

Partly Cloudy

In this film, clouds not only take on the familiar animal shapes we often see forming above, but cloud people actually create real babies. One cloud, Gus, has mastered the art of creating beautiful, but especially dangerous infants – crocodiles, porcupines, and others like that – and they make the delivery service increasingly difficult for Peck, the stork.

When Sohn pitched that idea to Disney/Pixar chief creative officer John Lasseter, he moved from story artist to director.

Sohn joined Pixar nine years ago as a production artist to work on Brad Bird's 'The Incredibles.' Because that film was still in development at the time, though, he started in the art department for 'Finding Nemo.' He didn't stay a production artist for long.

"I was asked to draw designs for people in the dentist's office," he says. "But, I didn't just want to draw default people, so I put them into a little scenario with kids looking into the fish tank and reacting to the dental equipment."

Director Andrew Stanton and others saw the scenarios and moved him into the story department for the 'Finding Nemo's' third act. When he joined the crew of the 'Incredibles,' he did so as a story artist and animator rather than production artist. He went on to become a storyboard artist and animator for 'Ratatouille,' and a voice artist, as well: He was the voice of Emile, Remy's brother, in 'Ratatouille.'

"That came from pitching storyboards," Sohn says. "They asked me to do the scratch voice and then liked it enough to keep it in the movie. That's just luck."

It wasn't luck, though, that brought him to Pixar. It was hard work on his part and that of his parents, an intense love of animation, and focused determination.



Peter Sohn at Pixar



Pencil sketch from 'Partly Cloudy.'

Sohn was born in the Bronx and raised in New York where his parents owned a grocery store.

"My father got a job as a hot dog cart salesman when he came from Korea," he says. "He had no money, but he saved enough to buy his own store."

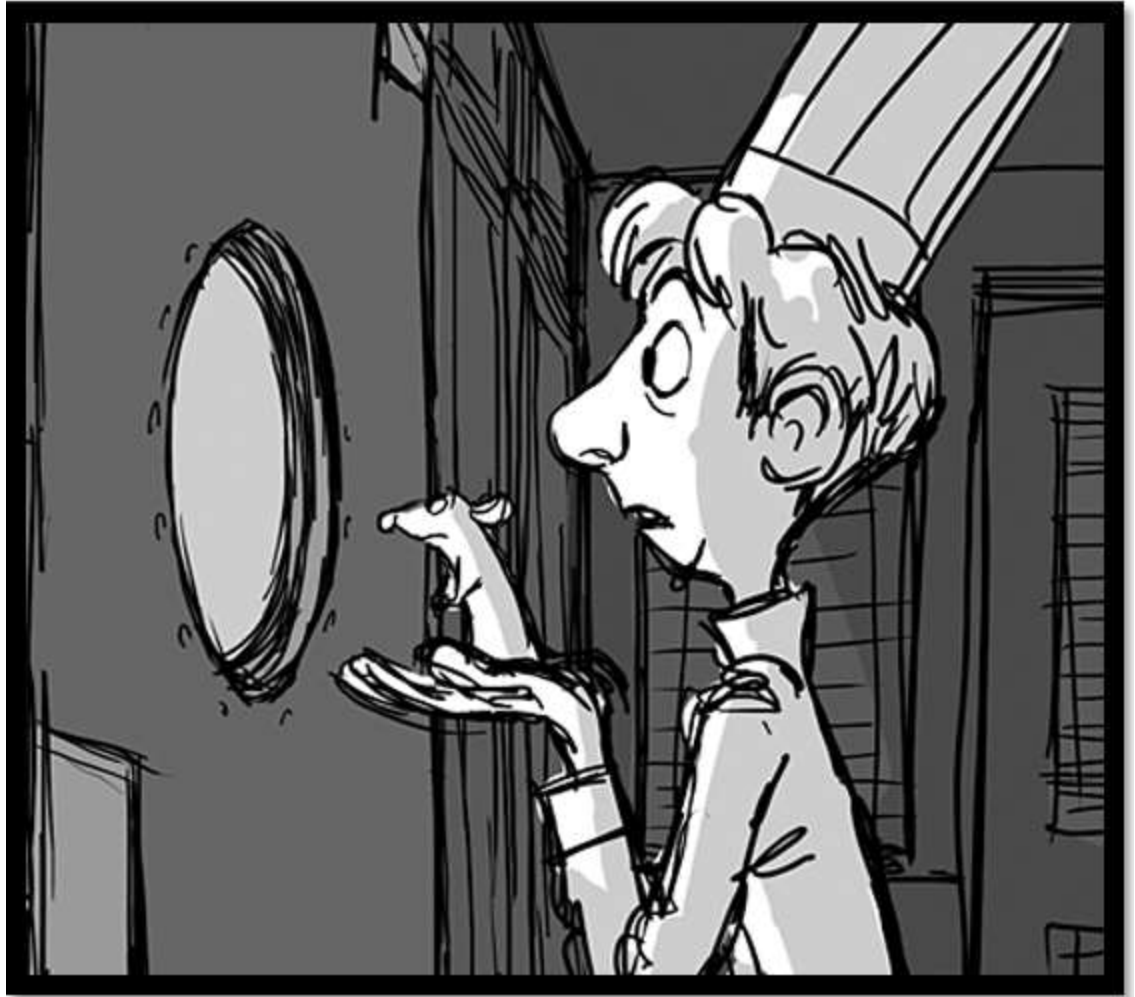
Because both his parents worked from five in the morning until 10 at night, the grocery store aisles became the after-school playground for Sohn and his younger brother.

"We didn't have a guardian and there was no television at the store, so we'd build towers with Campbell soup cans and I'd always draw little drawings and make up stories," he says.

Each time his mother needed to deposit cash from the store in the bank, she took the boys with her on the elevated train into the city. “If it was a good time, we’d go to a movie,” Sohn says. “She loved movies. In Korea, in the town she grew up in, they didn’t have printed posters. Someone had to draw them. So she used to draw the movie posters for the neighborhood.”

Because his mother didn’t understand much English, she chose Disney films. “They were told so well visually, there was no translating necessary,” Sohn says. “She could understand Dumbo and Peter Pan.”

And then one day, Sohn met a man who showed him how artists created those films. “I was really young,” he says. “I don’t remember his face, but I remember the acetate sheet and understanding that was how the movie was made. It was made. It blew me away. Ever since, I wanted to find out more.”



Linguini and Remy in Pixar's 'Ratatouille

By the time Sohn reached the eighth grade, his father was ready for a change. “It’s funny talking about it now,” Sohn says. “It’s really hitting me. It was a really hard time; my parents worked very hard. My father wanted a nine-to-five job.” So, he sold the grocery store and moved the family to White Plains where he bought an art supply and framing store.

Although Sohn’s father bought the store more for the framing side than the art supplies, artists would stop in, and Sohn’s mother, who knew her son was interested in animation, asked the artists about animation schools. Eventually, she found a summer program in animation at a visual arts school in Manhattan with classes taught by “Sesame Street” animators.

“Those guys were amazing,” Sohn says. “They did interstitials, numbers, little stories. But, while the guys next to me were animating with sand and markers, doing postcards and abstract animation, I was trying to figure out animals and doing motion studies. They said I had to go to California, that they don’t teach that stuff here.”

Someone recommended the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). Sohn applied and was accepted. “My mother didn’t want me to go,” Sohn says. “I had also gotten into New York schools. But my father said, ‘If that’s what you want, you’re going.’ I argued with my mother. I said, ‘I’ve got to get out of here.’ But, once I got on the plane and the jet engine turned on, I bawled my eyes out.”

Of course, it was the right thing to do. At CalArts, Sohn found animators who shared his passion.

“I’d be working until three in the morning, flipping pages, figuring out timing, the spacing in the drawings, the rhythm, to get a little elf jumping out of a tree, and the guy next to me was making a monkey climb a tree. We’d just nerd out. I made great friends there that I work with to this day.”

While he was in school, he and his classmates would call animators they admired and ask them to lunch.

“We called all the living ‘Nine Old Men’ at Disney,” he says. “We were such huge fans. We were passionate about what they had learned and done and we had big dreams about pushing the form.”

They also called an up and coming director they liked after watching the animated “Family Dog” episode of the TV series “Steven Spielberg’s Amazing Stories.” That director was Brad Bird. “He was working at Turner when we called,” Sohn says. He’s so famous now, but at the time, he was just one of the nerds we could totally connect to.”

The following summer, Bird gave Sohn a job as an in-betweener for “Iron Giant,” and, toward the end of production, some scenes to work on. “It was one of my greatest fulfilling times,” Sohn says. “Brad was living there, working 90 hours a week. All animators are great observers, and Brad is one of the best.”

After Sohn graduated, he found a job at Disney television, where he worked for a year before moving onto the crew for a Warner Bros. feature. And then Bird, who had joined Pixar to make “The Incredibles,” called. And, Sohn found his tribe.

“It’s a total family thing here,” he says. “These are my people. Every lunch, we talk about the things we love.”

But, even though he’s a story artist, director, and animator on Pixar projects, he still does little drawings and makes up his own little stories, just as he did when he was a child roaming the grocery store aisles. Sohn’s wife Anna Chambers, who he met at CalArts, is also an artist, and both create artwork at home.



"I do a lot of art at home," he says. "Little comic books and cartoons." He included some of his cartoon stories in the "AfterWorks 2 GN" comic book created by a group of other Pixar artists and published by Image Comics, and is working with Pixar artists on another.

Animated films are still his passion, though. In fact, one Disney film that he saw with his mother when he was a child influenced "Partly Cloudy."

"The idea came from 'Dumbo,'" Sohn says. "I've seen that film so many times. There's a scene in the beginning where a stork delivers animal babies and the last one he delivers is Dumbo. I always wondered where the birds get the babies. Then I realized that they come from clouds and that's why they have to be delivered by birds. I just dine on those early films."



Pencil sketch from 'Partly Cloudy'

http://www.cgsociety.org/index.php/CGSFeatures/CGSFeatureSpecial/peter_sohn

Partly Cloudy, According to Sohn

Peter Sohn gives us an exclusive about the importance of *Dumbo*, his mother and animating clouds in directing his first Pixar short, *Partly Cloudy*.

By [Bill Desowitz](#) | Friday, April 24, 2009 **Posted In** | Magazines: [AnimationWorld](#)

Prior to going [Up](#) with Carl and Russell in the latest [Pixar](#) feature, we discover how storks deliver babies in *Partly Cloudy*, the whimsical short from animator/story artist Peter Sohn ([Ratatouille](#), [The Incredibles](#), [Finding Nemo](#), [The Iron Giant](#)). Turns out that Sohn, who voiced Remy's brother, Emile, in [Ratatouille](#), also served as partial inspiration for Russell, the youngster who bonds with the 78-year-old Carl in the [Pete Docter](#)-directed *Up*. Never has there been such a strong thematic and visual pairing between a Pixar short and feature. In *Partly Cloudy*, a neurotic gray cloud named Gus is tasked with making dangerous babies, which puts an extra burden on his beleaguered pal, Peck, the stork assigned to deliver crocodiles and porcupines and electric eels -- oh, my! A misunderstanding nearly wrecks everything, but, like Carl and Russell, they come to realize the importance of their friendship.



[Partly Cloudy](#)'s theme and animation tie it very strongly to *Up*. All images © Disney/Pixar. All rights reserved.

Bill Desowitz: *How did the first public screening go in Austin?*

Peter Sohn: It was really fun. I was breathless for a while, but right at the first couple of laughs with the kittens in the beginning, I was thrilled. It's a great town down there. I had never been there before but everyone was so friendly. And I got to see *Up* for the first time in its finished form. I was moved by it.

BD: *They certainly go well together -- I don't think you could've found a better match. Was it a coincidence?*

PS: Yes, it was a coincidence. I had been helping out with *Up* and then had asked if I could pitch some shorts. So I pitched three of them, all thematically different, and this is the one that JL [[John Lasseter](#)] really connected with.

BD: *So let's start at the beginning with the influence of [Dumbo](#).*

PS: Yeah, I had seen it as a kid and it was one of those things -- I'm sure that countless kids have experienced the same thing with their parents -- it was very moving to me. I don't know, maybe I was just a sensitive kid, but the whole idea of where the storks get the babies from started that young. I was inspired since then but [the story and characters didn't come together] until the making of the short this past year.

BD: *Talk about the pitch and how it went from there.*

PS: The original pitch was just as I explained: There's the world of storks that deliver babies, but where do they get these babies from? And my answer was obviously the clouds. And I had done some drawings of these cloud characters -- taking some photos and Photoshopping eyes and a nose in and then having some birds all flocking up to the skies. I pitched this story of a smaller gray cloud that [lived below and] made some of the dangerous babies. And I showed John these images and he touched on one of them and said let's start developing this one. And that was close to a year-and-a-half ago and it's been a really interesting learning experience for me. Obviously, this is my first [short]. It really is like raising a baby. I felt very much like Gus during this thing -- making something and wanting people to like it.



Sohn pitched the idea of visualizing where baby-delivering storks actually get their babies from and picturing clouds creating them out of thin air.

BD: *And what was the experience like?*

PS: It was really wild because I had worked on a lot of other projects here as a story guy and an animator, and what's funny is that during that kind of production it's not my story. But I'll put my heart and soul into whatever I'm doing. So I would be more experimental with my ideas I'd be giving the directors of the other story teams. And with this one, because it was my idea, I'd be so protective of everything. "This is my kid -- I gotta raise him right!" During story production meetings, I'd pitch certain ideas and there were different endings; there were longer versions. Really early on, the stork gets its own baby. And there was a version where the cloud gets its own cloud baby. But they were too complicated and plot-driven and never got to the root of [whom] these characters were. It's a very interesting thing when you're directing to allow yourself to go to places [that don't work] to find where the story really needs to go. So, in the beginning, I may have been more tightly gripped around some of my ideas, but once I started letting go, it really allowed me to find these characters, and it was really a great lesson for me.

BD: *How did you find the tone?*

PS: I always wanted to have something with heart. And what I mean by heart is characters that are sincere in what they are doing. That was something I had to really look for and find. There were many different tonal characters. Gus was more like a bartender or a frat guy. And Peck went up and down. But ultimately it came down to being a story about miscommunication when I originally pitched it to John. I had grown up in New York and from Korean parents and they spoke very broken English and there were always miscommunications between my mother or father and me. So, from the very beginning, it was: How do these two guys work, a bird and a cloud? That miscommunication idea is a subtle thing: most of the shorts around here don't have any dialogue, but I really wanted to play with how they communicate with each other. And the way Gus looks off at the other cloud [Gloria] was inspired by my mother's reaction when I was going out to play with my friends. She would take it a certain way. That didn't change but how I moved the characters around did.

BD: As you say, there's a misunderstanding between Gus and Peck about their partnership, which Gus takes the wrong way.

PS: Exactly. He loves those babies. They need gators and porcupines in the world and he loves what he does. He just doesn't want to hurt his friend because he knows those babies are dangerous. It's really about how hard relationships can get but sticking with them.

BD: Let's talk about the animation, which is obviously very cloud-driven.



Peck and Gus in their early stages

PS: The animation is heavily based on rhythm and timing... but to describe how a cloud moves was a huge hurdle for us because the short needed to be snappy. And we did tests of Gus moving sharp and crisp, but it just didn't feel like a cloud. And we had to slow him down and get him to be floaty and have his nose and exterior parts move in a certain way and keep the crispness with Peck. So there were many experiments we did with him without even the cloud effect on him: "naked" Gus, who looked kind of like the Michelin Man. And a couple of animators [Matt Strangio and [Dylan Brown](#)] found this really amazing style of keeping him floaty: he doesn't stop ever, he just moves around. John Lasseter had a great call of that where he overshoots his overlap but doesn't rubber band back. He just floats out to that extremity and comes back. That call gave us a great place to shoot for with Gus and we experimented a lot with that and then added the cloud effect on top of that really helped sell Gus' look.

BD: How was this achieved technically?

PS: Gus is literally wearing a 200,000-particle suit. Because he had to be kept transparent, we have an invisible character that we animate that we turn off, essentially, and leave the suit on that we never get to see until later. The suit pretty much looked like a lint guy when we were using him because a cloud is basically moisture and light and the final lighting process is what brought him to life. It wasn't just the cloud movement but how soft the shadows are, how the light works underneath him and what kind of detail we get in the shadows. But he was really an amazingly difficult character to build. In the beginning, when I first pitched this to some of the technical folks, they gave you a lot of options and different "Yellow Brick Roads" to what Gus would finally look like. There was a gaseous-looking Gus and a ghosty-looking Gus. We came up with this version that was more of a caricatured puffy cloud. Sort of like Ralph Kramden from *The Honeymooners*. The really tough challenge was that, because he is transparent and made up of so many particles, the rendering and lighting times are really long. It was a big fear that we wouldn't have enough time to render this short.

BD: But obviously you did. What were some of the other challenges?

PS: What I loved about it was we were using techniques in a new way that no one had ever done before in the lighting and in the particle world like blending shadows. But it was so hard to sell his eyes and his mouth. They were so soft that you could hardly read what was going on the face or the hands. We had to do some tweaks to finally get a smile on his face. And we tried cloudy eyes and it looked scary. Or it was difficult to make the eyelids work. Because the cloud effect is so thin, when he closed his eyes you could still see the eyeball beneath it. We just wanted someone appealing and really cute. And we came up with these eyes and mouth.



Animators Matt Strangio and Dylan Brown found a style of keeping Gus floaty and see-through. This is achieved by having Gus wear a 200,000-particle suit.

BD: *And was any of this repurposed for Up?*

PS: No, actually we took something from *Up*. A storm sequence was tweaked for our own purpose. It was lucky that this technology had just been achieved.

BD: *What about the color palette?*

PS: I always wanted the short to take place in a day: it starts in the morning and ends in the evening. But Noah Klocek, the production designer, brought it to life with the pastels that he had done so that morning and sunset can look exactly the same. So he caricatured it to look really warm and golden for that classical drop of the storks and toward the evening to come up with a look that is its own kind of world. It's so abstract that you want it to be believable, but you also want to caricature it so that every time you saw those colors it would be iconic in a way. And then Tim Best and his lighting crew translated that and brought it a whole new level. It was really surprising for us because there were so many times when we were working that we don't even see the clouds above or Gus in the cloud form. When the lighters come in, which are the last few months, that's we finally get to see Gus and the world.

BD: *And what about the storks?*

PS: I really love the *Dumbo* storks in the beginning and was trying to get that realistic feel. There are really two *Dumbo* storks: the realistic storks in the beginning and the cartoony stork that actually delivers Dumbo. It was a mixture of both extremes: the realistic and finding how to caricature the stork's eyes to get the appealing faces from far away when they're flying in.

BD: *And the babies?*

PS: It was funny because JL kept saying to make them as cute as possible, even the more dangerous animals, because you want them to be the cutest things you'll ever see. We really tried pushing them and caricaturing them and that's what sold them.



The pastel color palette moves from sunrise to sunset over the course of the short, keeping the look iconic but also abstract enough to look believable.

BD: *And your mother was obviously a big influence.*

PS: Ultimately, the spine really came from my mother and me, trying to find our relationship through growing up in New York. That was something I always came back to during the making of the short. How would my mother feel about that? Or how would she react to that? Yeah, that was a big deal. I should tell her that, actually, before she sees it...

And a lot of inspiration really came from the team here. There were some problems that I didn't have the answers to, so the Pixar family of John Lasseter and [Andrew Stanton](#) and Bob Peterson and Pete Docter and [Brad Bird](#) were always there to fuel a different kind of inspiration.

BD: *What were some of their ideas?*

PS: John Lasseter was always pushing the pain stuff with Peck. For instance, how the lamb cloud was a porcupine underneath it. He thought it was funny that it would look like one thing and turn it into something else. Andrew really helped me out with the performances and selling ideas from beginning to end because one of the challenges with a short is to keep the jokes and character beats clear through every level. "Is his idea that he looked up to another cloud still selling?" And then with animation going into lighting: "We need

to brighten that background so that his feather cutouts pop out." Andrew always says, "Know where your audience is and know where you're at with what you're showing." The rhythm is like a poker hand -- don't reveal what you have all at once.

BD: *And what was it like working in [3-D](#)?*

PS: We've just done some of the right eye rendering the last couple of weeks, and that's what forms the 3-D. That world of 3-D has been really amazing. It's fun but it's a whole other set of challenges. You really feel like you're up in the sky in 3-D. It falls really far back in the depth, but you also want to focus where the audience's eyes go, and sometimes Gus' shoulder will be way in the foreground and you'll start looking at his shoulder instead of [what we want you to focus on]. It's a real balancing act of where the focus plane lies on the 3-D. But it was very successful and it's a really crazy thing to fly up there in the clouds in 3-D. 07



Gus thinks even his most dangerous babies are loveable.

BD: *One last thing: What was it like serving as the inspiration for the little boy, Russell, in Up?*

PS: Yeah, that was really early on when I was boarding it. They did these drawings and the [initial] inspiration was me and Pete Docter's neighborhood friend, Russell, an actual kid in his town. I did a lot of scratch voice for it early on... there were some mannerisms that they would catch, but the resemblance with me as a kid is pretty much where it ends. It is such a family at Pixar: you pretty much want to talk about movies and nerd out with these guys all the time.

<http://www.awn.com/articles/ipartly-cloudyi-according-sohn>

Last week, as previously mentioned, I had the opportunity to speak over the phone with Peter Sohn, Pixar animator and story artist, voice of Emile in *Ratatouille*, and now director of Pixar's latest theatrical short film *Partly Cloudy*, which arrives in theatres on Friday with *Up*. A record of our conversation.

Mike: *My first question —and you've talked about this before— is about how you got the idea to do a short based on the classic 'babies come from storks' fable or whatever. Give readers a brief history.*

Peter Sohn: Okay. The idea started a long time ago. The actual spark of it started when I was a kid in New York. My mom took me to go see *Dumbo*, and I remember there's an opening to that film where the storks deliver all the babies. And as a kid I really was wondering where did they get all the babies from. And I had this idea that because they were birds they flew to the clouds in the sky, that's where all the babies came from.

And later, I mean, like a year and a half ago was when I really started fleshing that idea out, when I was pitching it to John Lasseter. He really liked the idea, and then I started really fleshing out the characters and the actual story of what happens. But it was something that was just a seed for a long time until I got to plant it here at Pixar a couple of years ago.

M: *Were you told the story as a kid? Did you believe it? (laughing)*

PS: It wasn't about believing, it's just all I really, kind of, knew as a kid. Like, I remember, that's where —like if we wanted a pet that's where the pet would come from, you know what I mean? [But] then it was really fast after learning where babies [actually] come from.

It was such a innocent thing watching *Dumbo*. And there have been several other stories of stork delivery

mistakes but I didn't really want to go there I wanted to explore the other end of it, and try to find something new about the story.

M: *In an [interview](#) you did with the AWN, you mentioned that you pitched a couple of other short ideas that were rejected in favour of Partly Cloudy. You can't say what those were, can you?*

PS: No, but what's interesting is that they were thematically different from *Partly Cloudy*. I mean, they all had different, kind of, tones to it. It's interesting because I've seen it paired with *Up* several times and I'm very proud that it works with *Up* thematically.

M: *I haven't seen Partly Cloudy yet but I know that there's some very cute babies that were designed that way at John Lasseter's suggestion. Give me other specific examples of his involvement in the film.*

PS: Sure. Like in animation, when we first started animating the clouds, there was a very, kind of, interesting thing that was going on because what clouds feel like —they should feel like they're slow, and kind of undulating, and we did a lot of animation like this, but John was like the short needs to be snappy and have a good clip to it, have a great rhythm to it as well.

So you need to balance both the undulation and the snappiness of the cloud animation, and a great way to figure that out is if you think about it, like, with the overshoot, with the overlapping animation, it doesn't snap back like a rubber band. It stays out there and slowly comes back. So he really —this was during the animation process— where he would have ideas like that to hone us to the proper kind of animation look.

Pixar is very, very critical of finding the character and the style of movement that it needs and with Gus the main cloud we did several tests to try and find it and John was a real, real, you know, prolific part of that.

M: *The design of Russell in Up was based in large part on you —you as a kid. Did anybody in particular serve as inspiration for Gus and Peck?*

PS: Yeah, it's my mother and I, hilariously enough. I mean, because of the language barrier between my mother and I —and my father— but my mother is where I got my film love from, my mom is a great film lover. She grew up in Korea watching old American movies, and when I grew up she showed me all those movies. But what's funny is that when we used to go theatre she wouldn't understand the English and so I would be there translating a lot of the movies for her.

And that was the kind of relationship that I was really trying to find in this —a bird and a cloud both not able to really communicate with each other —oh, no, they can communicate with each other but the whole thing is about a miscommunication where one thing meant something else.

It really —when I made that the foundation, when I was having story issues, I would just go back to, well, How would I react to this if my mom said it this way or if I did this: If I left my mom, if we were having lunch and I went to go talk to someone else for a second. Would she think that I was, like, ignoring her, or what would she think at that point? And I always would go back to that.

M: *As director, how excited would you be to get an Oscar nomination for Partly Cloudy, which seems likely?*

(surprised) Ohh! Yeah, absolutely, it would be very exciting. I'm just living off the high of —I had just shown it to a crowd in Austin, Texas maybe a couple of weeks ago and just having people seeing it— cause I've shown it here to some story guys and we just had it premiere and it had a great response— but having [regular] people watch it, it's like no other feeling you'll ever have.

Just hearing an audience really connect to it and laugh at something, you know, really, really enjoying something that took a while, that a whole crew put their heart into, is the most satisfying thing. I mean, have you made any films? Do you know what I'm talking about?

M: *No, I haven't. That'd be like a dream for me, but...*

PS: Really, it's quite a feeling, just for that [the audience response], and that is something I'll hold on to forever.

M: *Do you see yourself ever helming a feature for Pixar? Is it a dream for you?*

PS: Um, yeah. Yeah, sure. Right now, it's just, I have my ideas that I'm still kind of putting into pots, growing the seeds. When they're ready to really grow, I'll show somebody.

<http://www.bigscreenanimation.com/2009/05/q-peter-sohn.html>

Sohn: "I came to Pixar in 2002. I was at Warner Bros. and I got an invite to work on *The Incredibles* but my animation reel was too green for Pixar, but I got into the art department for *Finding Nemo*. Ever since then, I've been moving around from department to department, film to film."

S101: **Where did the idea for 'Partly Cloudy' come from?**

Sohn: "That was an idea I had as a kid: it was one of those 'what if, where if, why if'-type things. I had a chance to pitch some shorts, and one of them was this one, I thought it could be a really cool world."

S101: **In the short, you set up this wonderful dialogue between Gus and Peck. What were the characters as you saw them?**

Sohn: "It started out like *The Honeymooners*, where it was this Ralph Kramden/Ed Norton relationship. But then it started turning into my mother and I. It was a cool learning experience, finding these characters and breaking them down into these personal things that I had grown up with."

S101: **How so?**

Sohn: "Gus is a fiery kind of artist: he makes things that are kind of difficult, but he loves it. Peck is a loyal bird, but knows it's a hard relationship, it's a tough thing to live with, and how do you answer that relationship?"

S101: **When I talked with [Doug Sweetland](#) about 'Presto,' he talked about how much of a change there was from his initial vision to what actually ended up onscreen. Did you have a similar journey?**

Sohn: "Oh yeah! I have to say 'Ditto' to everything Doug said. What I initially pitched was almost like a commercial, with Gus getting his own baby at the end. I was saying, 'I can't let go of this! This has gotta be the ending!' I held onto it for so long, but understanding what the process is of letting go, and letting your babies go! That was a real challenge."

S101: **What made you let go of that?**

Sohn: "It was figuring out, 'What am I saying with this short?' It was, 'how do I answer this relationship' versus 'wouldn't it be cool if there was this gimmicky cloud-baby at the end?' When I started looking deeper, finding the answers: what is Peck trying to say? He's trying to say that he loves Gus and he's not going anywhere, and that meant more to me than his present."

S101: **What were your visual inspirations for 'Partly Cloudy'?**

Sohn: “*Dumbo* was the first visual inspiration: the whole storks thing and the mother-son relationship. A lot of it was just drawing it out and collaborating with a bunch of people. It started out like Picasso mixed with a toilet paper-commercial mascot, such a cheesy thing. So collaborating with a lot of the technical and art people was really important to getting the look of the short right.”

S101: Who was really important to this process?

Sohn: “There were two guys: Mike Fu and Dave Bett. Finding what a cloud person looked like was a real challenge because clouds are wispy, see-through things. You can’t just put eyeballs and a smile on there because you’d just get pool balls and a weird tongue in this cloud. So we had to thicken them up and really caricature them, and we’d get so technical that there was no feeling to them anymore, so we’d have to push back and make them broader and more cartoony.”

S101: Who else was really important for finding the right track?

Sohn: “The meetings were mostly with JL: John Lasseter. He is completely focused on helping you find your story. It’s like this parent who tells you, ‘I’ve raised kids before, this is what I know about raising children.’ And me as a new parent, saying, ‘No! I know what I’m doing!’ (*RdC giggles*) But later on, I started to realize, ‘Ah, wise old man. I will listen now.’ Andrew Stanton and Bob Peterson were in the mix as well.”

S101: Who really guided you to that turning point that you talked about before, cloud-baby versus making the relationship work?

Sohn: “Andrew Stanton and Bob Peterson, both of them were asking me, ‘What do you want to say?’ I kept thinking, ‘I’m not trying to say something, I thought this would be a funny kind of thing.’ They were telling me to look deeper, in very different ways.”

S101: Chatting with animator [Jason Boose](#), I learned that the character of Russell was based on you, Peter. Where did that come from?

Ronnie del Carmen: “As part of the Pixar roster, Peter often lends his voice to various characters as we’re studying them. When we were making *Up*, there was only Carl for the longest time, there was no little boy. When the little boy character was created, we were thinking, ‘What would this little boy be?’ He needed to be this antithesis to Carl.

“When we were talking about these things, we were always looking at Pete, we’d start using him as an example: ‘Yeah, like Pete.’ So when we were fashioning this little boy, all the characteristics were already present in this guy who was there helping us draw the sequence.

“And because Peter has this great ability to add charm to a character. If you’ve seen anything from Pixar, and you know the people who make them, you can see the person behind the creation. When I watch ‘Partly Cloudy,’ I see Pete. With Russell, we wanted that charm and that engaging character: eternally curious but always lovable, and I was thinking, ‘Boy, that was easy!’ (*laughs*)”

Peter Sohn: “I would remember all the caricatures you would do, when he was turning into that chubby boy, and you were asking me, ‘When you were growing up, did you do these kind of things?’ And I’d say, ‘Yeah, I have a Cub Scout book.’ It was a slow, kind of melding in while they were figuring out the story. But when I saw the Asian thing, I thought,

‘Oh cool! An Asian kid in a movie!’ Like in *Temple of Doom*: ‘Indiana Jones has an Asian kid buddy? Yeah, I can’t wait to see that!’ (*Ronnie laughs*)

S101: Minorities in movies tend to be a tough sell in Hollywood. Did you have any resistance with the character of Russell?

RdC: “Not really. It was all about the characterization. Once you see the pairing of the two characters, the fact that he’s Asian is really beside the point. When I travel with the movie in Asian countries, audiences appreciated the fact that while Russell was Asian-looking, we didn’t play up the fact that he was Asian.

“He was just a kid; he wasn’t a caricature. We were very careful to represent a child, not an Asian, because it would have thrown the story off-balance if we had emphasized it.”

S101: It’s fascinating because you have Carl: very set in his ways, blocky, immovable. And then there’s Russell: soft, round, high-energy. What was the process of building the dialogue between these two characters?

RdC: “There was also another person that Pete Docter knew, a young kid around his neighborhood whose name was Russell, who is a Cub Scout. This kid has no ‘Slow’ button, doesn’t edit what he says. He walks into a room and just says what he’s seeing. He doesn’t mean to be disruptive, he just feels like he’s welcome anywhere. He also has a short attention span; he’ll move off right away and onto the next thing.

“Pete Docter brought him into the studio and we watched him doing the tour, and he was just like a top: spinning every which way. He wasn’t annoying; he was quite charming but his energy level was so different from the other kids.

“That scene in the movie where Russell first walks in the house, when it’s hundreds of feet high in the air, he puts down his backpack and starts looking around: ‘I’ve never been in a floating house before. Oh look! Goggles!’ He’s completely into the next moment and that’s quite charming.”

S101: Was Russell totally designed just to be the antithesis of Carl?

RdC: “That’s one of the tools you employ when you’re trying to create a character: put them up in trees and throw rocks at them. For an old man, the complete opposite is a kid. If the old man’s uncommunicative and surly, you want a kid that’s bubbly and full of life. So those opposites will push all the right buttons in Carl: make him annoyed, break him out of what he’s used to. Which is what we’re trying to do.”

S101: Peter, I heard you also worked on a few sequences for *Up*. Which were those?

Peter Sohn: “I worked on several sequences: when the house lifts off the ground, the first meeting with Dug. There were some other sequences that are no longer in the movie.”

Ronnie del Carmen: “You did the first version of meeting Kevin the bird as well.”

Sohn: “Yeah.”

RdC: “The core of those sequences that Peter boarded essentially stayed the same. We kept all the good parts that he put in. You would think that – because we didn’t have Pete in our story crew for the longest time while he was working on

‘Partly Cloudy’ – we would replace those sequences with more updated versions. But no, most of those core things that Pete did stayed in the sequences.”

S101: What were you trying to convey with those sequences?

Sohn: “Carl going up was a real breaking-away thing. I remember thinking at the time, ‘What would be fun about this?’ That’s how I begin everything I’m working on. How could a house fly? Just the practical terms, but then we’re seeing that he’s really breaking out of his life here. At first it’s just, how do we lift a house with balloons? After a while, it was: what does this say about Carl.

"This city is his cage, and how does he break away from that. There’s a scene where his house takes out an antenna; I was working with Ronnie, Bob and Pete about that. It wasn’t in the script at the time, we needed a scene where this was going to happen.

“With ‘Meet Dug,’ there were some lines that were coming up: ‘I can smell you’: there were some ideas, but mostly it was playing with the characters to see what would happen. Ronnie and the directors had what they wanted, but they said, ‘Go for it, and we’ll sculpt it with you’ before we put it into the reels, knowing that it’s gonna change later.”

RdC: “Pete’s one of those few story artists that you can safely say, ‘Go for it.’ He’s not only great at structuring a sequence in a way that’s very entertaining, but he’ll also find stuff along the way that you’d be so happy that he got to.

"There were scenes in ‘Carl Goes Up’ that most people would not pay attention to. For instance, when Carl’s house knocks over the antenna, there were all these pigeons on the high-tension wire that flew along with the house. It’s a celebration; Nature is applauding Carl for going on this adventure. It also wiped the screen in such a way that you’d think this was an almost cosmic event. And the next thing you’d see would be Carl’s face going, ‘Yeah.’ (*Everyone laughs*)

“You don’t write that. That’s the sort of thing that only comes out in storyboarding; you can’t write that in a script. Because Carl’s not going to do a happy dance (*Peter laughs*), that would be awful! That’s where a great story artist comes in; you let them find it. I don’t want to write it, it’s better if you let someone like Pete find it.

S101: You let the artist come up with something that’s better than you originally envisioned. Is that one of Pixar’s big secrets?

RdC: “Yeah, yeah, that’s the whole spirit of collaborating. Any one of us has a different point of view how to tackle a problem but, all together, we could funnel our solutions, distill it, and come up with the best way to solve these problems. Lone-wolfing it, as romantic as that is, is very lonely. Not only that, you don’t know if you’re doing anything good! (*laughs*) So this is the only way I know how to make these things.”

Sohn: “But it’s not like Ronnie is passing this stuff off. Ronnie is boarding away like nobody’s business and, through his work, it’s inspiring the rest of the crew to do their best.

“All the beginning montage, all the drawings, that was Ronnie, and we were taking that back to our desks, looking at it and going, ‘This makes me want to do my best, too.’”

S101: Was the opening montage one of your big sequences, Ronnie?

Ronnie del Carmen: “I did it with Bob Peterson and Pete (Docter) and all the story artists. We’re all going in there, trying to find the truth about the story of an old man’s life. I mean, we went other places, too (*laughs*), but that’s not in the movie.

“We tend to ask those questions: ‘What is the truth about an old man’s life? And how do we represent that without putting any dialogue in there?’ And then there’s the point where Carl finishes his journey in the prologue and finds it kind of hollow. That was where we were going to prove whether or not we had an emotional story.

“We couldn’t have him say stuff, we needed to observe it. It’s like seeing a family member who’s going through a hard time: he doesn’t want to talk about it, he doesn’t want to confront the pain. So you observe his pain from a distance.

“That’s what we wanted to do with Carl: we wanted the audience to feel for him at the beginning. That’s much better, to our mind, than having him talk to the audience.”

S101: What sequence in the movie do you feel proud of?

RdC: “Where Carl sits down and opens Ellie’s adventure book.”

S101: And finds it all completed.

RdC: “Yeah, we had to tell the completion of his story arc without dialogue. We had to set up all the components of this epiphany from the very beginning. So, if we did our job right, everything we had set up in the prologue would come together here. And I wanted to do it with no dialogue.

“But how do you dramatize this, and make it compelling, to see someone sitting there and just turning pages? Because we had this emotional story to tell, it felt important for me to look at Carl’s face, and all these little emotions that have to cross it. And I wanted to show that finding that Ellie had put in pictures beyond the page of ‘Stuff I’m Going to Do’ was going to be a surprise to him.

“(voice drops to a whisper) He closes the book, the finger is on the page, the page slips, and reveals something behind it that Carl had never seen before. So when he pulls away that page, he’s going to be surprised.

“In the hospital bed, Ellie had been pasting together the greatest adventure she had ever had, which was her life with Carl. And you have to watch his face change: from surprise, wistful, to happy. He’s absolved. So you have to be careful about what you choose his face to show: his arms can’t flail, he can’t stand up, it’s a subtle thing.

“From the time I was storyboarding it, Pete Docter had been looking for a temporary musical cue. He hadn’t seen anything I had done, and I didn’t know he had been looking for that. He calls me: ‘Ronnie, I got a piece of music for you.’ He didn’t know I had been storyboarding this far.

“So I put the music right on top of the storyboard sequence – I forget what piece of music it was – and I didn’t time the sequence. Then I pushed ‘Play.’ And it worked.

“So I brought Pete over, and showed it to him and he said, ‘There he is.’ And it was so amazing that I didn’t want to touch the sequence after that! (*laughs*) I don’t know what we just did, but I don’t want to ruin it.”

<http://suite101.com/article/peter-sohn-on-partly-cloudy-interview-a163087>