

THE KEY LESSONS

Humble Beginnings
Just get started.

Setbacks Can Lead to Your Dream Job
Some opportunities come the hard way.

The Imagineering Process
10 steps of attraction design.

Make Something Happen
Nothing will happen if you do nothing.



Magic Journey

My Fantastical Walt Disney Imagineering Career

BY Kevin P. Rafferty · Disney Editions © 2019 · 304 PAGES

“Walt Disney Imagineering has a mind, heart, and spirit of its own. It brings things together and draws people together as well. It does what it needs to do when it needs to do it. It survives and thrives. It falls but leaps way back up. It calls talented people with varied interests to itself and gives them a chance to discover who they are so they can make a difference. It presents impossible challenges and helps its Imagineers rise to the occasion when they need to the most.”
~ Kevin Rafferty from *Magic Journey*

If you’ve ever wondered how Walt Disney Imagineering comes up with its ideas for theme parks, cruise ships, and resorts, this book is for you. While other books provide a general overview of the Imagineering process, *Magic Journey* actually takes you behind-the-scenes sharing detailed stories of how attraction concepts were imagined, shaped, and created. It seems we’re entering a new era of Disney attraction storytelling as some of the post-Walt Disney Imagineers near retirement. If you’ve enjoyed other books chronicling how Walt’s Imagineers like Bob Gurr, Rolly Crump, and Marc Davis created classics like Haunted Mansion and Pirates of the Caribbean, you’re going to enjoy this one too. You’ll have even more appreciation for some of the modern attractions after reading Kevin Rafferty’s book.

Kevin Rafferty is a Walt Disney Imagineer with a distinguished 40-year career creating and co-creating many of the attractions at Disney’s parks and resorts. In the first half of his book, Rafferty shares his personal story of how he started in an entry-level position at Disneyland and eventually worked his way up to be one of the main creative talents at Walt Disney Imagineering. The second half of the book chronicles the behind-the-scenes stories of how he and his fellow Imagineers created, designed, and developed attractions such as Toy Story Midway Mania! and Cars Land. This book is a treasure for Disney fans who crave detailed information on the creative process of Walt Disney Imagineering (WDI). While Disney has published books that cover the general principles and practices of WDI, this book provides stories that reveal the inspirations, research, challenges, and personal interactions that make new attractions possible in the parks. Plenty of books have been written about how Walt Disney and his original handpicked Imagineers created Disneyland and planned Walt Disney World, but today’s Imagineers’ stories and processes have not been covered much.

“I never ever imagined
when I was a dishwasher
dreaming big dreams in
the very parking lot
where Cars Land stands
today that someday my
dreams really would
come true.”

- Kevin Rafferty

The book is written as much for current and future Imagineers as it is the general reader. Rafferty's book offers his experiences as a guidebook on how to create and handle the many challenges found on an attraction project; but the lessons are told in a personal manner to inspire and encourage the reader to pursue their own dreams as well.

If you've always wondered how a concept and story for a Disney attraction is created, you'll find out in this book. It's not a quick read—which is a good thing! It's 304 pages of small type, packed with details you rarely find in a post-Walt Disney era book. I encourage you to read the book, so you can enjoy the in-depth background stories of the Disney attractions you love. Now I'll share with you some of the Key Lessons I took away from the book.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

So, what was the creator of Cars Land and the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror's first job at Disney? Dishwasher. And what was he promoted to after washing pots and pans in the kitchen? Busboy at Club 33 at Disneyland. In remembering his first day at Club 33, Rafferty shares the attention to detail in the small things that makes the Disney Difference:

“My first duty was to serve an individual pat of butter to each guest. This was accomplished by first lifting said pat from a silver seashell-shaped dish—ensuring it rested comfortably on the curve of the cocktail fork, not stabbed onto the prongs for goodness' sake—and then, while standing behind the guest's right shoulder, to raise the butter-patted fork over said shoulder and placed down upon the bread plate, positioned at precisely two o'clock, all without interruption or disturbance...

“I quickly got the busboy biz down pat. Before long, Jim Lowman, then manager of Club 33 (who at the time of this writing was retiring after fifty years of service at Disneyland), promoted me to maître d', then sous-chef, followed by waiter, bartender, and finally, lead, which was like assistant manager, all in less than two years.”

~ Kevin Rafferty from *Magic Journey*

It's interesting that Rafferty's humble beginnings started as many of today's Disney leadership did. Dan Cockerell, recently retired Vice-President of the Magic Kingdom, started his Disney career in the parking lot of EPCOT. Kevin Lansberry, Chief Financial Officer of Disney Parks, Experiences, and Products, started as an accounting clerk at Walt Disney World. While some leadership is hired from outside the company, a lot have worked their way up from the bottom of the organizational chart. Rafferty's story demonstrates that the time working in these introductory roles isn't wasted because he learned how the parks work from the ground up. In his spare time, he often wandered the parks after hours watching maintenance workers and groundskeepers freshen, repair, and address any problems before the next day's guests arrived for a magical experience. Paying his dues in these roles also gave him an appreciation and understanding of how the attractions needed to be designed to ensure the cast members could

“When WED called to offer me the junior job I jumped on it....Sure, I took a cut in pay to take a job others may not have wanted, but befriending and learning from the giants of the industry was priceless.”

- Kevin Rafferty

run the operations smoothly while giving the guest the desired experience. The lesson we can take away from these early career stories is that no matter what role you're in, new doors can open if you tackle your current job as a learning opportunity and do it the best you can. Many of the things you learn in those roles can come in handy when you're making bigger decisions later. You'll be more informed and be able to relate with what your employees are trying to solve and accomplish as well. And never forget that you also serve as a role model for entry level employees who hope to rise to higher positions in the company one day.

SETBACKS CAN LEAD TO YOUR DREAM JOB

Working at Club 33 opened doors for Rafferty. He met many movers and shakers from Disney, other leading companies, and Hollywood. He enjoyed his lower level management job in the exclusive club, but when he saw a poster that said WED Enterprises (now Walt Disney Imagineering) was hiring, he jumped at the chance to apply. Disney was creating EPCOT and Tokyo Disneyland at the time, and it needed a lot more cast members in Imagineering to bring the new projects to life. With a college degree in art completed while working in the Disney kitchens and clubs, he hoped he was qualified for a creative role. He didn't get the artistic job he hoped for. He was hired at WED in 'special services' framing and matting the art work of other Imagineers, but he was working every day around the legends at Disney he admired so much. During his breaks, he wandered the halls of WED talking to the experienced Imagineers about what they were working on. And his job prepping their work for final display gave him the opportunity to regularly interact further with them as well. Rafferty later considered this a blessing:

“The world-class quality of the original art being produced at WED made me realize I had put my own artistic ability into a category much higher than it deserved. When I went in for my interview, I thought I was ready to jump right in and design away that very day. But I was clearly not ready, and therefore grateful my portfolio case was never opened....

Despite the misgivings I had about whether I possessed a creative soul I stuck it out, month after month, keeping my eyes and ears open while climbing the steep mountain to learn everything I could, directly and indirectly, from the gurus who resided at the summit of the art of WED Enterprises. And by that I don't mean visual art only; I mean the art of the process of creating enjoyable, memorable, and operational three-dimensional immersive entertainment experiences for our park guests.”

--Kevin Rafferty from Magic Journey

Enjoyable, memorable, and operational three-dimensional immersive entertainment experiences for park guests.

If you want to know what Disney pursues in its parks and resorts, it's that! Enjoyable: they have to be fun in the moment; Memorable: they have to be remembered years after going (so hopefully the guest will come back); Operational: they have to work. Three-dimensional immersive: the guest has to *feel* like they're in a real place, even if it's make believe (the sights, touch, sounds, smells, etc., all have to work together to transport

the guest to where Disney wants to take them); Entertainment experiences: That's Disney's business right there (this is what they do and everything is focused on that); and For park guests: all this is done with a focus on the paying customer to ensure they're getting their money's worth...and then some!

Everything at WDI and Team Disney is focused on these components. **Do you know what your operation is focused on? What do you ultimately try to deliver to your customers? Is everyone in your organization consistent in pursuing the same goals?**

Rafferty learned a lot about themed attractions when a new opportunity came to him via an old friend from Club 33. Mark Rhodes had been transferred to a new department called Scope-writing...and he was the whole department, as it was brand new and set up to help create "Project Scopes" for the large EPCOT and Tokyo Disneyland projects under way. Scope-writing was housed in the Project Estimating department inside the project management division. These two creative individuals weren't going to write shows for the parks; they were to capture all the elements of everything to be built inside the parks. **As Rafferty describes their job:**

"Project Scopes as they became known were matter-of-factly written descriptions of every element of every new theme park project in the hopper. They also included all of the pertinent facts and figures, such as facility square footages, animated figure details (including number of functions, lineal feet of ride track, ride vehicle specs, audio and lighting equipment, etc.; the list goes on and on. These handy all-encompassing encyclopedias, which became the 'go to' source for all project information, were attached to the cost estimates for everything being designed and developed, including shops, restaurants, back-of-house facilities, shows, attractions, entire lands, and entire parks. In a nutshell, the scopes, which evolved concurrent to the evolution of the projects themselves, helped explain and therefore justify the numbers in the estimates."

Can you imagine a better education for theme park design than this job? And yet, to others at WDI—and even to Rafferty and Rhodes themselves—it was not seen as a creative job, so it lacked the appeal of the more artistic positions designing the parks...that is until Rhodes changed the name of the department from Project Scopes to Scope Productions. Rafferty became Rhodes' "graphics specialist," and it was his job to "embellish the scopes with the latest facility plans, elevations and ride layouts, related concept art, and progress photos. 'Basically, Kev,' as Mark put it, 'to make them pretty.'" While he wasn't dreaming up the attractions yet for WDI, he was learning in great detail what went into them.

Rhodes and Rafferty enjoyed working together, but then the new parks were completed, and WDI was forced to institute major layoffs. Rafferty was one of the casualties. He would no longer be working at his beloved WDI desk. He was also disappointed that he never had the opportunity to apply his own creative skills to coming up with new ideas for WDI. But he had to roll with it, so with his portfolio in hand as a graphics specialist at Disney, he landed a job at a small advertising agency in Orange County. He started designing and laying out ads, but eventually worked his way

into copywriting and directing TV spots for the commercials. While it looked like WDI was in the past, Rafferty shares that he was actually developing a new track record that would be useful later in his second career at Disney:

“This experience was most useful in my outside-of-Disney development because attraction stories are also short stories that need to be written and directed. Some attraction stories are so short that they last a whopping ninety seconds! Copywriting forced me to distill the story and/or message down to its purest essence. The other growth experience that came out of working in the ad biz was learning to pitch an idea for a single ad or an entire campaign. You can imagine how this was useful in my career as an Imagineer in boosting confidence when it came to quickly and clearly communicating ideas.”

“Growth Experience.” I like that idea. When tough times happen, it’s easy to give up and lose your motivation. But there might be an opportunity in the situation to learn some new skills that you wouldn’t have developed if you were still in the same job. The key is to keep working away and growing until the next lucky break comes. For Rafferty, who had moved onto a corporate communications job at Edison Electric, it came in an invitation to come back to WDI as head scope writer. Mark Rhodes was transferring into show writing and recommended to his bosses that Rafferty take his place. With a track record as a copywriter, he could now move into a *writing* job at Disney. This little change in his job responsibilities made everything else in his future career at WDI possible. With the writer designation, he could start helping WDI come up with ideas for shows too. The rest is WDI history, but had he not been laid off and become an established writer, he may not have gotten the chance to move to show writing later. As the televangelist Joel Osteen often says, “Sometimes a setback is really a setup for something better in the future.”

Think of Rafferty’s career at Disney like a steam engine. A locomotive takes a while to build up steam, but once it reaches a high enough temperature, BOOM! Off it goes. Rafferty learned Disney from the ground up in the kitchen at the Plaza Inn, how to deliver the premier Disney guest experience at Club 33, the details that go into attractions working on scopes and layouts, and catchy writing and pitch making in advertising and corporate communications. Once he got the opportunity to work on show writing, he was primed for takeoff. The rest of the book shares in-depth stories working on new attractions, but it’s important to know how he got there. Whether you become an Imagineer at Disney or are pining for a more interesting job in your career, the first half of *Magic Journey* shares valuable lessons for making things happen in your life. In the following sections, I’ll share some of the inside stories Rafferty tells in the creation of many of your favorite Disney rides and restaurants.

THE IMAGINEERING PROCESS: 10 STEPS OF ATTRACTION DESIGN

So what is the Imagineering Process? How does WDI create those amazing three-dimensional immersive entertainment experiences you love so much? While Rafferty doesn’t specifically list

the steps, I'll try to capture what they might be based on how he tells the stories of the attractions' origins:

Step 1: Story—"What if...?" All projects at Disney begin with a story, but pinning down that story can take time. At WDI, this stage of the project is known as "Blue Sky," meaning the sky is the limit. The source of the ideas can come in many different ways. Sometimes Imagineers are given a theme to develop, such as the Star Wars Galaxy's Edge lands at Disneyland and Walt Disney World; sometimes Imagineers are told to "do something" with a location inside the park and make it better; sometimes Imagineers are told to develop a restaurant or park expansion in a certain area; and sometimes Imagineers dream up their own ideas and pitch them to WDI and company executives for consideration.

Regardless of the source, stories are often developed by starting with the phrase, "What if...?" As Rafferty explains how the idea for Typhoon Lagoon was created:

"Where do you start when you start to ideate something new? You start with a story. 'What if a typhoon swept in and turned a resort town upside-down? Everything is topsy-turvy after the storm leaves and it's all fun and funny. You know, what if the storm had a sense of humor? What are those things, those quick-read, visual-gag things the storm left behind?'"

Ideas aren't to be judged at this stage of story development, but are to be built upon instead, often by saying "Yes, if...". I find it amazing that from a simple idea generating in a person's head and kicked around a small team that a ride costing a hundred-million dollars is built. And yet apparently, much like the early days of WED when it was just Walt and a handful of his creative people, many of the rides emanate from a few main idea generators who are really good at coming up with interesting story concepts. Plus, the ideas reflect the personal interests and passions of those idea people. For example, Rafferty enjoyed cars and sci-fi, so he was creative lead on Cars Land, Test Track, and Tower of Terror; Joe Rhode is passionate about travel, world culture, and art, and thus led creation of Animal Kingdom, Aulani, and Pandora; and Tony Baxter was interested in Disneyland and Europe which played into his major involvement in what Disneyland Paris became. People who can dream up unique stories and places are highly prized in the Disney company. After all, Disney often says it is in the story business; so these story people play major roles in everything the company does.

Step 2: First-pass treatment. Once the 'What if...?' question has been answered and the germ of a story concept has been established, the next step is to write a short story treatment that captures the spirit of the attraction. Here's Rafferty's first-pass treatment of Tower of Terror:

"Witness if you will a Hollywood Tower Hotel that stretches up toward the vastness of space, through the void that is the sky, beyond the limits of your imagination. For the tower is host to a most uncommon pair of service elevators, just as the hotel is host to a most uncommon pair of residents: Science Fiction and the Fantasy of Terror. It has been said that science fiction is the improbable made possible and fantasy is the impossible made probable. If you should dare check

into this hotel, you may find yourself impossibly lost within the hidden corridors of the improbable. Lost inside a dimension between light and shadow, between science and the supernatural, between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. But don't worry. There is an escape. Simply step into one of the elevators and press the button on the panel marked "13th Floor." This button is easy to find. It is the only one. Next stop...The Twilight Zone."

This story treatment isn't long, but it gives us a really clear picture of the essence of the attraction Rafferty had in mind. He would often dash to his computer and type up a treatment right after a story meeting, so that he wouldn't lose any elements of the idea. What if you were to do this whenever you had an idea for a new project? It's a helpful step in preparing a more detailed plan later and gets the idea from your head to paper. Once on paper the idea has found its way into the world, and it can begin to take on a life of its own.

Step 3: Figuring out the story sequence and actual experience in detail. This step is harder than the story treatment. Now an Imagineer has to do the hard work of what the scenes of the story are—or, as Rafferty calls them, "the story beats." For the Tower of Terror, he and his colleague Michael Sprout had to figure out the story sequence and actual experience in detail. Plus, they had to ensure the scenes worked well with the elevator drop focus of the ride. Everything has to fit together well in the concept because although the ride often only lasts for 90 seconds to a few minutes, there is also a pre-show segment too when guests are passing the attraction, waiting in line, and boarding the ride. Once the pre-show and ride scripts are developed for an attraction's scenes, the Imagineers are ready to pitch the idea for further consideration by the company.

Step 4: Pitch to WDI executives. Pitching the story concept of a new attraction to WDI executives is a big moment for Imagineers. Often before the idea is pitched to company executives outside WDI, it has to pass this organizational filter (which is done even for attraction concepts originating from the Disney CEO himself; for example, It's A Bug's Life at Animal Kingdom was the brain child of Michael Eisner but developed by WDI). Experienced WDI executives like Bob Weis and Marty Sklar had a library knowledge of what worked and didn't work at Disney over the years, and it was Rafferty's job to convince them that his stories would be a big success for the company. After all, the growth and vitality of the company is based on new stories, but every story adapted comes with a big price tag. Rafferty had to clear the executive hurdle inside WDI that a story was worth the investment. When given the chance to pitch, Rafferty and his creative team would set the stage of what they wanted to build. He might start with "Imagine if you will..." and from there lead the executives through the scenes of the attraction they had written. Sometimes some rough drawings and storyboards would help give the executives more of an idea of what the team had in mind. But at this point, very little cost has been allocated other than time and effort. If the WDI executives liked what they heard and thought company executives would see it as a new draw to the parks, they approved the concept for further development. If they didn't, it would go into a file for possible future development—or as a helpful piece of a future attraction yet to be dreamed up. Although Imagineers are often

given the ‘no go’ in these meetings, they know it comes with the job. And as Rafferty points out through the book, what seems like a rejected idea often finds its way into other projects later on at WDI.

Step 5: Develop concept art and storyboards. If WDI executives thought the story and scenes were a winner, they would greenlight more refined concept art and storyboards for the attraction. The goal of this artwork was to paint a picture for the company’s top executives during WDI’s concept pitch for greenlighting more detailed development. Now the costs of development start to creep up as artists paint vivid creations of what the attraction could look like. The finished rides will often appear different from this artwork but again the essence of the attractions are to come out in these paintings and storyboards. They provide a framework for more detailed development to come.

Step 6: Corporate decision: Go or no go (or go back and iterate the concept again).

Once the story and art has been refined and the WDI executives have okayed the work, it’s time for their bosses to be pitched, which usually means the CEO and related company officers.

Rafferty shares how he pitched Michael Eisner and Frank Wells the concept for the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror:

“Supported by the new storyboard art, I took Michael and Frank, as if they were walking through the front door of the hotel, through the attraction experience, from the preshow TV in the library on which Rod Serling sets up the story of that fateful night long ago, to the ride experience in which guests become lost in the story themselves. Michael and Frank were totally on board that elevator, especially when I pitch that it "breaks free" of the vertical shaft only to travel horizontally across the floor into the... BUM BUM BUM...Twilight Zone.”

““Did you hear that, Frank? The elevator leaves the shaft. No one will expect that. This is really great. Home run!” Michael and Frank had a conversation after the pitch. Michael: “Frank, you think the Twilight Zone is still relevant?” Frank: “Are you kidding, Michael? It’s iconic! It’s timeless! They still have Twilight Zone marathons. Yes, of course, it’s relevant. Everyone knows and loves the Twilight Zone. It’s an American institution!” Michael: “Should we do this?” Frank: “All it takes is money.” Michael: “Then let’s do this!” Michael and Frank thanked us and left the room as calm and collected as if they had just purchased a vacuum cleaner. It was just another day for them at Imagineering.”

And with that, Marty Sklar turned to Rafferty and told him to get going immediately and figure out what the ride would be...but to do this would require another important step in the Imagineering process: Research...and lots of it!

Step 7: Research trips. Along with storyboards and concept art, the lead WDI creative team takes research trips to study possible technologies to be employed in the rides, and capture the details of a place that will inspire the creation of the attraction. It’s these research trips that help give the attractions a vivid sense of authenticity. A successful ride, restaurant, or other themed

“Always do your research. Ask questions. Seek advice. Study and learn from the failures and successes of those who came before you. Find out what worked and didn’t work—and why!”
- Kevin Rafferty

attraction should feel new and exciting while also feeling familiar and believable. It’s part of the process Rafferty calls “making make-believe believable,” which is really one of Disney’s competitive advantages in the entertainment market. No one does it better.

When recounting stories about the creation of some of the most popular rides at Disney parks, Rafferty emphasizes the role that research trips played in the process. For example, when the creative team was designing Cars Land, *Cars* executive producer and WDI executive John Lasseter recommended they take a research trip on Route 66. When Pixar was producing *Cars*, the writers and animation team wanted the movie to have the authentic feel of the unique western culture along that famous route. Pursuing the same aesthetic in the park, Rafferty and his team visited Route 66 roadside restaurants and shops and stayed in independently-run motels. They spoke to the locals, took pictures, and sketched whatever caught their eye. The buildings, landscape, and little details they observed and captured during the road trip are evident throughout Cars Land. It’s what makes the land feel “right,” as well as giving the guest the feeling they’ve walked onto the set of *Cars* (which was always one of Walt’s goals with Disneyland). When the team was working on the Tower of Terror, they visited Otis Elevator company to learn the dynamics of how elevators work. Test Track brought a research trip to attraction sponsor General Motors’ real test track, where the Imagineers experienced the tests car companies put their vehicles through before bringing them to market. Many of these tests became part of the story of the original GM Test Track ride. The loop outside the ride complex is taken right from the experience Rafferty had when he drove a vehicle at 180 MPH around the GM 4-mile oval layout.

Embarking on research trips is good advice for anyone before making a big investment in a project. If you have a new idea, research what already exists in a related field. Incorporating the best elements of those inspirations will help a new concept be accepted by the marketplace. It reminds me of what revolutionary industrial designer Raymond Loewy advised with his MAYA approach—“Most Advanced Yet Acceptable.” As his biographer Derek Thompson explains: “He believed that consumers are torn between two opposing forces: neophilia, a curiosity about new things; and neophobia, a fear of anything too new. As a result, they gravitate to products that are bold, but instantly comprehensible. ... He said to sell something surprising, make it familiar, and to sell something familiar, make it surprising.” This is exactly what WDI does when it merges details from their research trips into their make-believe attractions. They feel possible and real because they have elements of the real in them that fit and work together with the whole. It’s this design approach that makes unforgettable experiences for the guests. Always ask yourself, What can I learn from other people and places to bring back to my organization? As entrepreneurship educator Steve Blank says, Get outside your building and find out.

Step 8: Develop the show: attraction design and ride layout. So how do you go about building a show-controlled facility big enough to house a pirate ship? First, you have to have a good idea of where the facility can be located in the parks. Will it replace an outdated attraction or will it be part of an extension to a park? If it’s part of a new park, where would be its best home? Once you know the size and shape of the perimeter where the ride will rest, you have to

“As is usually the case,
things that are designed
for projects that get
canceled often find their
way into later concepts.”
- Kevin Rafferty

figure out the layout of the ride system. This is no easy feat. Imagineers have to be very creative in how they optimize the given space to ensure all onstage and backstage needs are met.

Now Imagineers have to get more specific about what the attraction will actually be. Scale models of the buildings and ride systems are iterated until the look of the attraction is agreed to. WDI development teams also consider what technologies to use to make the ride work. Will they utilize proven technologies and features engineered in already existing rides or will they have to create an entirely new ride system? Some ride systems like the Omnimover can be found in the Haunted Mansion and Nemo and Friends. But other rides like Test Track required an entirely new ride system. When new challenges arise, the development teams will turn to Imagineers who are good with the up-front design like show designer Rob’t Coltrin, who Rafferty often worked with on projects. Imagineers like Coltrin help the wild dreamers like Rafferty make the make-believe believable. Sometimes WDI will turn to outside engineering firms, many of which specialize in theme park design, to assist the team solve the problems on the project. And if an outside firm has a ride system or technology that could be used for the Disney attraction, those are sometimes bought as well. In fact, many leading Imagineers are former contractors who displayed talent and expertise on such projects and were later asked to join WDI fulltime.

Full scale mock-ups of the ride vehicles and systems are often designed, built, and tested to demonstrate what the guest might experience, as well as helping the Imagineers and contractors tinker with the overall design. New technologies, show elements, Audio-animatronics, and ride experiences are also put to the test during this step. For example, for Toy Story Midway Mania!, the team built a mock-up vehicle made mostly from parts purchased at a hardware store and coupled it with play-testing that required some sophisticated 3D computer programming. As such, Imagineers were able to prototype a crude version of the ride vehicle and system where the basics of the game itself could be played. The mock-up was housed in another building across the street from WDI’s main building, and visitors like CEO Bob Iger and Pixar/WDI executive John Lasseter would often be found there playing the game. With that type of interest, Rafferty and his team knew they had a future hit on their hands before the attraction’s foundation was even poured.

Step 9: Cost estimates. As the attraction gets closer to production, cost estimates and project scopes are produced. This step captures the financial reality of the attraction. By this point of the Imagineering process, the creative team has most of the nuts and bolts of the project figured out, and they are able to put a price tag on those nuts and bolts as well. Keep in mind, many of these steps are not stand-alone, as materials, labor, and technology are being estimated throughout the design. However, the further the team gets into the design process, the more accurate and detailed the project requirements become. Some projects are a “go” from day one as there might be a strategic purpose to its inclusion in a park. Costs can also increase dramatically beyond early estimates when the realities of design challenges arise. Other projects have to prove their financial viability before official production takes place. As sociologist Mark Gottdiener points out, “Theme parks are not public spaces; they are commercial ventures.” As more and more Disney units get involved, the concept becomes a company priority and not just a WDI project—

thus, greatly increasing the dollars spent on it.

“When you’re on the creative development side of things, also known around Imagineering as ‘Blue Sky,’ you’re always busy because you’re constantly dreaming up and working on many different new ideas long before they are presented and approved—if they are presented and approved.”
- Kevin Rafferty

Step 10: Corporate decision: Go or no go (or go back and iterate the concept again).

After the facilities, vehicles, ride systems, Audio-animatronics, and show elements are designed, the CEO and executive team have enough information to make an ultimate go or no go “corporate choice.” Is the cost of the show *really* worth it? If other projects have been in development as well, which ones are the best fit for the park? Does the park need a live-action show or a ride more? Is there something else taking precedence that requires moving this project back in the queue before being built? After seeing all the models, mock-ups, and artwork, do they think this attraction will really hold up for the long-term? I.e., will it have a long life and make the company money? Will it draw enough guests to warrant the cost? Is there a new development in the company that requires reconsidering whether this is really the right time for this project?

Sometimes projects are even sent back to earlier steps to be redesigned as a corporate choice. For example, Rafferty originally had an idea for a concept called Carland in 2004—independent of the Pixar film *Cars* which was released in 2006! As an automobile aficionado he wanted to build a land that paid homage to car culture. He practically had a model of Radiator Springs Racers designed (although it wasn’t called that) when he was told Pixar was making a movie about cars and was advised to pay a visit to John Lasseter and hear about it. Lasseter and Rafferty quickly saw the synergy between their projects and soon thereafter began working together on the theme park concept. However, Rafferty’s concept included more of his original ideas of what the land should be, and before production he was told to redesign the land to represent the movie more.

Rafferty shares the story behind this corporate decision:

“A year after the movie *Cars* was released in theaters, it would establish itself as a phenomenally strong and growing franchise. As a result, John Lasseter asked if we could consider turning Carland into Cars Land. I must admit, after all the hard work we had done, I felt like the carpet was getting yanked out from under us, especially since we had already created so many original stories and experiences for the new land. Turning Carland into Cars Land meant everything that was not related to the *Cars* franchise would be wiped off the map. But I respected his instincts, so I remained open-minded. In fact, the more I thought about his request, the more I realized, dadgum, he was right. It’s interesting to think that creating an entire twelve-acre land based on one movie, which had never been considered, much less done, would probably not happen were it not for the slow and steady evolution of Carland to its eventual transformation into Cars Land. In our business, sometimes you have to toss out the stuff you love—always painful at first—to get to the place you’ll love even more. It’s all part of the process.”

I love that line: “***Sometimes you have to toss out the stuff you love—always painful at first—to get to the place you’ll love even more. It’s all part of the process.***” The focus should always be on creating the best possible outcome. We can be proud of our ideas, but we have to be open to others making them even better. In the end, everyone wins when the best version of an idea comes forth: the creative team, the customers, the shareholders, the employees,

“The emotional part of animation comes more from the heart than the art, and the heart of that art is story.”
- Kevin Rafferty

“If you’re an Imagineer, the notion of stretching your imagination until your work, whatever it may be, arrives at a level beyond all expectations—even your own—should always be your goal.”
--Kevin Rafferty

and the company as a whole. In the end, it’s our outcomes that shape our reputations and offer us more interesting opportunities.

Show production and completion: Attention to detail and quality assurance of the show. Once an attraction or land gets the corporate go-ahead, the project brings in an army of WDI, company, and contractor teams to build it. Rafferty, like many show creators at WDI, stayed involved in a project while also bouncing around to others at various stages of development. As a result, he often worked long hours and traveled extensively from one site to another around the world. WDI is famous for the attention to detail given to their attractions and resorts. If something is seen, heard, felt, or smelled, it has to be right for the experience being offered to the guest. What does that require? Consider that when Rafferty was refining the ride experience for Radiator Springs Racers, he rode the attraction **879 times** with sound engineer Joe Herrington until all the ride scenes were perfect. Rafferty shares many stories working with voice talent like Don Rickles and Larry the Cable Guy for days to get their line deliveries perfect for the Audio-animatronic figures. You’re noticing I’m saying the word “perfect” a lot. That’s the goal. *Every* piece of the show has to feel right, and that takes many people working long hours to bring it to the finish line with that Disney Difference. Creativity. Discipline. High Expectations. It’s being creative and disciplined from the beginning to the end of a project—and in the operations of the show itself day after day—that drives WDI and the company forward. Does your organization approach its market with the same dedication?

MAKE SOMETHING HAPPEN

Rafferty sums up his book with advice for future Imagineers. He’s trying to impart to them some final words of wisdom as he hands the reigns over to a new generation of WDI dreamers. I’ll leave you with this quote to consider (and strongly encourage you to read the book):

“You are only as good as your last performance, so you must keep going and growing. There’s always more magic to make! So, make sure you stay sharp, relevant, and productive, not just every once in a while, or when you feel like it, but every day in every way. Work today to be better than you were yesterday. Never stop learning everything there is to know about everything. Always do your research. Ask questions. Seek advice. ...Study and learn from the failures and successes of those who came before you. Find out what worked and didn’t work—and why! If you have not been there and done that, listen to those who have. Welcome and grow from constructive and caring criticism that comes from those who have many successes under their belts and tribal knowledge in their brains. Be disruptive in a productive, contributing way. Shake things up. Shake things down. Stay alert and in the know. Take action. Take responsibility for your action. Believe in the power of your dreams, because dreams have the power to change everything, including you.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF “MAGIC JOURNEY”

KEVIN P. RAFFERTY

Kevin P. Rafferty has spent forty years developing dimensional storytelling experiences for Disney park guests around the world. He was a key member of the concept development team for Blizzard Beach Water Park at Walt Disney World, and was the co-concept creator, designer, and show writer for the award-winning Toy Story Midway Mania!, and created the original concept, story and name for The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror, among many other attractions.

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Mike Goldsby is a professor, author, university executive, and consultant whose research, teaching, and talks focus on complex problem solving, design, innovation, and leadership. His personal mission is to inspire others to pursue their opportunities, to become more self-sufficient in solving problems, and to increase their personal productivity.