

Franchise Vs Independent Films in the Hollywood Film Industry

1 There have been several movie franchises that have become iconic billion-dollar blockbusters with 49 of the 50 highest grossing movies of all time being a part of a movie franchiseⁱ. Film has evolved so much (or so little?) that people are beginning to realise that Hollywood is dominated by franchises. Has the Hollywood film industry developed from a place of creativity to somewhere where fast profits from franchises are the main interest? 2 “Franchising is based on a marketing concept which can be adopted by an organization as a strategy for business expansion”ⁱⁱ. Through the creation of series and remakes in the 1970s and 80s, there was increasing success with sequels and studios might not have expected this development to drive their business model in the future, but it has.

The past two decades have seen franchises dominating the Hollywood film industry. Additionally, there has been a growing trend of creating sequels to big budget films, with a shift from 6% to 32% between 1994-2014. The Hollywood Reporter broke news that Warner Bros allegedly plans to refocus their theatrical release strategy around the franchise model from 2016ⁱⁱⁱ. This demonstrates Warner Brothers’ shift from a creative studio to a profit driven business as they understand that franchises have become the most successful way for studios to gain money, rather than developing original content. Studios can build an entire production strategy around a series and have become dependent on these franchises, as films such as *Star Wars - The force awakens* and *Avengers: Endgame*, both made a lifetime gross of over \$850 billion. Franchises prioritise money over creativity, and are a product of big businesses, pushing out independent filmmakers who cannot afford to hire big name actors into their smaller, low budget films. The development of franchises may also result in the issue of franchise fatigue. “This is where the biggest money shots feel largely obligatory—just killers and filler, nothing more”^{iv}. This is where too many movies rely on familiar brand names, leading to a loss of interest within its audience. *James Bond* which has 25 titles is currently the franchise with the most movies, however, not all critics are positive about the future of the franchise with younger audiences^v.

4 The development of franchising as the main model for the Hollywood film industry has occurred because they are attempting to minimise risk, appeal to an international audience and boost the potential for additional revenues through games, DVDs and merchandise. ‘Genre Theory’ proposes a contract between the audience and producers, where all texts contain instances of repetition and difference, difference is essential to the economy of the genre to ensure the ongoing survival of the product as it remains recognisable and attractive to the audience. Emma Thomas, one of the producers of *Interstellar* says that “technological change and the rise of the international market are to blame for the proliferation” of franchise films. Branded films dominate both the box office and retail shelves. This trend will not only get stronger as more of the studios shift their business model in this direction, but will also increase competitiveness between studios. 5

“The more the international audience is familiar with a title, the more they look forward to seeing it again”^{vi}. All major Hollywood studios are determined to match Disney’s huge success through franchise development. The rivalry between Disney and Warner Bros dates back to the 1920s, with ownership of the two biggest comic-book publishers DC and Marvel, respectively^{vii}. They create films that revolve around the idea of business and the money they get in return, meaning they look for a specific audience to target. The business model guarantees the biggest investment return for each film, balancing the high cost of production against expectation of huge box-office profits. Production is expensive because audiences have high expectations in films and it can be difficult to satisfy them. Viewers do not want to see ‘just another alien movie’ and expect well-known (expensive) actors. This adds to the production cost as stars demand higher compensation for their continued involvement in franchise productions. Currently, Dwayne Johnson is the highest paid actor in the world, earning \$23.5 million upfront for the upcoming *Jumanji: The Next Level* and receives 15% of profits for each franchise film he is involved in. The expenses of advanced technology during and post-production, along with distribution 6

and marketing costs can add up to an average of \$100 million for a major movie, with the latest Bond film costing approximately \$250 million to produce.

7 The development of franchises has several impacts: economic, cultural and technological. It is financially impossible for smaller “indie” producers to compete with the big corporations that sit behind the major studios. Over the past forty years, film companies have been bought out by large global corporations, such as Sony’s purchase of Columbia Pictures Entertainment and Amazon’s intended purchase of MGM. This impacts smaller projects negatively as it makes it extremely hard to compete with these larger studios/corporations. Independent films do not get the recognition they deserve because of lower budgets for high cost stars, less advanced production technology and low-cost marketing and promotion once films are complete. However, some independent, creative film makers can be successful enough to create a franchise itself. An example is Guillermo del Toro, a Mexican film maker “who has managed the rare achievement of sustaining success in Hollywood”^{viii}. He started off as an independent filmmaker and had successfully developed a name, being well known for his horror and fantasy films such as *Pans Labyrinth*. From films like this, led him to winning an Academy Award for Best Director and a net worth of \$30 million, from which he was able to invest in making more films that he retained creative control over. De Toro’s situation is different to most filmmakers, as he independently finances films, but is distributed by the major studios. Many filmmakers do not retain this level of creative control, and therefore end up cyclically directing/producing franchise films as this is what the large studios want to finance. 8

7 Additionally, franchise films have a socio-cultural impact. Some franchises can bring groups of people in society together, an example is the Harry Potter series. These films offer a social experience to the audience as they can share their interest in these films with other like-minded people. Audiences have watched Harry’s character grow and from this growth, encouraged the audience to wait annually for the next film to come out. Movies are powerful as they can make audiences feel a range of shared emotions, as they connect to the characters and watch and learn as they go through similar situations. Additionally, “franchises also allow an audience to engage with the story outside of the cinema”^{ix}, through merchandise, games and the original books from which the film has been developed. Most importantly, good franchises are successful because the story or the characters are so compelling in the first film that audiences genuinely want more of that story or character. The last twenty years have seen major technological advances in film, many of which has gone on to become franchises, like the Harry Potter series where the visual and special effects technology advanced alongside the storylines. This may account for the ever-growing box office take from \$1 billion USD in the first film to \$1.7 billion USD in the final of the Harry Potter series. 9

The development of franchises have started to dominate the Hollywood film industry. The industry has run out of ideas and there is a feeling that there is nothing new in Hollywood. This development might worsen as the film industry is mostly profit driven rather than developing content that might positively impact on society by developing creative content. Independent filmmakers may increasingly find a wider audience simply because they are not hiding behind the repeated fictional plot.

ⁱ [Why Movie Franchises are Everything Now](#)

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multimedia_franchise

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://consequenceofsound.net/2016/04/why-film-franchises-could-change-cinema-forever/>

^{iv} <https://www.wired.com/2017/05>

^v <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/10/1044830230/bond-franchise-will-have-to-make-changes-to-appeal-to-a-younger-audience>

^{vi} [Analysis: Why Hollywood Has Embraced Franchise Films](#)