

## Chapter 1

### Blockbusters . . . for the Kid in All of Us!

Blockbusters are easy to find. They are the best-selling novels, best-selling video games, toys that become *must haves* at Christmas, the comic books whose heroes become aspiring worldwide role models, the television shows with impressive ratings, and the movies that achieve at least \$100 million in domestic box office receipts, though accounting for inflation and the higher price of 3-D movies that hurdle is rapidly increasing to \$150 million (in 2011 dollars).

#### Not All Blockbusters Are Created Equal

There are three types of blockbusters. *Single-Event Blockbusters* are those that have great success but do not continue from there. If it's a movie, for example, it might do very well at the box office but the story might be too close-ended to allow for a sequel. Some blockbusters are extendable enough to become *Linear-Franchise Blockbusters*, which are successful and open-ended enough to warrant on-going installments in their original category. This occurs when a successful novel becomes a book series, a successful video game has added versions, or a successful movie leads to sequels. Some blockbusters are so immense that they transition into *Multi-Category-Franchise Blockbusters*. This denotes a blockbuster that is an on-going success in its category and is able to hop from business category to business category to become a movie, video game, book series, apparel, concert, and more.

Any blockbuster type (Single-Event, Linear-Franchise, Multi-Category Franchise) is to be cherished.

#### Winners and Losers

It's not easy to create a blockbuster of any type. The majority

of entertainment projects fail. Either they are never bought by entertainment executives or they never survive the development process. Even if they make it through the development process, a great percentage of them fail once they are launched into the marketplace of entertainment options.

In June of 2011, the *Hollywood Reporter* noted that “only 23 percent of past season’s new broadcast series were picked up for the fall, the lowest rate in the past five years.” According to Bruce Nash, president of Nash Information Services, a special analysis of his database of 625 movies released since the beginning of 2006 revealed that only 30 percent of studio films end up making money after accounting for studio overhead. He notes that “one interesting observation from the numbers is that less than 5 percent of the films account for all of the profits.”

Success and failure are based upon numbers. A TV show will be deemed a failure if it did not achieve high enough ratings to bring in sufficient advertising dollars. A film will be deemed a failure if it did not put enough butts in theater seats to justify the cost. A first novel is deemed a failure if it did not attract enough readers to justify the advance. The reasons for the failure are plentiful. It may be a result of a poor concept, a lousy execution of that concept, inadequate and unimaginative marketing, or a lack of support from senior management.

The unfortunate fact in the entertainment world is that blockbusters are vital not just because they make money for their own sake, but because they pay for the great percentage of projects that fail miserably and lose fortunes. As a March 2011 headline in the *Los Angeles Times* read, “Theater owners and studio chiefs put their finger on the cause of a ticket slump: Most of today’s films stink.” It went on to quote Michael Lynton, chief executive of Sony Pictures Entertainment, who added, “So far there is just nothing terribly compelling about what we’re delivering as an industry.”

The objective of this book is to help entertainment executives and creative types increase the odds of creating, selecting, and launching blockbusters. The scope is broad and will include key venues where storytelling is central, most notably in film, television, and publishing. But it will also discuss related

fields that have become reliant upon storytelling, particularly in video game and toy arenas. Effective storytelling will continue to make its way throughout many manufacturing venues as I discussed in my earlier marketing books—*Creating Ever-Cool: A Marketer’s Guide to a Kid’s Heart* and *The Blockbuster Toy! How to Invent the Next BIG Thing*.

### Industries and Blockbusters

But let’s begin our voyage in the industry that is at the heart of the entertainment beast, in the venue where storytelling is most prominent in terms of generating both mass awareness and mass financial trepidation—film. Exhibit 1 shows the top ten films from 2008. Assuming you did not live in a cave that year, it’s probably not a surprise to you that *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man*, and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* made it to the top of the list with domestic grosses exceeding \$300 million each. You might argue that these films topped the list because they were based upon already proven storylines, and in two cases, they were based upon already proven film franchises. That’s fair enough. It’s always harder to invent something entirely new than it is to take something old and contemporize it for today’s audiences. But a closer look at the top films reveals a deeper truth.

**Exhibit 1: Top Ten 2008 Films**

<b>Films</b>	<b>Domestic Grosses</b>
1 The Dark Knight	\$533,345,358
2 Iron Man	\$318,412,101
3 Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	\$317,101,119
4 Hancock	\$227,946,274
5 WALL-E	\$223,808,164
6 Kung Fu Panda	\$215,434,591
7 Twilight	\$192,769,854
8 Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa	\$180,010,950
9 Quantum of Solace	\$168,368,427
10 Dr. Seuss’ Horton Hears a Who!	\$154,529,439

*Source: Box Office Mojo, permission granted*

Notice that the highest-grossing blockbuster films in 2008 were not intended only for the older crowd with mature drama subject matter. Instead, the bulk of the most successful films had their origins in youth culture. Most importantly, they did not just appeal to kids, they appealed to the *kid in all of us*. It's by attracting the kid in all of us that helps stories appeal to as many of the "four audience quadrants" as possible—younger males, older males, younger females, older females.



(Courtesy Rod Fong)

Born from the grand imaginations of Bob Kane and Bill Finger, *The Dark Knight* (aka Batman) originated as a superhero in comic books read by kids and teens in 1939. However, the 2008 film version would not have attained more than \$500 million in domestic box office sales by attracting kids and teens alone. It did more than that. Batman connects with the kid in all of us who desires to have the power to right the wrongs that exist in crime-infested Gotham City. Through Batman, the kid in all of us can imagine he wears the cool costume, fights with the cool gadgets, and drives the cool car. The film added touches of realism that are dark, edgy, and action packed, exactly what was needed for adults to line up for their own sake. In effect, the film teased the child up from the depth of our adult souls and rocketed it to the surface long enough to watch a great film while tossing buttered popcorn pass our lips at a rapid pace. It's kid stuff, made enticing for adult tastes, too.

Similarly, *Iron Man* was born in 1963 at Marvel Comics. It came from the genius of story plotter Stan Lee, scribe Larry Lieber, story artist Don Heck, and character designer Jack Kirby. Read by millions of youth the world over, *Iron Man* gave us a fantasy that we could not achieve in our own lives; the fantasy to build and wear a suit that can save and protect us from evil. What kid wouldn't want that? And what adult couldn't appreciate the same? Even better, the war-related themes used in the early *Iron Man* comics connected with America's involvement in the Cold War. It was on trend. But the film went one better. It was brought to the screen with a great story, well told, and executed in an edgy, realistic, action-packed way, thus giving permission for adults to seek out the film in order to feel like kids again.

Indiana Jones connects us to our kidlike wonder. Who among us hasn't dreamed of finding ancient treasures and unraveling ancient mysteries? Who doesn't want to wear Indy's hat and crack his whip?

Films like *WALL-E* and *Kung Fu Panda* appear on the surface to be solely "kid stuff," but beneath the surface, these

films contain themes that touch the childlike wonder within all of us; themes that adults and children can easily admire and love. *WALL-E* connects us to tender romance, overcoming evil, and a great desire to save Earth from environmental calamity (on trend). *Kung Fu Panda* connects us to characters that, like us, have great, hidden potential.

To be clear, when children love films, they will drag their parents along with them, which enhances box office receipts. That happens all the time. I suspect that the film *Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!* did that because children who went to see this movie were likely to be younger. Nevertheless, with the right storytelling, adults will desire to see a film with kidlike icons independent of their children's desires. And some (this author included) will even use their children as the excuse to see a film that they wanted to see. We never quite grow out of the kidlike wonder of our youth. We hold onto fantasies and revisit them when those fantasies are served up in more mature, realistic ways.

In 2008, the films that were much more adult-oriented showed up as numbers 11 and 12 on the list (*Sex and the City* and *Gran Torino*). Both did well but were dwarfed in size by those films that targeted the kid in all of us.

As a child, a girl might love the story of a commoner who marries a prince in the classic tale of *Cinderella*. As a teen and young adult, she might love *The Princess Diaries*, a story about a teen who discovers she's a princess of a small European country. As an adult, she might love *Pretty Woman*, a story about a prostitute who falls in love with a successful businessman who hires her as his escort. In all three cases, the princess's slipper fits perfectly. About two billion of these same girls . . . young and old . . . were glued to the television set in May 2011 to watch the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. It's a real life story of a commoner marrying royalty. The fantasy lives in all of us!

Adults might say that they are not kids, but who are they kidding? Our interests betray us and demonstrate that our

childlike fantasies never die. Why else would a thirty-five-year-old man plunk down \$12 for a theater ticket to see *Transformers*, a story based upon a toy line that he played with when he was about ten years old? Answer: part of him never grew up, and he looks to relive his childhood in ways that feel more realistic, even gritty, so as to be acceptable to adult sensibilities. The cliché is true—the bigger the kid, the bigger the toys.

As Robert A. Iger, president and chief executive officer for the Walt Disney Company, stated in the company's 2010 annual report, "*Toy Story 3* is at once a gorgeous work of art, a great example of how new technology can make entertainment even more compelling, and a story that speaks to all of us. It shares the DNA of Disney classics like *Snow White*, *Pinocchio* and *Beauty and the Beast*; deeply human stories that appeal to people across cultures and ages and are enjoyed every day the world over."

In a similar fashion, providing appeals that connect to the kid in all of us has resulted in the tremendous success of *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Shrek*, and more. My intent throughout this book is to explain why.

This book will help you to craft entertainment that millions of adults will rush to see because it entices that aspect of their psyches that demands to be a kid—their kid's heart. The added bonus is that the principles I impart will entice children as well.

You might say that the year 2008 was just a fluke. Not so. Exhibit 2 shows the top 10 domestic grossing films for 2009 and 2010. Once again, you will note that nearly every film on the lists has fundamental themes that appeal to adults who are kids at heart. Also notice that the films with adult themes such as *The Hangover* and *The Blind Side* are further down the list.

You might argue that the biggest blockbusters are simply "family-friendly films." That description belittles what is really happening here. The term "family-friendly film" often

implies that the movie has a sweet story, that there's something for everyone, and so the kids might bring mom and dad, too. First, there's nothing sweet about the battle inherent in *Avatar*. Second, the theaters for many of these blockbusters are filled with adults with and without their kids.

**Exhibit 2: Top Ten 2009 and 2010 Films**

<b>2009 Films</b>		<b>Domestic Grosses</b>
1	Avatar	\$749,766,139
2	Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	\$402,111,870
3	Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	\$301,959,197
4	The Twilight Saga: New Moon	\$296,623,634
5	Up	\$293,004,164
6	The Hangover	\$277,322,503
7	Star Trek	\$257,730,019
8	The Blind Side	\$255,959,475
9	Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakquel	\$219,614,612
10	Sherlock Holmes	\$209,028,679

<b>2010 Films</b>		<b>Domestic Grosses</b>
1	Toy Story 3	\$415,004,880
2	Alice in Wonderland	\$334,191,110
3	Iron Man 2	\$312,433,331
4	The Twilight Saga: Eclipse	\$300,531,751
5	Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1	\$295,001,070
6	Inception	\$292,576,195
7	Despicable Me	\$251,513,985
8	Shrek Forever After	\$238,736,787
9	How to Train Your Dragon	\$217,581,231
10	Tangled	\$199,634,414

*Source: Box Office Mojo, permission granted*



I have not yet addressed the issue of profitability. A film may have domestic box office receipts of a very respectable \$150 million and a total worldwide gross of \$300 million, but it would be considered a tremendous flop if it cost more than that to produce and market. It happens all the time but has more to do with bad production decisions and expectations than with consumer interest, which is best exhibited by consumer measures like box office receipts.

Now let's jump way down the box office list. Exhibit 3 shows 2010 films that ranked 141 to 150 by box office receipts. They are predominantly films directed toward an adult audience, featuring more dramas, foreign titles, and R ratings. None of the themes were for the kid in all of us. The documentary *Waiting for "Superman"* received considerable press for its analysis of the failures of the American public education system. Such films have an important place, but they are not the topic of this book.

The immense distance between top-grossing films and bottom-grossing films is staggering and represents the difference in potential between developing adult-oriented films and developing entertainment that targets adults who possess a kid mindset. To be fair, each of the films on the bottom list could have had any number of issues that resulted in their lower performance, including poor marketing, a crowded premiere date, or inadequate distribution. Some might have still been profitable depending upon their production and marketing costs. However, just a quick glimpse at Exhibits 1, 2, and 3 provides at least one inescapable conclusion; films that target the kid in all of us have far more massive appeal than those that don't. Yet, the industry still creates an abundance of films that end up at the bottom, financial failures that must be subsidized by those films at the top.

Similarly, some of the most enduring TV shows are those that connect with the childlike aspects of our psyche. *The Simpsons* is a standout example. It debuted on FOX in 1989 and has become the longest-running American sitcom, lasting nearly twice the number of seasons as other comedies (see Exhibit 4). Adults and children alike are enthralled by this seemingly childlike *cartoon*. But it's not just for kids. In 2009, it even became the longest-

Exhibit 3: Lower-Ranking 2010 Films			
	Films	Genre/MPAA Rating	Domestic Grosses
141	City Island	Comedy/PG-13	\$6,671,036
142	The Last Station	Historical Drama/R	\$6,617,867
143	Winter's Bone	Drama/R	\$6,531,503
144	Waiting for "Superman"	Documentary/ PG	\$6,417,135
145	The Secret in Their Eyes	Crime Drama/R	\$6,391,436
146	It's Kind of a Funny Story	Drama/PG-13	\$6,363,628
147	The Warrior's Way	Western/R	\$5,666,340
148	The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest	Foreign/R	\$5,190,196
149	I Am Love	Foreign/R	\$5,005,465
150	Mao's Last Dancer	Drama/PG	\$4,817,770

*Source: Box Office Mojo, permission granted*

running American primetime entertainment series by surpassing the adult-oriented, live-action series *Gunsmoke*. After all these years, the animated series still lands on the list of the top shows. It won twenty-seven Primetime Emmy Awards, *Time* magazine once named it the twentieth century's best television series, and the Simpson family received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. It consistently delivers wide audiences because it speaks to all of us through the characters of Homer, Bart, Marge, Lisa, and Maggie. Kids and adults can identify with them, albeit in different ways, which is a key concept that will be explored in this book as well. That is, how to create entertainment that is layered with characters, humor, action, and nuances in such a way that both kids and adults can find some aspect of it to enjoy.

It's also worth noting that of all television shows, one of the longest-running is *The Wonderful World of Disney* with fifty-two seasons under its belt. It touched the childlike wonder in all of us.

## Exhibit 4: Longest-Running Television Sitcoms as of September 2010

Sitcom	Seasons on Air
The Simpsons	22
The Danny Thomas Show	18
South Park	15
The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet	14
King of the Hill	13
My Three Sons/The Lucy Show (I Love Lucy)	12
Happy Days, Married . . . with Children, The Jeffersons, 7th Heaven, Frasier, Cheers, M*A*S*H	11

Source: Various

Exhibit 5 shows an assortment of best-selling *single-volume* books. *A Tale of Two Cities* is the only book with higher sales than *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*; both of which are giants compared to more adult-themed books like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Godfather*. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* have achieved such great success because they appeal to the childlike mindset in all of us. It's pure fantasy. The four-hundred-pound gorilla in the bookstore isn't on this list because it's not a *single* book. It's a series. If you add all the Harry Potter books together, they total more than 400 million copies sold! One of the few books to have greater total sales than the *Harry Potter Series* is *The Holy Bible*.

How could that be possible?!

The world of Harry Potter satisfies deep emotional needs within all of us . . . young and old. We rushed into stores to buy the books. We waited in long lines to see the films. We purchased merchandise to *look* and *feel* like the characters. What is it about this franchise that makes us act so? This book will explain all of this in the hopes that you, too, can achieve even a fraction of that success.

**Exhibit 5: Assorted Best-Selling Single-Volume Books**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Copies Sold</b>
A Tale of Two Cities	Charles Dickens	200+ million
The Lord of the Rings	J. R. R. Tolkien	150+ million
The Hobbit	J. R. R. Tolkien	100+ million
And Then There Were None	Agatha Christie	100+ million
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe	C. S. Lewis	85+ million
The Da Vinci Code	Dan Brown	80+ million
Gone with the Wind	Margaret Mitchell	30+ million
The Godfather	Mario Puzo	21+ million

*Source: Various*

Let's jump to theme parks. Exhibit 6 shows that Disney-related theme parks dominate top attendance. Why? In part, the overall theme and related rides and parades are predominantly based upon stories and adventures we all grew up with! At Disneyland, you can visit Cinderella's Castle, experience the Indiana Jones-themed ride, and visit Tom Sawyer's Island. We can all feel like youngsters again.

Video games show a similar pattern. Of the top best-selling video games from 2000 to 2009 (see Exhibit 7) several are based upon childlike fantasies, such as *Super Mario Bros.* and *Pokemon*. Importantly, the average age of a game player is thirty-seven according to industry statistics. Thirty-seven! Many gamers born in the 1970s, with the introduction of Atari and Nintendo, never left their games behind. They continued to play video games well into adulthood. Why? At their core, video games appeal to the kid in all of us by providing a good dose of childlike fantasy fulfillment.

**Exhibit 6: Top Fifteen Amusement/Theme Parks**

	<b>Amusement/Theme Parks</b>	<b>2010 Attendance</b>
1	Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World (Florida)	16,972,000
2	Disneyland (California)	15,980,000
3	Tokyo Disneyland	14,452,000
4	Tokyo DisneySea	12,663,000
5	Epcot at Walt Disney World	10,825,000
6	Disneyland Park at Disneyland Paris	10,500,000
7	Disney's Animal Kingdom at Walt Disney World	9,686,000
8	Disney's Hollywood Studios at Walt Disney World	9,603,000
9	Universal Studios Japan	8,160,000
10	Everland (South Korea)	6,884,000
11	Disney California Adventure	6,278,000
12	Islands of Adventure at Universal Orlando (Florida)	5,949,000
13	Universal Studios at Universal Orlando	5,925,000
14	Lotte World (South Korea)	5,551,000
15	Hong Kong Disneyland	5,200,000

*Source: The Global Attractions Attendance Report, 2010. Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) and AECOM, permission granted*

**Exhibit 7: Best-Selling Video Games from 2000-09 (Multiplatform)**

	<b>Game</b>	<b>Units Sold</b>
1	Wii Sports	58.40 million
2	Wii Play	26.53 million
3	Nintendogs	23.43 million
4	Wii Fit	22.50 million
5	New Super Mario Bros. DS	20.92 million
6	Mario Kart Wii	20.71 million
7	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	20.15 million
8	Brain Age	18.73 million
9	Pokemon Gold/Silver	18.02 million
10	Pokemon Diamond/Pearl	17.35 million

*Source: VGChartz, permission granted*

### Uncovering and Applying Principles Are Key

This book will outline the principles that made these blockbusters successful. Not all great films, novels, toys, comic books, or video games are financial blockbusters. There are countless offerings that we hold dear that never enjoyed huge financial success. Not all financial blockbusters are deemed to be great by the critics. But the only critics that matter for the purpose of this book are audiences who have voted with their dollars.

There are many books that teach you how to write and sell your screenplays or novels to the entertainment industry, most notably to entertainment company presidents, publishers, or producers. Given the failure rate, many executives appear to be picking the wrong material. If you are a writer/developer, this book will show you how to create entertainment that audiences *want to buy*. If you are an executive, this book will provide a system of principles that you can employ to evaluate and market that entertainment.

The knowledge and insights within this book come from several sources. They are derived from my thirty years of making general observations in the entertainment industry regarding what works and what has not. They come from working on a slew of research and consulting projects for films, TV shows, video games, and toys. They come from my experience as a storyteller and novelist. They come from many successful entertainment executives whose helpful tips you will find within these pages. And they come from a new research project that I commissioned specifically for this book in order to provide fresh audience opinions. This research discovered the types of emotional satisfaction audiences seek through entertainment, the types of iconic characters they desire to see, the challenges and fears they want these characters to face, the emotional and physical ways they wish these characters would transform in the context of the story, and the dislikes they have of current entertainment offerings. This research shows, for example, that when asked for chief

dislikes of entertainment, 44.5 percent of the respondents said that today's offerings don't interest them from the start. Among other things, many of today's entertainment offerings lack relevant and aspiring stories and characters. All of this and more created a foundation for the key principles you will find within. I will demonstrate these principles with examples old and new, spanning many decades of observations, to provide both a historical and contemporary context.

William Goldman once famously said that "nobody knows anything," in reference to whether anyone could predict if a particular film would be a success or a flop. With due respect, he's wrong. Immensely creative, Goldman knew that he was onto something when he wrote the Academy Award-winning screenplay for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as well as *The Princess Bride*. George Lucas must have known something, deep down, or else he would have given up on *Star Wars* long before the final edit. Stephen King must have thought that *Carrie* had potential or he would have succumbed to the plethora of rejection letters he received.

It seems that *somebody knows something*, and some very successful storytellers have proven that they do time and again. These writers have an instinct that is not magic. Their instinct is rooted in sound principles. This book will explain these principles and how you can immediately apply them in order to help you create, develop, and market blockbusters.

Then you will be *somebody who knows something*, too.