

Aardman have made many endearing and captivating films with their stop motion animation. But how did they get swept up in Hollywood mud-slinging and what impact did it have on their films?

In the 90s, Jeffrey Katzenberg, having overseen the Disney Animation unit from the films that struggled to perform following Walt's death into the Renaissance and some of their all time greatest movies, he felt like he deserved a promotion. And indeed, when the position of second-in-command opened up, Disney CEO Micheal Eisner offered the job... to himself. This led to Katzenberg's resignation in 1994 who would go on to form Dreamworks later that year. And he was determined to outdo Disney. A bitter feud had been born.

Like Dreamworks's first animated movie, Prince Of Egypt, an idea that Eisner had personally refused to make, was set to release in November 1998 but Disney then scheduled Pixar's A Bugs Life for that exact same weekend. So Dreamworks postponed the Prince to December 1998 and instead rushed their own bug-themed movie Antz to October 1998, one month before A Bugs Life. And I thought I was petty. What went on at Disney was nothing to do with Pixar, and they were incredibly upset at this move, but Katzenberg was taking no prisoners.

He helped seal the deal with Disney and Pixar in the first place, so under Dreamworks he wanted his own Pixar and set his sights on a small British studio in Bristol.

Aardman were very successful, not just with commercials and music videos, but animated shorts like Morph and eventually Wallace & Gromit which would bag them two Oscars. They needed help to take them into feature films, and even Disney were interested. But Katzenberg had wanted Aardman ever since seeing Creature Comforts and scooped them up for a five movie deal, a move that mirrored Disney's initial three movie deal with Pixar.

And so Aardman's first movie Chicken Run could finally take flight.

Inspired as a parody of The Great Escape, this was a major departure for animated movies at the time. Not because it was stop motion, stop motion animation as feature films were relatively new but not all that unusual for the time, such as big hits The Nightmare Before Christmas and James And The Giant Peach. What made Chicken Run stand out differently was how British it was.

Despite the star power of, ew, Mel Gibson, ew, The LA Times published a glossary of British slang like nellypodging and wazzock. Katzenberg defended the codswallop saying: "Do you literally know what it means? No. Do you understand what it means? Yes." "Not only have people never seen a movie that looks like this, they've never seen a movie that talks like this. But that's its charm."

And it was a gamble, The Road To El Dorado released that same year had underperformed at the box office so all eyes were on this quirky plasticine movie with words Americans wouldn't understand. And it worked.

Chicken Run was, and remains to this day, the highest grossing stop motion animated movie to date, even outdoing Nightmare Before Christmas and anything Laika has produced. Award winning, universal acclaim from critics and was even partially responsible for the creation of the Best Animated Movie category at the Oscars. Not bad for a chick flick.

The creation of Chicken Run was a heavy toll on Aardman. As their first feature length film, involved everyone working continuously to optimistically make maybe six seconds per week. Katzenberg would take regular flights to Bristol to check in on progress. During one of these visits he would ask, "So what's the next film?" Given this one film alone took up everything, they hadn't had the chance to even think about what to do next. They were still a small studio, they couldn't make multiple movies at once like the animation powerhouses of Disney or Pixar.

Aardman considered an idea based on The Tortoise And The Hare but as the script just wasn't coming together, they bailed on the idea and moved onto some old favourites.

Wallace and Gromit are ashamedly British and the short films that sent up the American movie tropes of Hitchcock Thrillers and Hollywood Action carried that homely sense of unique Aardman charm. The Wrong Trousers especially is a masterpiece and the cheese-loving duo deserved a chance to charm the movie-goers too. But there was a problem. Dreamworks had made Shrek.

Now they had a taste of the big money, Disney level of money. Chicken Run was the highest grossing Dreamworks Animation movie until Shrek DOUBLED IT. And unfortunately for Wallace & Gromit: The Great Vegetable Plot this resulted in a lot more studio meddling. Such as the name.

So what we have here is a major culture clash. Here is a Hollywood mogul, determined to outdo his competitors and he wants his movies to be loud and brash because that's what works. And here was a man who just really likes cheese. It was never going to work. But Katzenberg, a notorious micromanager, was going to try.

First up was the British slang. Remember "But that's its charm". No you don't, it's gone. Some lines of dialogue had to be re-recorded to be better understood by American audiences.

There was a huge argument over the word marrow that Katzenberg insisted Americans wouldn't know, so it was awkwardly redubbed to say melon, even though it's not a melon. There were reports of wanting to recast Peter Sallis, the original voice of Wallace, with someone more famous. It's unclear if this came from Katzenberg, it's may have been a general direction from Dreamworks that ultimately thankfully went ignored. Aardman co-founder Peter Lord on the subject of how to talk to the LA executives, said, "We listen and nod and then go and do our own thing"

It seems the decision to cast Hollywood stars like Helena Bonham Carter and Ralph Fiennes as principle cast members was a kind of compromise in order to keep Sallis, but even then Katzenberg wanted younger, trendier actors instead. Because that's what Shrek did.

Why doesn't Wallace ever learn his lesson? Why doesn't Wallace drive a nicer car? Because it's British. We like things being a bit shit, stop motion animation itself is obviously not as smooth and clean as CG movies, with fingerprints and indentations. The imperfections have that clear tangible human touch, that's its charm, and I wouldn't change a thing about it. And this revealed just how divided the two studios were culturally. Hollywood is a long way away from Bristol.

In fairness, Katzenberg may have been a bit spooked by a string of box office failures, *El Dorado*, *Spirit* and *Sinbad*, and the company was close to bankruptcy. He was competing against Disney, he couldn't fail so publicly, not so soon.

I don't think Katzenberg wasn't trying to completely remould Wallace and Gromit, just reshape them into a box office smash hit. It didn't work.

Once again, critically acclaimed and award winning, including the Oscar for Best Animated Feature, even beating *Howl's Moving Castle*. And despite earning \$190k on a budget of \$30k, Dreamworks suffered yet another loss.

Following *Sinbad*, Dreamworks Animation shifted away from traditional animation in favour of computer animation, which proved to be a successful formula for *Shrek* and *Madagascar*, continuing the *Shrek* tradition of popular actors, popular music and pop culture references, as with the massively successful *Shrek 2*.

Well, if Dreamworks wanted an Aardman version of *Shrek*, they got it with *Flushed Away*.

Flushed Away is so off-brand for an Aardman movie, I struggle to even remember this was an Aardman movie.

There's nothing wrong with the CG element of the film, Aardman have been using it for a long time, such as the floating CG bunnies in *Curse Of The Were-Rabbit* or the entire ending of the film where they had to edit out Wallace's bunny ears after re-writes. And there were efforts made in the CG to replicate imperfections like fingerprints. The characters were designed to stay true to Aardman, such as a lack of fur.

The official reason given for making *Flushed Away* entirely CG was because the water scenes would be obviously exhausting to make with plasticine and to superimpose it on top of the stop motion would be too difficult. But I do wonder if the constant pressure from Dreamworks may have helped inform that decision. After all, Aardman accomplished CG water six years later in *Pirates In An Adventure With Scientists*.

Flushed Away has good parts, such as Ian McKellan's performance. But gone was that charm, the very thing that made Aardman Aardman. This was loud and brash with screaming slugs and pop culture references crowbarred in. This looked like Aardman, but didn't feel like Aardman. It pandered to an audience who didn't turn up, as it underperformed yet again at the box office and Dreamworks pulled the plug on their five movie deal.

At the time, Aardman were developing a caveman themed idea in collaboration with John Cleese, but when the deal with Aardman ended, Dreamworks kept the film rights to the caveman idea and it became... *The Croods*? Wait, *The Croods* was an Aardman movie?! Huh.

It would be a very Hollywood trope to say that Katzenberg was the villain and Aardman could now finally prosper, but by all accounts the split was amicable. The two sides agreed their production styles differ too much to each get what they wanted out of it. Nick Park felt a tide of relief to no longer be forced to cater his films for an American audience. Part of the reason they signed a deal with Dreamworks in the first place was to maintain creative control, but

Katzenberg started to apply more and more pressure which counterintuitively was met with diminishing returns.

It may have not been a dream pairing but unfortunately for Aardman, they've never been able to recapture the success they once had with Dreamworks. Arthur Christmas and Pirates performed modestly but their own cave man movie, Early Man was a box office bomb. It seems like even with the celebrity cast and efforts to cater to a British audience with football, they couldn't recreate the charm they once had with Chicken Run. So their next movie is a sequel to Chicken Run. They recast Mel Gibson but also Julia SA WA LA Sawalha? Like, come on guys.

But an unlikely success story was found in Shaun The Sheep. It started as TV shorts before being adapted as a movie and uniquely has no dialogue. So not being able to rely on the pull-power of celebrities, the film uses mild grunts and vocalisations along with the tricks of silent movies like visual gags to tell a story without dialogue and it's wonderfully charming. Which led to a sequel, tv specials and despite being a spin-off from Wallace & Gromit, it had it's own spin-off with Timmy Time. A spin off of a spin off.

Aardman continue to be an independent studio, producing films, long and short, of incredible quality. Maybe they haven't recaptured the glory days like they once had with Dreamworks, but as long as they don't lose their charm, they'll continue to mould and shape childhoods like modelling clay.

But what about Katzenberg? This story started with him, so how does it end? When forming Dreamworks, the plan was to create a multifaceted entertainment empire that would "outlive us all." It did not.

The live action studio was sold to Viacom in 2005 and now releases films... through Disney. Awkward.

But he stayed in charge of Dreamworks Animation until 2016 when it was sold to Universal and continues to succeed with a franchise with a lot of Boss Baby vibes - Boss Baby.

So while Katzenberg didn't succeed in outdoing Disney at their own game, he still led the charge of a whole new wave of animated movies, Shrek, How To Train Your Dragon, Kung-Fu Panda and Megamind. And in doing so, he gave Disney something they never had before. Competition. And he accomplished that, with a little help, from a small British studio who like cheese.

Just don't mention Quibi.