
Could 'Toy Story 4' Bring Animation Into the Legacy Sequel Fold?

Forky is the googly-eyed face of the future for the 'Toy Story' franchise, but what might that mean for Woody and Buzz?



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If there's one movie that could challenge *Avengers: Endgame*'s dominance this summer (and 2019 as a whole), it's ***Toy Story 4***. Like *Endgame*, the Pixar animated feature is a Disney sequel, fourth in a series (but twenty-somethingth in a larger cinematic franchise). And like *Endgame*, *Toy Story 4* appears to be passing the torch to a new generation of

characters. No, I don't expect Buzz and Woody to die at the end of the movie so that Forky can take over as the star of a new phase of the franchise, but this could be the closest we come to an animated legacy sequel.

Legacy sequels are primarily a live-action concept because they have to be. Returning to a franchise many years later means revisiting characters who are older and in need of being retired. We've seen this happen with *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Tron*, *Jurassic Park*, *Indiana Jones*, *Blade Runner*, *Rocky*, *Wall Street*, and *Halloween*. And even many decades ago with *The Color of Money* passing the baton from *The Hustler*. But animated properties don't ever need to be rebooted from within because their main characters never get old — or never need to, anyway.

If *The Incredibles* had been a live-action superhero movie, perhaps the long-awaited *Incredibles 2* would have required a bit more focus on the younger generation of the Parr family. Violet and Dash would have been adults but maybe not old enough to be parents on their own. But Bob and Helen might have been aging out of their crimefighting prime, similar to Avengers' Tony Stark, as portrayed by Robert Downey Jr. Because the movie is animated, though, the sequel could instead pick up immediately from the original despite being made more than a decade later.

The thing about the *Toy Story* franchise is the main characters are doubly ageless because they're toys rather than mortal beings. And yet, Pixar's approach with the series over the first three movies was to allow for a passage of time anyway. The human characters in the background keep getting older while the toys stay the same age, and this provides the sequels with much of their dramatic weight. This is especially true of *Toy Story 3*, which arrived more than 10 years after *Toy Story 2* and deals with the toys' owner, Andy, having matured to college age and ready to give away his playthings.

Despite *Toy Story 4* coming out nine years after *Toy Story 3*, the upcoming sequel doesn't seem to adhere to the same rules in terms of time. Bonnie, the little girl who became the new owner of the gang of toys at the end of *Toy Story 3* is not much older than she was in 2010. There's no reason for her to be, however, with respect to her narrative purpose. Fans aren't as invested in her as even a background character or as a context for the toys' purpose in life. *Toy Story 3* was a legacy sequel of sorts in introducing her as the new guard but not until the end.

She's appeared in multiple shorts and specials since then, but *Toy Story 4* now gets to properly establish Bonnie as that next generation of the franchise. Still, she's not one of the main characters, so it's not a significant progression for the franchise. For that, there's Forky. He's a newly birthed toy, created by Bonnie out of a spork and some arts and craft staples like googly eyes and pipe cleaners. We've seen new toy characters introduced throughout the *Toy Story* movies — in fact, the first movie is built out of a situational premise based on fear of a legacy substitution — but Forky is the closest thing to a legitimate legacy sequel character. He's younger, reluctant to accept his purpose, and guided by the established hero.

Forky also already has his future ahead of him as a franchise lead. In small-screen spinoff form, anyway. The character is getting a 10-part series of short films on Disney+, the studio's streaming service, titled ***Forky Asks a Question***. These episodic *Toy Story* bites will apparently feature other characters from the films, with Forky inquiring about such things as love, time, and cheese. But will Woody appear as part of the gang offering answers? Or will *Toy Story 4* send him on his way? The man behind his voice, **Tom Hanks**, **has stated** that this "is going to have an impactful ending." He has expressed that recording *Toy Story 4* has been an emotional experience and also said, "When I realized what they were going for, I realized, 'Oh, this is a moment in history.'"

What that could mean is anyone's guess at this juncture, but it's difficult to imagine Disney and Pixar allowing for Woody to be retired in any way. He's not just the most iconic character of the Pixar brand but is maybe also the most iconic character to come out of Disney animation in 25 years (*Frozen's* Elsa might just be a very close second). Now that *Toy Story Land* is part of the Walt Disney World Resort as well as part of three other Disney parks around the world, the franchise's value has been demonstrated and increased through the ancillary stream for fan engagement and, of course, revenue.

Can *Toy Story* continue forever, though? Eventually, Hanks has to leave the role behind him, and do we want anyone else voicing Woody? Fans have expressed enough concern regarding Mr. Potato Head since the death of **Don Rickles**. Unlike Slinky Dog, whose change in voice actor could be easily accepted after the passing of Jim Varney, Mr. Potato Head is a pretty big part of the gang, and he's so perfectly linked with Rickles' iconic wisecracking insult humor shtick. The comedian will be heard posthumously in *Toy Story 4*, but what about afterward?

Maybe audiences won't even wish for more *Toy Story* movies after this new one. **As I've noted before**, the fourth installments of animated film series tend to disappoint at the box office. There are exceptions, of course, but even those you'd expect to be a hit, such as *Shrek Forever After*, *Despicable Me 3*, and *The LEGO Movie 2: The Second Part* (yes, despite the numbering, each is its franchise's fourth movie), have pulled their respective properties down. Thanks to the time passed since *Toy Story 3* plus the theme park synergy, *Toy Story 4* should be another anomaly.

I foresee the *Toy Story* sequel breaking animation's box office record this summer. Pixar has managed billion-dollar worldwide grosses with other years-later sequels, including *Toy Story 3*, *Finding Dory*, and *Incredibles 2*, which **took the global box office crown** for the format last summer despite being such a lesser product compared to its predecessor. Anyone betting against *Toy Story 4* being one of the top movies of 2019 is crazy. Any other company's franchise than Disney's and sure, take the gamble, but not this. *Toy Story* still has a friend in millions of people who can't wait for part 4's June 21st release to arrive.