computers ran sluggishly due to the complexity of the character models. Lasseter and Stanton had two supervising animators to assist with directing and reviewing the animation: Rich Quade and [Glenn McQueen](#). The first sequence to be animated and rendered was the circus sequence that culminated with P.T. Flea's "Flaming Wall of Death". Lasseter placed this scene first in the pipeline because he believed it was "less likely to

change."^[16] Lasseter thought it would be useful to look at a view of the world from an insect's perspective. Two technicians obliged by creating a miniature video camera on [Lego](#) wheels, which they dubbed as the "**Bugcam**."^{[10][17]} Fastened to the end of a stick, the Bugcam could roll through grass and other terrain and send back an insect's-eye outlook. Lasseter was intrigued by the way grass, leaves, and flower petals formed a translucent canopy, as if the insects were living under a [stained-glass](#) ceiling. The team also later sought inspiration from *Microcosmos* (1996), a French documentary on love and violence in the insect world.^[10]

The transition from treatment to storyboards took on an extra layer of complexity due to the profusion of storylines. Where *Toy Story* focused heavily on Woody and Buzz, with the other toys serving mostly as sidekicks, *A Bug's Life* required in-depth storytelling for several major groups of characters.^[13] Character design also presented a new challenge, in that the designers had to make ants appear likable. Although the animators and the art department studied insects more closely, natural realism would give way to the film's larger needs.^[14] The team took out mandibles and designed the ants to stand upright, replacing their normal six legs with two arms and two legs. The grasshoppers, in contrast, received a pair of extra appendages to appear less attractive.^[14] The story's scale also required software engineers to accommodate new demands. Among these was the need to handle shots with crowds of ants.^[14] The film would include more than 400 such shots in the ant colony, some with as many as 800. It was impractical for animators to control them individually, but neither could the ants remain static for even a moment without appearing lifeless, or move identically. Bill Reeves, one of the film's two supervising technical directors, dealt with the quandary by leading the development of software for autonomous ants.^[14] The animators would only animate four or five groups of about eight individual "universal ants". Each one of these "universal ants" would later be randomly distributed throughout the digital set. The program also allowed each ant to be automatically modified in subtle ways (e.g. different color of eye or skin, different heights, different weights, etc.). This ensured that no two ants were the same.^[17] It was partly based on Reeves's invention of particle systems a decade and a half earlier, which had let animators use masses of self-guided

particles to create effects like swirling dust and snow.^[15]

The animators also employed [subsurface scattering](#)—developed by Pixar co-founder [Edwin Catmull](#) during his graduate student days at the [University of Utah](#) in the 1970s—to render surfaces in a more lifelike way. This would be the first time that subsurface scattering would be used in a Pixar film, and a small team at Pixar worked out the practical problems that kept it from working in animation. Catmull asked for a short film to test and showcase subsurface scattering and the result, *[Geri's Game](#)* (1997), was attached alongside *A Bug's Life* in its theatrical release.^[18]

Controversy

During the production of *A Bug's Life*, a public feud erupted between [DreamWorks'](#) [Jeffrey Katzenberg](#), and Pixar's [Steve Jobs](#) and John Lasseter. Katzenberg, former chairman of Disney's film division, had left the company in a bitter feud with CEO Michael Eisner. In response, he formed DreamWorks SKG with [Steven Spielberg](#) and [David Geffen](#) and planned to rival Disney in animation.^[19] After DreamWorks' acquisition of [Pacific Data Images](#) (PDI)—long Pixar's contemporary in computer animation—Lasseter and others at Pixar were dismayed to learn from the trade papers that PDI's first project at DreamWorks would be another ant film, to be called *[Antz](#)*.^[20] By this time, Pixar's project was well-known within the animation community.^[21] Both *Antz* and *A Bug's Life* center on a young male, a drone with oddball tendencies that struggles to win a princess's hand by saving their society. Whereas *A Bug's Life* relied chiefly on visual gags, *Antz* was more verbal and revolved more around satire. The script of *Antz* was also heavy with adult references, whereas Pixar's film was more accessible to children.^[22]

It was clear that Lasseter and Jobs believed that the idea was stolen by Katzenberg.^{[8][19]} Katzenberg had stayed in touch with Lasseter after the acrimonious Disney split, often calling to check up. In October 1995, when Lasseter was overseeing postproduction work on *Toy Story* at the [Universal](#) lot's [Technicolor](#) facility in [Universal City](#), where DreamWorks was also located, he called Katzenberg and dropped by with Stanton.^{[19][23]} When Katzenberg asked what they were doing next, Lasseter described what would become *A Bug's Life* in detail. Lasseter respected Katzenberg's judgment and felt

comfortable using him as a sounding board for creative ideas.^[23] Lasseter had high hopes for *Toy Story*, and he was telling friends throughout the tight-knit computer-animation business to get cracking on their own films. "If this hits, it's going to be like space movies after *Star Wars*" for computer animation companies, he told various friends.^[8] "I should have been wary," Lasseter later recalled. "Jeffrey kept asking questions about when it would be released."^[19] When the trades indicated production on *Antz*, Lasseter, feeling betrayed, called Katzenberg and asked him bluntly if it were true, who in turn asked him where he had heard the rumor. Lasseter asked again, and Katzenberg admitted it was true. Lasseter raised his voice and would not believe Katzenberg's story that a development director had pitched him the idea long ago. Katzenberg claimed *Antz* came from a 1991 story pitch by [Tim Johnson](#) that was related to Katzenberg in October 1994.^[8] Another source gives [Nina Jacobson](#), one of Katzenberg's executives, as the person responsible for the *Antz* pitch.^[21] Lasseter, who normally did not use profane language, cursed at Katzenberg and hung up the phone.^[24] Lasseter recalled that Katzenberg began explaining that Disney was "out to get him" and that he realized that he was just cannon fodder in Katzenberg's fight with Disney.^{[8][21]} In truth, Katzenberg was the victim of a conspiracy: Eisner had decided not to pay him his contract-required bonus, convincing Disney's board not to give him anything.^[21] Katzenberg was further angered by the fact that Eisner scheduled *Bugs* to open the same week as *The Prince of Egypt*, which was then intended to be DreamWorks' first animated release.^{[21][24]} Lasseter grimly relayed the news to Pixar employees but kept morale high. Privately, Lasseter told other Pixar executives that he and Stanton felt terribly let down by Katzenberg.^[21] Katzenberg moved the opening of *Antz* from spring 1999 to October 1998 to compete with Pixar's release.^{[21][25]} David Price writes in his 2008 book *The Pixar Touch* that a rumor, "never confirmed", was that Katzenberg had given PDI "rich financial incentives to induce them to whatever it would take to have *Antz* ready first, despite Pixar's head start".^{[21][24]} Jobs was furious and called Katzenberg and began yelling. Katzenberg made an offer: He would delay production of *Antz* if Jobs and Disney would move *A Bug's Life* so that it did not compete with *The Prince of Egypt*. Jobs believed it "a blatant [extortion attempt](#)" and

would not go for it, explaining that there was nothing he could do to convince Disney to change the date.^{[8][24]} Katzenberg casually responded that Jobs himself had taught him how to conduct similar business long ago, explaining that Jobs had come to Pixar's rescue by making the deal for *Toy Story*, as Pixar was near bankruptcy at that time.^[15] "I was the one guy there for you back then, and now you're allowing them to use you to screw me," Katzenberg said.^[24] He suggested that if Jobs wanted to, he could simply slow down production on *A Bug's Life* without telling Disney. If he did, Katzenberg said, he would put *Antz* on hold.^[8] Lasseter also claimed Katzenberg had phoned him with the proposition, but Katzenberg denied these charges later.^[16]

As the release dates for both films approached, Disney executives concluded that Pixar should keep silent on the DreamWorks battle. Regardless, Lasseter publicly dismissed *Antz* as a "schlock version" of *A Bug's Life*.^[18] Lasseter, who claimed to have never seen *Antz*, told others that if DreamWorks and PDI had made the film about anything other than insects, he would have closed Pixar for the day so the entire company could go see it.^{[8][22]} Jobs and Katzenberg would not back down and the rivaling ant films provoked a press frenzy. "The bad guys rarely win," Jobs told the *Los Angeles Times*. In response, DreamWorks' head of marketing Terry Press suggested, "Steve Jobs should take a pill."^[24] Despite the successful box office performance of both *Antz* and *A Bug's Life*, tensions would remain high between Jobs and Katzenberg for many years. According to Jobs, Katzenberg came to Jobs after the success of *Shrek* (2001) and insisted he had never heard the pitch for *A Bug's Life*, reasoning that his settlement with Disney would have given him a share of the profits if that were so.^[26] Although the contention left all parties estranged, Pixar and PDI employees kept up the old friendships that had arisen from spending a long time together in computer animation.^[16]

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