Using the Imagineering Process   Guest was Lou Prosperi

Using the Imagineering Process

Transcription of Interview

Joe: *Welcome everyone. This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 Podcast. With me today is Lou Prosperi. Lou wrote the first book in the Imagineering Toolbox Series called The Imagineering Pyramid. When not visiting Disney parks, Lou is a manager, technical writer, instructional designer and former game designer. Lou's book outlines 15 practices and principles that will enable you to make your project a Disney production. Lou, thanks for joining me and tell the listeners what is your story and how did the book come about?*

Lou: Joe, thanks for having me. My story is I grew up knowing a little bit about Disney but had never gone as a child, and my first trip to Disneyworld was on my honeymoon. It really was a bit of a transformative experience when some of the initial attractions I saw really blew my mind like they do for many people. But it really struck me powerfully. And so I wanted to learn as much about Imagineering as I could and as books came out, I would study the and I realized that Imagineering, the process they use to develop parks was a great model for creating other creative ideas. I'm a big believer that principles and ideas from one place can be used in others. I'm a technical writer by trade. I shouldn't just be reading about technical writing to learn more about how I can do what I do. So I'd like to read outside my field, and I identified Imagineering as a great model for the creative

process.

In particular, I ran across a line in a book by Jason Surrell about Pirates of the Carribean about that the Imagineer creates scenes that are very recognizable, and they can be read very quickly. I realized that that was exactly what we do in instructional design. I was working as a trainer and a teacher, a corporate trainer at the time, and I realized that that's what we do; we'll create a picture or an illustration to quickly communicate ideas.

I started looking more deeply through my collection. I had been building a collection of books for more ideas like that and so I identified a set of them and eventually came to a group of 15 of them and arranged them into a pyramid, which we'll talk about a little bit later. I had put together a presentation about Imagineering and Instructional Design. I presented it at a conference, and I did a webinar. Bob McLean from Theme Park Press found it online. I had posted it online. He found it and approached me about expanding the ideas into a full book, and so that's sort of how The Imagineering Pyramid came to be.

Joe: *What does the book center around? Is it about just principles or practices?*

Lou: The pyramid comprises 15 practices, concepts, and principles that the Imagineers use in the design of the theme parks. And so some of these are named specifically for things that Walt Disney himself created and named; others are my name for things that the Imagineers do. These include anything from focusing on their story, to strict attention to detail, to the use of wienies which are these visual magnets that draw people's attention, to their use of storyboards and their use of forced perspective. They span a range of different types of practices, but they are all born from practices that the Imagineers have used in the design of Disney theme parks from the earliest days with Walt Disney himself.

Joe: *Then what is the toolbox series? Is that different than what is in the pyramid or will it be similar things? What is the series?*

Lou: The original title of the book was the Imagineering Toolbox, and it was originally going to contain two main pieces. One was the pyramid that we'll talk about today, and the other is the Imagineering process which is a distillation of the process the Imagineers go through when they develop an attraction, something with the blue sky where they're told, hey we need a new attraction for Fantasy Land. They'll have brainstorming and blue sky sessions to identify the idea they want to pursue, and then they move to concept development where they flush out that idea. They move from there into the formal design where they do blueprints and other design documents, and then finally they move into construction.

The process takes you through step by step how did they do that and it's a simplification of the real process because the real process is very involved. The toolbox contains these two types of tools but during the development of the book for a couple of different reasons, the publisher and I opted to remove the process piece from this book and focus this book on the pyramid. Part of it is because of one of the principles. The very first principle in the pyramid is called 'It begins with a story', and that's about using your subject matter. I began to feel that the toolbox was a little too broad a subject matter for a single book and that by focusing it on the pyramid, I could keep it a little bit more narrowingly focused and do a better job with it. I plan to be writing the second book which is about the process in the new future.

Joe: *I think you made a wise choice because there's a lot of information in the book. Could you do the Pre-show here as you allude to in the book to tell the listeners, I mean*

maybe not all of them really understand what Imagineering is and how it originated.

Lou: Sure! Imagineering is a term, and technically it's what's called a 'portmanteau,' I believe is the word, and that's a combination of two words to form a new word. It's been popularized by Disney, and it's the blending of technical know-how and creative imagination. They did not originate it, despite legend, urban or Disney legend, the Disney Company did not originate the term. The first instance I was able to find in my research was Alcoa in the 40's. The Alcoa Corporation used it in the 40's to identify creative approaches to engineering. And so it's all about creative know-how, creative imagination and technical know-how. That technical know-how doesn't have to be….. with the link of Imagineering in terms of Disney Parks; it doesn't have to be just about ride design and show design. Any sort of technical know-how we have, we can apply creative imagination to it. And that's one of the foundational ideas of the book which is you can imagine your teaching, you can imagine your cooking, you can imagine any number of things by taking your specific technical know-how and applying your creative imagination to it. What I've tried to do in the book is say to get one step more and say okay, some specific things that the Imagineers do when they design theme parks also have principles that you can apply to other projects.

Another key idea in the book too is that we're all creative. There's creativity in everything that we do. Very typically, we think of creativity as a specific subset of people. The creatives are sometimes the weirdoes in some companies or that if you're involved in art, or music, or the typical creative field, but the truth is software engineers have to be creative in their jobs, project managers have to be creative in their jobs, and so I firmly believe that there's creativity everywhere, and everyone can be creative. We all have creative work to do, so why don't we all look for models and examples of where we can learn some lessons about creativity. And so this book is sort of my attempt at how do the

Imagineers build these wonderful environments of the Disney Parks and these 15 principles are among some of the core ideas and practices that they use to do that, so I'm trying to identify the principles behind them and how we can apply those to our own projects outside the parks.

Joe: *You have 15 principles, and they're pretty tough to cover all of them in the podcast, but you did a great job I thought of organizing them in peers, building basically the pyramid. You have a foundation tier there. Let's just start; there's all these principles, especially the ones in the foundation, do we need them all to be able to go ahead and make a good story and create it? Why are they the foundation I guess?*

Lou: The foundation as I look through them, I realize, so what are the cornerstones of Imagineering, what are the real basics that they practice all the time that they really set the stage for what they do, and I just thought about some of the cornerstone things. The first of those is about the story. It all begins with a story. Everything in the Disney Parks has a story behind it or is informed by its story, and that's the subject matter. That includes, if you go on Peter Pan's Flight, the story of Peter Pan informs every decision, all the way down to the types of materials they use in the queue for the walls and the wallpaper and things like that. Or if you go to town square theater to visit Mickey Mouse backstage, all the design decisions are based on Mickey Mouse. And so that's a cornerstone.

Another one is creative intent which is what is their objective? What is the experience the designer wants the audience to have? That's pretty foundational because until you know that, you don't know how you're going to do all these other things. Attention to detail is something the Disney Company is famous for, and again I felt that it was certainly a foundational skill. Some of the other principles in the pyramid on the higher tiers leverage

attention to details, using details in a specific way to create specific effect or reaction in your audience. Theming is critical. I mean Disney is credited taking the concept of an amusement park and turning it into a theme park, so that's another critical one. And then the last, Long, Medium and Close shots, which is about organizing your information and your details to lead your audience from a big picture down into the details.

Those 5 really do set the stage. Without some of those in place, without understanding your story and your objective, using details, paying attention to your details and using the right details and arranging them the right way, you really have no foundation to start from. I set those as the cornerstone's foundations and all the other techniques build upon those. And in the book, there are a lot of references to go back to those as we talk about the principals, I end up making references back to subject matter and objective and creative intent and detail and things like that. So I really found those to be just the basics, and so I believe as you said, can you move on without them? I don't really think you can. You have to have some of these in place before you can move on, on your own projects.

Joe: *The foundation is pretty important. But your second one, Wayfinding, it sounds like a search and mission type arrangement or something. Let me go and find my way. Is this where I would get better direction?*

Lou: The term Wayfinding actually comes from the use of signage to direct audiences and some people like, you know, simple signs to say Fantasy Land is that way and Adventure Land is that way. I used it because all the principles in the second tier are focused on navigation and guiding and leading your audience. You have an idea how are you going to guide into and through your experience. Those include things like wienies, which I mentioned earlier, which are these visual magnets that attract your audience's attention and capture their interest and a classic example of that in Disneyland is Sleeping Beauty

Castle at the end of Main Street. You enter the Main Street and down at the end, you see Sleeping Beauty Castle, and it's intriguing, and you want to go down there and get a closer look and see more.

As you move through the park because you see a wienie, and so you're going to go investigate, you're going to move from area to area, so the next ideas transition, which is how do we move our audience, how do we make a change that the audience will experience smooth and seamless. We don't necessarily want to make these changes abrupt. You don't want to be one-step. As you're walking down a pathway, so we want to cross the line and all of a sudden you've moved very abruptly from Main Street USA to Adventure Land. They want that to be more seamless, and so the Imagineers use what they call visual pros dissolves. They change the textures, they even sometimes change the background music, to facilitate that.

The Imagineers also use storyboards to plan out everything they do. And so when we're working on a creative project, we want to maybe step back and see the big picture and use storyboards to understand the overall experience. And then the last idea there in Wayfinding which is more specific, meeting your audience into and out of your experience, which are pre-shows and post-shows, and that's about introducing your ideas. Usually, when you go to an attraction, oftentimes the queue of the line that you go through will have Theming and queues about what you're going to see. That's the pre-show. It's preparing you for what you're going to experience, and then some attractions, particularly in Epcot have activities like video games or other things that you can do after the attraction to keep you engaged and reinforce what you've just seen. So Wayfinding is all about sort of how the audiences led through and in and out of experiences.

Joe: *I identify so closely to that because one of the most magical things about Disney is*

Using the Imagineering Process   Guest was Lou Prosperi

that Wayfinding because all at once you're in one section and then seamlessly, you magically appear in another.

Lou: And you didn't even know they did it, right.

Joe: I mean it's like, poof!

Lou: You know it's interesting, I wrote the book about taking these ideas out of the parks, but I shared it with a few people ahead of time before it was published and a couple of the observations I got back were… And I sort of knew this but I didn't really write the book around this is, these principles, the way they're described, hopefully, they can also for some people when they go back to the park, they can actually look for these things and they may become more attuned to how the Imagineers create the magic that they really do. And so for instance, the next time you're in a park, this may actually cause you or you may think to look more carefully at the way they actually manage those transitions; not to spoil the illusion but just that I love to learn, and I love to see how things are done, and so my hope is that for some people, as they read this, the next time they go to the park, they'll actually look closer and see how some of this magic is done.

Joe: The visual communication is that third tier there. What are your 3 steps that you put in there and how do they relate to each other and to the rest of the story?

Lou: The third tier as you say is visual communication, and these are techniques and practices that Imagineers use in almost every attraction that they design. They help communicate information quickly. And so the first of those is forced perspective, which is using the illusion of size. Very often, the buildings that we see in Disney Parks are not quite as large as we think they are. For instance in Florida, in Walt Disney World, there is a

200 foot limit to how tall the buildings can be. If they're 200 feet, they have to have an airline marker on them, like an air traffic marker, and that would ruin the illusion, you know. If you went to see Expedition Everest and at the top of the mountain, there was a flashing blue light, that would really kind of take you out of the experience. They never go above 199 feet.

What they'll do is they'll use forced perspective which is a theatrical technique used to make some things in the business look larger than they are to help communicate that. For instance, in Cinderella Castle, as you move up the castle, the sizes of the windows, the stones are smaller. A simpler example is Main Street USA. The first-floor façades are 90% of actual size. The second-floor facades are 80% of actual size, and the top floor facades are even smaller. It looks like a 3-storey building; we see it; we think we're walking down between these 3-storey buildings, but they're really not 3-stories tall. And so that helps this illusion size. They use this the other way too in Epcot, at the American Adventure. That building is a colonial building. Because of the operational needs of the building, with the number of people they need to cycle through and the show and all those other factors, it turns out it's a 5-storey building. Well, they didn't have 5-storey buildings in colonial times, so they actually used forced perspective the other way to make it actually seem smaller. When you look at it from a distance, it looks like a 2-storey building, but in reality, it's the equivalent of a 5-storey building.

So that's one. The second one which is at the heart of the pyramid, and I'm really happy about that coincidence; it worked out that way but this readability, readability is the principle of the heart of the pyramid. That is the idea that I mentioned earlier on that I caught in Jason Surrell's book about Pirates of the Caribbean about the ability to quickly communicate an idea, and that's about simplifying complex subjects. The best example of that is found in the Pirates of the Caribbean. The wench auction scene or the scene where

they're dunking the mare in the well or perhaps the best of all is the jail scene when you go by, and you see the pirates are in the jail, and the dog has the key. It doesn't take us but three seconds to understand that. And the reason that the Imagineers do this is in these dark rides, the audience is continually moving. They only will be seeing them for a short period of time, so they had to design scenes that were very quickly read and understood by the audience. And so that's again about simplifying the subject and this I think really ties into what you're talking about being visual and lean. Communication quickly through illustration and metaphor and example are all about readability.

The last in terms of visual communications is kinetics, and that's about dynamism or keeping the experience dynamic and active. The Imagineers do that by this movement throughout the parks. There are very few spots in Disney Parks that are quiet and still, where you don't see something moving. There's either a fountain or flags waving in the breeze, or a ride or attractions moving in the background, and so these are just visually to keep the experience alive and active. These three, as I said, are techniques they use throughout many, many parks and attractions to sort of visually communicate this experience they want us to have.

Joe: *Well that fourth tier, making it memorable, I was surprised about that one when I got to it because I assumed I already knew what it was about. It was going to be about uniqueness, but you surprised me. Tell us about it.*

Lou: The fourth tier, only two blocks, and this one is about reinforcing ideas and engaging the audience, and that's just to make it memorable. The two principles there, the first is called the 'It's a Small World' effect, and that is about using repetition and reinforcement to make your audience, your message memorable. For some people, I'm sure by just saying the words 'It's a Small World' it puts that song in their head. Imagineers use

repetition particularly in their music and songs to reinforce these ideas. In fact, there's a story about Walt Disney for the New York Fair; I think it was, talking about he spent a lot of time working with composers on the 'It's a Small World' song. And when asked about it, he said, well the people don't come out of these places humming the architecture. He really wanted them to understand and have a memorable song. Some of the other examples that I talk about in the book, so there's the 'It's a Small World' effect, there's the Tiki Room that uses a lot of repetition. Even the Pirates of the Caribbean with the 'yo ho' song. You hear that over and over, and you come out of there, and you hear it. These are ways that they use repetitions and other reinforcement, and that comes back to Theming again, so we're going back to our foundation of Theming and attention to detail by making sure all the details and thematic elements are consistent and tell the same story, it reinforces the message, and it really helps to communicate that.

The other block in this tier is called 'Hidden Mickeys.' Hidden Mickeys are either partial or complete profiles of Mickey Mouse. Technically there are three circles; you know that shape of Hidden Mickeys head that are incorporated into the design of the parts and attractions, but they're not obvious, and they're hidden. There are actually books about Hidden Mickeys with guide books and scavenger hunts that you can find them. What I find interesting about them is it really engages the audience. It encourages the audience to look for them and really engage with the environment.

Another related idea is that of what we call 5-legged goats which go back to the big mural that Mary Blair, Imagineer, and artist Mary Blair painted in the contemporary resort, well Disney World has a number of goats but one of them is 5-legged, and so it's this little thing that you would spot, and you see. The Imagineers do other things like by putting records as to Imagineers names or particular people in the signage or in some of the Theming. What's interesting to me about Hidden Mickeys though is that once you find them, you

never see that object the same way again. You've engaged with it, and you don't just see…
For instance, the example that I use in the book is about a set of light switches that are arranged in the shape of Mickey Mouse's head in the queue for Expedition Everest. In my experience, once you see that Hidden Mickey shape, you don't know longer see them as light switches; you only see them as Hidden Mickeys.

I take that as for instance in an instructional design perspective or a teaching or training environment, if you can identify ways that your students can come to learning on their own or put the pieces together on their own, they'll learn and retain far better than by you just telling them. The Hidden Mickeys again makes it memorable; so these two are all about making the experience memorable and having your message stick with your audience.

Joe: *All my continuous improvement people will enjoy the last tier of course, which is only one block and it's called Plussing. Did it just work out that was the last block up there or one block left? How did Plussing end up the king of the mountain?*

Lou: Well, I think there're two answers there. The first is it really is Walt Disney's cardinal rule. He was all about Plussing. He was always constantly asking his people to do things better. Some classic examples of this in animation were adding sounds to animation, adding color to animation. The development of the multi-plane camera that he did that added to animation. He was constantly looking for ways to improve what he did and plus what he did, and he encouraged his people to do that, and when they moved into theme parks, that tradition carried on, and so the Imagineers are constantly looking for how do they things better? The first answer, it ended up on the top because it is really one of just Walt Disney's Imagineering primary rules but it goes back to their founder Walt Disney.

The second is as I identified these and I grouped them, and a couple of them moved here

and there as I went through these, some of my formative and my own concept development if you will, I realized I had three visual communications ones that we talked about earlier. I identified my foundations and really there was no place else for Plussing to go. I don't want to say it was leftover. It was clearly important, but it really is by itself, it stands alone, and it's the king of the mountain for a reason.

The other interesting thing that I discovered while writing the book, I hadn't really planned it this way, but when I went to write about Plussing, I realized that the other 14 principles really are ways to plus your experience. If you design something or working on something, you can go back to these other 14 ideas and say, hey am I really focusing on my story? How could I focus on my story more to make it better? Or how can I communicate my message more readable, or can I use the illusion of size a little differently, or how can I make them more memorable?

All these other principles really are ways to plus what you're doing. I guess there are a couple different reasons that it ended up on the top, and again, it is really a central idea. What's interesting is it's not unique to Disney. Deming was very into continuous improvement. On the sports side, Coach John Wooden was very much about continuous improvement.

Joe: *What does the other people working in the field, the Imagineers themselves, have you gotten any feedback from them, what they thought of the book?*

Lou: I have actually. Some of the people I sent it t for review are some former Imagineers. I've sent copies to some current Imagineers. They weren't able to be involved for legal reasons. For instance, Jason Surrell, who wrote that Pirates of the Caribbean book now works for NBC and Universal Creative. I sent it to him, and one of his quotes about

the book is that I identified these principles, these tenants of design that has been around for a long time. He reinforced the idea that yes, these 15 are definitely things that are used. I also sent it to a gentleman named Rolly Crump who was one the original Imagineers. He participated in the design of the Haunted Mansion, and It's a Small World, and the Tiki Room. He had kind things to say about it as well, but it was still nice to get that feedback from this former Imagineers to say yes, I recognize all those and I used to do those. That was very flattering actually.

Joe: *What did you learn from the book? At the end of the book, when you put that body work down, what did you say this is what I'm taking from the book?*

Lou: If you seek, you will find. As I had ideas about how I would describe these principles, both inside and outside the parks, but one of the interesting things that happened as I ended up finding completely other examples. And I think it was a reinforcement of the power of goal setting as well, in that I had this focus and then seemingly serendipitously, I would find examples that help me explain these principles. Like I was working on this book, and I was traveling, and I picked up a copy of 101 Things You Learn in Architecture School. Looking through it and there's an example that I pulled directly, and it's in the book.

One of the things I sort of… I don't know if I learned it but it sort of reinforced this idea of focus and one of the things that happens when you set a goal is your attention gets focused on it, I talk about that at the beginning of the book when I talk about what I think of as magnetic words which are these words we carry with us that draw our attention. Like creativity is one of those for me; when I'm like looking through, on a Website if I see an article about creativity, it grabs my attention, and I reach out to it. So I don't know if that really answers your question, but one of the ideas that was reinforced for me was the power of goal setting and how it can really help you focus and find solutions to your

problems in potentially unexpected ways.

Joe: *Well what I just took from that is sort of interesting and maybe what this pyramid is all about is that having this focus, having this structure involved really creates an easier way for creativity to prosper.*

Lou: I think that's true and what I've noticed myself doing is I use this pyramid as a lens, and I look at almost everything through that lens. I have been living with this for a year and a half, so it makes sense, but I would be doing that. But I hope that the same is true for other people that once they read about these principles, they start looking at things like oh, this is a good example of readability. Here's a simple little example. Over this past weekend, our high school put on their spring musical and so as one of the parent volunteers, I was there helping with ticket sales and we had set up this area for concession and things, and I found examples so there of wienies, of Theming, of Plussing. Each night, the person in charge was trying to tweak things a little bit to make them better. Now, I'm not saying he read my book and is consciously doing it, but I saw these examples of the principles in action. I think carrying around a model like this is a way to look at what we do and look for ways to improve it or plus it, and this gives you a whole set of tools to do that.

Joe: *Oh, I think that's a great thing to take from it. What's next for Lou? The Imaginary Toolbox, is that something that's going to be expanded upon? You mentioned the book on processes that you're working on now, is there more down the line?*
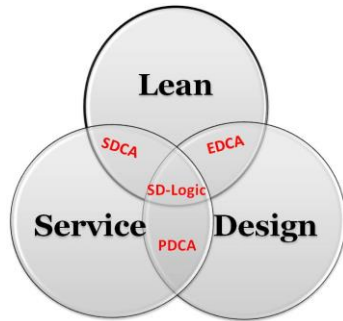
Lou: Right now, since the book came out, I started working on a couple sort of supplements, not that would be published but would be made available online. So a discussion guide in case a group at a workplace would read it or a book group might read it. Some questions that elaborate on some of these ideas to allow people to talk a little bit

more about some of the ideas in it. So a discussion guide and a workbook which basically takes the questions that form the checklist. So each pyramid, at the end of each chapter I Included a set of questions about how to think about and focus on that principle. And I collected those, and then I provided space for people to jot down notes and so the idea is you have a project, jot down some notes about your project, then as you go through this workbook, you can look at these principles and how might you apply these principles to your specific project. So those are a couple small things I'm working on. I'm going to start more focus work on the next book which is The Imagineering Process.

Joe: *How could someone contact you and learn more about the book?*

Lou: The book is available from Theme Park Press at the Theme Park Press Website. That's themeparkpress.com. It's right on the front page right now. That might move as they publish more. They publish quite a few books. My contact information is in the back of the book. I'm on Facebook. Facebook.com/louprosperi. I'm also on Twitter @louprosperi. I have a Pinterest board where I post pictures of the different blocks in the pyramid, what the pyramid highlighted in different ways to highlight individual blocks. And in the back of the book, I have my contact information and email address as well. The Website will be Imagineeringtoolbox.wordpress.com. It's not quite live yet, but it will be hopefully soon.

Joe: *Well Lou, I would like to thank you very much. This podcast would be available on the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 blog site. Thanks everyone for listening.*

Joseph T. Dager

Business901

Phone: 260-918-0438

Skype: Biz901

Fax: 260-818-2022

Email: jtdager@business901.com

Website: http://www.business901.com

Twitter: @business901

Joe Dager is President of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

Visit the Lean Marketing Lab: Being part of this community will allow you to interact with like-minded individuals and organizations, purchase related tools, use some free ones and receive feedback from your peers.

Using the Imagineering Process   Guest was Lou Prosperi