The New Blockbuster Film Sequel:
Changing Cultural and Economic Conditions within the Film Industry

Jessica Bay

Interdisciplinary MA in Popular Culture

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Popular Culture

Faculty of Social Sciences, Brock University

St. Catharines, Ontario

© October 2010

ABSTRACT

Film sequels are a pervasive part of film consumption practices and have become an important part of the decision making process for Hollywood studios and producers. This thesis indicates that sequels are not homogenous groups of films, as they are often considered, but offer a variety of story construction and utilize a variety of production methods. Three types of blockbuster sequel sets are identified and discussed in this thesis. The Traditional Blockbuster Sequel Set, as exemplified by *Back to the Future* (1985, 1989, 1990) films, is the most conventional type of sequel set and capitalizes on the winning formula of the first film in the franchise. The Multi-Media Sequel Set, such as *The Matrix* (1999, 2003) trilogy, allows the user/viewer to experience and consume the story as well as the world of the film through many different media. The *Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003) set of films is an illustration of The Saga Sequel Set where plot lines are continuous over the entire franchise thus allowing the viewer to see the entire set as a unified work. The thesis also demonstrates how the blockbuster sequel sets, such as the *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003, 2006, 2007) franchise, restructure the production process of the Hollywood film industry.

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Introduction

Hollywood film production is a multi-billion dollar industry that is in a unique position whereby its influence straddles economic, social, and cultural practices of society. While the impact of blockbuster Hollywood films upon popular culture is now regularly studied by some scholars, it seems the importance of the film sequel is questioned regularly. In popular rhetoric sequels are often dismissed, labelled with negative connotations that suggest that this type of film is the worst kind of money-making attraction that lowers the quality of all film. This is not the case, however. The increasing prevalence of the blockbuster sequel invites more study of the phenomenon, as this type of film has the potential to completely alter the way the industry works. This thesis highlights the industrial role of the blockbuster sequel since 1975 by elaborating different subcategories of sequel sets within that large group of films. Through a review of some of the historical circumstances that have brought about changes in the sequel set this thesis will further delineate this diverse type of film. It argues that the economy of blockbuster sequels is a significant factor in the creation of Hollywood films such that studios now look to produce sequel sets at least as often as they produce one-time hits.

The film sequel is now an important cultural and economic factor in the decisions of major Hollywood corporations and should be recognized as such by film historians and cultural critics. The sequel has changed throughout film history but it is currently often an anticipated part of economic decisions as opposed to a way of exploiting the success of the original film well after the fact. The move within the Hollywood industry to make major sequels a part of the planning processes of blockbuster films has

influenced popular culture to a point where entertainment news media and audiences now expect and, more importantly, often greatly anticipate blockbuster sequels to follow many highly successful films.

This thesis attempts to explain the function of the sequel in the industry today by considering the diversity of this type of film. Generally the term "sequel" can be used to define one large group of films without recognizing divisions within the group. Upon closer examination however, we can see that not all sequels are alike. When we look at the production process we can see that, for example, the creation of a *Star Trek* film is quite different from that of a *Jaws* sequel. A *Star Trek* sequel is part of a larger story world in film, as well as other media, while a *Jaws* sequel is more-or-less an attempt at repeating the success of the original film. To highlight some of the differences between these films, beyond their generic classification, I have identified three major types of sequel sets: Traditional, Multi-Media, and Saga. My production examples highlight the emergence of each sequel set type by describing the changes in the film industry since 1975. I argue that the potential for franchise-style sequel sets is a crucial component in the production of any blockbuster film in the current Hollywood industry.

My interest with this project lies in the different conditions within the Hollywood film industry that have influenced the production of blockbuster film sequel sets. Understanding how sequel sets have been created helps us to work towards a better understanding of how they affect and are affected by us. It would be misguided to dismiss the sequel as merely the unanticipated but highly appreciated economic extension of an original film or to examine these films solely in terms of aesthetic values. The role of sequels and their place within the film industry has changed since the birth of film and

particularly since the emergence of the new Blockbuster in the mid-1970s with its unprecedented box office returns and massive marketing campaigns. The shift to a new blockbuster mentality affects the way in which films are conceived and made. More specifically, the current Hollywood industry has changed its opinion of the sequel such that the "Big Six" production studios (Disney, Fox, Paramount, Sony, Universal, and Warner Bros.) now often buy and commission screenplays or other source material based on the potential to create a franchise of multiple sequels[1].

Franchises offer the studio and its parent corporation the promise of an existing market that requires fewer and lower marketing costs for subsequent films as well as the potential to develop characters and storylines over increased screen time. While franchises, including sequels, of lower budget films are constantly released by studios, the majority of these head straight for the home video/dvd market, for example the *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997, Columbia) sequels (1998 and 2006). It is the phenomenon of the blockbuster sequel that brings large crowds to theatres and box office returns to producing studios. It is the potential for profit that makes the blockbuster sequel extremely popular with industry executives and a staple in the current configuration of the Hollywood film industry. Sequel sets that are filmed in groups of two or more offer an overall reduction in production costs. It is these considerations that now play a large part in the decisions of studios regarding the purchase and production of potential blockbuster film sequel sets.

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[1] It should be noted that these major studios are not the only producing studios connected to Hollywood. Many independent and mini-major studios have played significant roles in the Hollywood system. I do not identify most of these studios, however, either because they have not made a blockbuster sequel set discussed within this thesis, or because they are actually part of one of the "Big Six" studio conglomerates. It should also be noted that "the studios" are often discussed as one large group throughout the thesis. I recognize that the dynamics of this group have changed throughout history. The major studios mentioned here, however, have always been connected to Hollywood in some form or other.

Although the decision to create franchise-style sequel sets is a financial one connected to synergy within the film production studios and their parent corporations, it has also had a cultural impact. This thesis considers the motivation for and the cultural effects of this extended narrative format as it currently suggests a reconfiguration of the production system from one centered on star power to the sequel-driven model which has consequences for the way in which consumers experience film. The modern blockbuster sequel needs to be examined as both a cultural and economic phenomenon in today's industry. Producers choose story ideas based on their potential as sequel sets or franchises and it is those stories that populate and shape our culture. The examination of the variety of blockbuster sequel set types allows us to better understand not just the sequels themselves but also Hollywood's relationship to popular culture and to audience consumption on a broader level.

My thesis explores the diversity of the blockbuster sequel. I propose that there are three types of blockbuster sequel sets that I define and label as Traditional, Multi-Media, and Saga Sequel Sets. These types are distinguished by production processes. Throughout the thesis each type of sequel set is discussed within a particular time period with a set of films that acts as exemplars of each sequel set. Some types of sequel sets have been around since the beginning of film and will continue to exist as long as they remain profitable.

The first of the sequel types I call the Traditional Blockbuster Sequel Set because it is the type that has been employed throughout film history. It is this type that is most commonly thought of when discussing sequels. With this type of set, the creation of sequels is wholly dependent on the success of the first film. Additionally, these films

often follow very similar storylines to that of the first film. The *Back to the Future* group is an example of the set since the sequels were only conceived of after the enormous success of the initial film.

The Multi-Media Sequel Set, exemplified here by *The Matrix* films, is the only type of set that can be seen as time-specific as its success is dependent on emerging technologies. Henry Jenkins has theorized a new type of media formation that offers no restrictions across media and often carries over elements of the story to many other media. The blurring between different media is an idea which Jenkins has termed "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins: 2007). The Multi-Media sequel set is precisely this form of transmedia storytelling. When combined with the creation of a sequel set, the concept is expanded upon to the point of creating a whole new level of possibilities for film and the sequel itself. While films such as those in the *Star Trek* series engaged multiple media with tangential material for decades, Multi-Media Sequel Sets have the potential to offer important expansion of story elements in a medium other than film. For this reason, it is only with the advent of the internet and other digital technologies that this type of sequel set has really been able to approach its full potential.

Finally, the Saga Sequel Set refers to those sets of sequels that offer a complete story over often three or more films. With these types of films it would be detrimental to watch the films in a set out of their intended order as understanding of subsequent films is dependent on knowledge gained in earlier films. These films differ from the old serial format which began in the silent era most notably in their length. Serials are quite short while Saga Sequel Sets include films that are regular feature length. *The Lord of the Rings* set of films is an excellent example of this industrial model for it exemplifies most

of the elements of the Saga Sequel Set and is regularly referred to as a complete set of films.

Through an examination of the three types of sequel sets I attempt to underline those changes to the industry that have come to favour the creation of blockbuster sequels. My discussion of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films serves as an example of the rapidly changing film industry trying to accommodate the new format. We see that changes in industrial practices have an effect on the way that films are made and on the expectations of the film-going public. While producers seek out material that can be turned into a set of films, audiences eagerly anticipate future instalments to blockbuster films.

While a growing body of scholarship now exists on the film sequel[2], the assumption underlying much of the popular writing on sequels is that they are simply a money-grabbing scheme created by film corporations. Along with this assumption comes the view that sequels are never as "good" as the original film. These assumptions must be reconsidered in Hollywood's new era of sequelization.

Blockbuster sequels must be acknowledged for they inundate our senses by virtue of being blockbusters and through their mass marketing campaigns. The "buzz" surrounding blockbuster sequels is such that it is virtually impossible to ignore them, especially as the franchises grow and as entertainment news grows in prominence within the traditional news media and now digital media. The corporations within Hollywood

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[2] Until recently the majority of this material either simply listed sequels (Nowlan and Nowlan's *Cinema Sequels and Remakes, 1903-1987*, 1989) or examined individual sequel novels and films (Budra and Schellenberg's *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, 1998). New and notable work that now examines the sequel and sequelization as a phenomenon can be seen in *Second Takes: Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel* edited by Carolyn Jess-Cooke and Constantine Verevis, 2010 and especially Carolyn Jess-Cooke's simply titled *Film Sequels*, 2009.

are in the business of making films that entertain a large enough audience to allow them to turn a profit. From this perspective, all Hollywood movie sequels, like all films, are created by corporations with the intent of increasing profits. With the increase in the number of sequels and their prevalence in popular culture over the past few decades, however, it is necessary to consider these films as more than just means by which studios make money. While economic and industrial analysis can yield significant information about modern industrial practices, the study of film sequels can provide insight into many other significant aspects of film study, including narrative practices and the shifts in and development of special effects technologies.

While recognizing the importance of early film sequels, series, and serials, this thesis only considers Hollywood blockbuster sequels made after 1975. Within this study the new Hollywood blockbuster is defined by its massive box office achievements, its status as theatrical event, and by its expensive marketing campaign. With this in mind, blockbuster sequels then are sequel films that not only follow a blockbuster, but are also constructed as blockbusters themselves. Recognized by many as the birth of the modern blockbuster, this period is characterized by dramatic shifts in industrial and economic practices within the industry and it is for this reason that it has been chosen as a beginning of the timeline for my research on sequels. I have broken my research into sections, roughly segregated by decade, each of which discusses sequels within their respective time period and in terms of the changes taking place in the larger film industry. Each section includes a case study of a particular set of sequels that shows the changes made to the way sequels were created during that time period. I have chosen sequel sets

that best represent both the era in which they are studied as well as the type of sequel set they represent.

In conducting my research I chose to take a closer look at the industrial workings of the Hollywood production system. The hope is that this research will contribute to the ever-expanding work on the Hollywood blockbuster and recent reconfigurations of the sequel model. This study tries to answer questions about economic practices of the industry throughout different time periods regarding the role sequels have played in each of those periods. This historical discussion will help contextualize my investigation of the ways in which the role of the sequel has changed and how this new role works in the current system. A change in the way sequels are made is affected by and has an effect on the economic and cultural conditions of the industry and it is this effect that I examine throughout this thesis.

It is important here to note that I am not attempting to set up a chronological evolution of the sequel that suggests that sequels are the way they are today due to specific moments in film history. The different types of sequel sets identified in this study do not exist only within the time frame in which they are identified. Looking at the recent history of the sequel is necessary to better understand how the sequel works within the industrial setup of Hollywood and the conditions that have placed them in such a position. As Mathijs states "[i]t is only through its interaction with mechanisms of production, distribution, reception and consumption that a film acquires any meaning for society" (Mathijs: 2006, 6). In other words, it is necessary to understand the production, which is the focus of this work, and consumption of these movies as well as any inherent

meaning(s) in the text before we can truly approach their overall role and place in our popular culture.

Defining Serials, Series, and Sequels

Film sequels are sometimes confused with film series and film serials. Although this thesis deals only with sequel sets, it is important to distinguish them from the other two categories. While these distinctions are somewhat arbitrary, for example sequels may also be categorized as either series or serials, I argue that film serials are generally an historic category that do not exist in the same way now that they did in early cinema. In the first twenty to thirty years of film, serials were common practice offering film-goers a short viewing of a continuing story of a particular character every week. This practice ensured weekly attendance and income for producers and distributors. These films were generally shorter than feature films and offered a fairly continuous story through multiple offerings. Serials are presented individually and often include a recap of the previous instalment as well as a "cliffhanger" ending whereby the main character is last seen in some sort of dire situation often with no visible chance of escape. It is a formula adapted from print media. Although some critics have likened film sets such as the *Back to the Future*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings* films to early film serials (Thompson: 2003, 105), I consider these to be sets of sequels rather than serials. While modern sequel sets may occasionally end individual films without completely resolving some part of the plot (for example: *Back to the Future: Part II* or *Empire Strikes Back*), they can be distinguished from earlier serials by their length but also by their ability to function as standalone films.

Film sequels, on the other hand, can be seen as an extension of the story in an earlier film with the same characters but with a finite ending. Sequels present a change from the original film within the comfort of that first film's world so that "the agenda of the sequel includes renewal, return and difference, in contrast to the serial's emphases on repetition and sameness" (Jess-Cooke: 2009, 31). Sequels offer the audience the ability to learn more about the characters of a film and the world in which they live. Each individual film offers a separate plot further testing the main characters, as opposed to film serials that often simply extend the plot endlessly from film to film. Though they can often be watched as individual films (i.e. complete plot with no cliffhanger ending) separate from their precursors or successors, the storyline is designed to be more complex and sustained for the viewer who has watched the entire set of sequels.

Finally, film series can be seen as a group of films linked together by a character, setting, or overt theme. For the most part, no real insight into the character or plot will be gained from watching other films in the series and it is certainly not necessary to watch these films in any kind of order. As stated above, many films can straddle two or all three of these categories as this study will reveal.

The iconic James Bond films may serve to clarify these distinctions as well as demonstrate how a film series can also be considered as a set of sequels. James Bond has been a fixture in British popular culture since the 1950s when the first Ian Fleming novels became bestsellers. This British super spy was introduced to the rest of the world in 1962 with the first of the big screen adaptations of the novels, *Dr. No* (United Artists, 1962, Terence Young) and, to date, there are twenty-two "official"[3] Bond films including the

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[3] The Bond films that are deemed "official" films are those produced by EON Productions, the company that has owned the rights to the Bond novels since 1962 (Chu: 2002, 126; Thomas: 2008, n.p.).

most recent one, *Quantum of Solace* (MGM, 2008, Marc Forster). This group of films is the most successful series of all time. It has been fairly strictly conceived as a series and not a set of sequels which can help identify the differences between the two narrative forms. Generally a sequel is another part of the story which began in the first film while a series is a collection of films with no real story connection other than the main character(s) or setting or some ether element excluding story.

Having offered this distinction, it should be noted that some of the sequel sets in this work could potentially fall into the category of series and, by all rights, some of the Bond films can also be referred to as sequels. As such, the two terms are somewhat flexible, though Bond films generally fall under the title of "series" based on the fact that each film is a completely separate entity from any other in the series. There is no distinct order in which the films should be watched to ensure understanding of the plot, and the only major connecting factor over all twenty-two films is the character of James Bond, who is played by six different actors over the years without any apparent disruption to the series. While considerable scholarship has been devoted to the Bond series they will not be included here because this franchise functions somewhat differently from the other sequel sets I will be studying. Not only does the Bond series predate the first films in this study, but it also, until recently, does not seem to conform to a sequel production model.

With the Bond films we can see that changes have occurred over time in the way that this series connected its films and presented itself. The plot connections in the two latest Bond films not only represent a move to more sequel-type films but also reflect a change in the industry and culture, whereby large connected sequel sets have become more desirable for both studio and audience. Hollywood has always capitalized on

repetition. Genre developed as a way to capitalize on the popularity of different types of stories by repeating a winning formula. This can be seen in Douglas Fairbanks' decision to move into making swashbucklers based on the success of *The Mark of Zorro* (United Artists, 1920, Fred Niblo) or Warner Bros. method of mining popular genres such as the Busby Berkely musicals (Bordwell: 2003, 153, 215). Occasionally important storyline elements are also repeated from one film to its sequel to remind viewers what has happened. More obviously, whole films are often repeated through remakes. All of these repetitions, however, must include some variation or viewers would become bored with the material. Sequels and series are another example of repetition in film whereby some element of the original film (setting, characters, or story for example) is repeated in subsequent films but with some variation (new characters, new situation, or a new problem as examples). The sequel itself as a type of film also requires some variation or the tradition would fail. By looking at the most recent Bond films we can see that the film series model of producing a large franchise has undergone its own variation towards a sequel set of films with a connected story in hopes of renewing the franchise and remaining current with the present mode of franchise production.

In 2006 Bond was reborn and the series was essentially revived with *Casino Royale* (MGM, 2006, Martin Campbell), based on the first Fleming book. In this film, among other things, Bond (Daniel Craig) falls in love with Vesper (Eva Green), who ultimately betrays him before killing herself, at which point Bond captures some of the main characters responsible for her betrayal and death and the film's end. *Quantum of Solace* follows Bond as he continues to chase the organization responsible for Vesper's death and the audience experiences his struggle for vengeance. Here we have the first real

sequel in the Bond series. This connection between two films is not completely

unprecedented for the Bond series – earlier films included the return of specific

characters (other than those in MI6) such as Jaws (Richard Kiel) – but generally the

stories remained completely separate from one another. The difference here is that the

plots of these two films are connected while previous films only connected characters and

general setting (MI6, for example). Derek Elley writes in *Variety* that this "pic [sic] is the

first in the series in which the action follows directly from the previous film" (Elley:

2008, n.p.). At a time when audiences seem to be asking for more complexity in film

plots and are more willing to accept a story that carries over many films, we see how an

established series such as the Bond franchise is adapting to a new industrial model.

Literature Review

Once considered undeserving of critical study, the modern blockbuster has grown

in status in recent years. An increasing number of studies are being published regarding

the blockbuster and its role within film culture. Tom Shone's *Blockbuster: How*

Hollywood Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Blockbuster (2004), for example,

examines the blockbuster as it is: a form of entertainment. With this work there is no

need to justify the blockbuster as anything more than a fun and smart way to make money

in Hollywood. His discussion differs from other works of its kind in this lack of

validation of the blockbuster as a work of art. Shone also differs from his contemporaries,

however, in his writing style. This book has been written in prose rather than scholarly

jargon, presumably to appeal to both a scholarly and distinctly popular audience. On the

other hand, Julian Stringer takes a more academic approach to the topic of the

blockbuster in his anthology *Movie Blockbusters* (2003). This collection of writing is

definitely not written with the lay consumer of such films in mind yet it still attempts to justify its study of a topic so disliked by many critics. This is common of other such studies of the blockbuster, as is the glimpse into the many facets of the blockbuster, from history to international acclaim to its role within the industry. For how can one study a commercially-viable product such as the blockbuster without also considering the industry to which it belongs? This is the greatest difference between the study of the blockbuster and the study of other films: an acceptance of the study of the film industry as not only worthy of scholarly attention, but also required. Studies of those films considered art house fare tend to avoid discussions of the industry but the blockbuster cannot be separated from its industrial position.

These studies have worked very hard to elevate the status of the blockbuster and acknowledge its role within popular culture and the film industry itself. In fact, the study of film as an industry is also growing in popularity as we can see in such anthologies as Stringer's which has a complete section entitled "Industry matters." Along similar lines, Janet Wasko has produced her study of the industry of Hollywood: *How Hollywood Works* (2003). From production to exhibition, Wasko scholarly examines a topic that is often ignored in film studies. Kristin Thompson goes even further in her study of *The Lord of the Rings* franchise by studying both industrial practices while touching on the aesthetic significance of this group of films. Her book, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (2007) presents the history of the creation of this set of sequels while connecting the entire project to the workings of the industry of contemporary Hollywood.

Along with this move toward scholarly analysis of both the blockbuster and the film industry comes a desire to examine the sequel. Previous studies did not look at the sequel as a phenomenon so much as they examined individual sequels for their value in relation to the original film to which they were connected. For example, Lianne McLarty, in her article "□I'll Be Back': Hollywood, Sequelization, and History," discusses the plot of *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (TriStar Pictures, 1991, James Cameron) as offering the character of Sarah Connor growth. This character was rewritten as an autonomous being in the film rather than allowing actions to occur to her. In this way, McLarty suggests that sequels offer the opportunity to rewrite social wrongs from the original film by giving voice to the absent or disenfranchised while serving to restore the patriarchy. McLarty ultimately analyzes sequels as a genre and from a distinctly feminist position. There is great value in this discussion in that it does introduce the idea of postmodernism as playing a role in the way that sequels are made. It is also important that the economic as well as the socio-cultural positions sequels occupy be understood so that the overall effect of this type of film can be better appreciated.

Current studies of the sequel, however, have begun to consider this type of film as a mode of its own. These studies have begun to consider the sequel for both its narrative and industrial importance. The biggest concern within this new area of study lies in the definition of the sequel as it is to be studied. Many of the studies take considerable time in attempting a definition and some occasionally get lost in the act of defining sequels and excluding those deemed to be "false," as happens in Jennifer Forrest's "Of 'True' Sequels: The Four Daughters Movies, or the Series That Wasn't" in Carolyn Jess-Cooke and Constantine Verevis' *Second Takes: Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel* (2010).

Regardless the differences in opinions regarding the specifics of the term, studies such as those in *Second Takes* and Carolyn Jess-Cooke's *Film Sequels* (2009) help to elevate the study of the sequel in terms of aesthetic, historical, and industrial perspectives. Ultimately, all of these new studies agree that sequels constitute a narrative continuation of a preceding film while offering similarity with some variation. As Carolyn Jess-Cooke states: "[s]equels are transitional, not conclusive. By definition, the sequel has no end, it is a perpetual diegesis with which consumers can engage as many times in as many ways as possible" and, in many ways, this is also true of the study of sequels (Jess-Cooke: 2009, 8).

From Serials to Blockbuster Sequels

Though sequels have been part of film history since its earliest days they were less common than the weekly film serials popularized early in the twentieth century. One of the first true film serials was *What Happened to Mary* (Edison Company, 1912, Charles Brabin) (Stedman: 1971, 5-6). This serial began as a continuing story in *The Ladies' World* magazine in August 1912 and was released shortly after as a film serial by Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope Company (Stedman: 1971, 5-8). The discovery that film companies could draw the same audience in to theatres on a weekly basis by prolonging the fate of a particular character was an important one and spawned many different serials by most major film companies around the world during the 1910s and early 1920s. These films were useful because they were shorter than feature films but, for the overall length of the serial, were cheaper to produce. The reduced costs built into a film product that provides weekly entertainment but employs the same cast, crew, and sets during filming was undeniably appealing. Until the mid-1910s "making longer movies in [America] was

a precarious undertaking … because of expense (which smaller companies feared to undertake) or because of the direct resistance of the old guard (which had money but not foresight)" (Stedman: 1971, 10). In addition, the Edison Trust, or Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), had cornered the market on motion pictures and had discouraged feature length films between 1907 and 1913. Studios that were members of the Trust agreed not to create films longer than one to two reels and serials were an alternative way of telling longer stories. It was an additional benefit that film serials were easier to finance and market due to their connection to newspapers. Running the serials in papers at the same time as showing them in theatres offered advertising for the films while newspaper executives were willing to provide financial assistance as they also saw this as advertising for their papers (Stedman: 1971, 10).

As the industry consolidated around the feature length format around the 1910s (Jess-Cooke: 2009, 17), the lucrative opportunities presented by the serial film were not forgotten. In fact, the earning potential of the sequel has been exploited since the earliest days of film as well. For example, as early as 1911 the Danish crime thriller *Dr. Gar el Hama* led to *Dr. Gar el Hama flugt* (1912) and, perhaps more recognizable to American viewers, the popularity of *The Sheik* (Paramount, 1921, George Melford) was followed by *Son of the Sheik* (Paramount, George Fitzmaurice) in 1926 (Thompson: 2007, 3). These sequels resulted from the unexpected success and profits of the original productions.

As the popularity of feature films grew, so did the industry. The grandeur of films and their marketing also grew to the extent that the blockbuster film was born. The term "blockbuster" is a fluid one that has changed its meaning over the years. Through the

years such films have had many names from megapictures to event pictures, to superfilms, and finally blockbusters or even megablockbusters. Early on, the blockbuster film was "a purely economic term, with no generic preference, it was conferred solely by a movie's box office returns" (Shone: 2004, 28). As such, *Gone With the Wind* (MGM, 1939, Victor Fleming), the largest grossing film of its time, was the prototypical blockbuster for many decades. Other films that garnered this blockbuster title, based on their box office returns, before the 1970s were *The Ten Commandments* (Paramount, 1956, Cecil B DeMille), *Ben-Hur* (MGM, 1959, William Wyler), and finally *The Sound of Music* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1965, Robert Wise) (Shone: 2004, 29). In comparison with other films of their time, these films earned massive box office returns and that success qualified them as blockbusters. Over time the titles have changed and the qualifiers for those titles have also changed but the underlying elements are the same. Blockbuster films are larger than life; they "impl[y] success: a going beyond of what had been the size norms of accepted or established practice; the adding on of something special; the presence of an extra dimension of some kind or other" (Stringer: 2003, 5). They are perceived as such by audiences and the media. With the success of *The Sound of Music* Fox, in particular, felt they had achieved a winning formula for blockbuster success: high production budgets, a big name star, and the reworking of a winning musical. Unfortunately, they were unable to secure the same box office returns with subsequent musicals. In fact, no studio was able to secure such large box office returns again until the 1970s with *The Godfather* (Paramount, 1972, Francis Ford Coppola).

The changes occurring in the 1970s and 1980s that enable a resurgence in blockbusters with greater box office numbers than ever before had some roots in the

Paramount Decision of 1948. Before 1948 studios were vertically integrated giving them much more control over when, where, and for how long their films were exhibited. They employed a practice known as "block booking" whereby exhibitors were forced to take a block of pictures in order to exhibit one film deemed 'A' quality. Such blocks may also include one or more B films, newsreels, serials, and/or animated cartoons. In this way, studios could ensure that every film they produced would be shown in theatres, therefore earning them money. When vertical integration was abolished in 1948 studios disposed of their exhibition branches leaving exhibitors free to rent and exhibit films as they saw fit. Films that earned the exhibitors money could enjoy a longer run. Conversely, those films that were not bringing patrons in to theatres were pulled from screens early. Studios were no longer guaranteed income from every film they produced. With much greater importance placed on the financial success of individual films, studios cut back on the number of films they produced in order to focus resources more profitably (Bordwell: 2003, 327).

While studios were cutting back the number of films produced, factors such as television and changing demographics were further endangering film profits by reducing the number of moviegoers. Television was still a relatively new medium but it was quickly growing in popularity. The threat posed by television was simple: why should viewers choose to go out to theatres and pay money to see a film when they could watch something on television for free in the comfort of their own homes? At the time studios did not immediately see the benefits that television could offer them. Rather than anticipating the profits from selling their film libraries, producing for the small screen, or even owning television networks, they initially saw only the loss of revenue as

moviegoers chose to stay away from movie theatres. At the same time, studios began to realize that their audience was no longer homogenous. By the 1950s films were being made that aimed at specific age groups (Bordwell: 2003, 333). This is significant because it often meant smaller audience numbers per film overall as it was no longer always suitable for an entire family to enjoy one film together. More than this though, the demographics of filmgoers were changing such that teenagers and young adults constituted the majority (Neale:2003, 20-21). Many of these young adults were also suburbanite families who came to choose only specific films to travel into town to see rather than attend their local cinema weekly. Films that would draw people away from their television sets and into the city from the suburbs then had to be something special and exciting (Bordwell: 2003, 328; Neale: 2003, 20-21).

In order to draw filmgoers back to the theatres, studios reincarnated the practice of roadshowing films. Roadshows began in the early days of film and this tactic has seen resurgences over the decades. The practice involves opening a show in select cities and theatres, often in some innovative new form (i.e. widescreen, 3D, colour, sound, etc.), before sending the film in regular format to more theatres (Neale: 2003, 51; Bordwell: 2003, 328). We can still see remnants of this practice today with limited releases of some films in IMAX and 3D formats. This practice was brought back during the 1950s and 1960s in order to entice viewers to movie theatres to experience films as they never had before. In fact, *The Sound of Music* was roadshown in 1965 to great success (Neale: 2003, 50). While roadshowing films did bring in more money at the box office, it did not help to reinvigorate the industry itself. These films required large budgets to accommodate the different formats and expensive marketing. They also often featured

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big name actors as big stars were frequently successful in drawing crowds. However, this was not always the case. Even when crowds came out to see the newest A-list movie star a film could still lose money especially when popular actors' salaries and profit percentages were factored into the equation (Bordwell: 2003, 312; Epstein:2006, 149). Finally, studios were forced by banks and other financiers to cut even more films and stop producing big-budget films (Bordwell: 2003, 513). This move ended the roadshow trend and forced the studios to look for an alternate guaranteed moneymaking formula.

In the 1970s we can see that studios were searching for some new form of event picture to ensure the security of the film industry. Studios began experimenting with untested directors and film types while looking for the next big film. Due to new tax incentives, studios and co-financiers were more willing to back projects with the hope of finding the newest trend (Bordwell: 2003, 522). This ushered in a time of virtually unknown young directors making often low-budget pictures for youth. The iconic film of this period is *Easy Rider* (Columbia, 1969, Dennis Hopper) with its countercultural images and themes. Occasionally the studios would succeed, as with *The Godfather,* but they had yet to hit upon a formula that would essentially guarantee a large box office return. Films such as *The Godfather* and other early 1970s blockbusters anticipated the colossal earning potential of the late 1970s and 1980s without ever reaching them.

Currently, films that can be referred to in the popular and industry media as blockbusters are often those that have/are expected to earn at least $100 million (Chapman: 2003, 141). However, another important aspect of these films is their status as events or event pictures. The blockbusters and blockbuster sequels to which I am referring here are also set apart from other films (both past and present) by their

marketing campaigns. Blockbuster films, in this study, are those films that have or are expected to earn at least $100 million in box office returns, are thought of as event films (designed and marketed to be theatrical experiences), and have high-profile and expensive marketing campaigns aimed at a broad demographic. By this definition the first film to achieve blockbuster status was Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (Universal, 1975) (Shone: 2004, 32-33). It has been widely suggested that the reason this film was able to achieve blockbuster status is largely due to the marketing ploys initiated by then head of Universal, Lew Wasserman (Gomery: 2005, 213-15). The innovation here is really in taking an old practice and making it new. At this time, films were usually released in select first-run theatres with only one copy per market or geographic location while a wide release of films was generally reserved for exploitation pictures (Beaupré: 1986, 193; Epstein: 2006, 209). Wide release offers the opportunity to blanket the market with a film and also ensures that much of the audience will have seen it before any negative criticism can circulate. Wasserman chose to bank on the success of the novel during the previous year and release *Jaws* in 409 theatres on 20 June 1975 and then open the film up to a total of 675 theatres by 25 July 1975 (Gomery: 2005, 213-215, Box Office MoJo, n.p.). This was preceded by a massive national ad campaign whereby "[Wasserman] took out a thirty second ad on every show on all three of the networks three days prior to the 20 June 1975 opening" (Gomery: 2005, 213). This new marketing formula ushered in an era of increasing marketing costs and campaigns for blockbusters. Such innovative advertising, combined with the story based on a best-selling novel, state of the art special effects—in particular the robotic shark's head—created the highest grossing film to that date.

The success of *Jaws* was not lost on other film companies and before long all of the other major studios (Disney, Sony, Paramount, Fox, and Warner Bros.) had made or were attempting to make similar blockbusters of their own with big stars and massive marketing campaigns. Early successes included *Grease* (Paramount, 1978, Randal Kleiser), *Superman* (Warner Bros., 1978, Richard Donner), and *Star Wars* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1977, George Lucas). Now that the industry had found its blockbuster rebirth, it was unwilling to test its limits as it had during the early 1970s. Studios looked to replicate the success of *Jaws* by producing films that had some sort of action but often action/suspense/thriller to appeal to a mass audience as well as the newest special effects. The best model included built-in tie-ins to a source material such as a novel, musical, or comic book that already had brand recognition. For this reason, the "high concept" film rose to prominence at this time. This type of film could be easily pitched and marketed, often with just one sentence, and offered studios the safest bet in terms of blockbuster films. With studios "pay[ing] particular attention to the aspects of a movie idea that are likely to attract, or repel ... major [financial] contributors" (Epstein: 2006, 130) the idea of "high concept" was ideal for blockbuster creation as it quickly and succinctly laid out those very elements. Film ideas could now be boiled down to one sentence that often incorporated some other element of popular culture. For example, *Days of Thunder* (Paramount, 1990, Tony Scott) could be pitched as "□ *Top Gun* (1986) in race cars'" (Wyatt: 1994, 17). This was also the first type of blockbuster film to really incorporate aggressive marketing tactics as part of the concept of the film. Potential blockbusters at this time were not going to be produced if they did not include a built-in marketing ploy. The idea of "high concept" really helped pave the way for a rise in blockbuster sequels as

sequels of blockbuster films are the ultimate high concept. The next step to stating that a potential film is *"Top Gun* in race cars," is to simply suggest *"Top Gun* 2." The shorthand method of pitching films accorded to high concept allowed for a proliferation of blockbuster sequels.

To extend the earning potential of such high concept films, sequels to blockbusters were put into production. Some popular achievements include the *Jaws* sequels, *Grease 2* (Paramount, 1982, Patricia Birch), the *Superman* movies, and the two original sequels to *Star Wars* (See Table 1 for production information of these films). Just as production companies were able to bring audiences back on a weekly basis with successful serials such as *What Happened to Mary?*, they hoped to bring the same large audience numbers that had attended the original blockbusters back to the theatres to see the sequels. Part of the success of the first blockbuster film in a set lies in the originality of the special effects and stunts for the blockbuster film of "the early seventies was a decidedly high-end, no-expense-spared, red-carpet affair" (Shone, 31) When producing sequels to these huge successes production companies were usually unwilling or technically and financially unable to improve upon those innovative elements of the first film, often resulting in losses at the box office. Table 1 shows us such losses for the above-mentioned films.

Table 1

Film Title	Studio	Year	Director	Domestic Box Office
Jaws	Universal	1975	Steven Spielberg	$260 000 000
Jaws 2	Universal	1978	Jeannot Swarc	$77 737 272
Jaws 3-D	Universal	1983	Joe Alves	$45 517 055
Jaws IV: The Revenge	Universal	1987	Joseph Sargent	$20 763 013
Grease	Paramount	1978	Randal Kleiser	$159 978 870
Grease 2	Paramount	1982	Patricia Birch	$15 171 476
Superman	Warner Bros.	1978	Richard Donner	$134 218 018
Superman II	Warner Bros.	1980	Richard Lester	$108 185 706
Superman III	Warner Bros.	1983	Richard Lester	$59 950 623
Superman IV: The Quest for Peace	Warner Bros.	1987	Sydney J Furie	$15 681 020
Superman Returns	Warner Bros.	2006	Bryan Singer	$200 081 192
Star Wars	Twentieth-Century Fox	1977	George Lucas	$307 263 857
The Empire Strikes Back	Twentieth-Century Fox	1980	Irvin Kershner	$209 398 025
Return of the Jedi	Twentieth-Century Fox	1983	Richard Marcquand	$252 583 617

Table information provided by Box Office Mojo. Last visited on 8 July, 2008.

In order to compensate for the larger budgets for both production and marketing that Blockbuster films required, Hollywood film companies began to look for alternative sources of income. Synergy was a new strategy for funding models that emerged in the 1980s. This strategy has become a very important part of the business plans of all of the

major film studios (along with many other businesses in America). Synergy in this sense began with the business practice of buying up many different and unrelated companies and working to create a conglomerate. If we consider a conglomerate to be a disparate collection of companies then one of the first corporations in the film industry to employ this synergistic strategy aimed for a true conglomeration of unrelated businesses when, in the "autumn of 1966, Charles Bluhdorn's zinc-sugarcane-auto parts conglomerate, Gulf + Western Industries, purchased Paramount" (Gomery: 2005, 226). Many of the other film companies in forming conglomerates tried a different strategy as they moved toward or were bought up in an effort to combine like products or services. For example, the making of the *Superman* movies in the 1970s and 1980s was simplified for Warner Bros as they already owned the rights to the comic book franchise through the conglomerate to which they both belonged. They were further able to promote the possibilities of the Superman franchise, among other things, by the earlier acquisition of the Knickerbocker Toy Company which offered a merchandising division (Gomery: 2005, 241-42). The situation with the *Superman* films helped to promote the idea of synergy whereby many different companies can work together under an umbrella conglomerate. In many ways this new business practice reversed/negated the Paramount Decision of 1948 as most of the conglomerates owned production, distribution, and exhibition companies. By the 1980s, vertical integration had returned to Hollywood and it allowed the industry to remain in business.

The more synergistic the conglomerate, the more profitable it can be. As happened with *Superman* and Warner Bros, film companies now had ownership rights to popular, established commodities that would previously have cost a considerable amount

to acquire even before adaptation to the big screen. The benefits of this type of conglomerate are more diverse than just offering licensed products and pre-made stories for filming, such a set-up also cuts out extra exorbitant fees between the production, distribution, and exhibition arms of a given conglomerate. In addition to cutting out the middle-man, the new era of conglomerate-style business practices in Hollywood allows for greater marketing opportunities. All of the Big 6 film companies own or are connected to television networks[4] and print media – most notably Warner Bros link with Time Inc. Other media sources offer greater opportunities to market films, through traditional print and television advertisements as well as interviews with stars or other talent connected with a film and "Making-Of" documentaries, not to mention alternate forms of advertising available through new technologies, particularly the internet.

Another important element of marketing that developed as a result of the new synergistic conglomerates lies in the development and production of licensed products. The licensing of ancillary products such as toys, books, and other materials related to a film results in the greatest synergy possible for a film company and the creation of a franchise. Such a franchise can be seen as a combination of different ancillary products revolving around one film. These products can include, for example, toys, games, clothing lines, or books, as well as sequels, prequels, and television shows (Thompson: 2007, 4). Walt Disney is often credited with creating the first film franchise (Epstein: 2006, 13, Gomery: 2005, 154). He is regarded as a visionary who understood the profitability of marketing films across media and to children in particular (Epstein: 2006, 12-13). Disney's 1937 feature film *Snow White and the 7 Dwarfs* (Disney, 1937, David

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[4] For example: Disney's Family channels and ABC, the Warner Bros connection with Turner Broadcasting including CNN and HBO, Paramount's Nickelodeon and MTV, and the Fox network.

Hand), at 83 minutes, was the first full-length animated film marketed specifically to children (and their parents). Disney was doing what production companies aim to do now; by creating a film from a pre-existing story familiar to many children and adults alike. The film offered many licensable characters, which he presented to other companies for the purposes of creating ancillary products. Disney also produced a soundtrack album, featuring the hit "Someday My Prince Will Come," as a tie-in with the movie. Not only is Disney seen as the first to take advantage of the potential of the franchise, but "[f]or decades, Disney's was the only Hollywood studio that essentially ran on the franchise principle" (Thompson: 2007, 3). When franchises became popular for other studios, it was not necessarily because they had witnessed Disney's success, rather the move toward franchises was seen as a new business strategy that was needed partly to save the industry itself. The move toward blockbusters with more special effects was essentially bankrupting parts of the industry (Gomery: 2005, 258-59). The franchise appears often in the form of a sequel set but, occasionally, as with Disney's *Snow White and the 7 Dwarfs*, a franchise can be formed around a single film that offers brand recognition and greater opportunities for profit from ancillary products and home video/dvd.

A New Blockbuster Era

Between 1975 and 1984 the sequel did not change drastically. At this time studios were still unsure as to whether they should invest their money in the young directors of the 1970s—who cultivated an auteurist, art cinema approach to filmmaking such as Dennis Hopper or Francis Ford Coppola—or embrace the era of the modern blockbuster. The success of *Jaws* was tempting for many, but the higher budgets involved in that type of film made it difficult for producers to gamble with the possibility of such a loss. The industry was too weak for any one studio to weather a poor showing on a possible blockbuster. With time, all of the studios attempted blockbusters and were eventually rewarded. However, it was longer even than that before studios began to truly develop the potential of the blockbuster sequel. Studios did not want to suffer the same sort of loss that Paramount had endured early in the 1970s when they followed their hit *The Godfather* with the lesser success of *The Godfather: Part II* (Paramount, 1974, Francis Ford Coppola). While the production budget from one film to the next was more than doubled, the returns for the second instalment did not live up to expectations. With this experience in mind, most studios were interested in the possibility of a "sure thing" that sequels offered but they were largely unwilling to put forth the budgets for such films. Instead, following an older trend in production, sequels were made of cheap-to-produce comedies such as *Airplane!* (Paramount, 1980, Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker) which was followed by *Airplane II: The Sequel* (Paramount, 1982, Ken Finkleman), a trend which really picked up in the mid-1980s as we shall see later. Other sequels appearing in Top Ten earners lists are the *Superman* films and the science fiction films of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Paramount, 1979, Robert Wise), *Star Trek II:*

The Wrath of Khan (Paramount, 1982, Nicholas Meyer), and *Star Trek III: The Search
for Spock* (Paramount, 1984, Leonard Nimoy). The *Star Trek* films have a guaranteed fan
base that continues to make itself known at many international conferences devoted
entirely to this series of television shows, films, and books. Table 2 demonstrates the
earnings of these high profile films and their sequels. From this we can see that the
popular films of the 1980s were not high-grossing and their sequels generally earned
increasingly lower profits (Information for the *Star Wars* and *Superman* sequels can be
found in Table 1).

Table 2

Film Title	Studio	Year	Director	Domestic Gross
Raiders of the Lost Ark	Paramount	1981	Steven Spielberg	$209 562 121
Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom	Paramount	1984	Steven Spielberg	$179 870 271
Airplane!	Paramount	1980	Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker	$83 453 539
Airplane II: The Sequel	Paramount	1982	Ken Finkleman	$27 150 534
Rocky	United Artists	1976	John G. Avildsen	$117 235 147
Rocky II	United Artists	1979	Sylvester Stallone	$85 182 160
Rocky III	United Artists	1982	Sylvester Stallone	$124 146 897
Star Trek: The Motion Picture	Paramount	1979	Robert Wise	$82 258 456

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan	Paramount	1982	Nicholas Meyer	$78 912 963
Star Trek III: The Search for Spock	Paramount	1984	Leonard Nimoy	$76 471 046

Table information provided by Prince and Box Office Mojo.(Last visited on 30 November, 2008).

The *Star Wars* trilogy is basically three separate stories concerning the same group of characters with a somewhat continuous story over the three films. It displays a connection both to earlier film serials and the yet to be discussed Saga Sequel Sets. The *Star Wars* films demonstrated that sequels can potentially make just as much money as the original, suggesting that these films can be blockbuster sequels rather than just sequels of blockbusters, and that ancillary product merchandising for blockbusters can be a virtual goldmine. Studios would work to find the winning combination of story, actors, director, and special effects that will mediate such a situation. Frank Allnut describes the atmosphere surrounding the opening of the third film of this sequel set in such a way:

> "There were beginnings and endings in motion picture history on May 25, 1983.
> On that day the spectacular $32 million production of the *Return of the Jedi*
> opened in 950 theaters across the continent, breaking all opening day income and
> attendance records as it began what may become the most successful run of any
> movie ever. Perhaps the most looked-forward-to film of all time, *Return of the
> Jedi* inspired hundreds of eager *Star Wars* fans to camp out overnight at the
> entrance to movie theaters on the eve of the film's premiere, hopefully insuring
> for themselves good seating." (Allnut: 1983, 7)

It is that kind of success that studios have always been very interested in repeating. The original *Star Wars* trilogy offers an opportunity to examine an exception to the generalization that sequels have less earning power than the originals. Each of the two sequels in the early trilogy surpassed the initial film in box office returns at the time of their releases and all three films continue to earn sizeable incomes.

Despite creator George Lucas' well-documented dislike for Hollywood and the direction he felt the film industry was taking in the 1960s and 1970s, the *Star Wars* saga is a case where the changing structure of the industry from self-contained studio to synergistic conglomerate helped the films to be made. While large corporations had no real knowledge or experience in making films, they certainly knew how to run a business. Around this time, corporations began to treat film as a business and brought into practice the idea of marketing research (Wyatt: 1994, 19). In the interest of selling products (films), the new corporations noticed that "people of ages 12 to 29 ... constituted 75 percent of the moviegoing public" (Bordwell: 2003, 684). For this reason, corporations began a pattern of hiring young film directors to make films for young people, especially following the success of *Easy Rider*. Through this pattern of film production and his friendship with Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas was given the opportunity to co-write and direct his nostalgic piece, *American Graffiti* (Universal, 1973, George Lucas) to be distributed and backed by Universal Pictures.

During the making of *American Graffiti* Lucas inked a deal with Twentieth Century Fox to make his space opera. Since he was still relatively unknown at that time, the Lucas-Fox deal clearly favoured the studio. After *American Graffiti* became a hit, Lucas was in a position to renegotiate with Fox for more money. In a surprising move, he

chose to forfeit the larger paycheque for directing *Star Wars* in return for the rights to all potential sequels as well as the merchandising rights to the films and their characters. This was really an unprecedented move but Lucas knew that he wanted to make the sequels and, to ensure they would be made the way he wanted them to, he had to control the sequel rights (Vallely:1999, 93). The acquisition of the merchandising rights may have been a last minute decision, but it had a huge and lasting impact on the way films, and franchises in particular, continue to be marketed and financed to this day. While production companies had and continue to grant some actors and directors profit points and percentages, they do not generally grant the actual rights to any one person. As Leo Braudy states in the documentary *Empire of Dreams: The Story of the Star Wars Trilogy* (Lucasfilm, 2004, Edith Becker and Kevin Burns): "the studios didn't know the world was changing. George did know the world was changing, I mean, he changed it" (Becker: 2004, n.p.). By retaining the merchandising rights rather than allowing the studio to sell them off to other companies, Lucas was changing the way that films were merchandised and marketed.

Prior to *Star Wars* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1977, George Lucas), films and the distribution companies through which they are promoted, were often sold to audiences for the most part as films alone. If they were adaptations of popular novels, as *Jaws* was, that fact was mentioned in the advertising but other than that trailers and posters for the films were the sole sources of promotion. Any ancillary products created based on a film's characters were made by a separate company with little income forwarded to the studio to which the film belonged, and occasionally none as it could be used as free publicity (Hall, 220). With *Star Wars* Lucas had always pictured toy figurines of the main

characters of the film, especially the "droid" characters of R2D2 and C3PO, and he planned to use these toys as an alternative source of promotion for the film. He sold the rights for such toys to Kenner, but when the film began to gain popularity, Kenner was not prepared for the demand for such toys. This situation led to what critics have called the "Empty Box Campaign" whereby boxes with images of the toys/movie were sold as Christmas presents, to be redeemed in the Spring (Bhatnagar: 2005, n.p.).[5] In today's culture where action figures of film characters are often designed by studio affiliates during film production or even pre-production, the idea that toy companies would not be prepared for a movie's release seems ludicrous. But film marketing in the 1970s was such that ancillary products were not seen as a large part of a film's income, besides which, no one could have predicted the level of success this minor science fiction film would achieve.

With the synergistic conglomerates that exist in the film industry today, the profit from ancillary products is even more important to a film's overall income since the rights are often sold to companies within the same conglomerate. These ancillary products are also designed to tie in with the film's opening so that they help to advertise the film as well (Epstein: 2006, 226). While Disney had discovered by 1935 that ancillary markets could make more money than the films themselves, the other studios had very little experience with this practice (Epstein: 2006, 225). Lucas was breaking new ground by both using ancillary markets to promote his film and by himself controlling the merchandising rights (Hall, 220). Fortunately, this decision showed remarkable foresight.

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[5] In fact, these Empty Boxes became collectors' items in their own rights and the story itself was so popular with fans of the sequel set that, when planning the new merchandise for *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 2005, George Lucas), the final film in the prequel set of·*Star Wars* films, in 2005 Hasbro chose to recreate this situation with their own set of collector's boxes to be filled with upcoming character figurines (Bhatnagar: 2005, n.p.).

Their sale to different companies helped to provide the majority of the funds to make the two sequels: *The Empire Strikes Back* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1980, Irvin Kershner), and *Return of the Jedi* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1983, Richard Marquand), as well as funding the creation of Lucas' own independent "studio" Lucasfilm. Without stating exact profits for merchandise from the original films of the *Star Wars* trilogy, we can certainly claim that Lucasfilm and George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch getaway for filmmakers owe a great deal of their creation to little plastic figurines.

Merchandise-rights ownership was not the only innovative marketing tactic deployed with the *Star Wars* trilogy. Perhaps out of fear that their gamble with a trilogy of science fiction films would not pay off, Fox made the decision to re-release *Star Wars*. As recounted by Olen J Earnest:

> "Intending to remain the undisputed box office victor, *Star Wars* was released again in August 1979 with a concentrated three-week schedule. Furthermore, this 1979 re-release was used to announce the forthcoming release of the next instalment in the *Star Wars'* saga, *The Empire Strikes Back*, which wide segments of *Star Wars'* fans eagerly anticipated. Each print of *Star Wars* was tagged with a preview of scenes from *The Empire Strikes Back* with this fact prominently stated in the re-issue's advertising campaign." (Earnest: 1985, 17)

The pattern created by Lucas has become a sort of blueprint for the marketing of other blockbuster films and even those films that aspire to blockbuster status. This fact is witnessed, in part, in the well-planned release and re-release of dvds leading up to the theatrical premiere of a sequel. Without both the ground-breaking technology begun by Lucasfilm subsidiaries and the innovative marketing and merchandising deals by George

Lucas, blockbuster films, let alone sequels of such films, would not be the same today. With *Star Wars* and its sequels, George Lucas inaugurated a new blockbuster era for sequels. With the merchandising of ancillary products coinciding with film release and other new marketing techniques, Hollywood learned a new model for franchise development. Without the proven success of the two *Star Wars* sequels, George Lucas' marketing plan could have remained simply speculation. As it stands, however, the example set by *Star Wars* has become the foundation upon which franchise building rests.

The Traditional Blockbuster Sequel Set

Traditional Blockbuster Sequel Sets are a more conventional way of making sequels. With this format, the sequels are decided on, written, and approved **after** the success of the first film. Often executives are wary of changing anything thematically as they do not want to complicate or modify what they see as a winning formula, but they do want simply to capitalize on the success of the first film. For many studios the Traditional Sequel Set appears to be the safe way of making films; in fact, we can see that these "sequels and series have been elevated to blockbuster status in New Hollywood" (Chapman: 2003, 143). If we examine the box office numbers, however, especially in comparison with the other film sets in this study, we can see that the resulting sequels typically make a great deal less money than the original film in most cases. The creation of these films is influenced by a desire to make more money after a highly successful blockbuster. These types of films are initially produced as stand-alone films. Their sequels often closely mimic the original in the set.

While the Traditional sequel set has a longstanding history in Hollywood, the cultivation of sequel sets as blockbuster events grew in popularity in the 1980s after the success of both *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. Therefore, it seems fitting that a discussion of this type of sequel set should begin with some background on the films of the 1980s and end with an examination of the *Back to the Future* trilogy as an example of the Traditional Blockbuster Sequel Set. While most of the films that would have been discussed as blockbusters during the 1980s never earned the monumental box office returns in their first runs accorded to more recent films or even to films such as *Jaws* or the early *Star Wars* movies, they reached the same blockbuster status, earning a spot in the top ten box office lists for their respective years. In fact, during the 1980s only one or two films per year at most broke the $100 million mark (Prince: 2000, 447-48). This lack of earning potential does not necessarily reflect the success of the individual films so much as a trend across the box office which experienced a period of decline at this time largely due to economic factors that extend beyond the film industry.

The 1980s was a decade during which the trend of buying production studios by larger communications and entertainment conglomerates intensified. These larger companies were not always versed in the business of making movies and chose to treat them as any other product they offered. This meant that the type of marketing begun by Lew Wasserman with *Jaws* and expanded upon by George Lucas was increased almost exponentially. This was also a time period characterized by the "high concept" film, one that was both easily pitched to studio executives and easily marketed. As such, these films were generally defined by a one sentence tagline such as: "□John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John star as the '50s greaser and the 'good girl' in the screen adaptation

of the hit stage musical *Grease*'" (Wyatt: 1994, 7). High concept films were those films expected to become blockbusters during the 1970s and 1980s. These extremely commercial products – and the profits they could potentially yield – became the focus of all studios.

One element of filmmaking that these new producers embraced was that of sequelization. Sequels mean recreating a winning formula and can mean reducing marketing costs. At a time when marketing and promoting features increased exponentially, interest in sequels and franchises continued to grow. During this decade we see the development of sequel sets such as the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, the *Friday the 13th* films, and various film sets made for children in particular. Such films were by no means blockbusters nor do they attempt blockbuster status, however, they are and continue to be money makers for their producers and distributors and that is what the conglomerates of the 1980s were looking for. At the same time that sequels remained a popular strategy, producers were attempting to repeat the blockbuster success of individual films begun with *Jaws*. Such attempts started a new age of tentpole filmmaking. It has been suggested that this era was a result of the number of successful films created by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas and that "[i]t was largely a consequence of the Spielberg-Lucas phenomenon, moreover, that sequels and series films became central to the industry's production strategy" (Chapman: 2003, 143). Unfortunately, the majority of these tentpole films did not live up to the monumental successes of Spielberg or Lucas. The old strategy of making sequels and series, however, seemed a fairly safe way to continue making money off of a profitable film and progressed throughout the 1980s up to the present. For the most part, sequels were really

only attempted for films that had been high earners in their first run, films such as: *Back to the Future* (Universal, 1985, Robert Zemeckis), *Back to the Future: Part II* (Universal, 1989, Robert Zemeckis), and *Back to the Future: Part III* (Universal, 1990, Robert Zemeckis).

The *Back to the Future* set offers an example of this more traditional style of making sequels. In other ways the *Back to the Future* sequels differ from other Traditional Blockbuster Sets which is why I include them here. The *Back to the Future* films offer a continuing story arc, so that the three films can be watched in succession as one long film if desired whereas Traditional Blockbuster Sequels tend to repeat the story of the first film, occasionally even with different characters. In addition, the second and third sequels were filmed back-to-back and released within six months of each other. The sequelization of these films could simply be seen as a "sign of the times" as the 1980s were often referred to as the decade of the sequel. In fact, some critics suggest that this decade was itself a sequel of the 1950s in terms of conservative politics and culture as well (Palmer: 1993, ix-xv). In particular, both decades "had the previous decade's war to remember and get over" (Palmer: 1993, ix) and "[t]he major issues of ... both decades were strikingly similar and were explored and disseminated to a mass audience through the movies" (Palmer: 1993, x). In hindsight we can see how making a sequel in the 1980s of a film about time travelling back to the 1950s was so fateful. Making the two sequels to *Back to the Future* at one time could also be linked to the experiences of the films' producer Steven Spielberg. The fact that he was both the director of the first blockbuster (*Jaws*) and the *Indiana Jones* series of sequels prior to working on *Back to the Future* most certainly played a part in his eagerness as well as the studio's willingness to film the

two sequels back-to-back. Without the expectation of some success, it is likely that the sequels would have been filmed separately, and entirely possible the third film would not have been made at all due to the dwindling returns of *Back to the Future: Part II*.

The story of the *Back to the Future* franchise proper begins with production in November of 1984. This film was made by Universal Studios with Amblin Entertainment and directed by Robert Zemeckis. On 3 July 1985 *Back to the Future* opened in 1 420 theatres in the United States and Canada and made $11 152 500 in that first weekend. The film ended its theatrical run with a domestic box office total of $210 609 762 and was released a year later on videocassette (Box Office Mojo, n.p.). The franchise continued from there through ancillary products only. Four years after the release of the first film, production began on the two sequels. The films were shot back-to-back partly to ensure the stars of the film would be available for both shoots at the same time. In total, the three films made $416 787 347 domestically (Box Office Mojo, n.p.). As a sign of the popularity of these films it is important to note that the first *Back to the Future* film was the top earner in 1985 while the two sequels were in the top fifteen films of their respective years (Prince: 2000, 447-48; Box Office Mojo, n.p.).

In terms of placing the *Back to the Future* films within their time period and the production trends of the time, we need to compare the production history of these films to other typical films of the period. Popular sequel sets of the mid-1980s to mid-1990s consisted of those such as the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* type of films. Higher earners in the sequel sets of the mid-1980s included *Ghostbusters* (Columbia, 1984, Ivan Reitman), *Gremlins* (Warner Bros., 1984, Joe Dante), *Beverly Hills Cop* (Paramount, 1984, Martin Brest), the *Police Academy* (Warner Bros., 1984, Hugh

Wilson) films (one in each of the years from 1984-1988, and in 1994), the middle two

Indiana Jones films: *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Paramount, 1984, Steven

Spielberg) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Paramount, 1989, Steven Spielberg),

and so on. In fact, of the top ten films for every year from 1984-1989, there are no less

than four sequels or initial films in sequel sets (Prince: 2000, 447-48). These results

suggest that the creators of *Back to the Future* were definitely not unique in deciding to

expand or even anticipate the franchise. In fact, the way in which the decision to make

the *Back to the Future* sequels came about was quite typical. By all accounts, the second

and third films were decided upon as a result of the success and popularity of the first

film, in the same way that many other sequels were born at the time (Shone, 159). In

addition, the fact that the sequels did not appear until four years after the first film tells us

that it is possible the producers were not prepared for the possibility of a sequel

immediately following the first film.

The naming of the sequels also fits in with this strategy of repeating the success of

those that had gone before. Instead of giving each sequel in the *Back to the Future* set a

separate name or even subtitle suggesting something of the overall plot, these films were

given numbers. This was a common trend during the 1980s whereby many sequels of this

time period were simply named with roman numerals in an effort at retaining the

popularity of the original film. However, we may also suggest that the plots were so

similar no differentiating title is needed to delineate them from one another.[6]

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[6] In a comedic way, *Back to the Future Part II* draws attention to the growing popularity of sequels within the industry by including a scene where Marty believes he is being attacked by an holographic advertisement for *Jaws 19*. Besides being a reference to co-producer Steven Spielberg's hit film, this also allows the audience a humorous connection with their own time period as well as poking fun at the trend of making perhaps too many sequels of a good film. In addition, we can see how the writers are poking fun at the trend of naming sequels with numbers while they themselves name their own film with a "II."

The story set-up over the entire *Back to the Future* set follows the trends of other sequels of its time in that each film basically repeats a very similar storyline, following key plot points that are only slightly changed from those that worked so well in the first instalment. In fact, some story elements appear to almost exactly duplicate those in the first film. For example, all three films include a scene that begins in the local soda shop (though it is a saloon in *Part III*) between Marty and Biff/Buford Tannen and escalates to a chase scene which ends with Biff's face in a pile of manure. The similarity of these scenes is there to create a sense of familiarity for the audience and to reward those viewers of all three films for remaining loyal to the franchise, but we can also see how scenes such as these can be financial decisions. By choosing to recreate memorable scenes from the first film, producers hope to guarantee success with subsequent films. As co-writer Bob Gale has said, "□[t]he trick to writing a sequel is that people want to see the first movie but they don't want to see the first movie. They want to see the same except different. That's what we gave'em'" (qtd in Shone, 159). This is a fine line to walk as audiences can get bored if there is no development over time, but copying the formula of the original is one way of attempting to bring some stability to a seemingly unstable industry.

At the same time that the *Back to the Future* set of films was following a fairly typical path for sequels and franchises of its time, especially in terms of storyline, its production trajectory is unusual: once it was decided sequels would be made, they were produced and developed together. As we shall see with later sequel sets in this study, one of the most important reasons sequels are shot back-to-back is financial, and the *Back to the Future* set of films was no exception. Producers can save money on virtually

everything when shooting two films together as package deals and discounts for repeat business can apply on everything from catering to props building. It seems that the greatest appeal of this production method for producers is the savings on sets, locations, cast, and crew. The benefits are logistical as well. The first and second *Back to the Future* films included town square scenes shot on the backlot of Universal Studios. By shooting back-to-back, the studio lot and set pieces were already available for the scenes required in the final film. If the *Back to the Future* sequels had been shot even a year apart, it would have been expensive to try to duplicate the sets exactly and difficult to ensure availability of the location when needed.

As for cast and crew, shooting two films together can result in shorter shooting schedules overall which means less money paid out. More importantly, however, making two films back-to-back provides security in that the required talent is booked for their requirements in two films at once. The producers of the *Back to the Future* films had previous experience with this problem when they hired Michael J. Fox to take over the lead in the first film.[7] At the time, he was also starring in the hit television sitcom *Family Ties* (Paramount Television, 1982-1989, Gary David Goldberg), and had to split his time between both productions which was a logistical nightmare. By the time the sequels were scheduled for shooting Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd were very busy working on other projects. Fox, in fact, was a sort of "golden boy" in Hollywood at the time, having just completed his run on *Family Ties*, only to transition into feature film popularity with a string of hits beginning with *Back to the Future* and *Teen Wolf* (Paramount, 1985, Rod Daniel), *The Secret of My Succe$s* (Universal, 1987, Herbert Ross), and *Casualties of*

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[7] The film originally starred Eric Stoltz and a few scenes with him were shot before it was decided he would not be able to carry the part (Bouzereau: 2002, n.p.).

War (Columbia Pictures, 1989, Brian De Palma). Lloyd, meanwhile, continued to work energetically with three films released in 1988, two more including *Back to the Future Part II* in 1989, and another two including *Back to the Future Part III* in addition to a television movie released in 1990. This time around the producers hoped that by shooting both films at once, they could keep both of their star actors committed to finishing the sequels in a timely fashion without negotiating complex schedules.

Though the combination of making two films at once worked in this particular case, it was not adopted as a popular strategy as most studios preferred to ensure a film's success before agreeing to make each instalment of a set. In fact, one of the only other times combined filmmaking had been attempted was with the Superman films. In 1977 shooting began on both *Superman I* and *Superman II* with the assumption that the character of Superman is so popular that the first movie would be profitable enough for at least one sequel.[8] In actuality, the *Superman* films did not work the way they were expected[9] but they did set a precedent and open the door for films like *Back to the Future* and later, *The Matrix, Lord of the Rings*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, to deploy a back-to-back shooting schedule.

The *Back to the Future* films offer a sort of stepping stone between Traditional Blockbuster Sequel Sets and those that anticipate a franchise. Although these sequels

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[8] As mentioned earlier, this was also an early foray into the wealth of material available through other branches of the new conglomerates. The rights to the character of Superman belonged to DC Comics which became a part of Time-Warner. Superman was a character the creators felt they could really bank on. In fact, films are still being made about him, regardless their showing at the box office. We can see this in the fact that production of the newest Superman film: *Superman: Man of Steel* (Bryan Singer, 2011 expected, Warner Bros.) has been approved in spite of the poor returns of its predecessor *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006, Warner Bros.). This 2006 film actually made $200 081 192 domestic gross but had a production budget of $270 million. We can only assume that the new film is being made with the hope that a sequel will reinvigorate the merchandise.

[9] Producer Ilya Salkind and director Richard Donner could not agree on any point by the time the first film was released so nearly all of the footage shot for *Superman II* by Donner was replaced when Richard Lester took over directing the film.

were most likely retroactive developments based almost entirely on the prospect of reproducing the box office returns of the successful first film in the set, the fact that they were produced together made it easier for other producers to see the financial benefit of proceeding in such a way. While representing a step toward franchises of the future that more commonly prepare for, and film, future instalments consecutively, the *Back to the Future* set also reminds us of a history of series by offering virtual carbon copies of plot in differing locales and serials through the cliffhanger mentality of such films. Without the popularity of such a sequel set the practice of preparing, and perhaps filming, sequels at the outset of the first film could have fallen by the wayside or have taken longer to develop.

Multi-Media Sequel Sets

In the late 1990s and the early part of the twenty-first century we have seen a new type of sequel set has developed. The Multi-Media Sequel Set is so called because it makes use of many media in telling the story. Attempts at something similar to this phenomenon have existed since the early days of film serials and their newspaper story counterparts and have been seen more recently in sequel sets such as *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* films, television shows, games, and other ancillary products. The most important differences[10] between those earlier examples and the contemporary Multi-Media Sequel Set lie in the type and range of media employed and the extent to which the story is dispersed and extended over these media. True Multi-Media films do not limit the plot or story to one medium and the story flows continuously over several media, encouraging

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[10] It is also worth noting that much of the story material told in other media for both the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* films is not only tangential to the central stories, but it is also written by fans of the films rather than the creators of those stories themselves. Although this is changing as well as television shows such as *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (Lucasfilm, 2008-2010) and video games such as the anticipated *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (LucasArts, 2011) are integrated into the main storyline of the sequel set.

the viewer/user to be an active participant. With this type of sequel set it is not often necessary to engage with all media, however, it is assumed that the story will be more fulfilling when experienced completely. The model for this classification of Multi-Media Sequel Set comes from Henry Jenkins' concept of "transmedia storytelling" where the "story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins: 2006, 95-96). Transmedia storytelling and the Multi-Media Sequel Set could not have existed before the technological advances and Information Age of the late 1990s. Some of the greatest influences on how and what types of films are made over all time are technological advances, film itself being the first of these advances. The birth of sound, colour, and other trends such as "3-D" technology or even "Smell-o-vision" all changed the way films were made, if only for a short time in some cases. Advances in digital media seem to be flying at filmmakers faster than they can use them today, with some technologies non-existent at the start of a film's production, but in full use by other directors by the time the film is released. The fast digital advances were the basis for the environment in Hollywood from the mid-1990s onward. Personal home computers were finally affordable for the average person and, coupled with the introduction of the high speed internet connectivity to the world outside of academia, the digital age was well underway. The possibilities for connecting with others as well as creating and absorbing digital media from many different sources were huge.

Most films of the late 1990s took advantage of the CGI and other digital advances for greater explosions and special effects, and sequel sets of the time are no different. In fact, it is during the late 1990s that many critics suggest that blockbusters and their

sequels are really just a series of explosions and other special effects. For Steven Spielberg's sequel to *Jurassic Park* (Universal, 1993, Steven Spielberg) for example, Leonard Klady reported for *Variety* that "[t]he good news about "The Lost World: Jurassic Park" [sic] is that the dinosaur creations are even better than those in the first film --- credible, breathtaking and frightening. As for the rest, every department pales by comparison" (Klady: 1997, n.p.) while Roger Ebert says about the same film, *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (Universal, 1997, Steven Spielberg), "that the creatures in this film transcend any visible signs of special effects and seem to walk the earth. But the same realism isn't brought to the human characters, who are bound by plot conventions and action formulas" (Ebert: 1997, n.p.). In both reviews we see the awe and delight in the newest CGI possibilities but also the disappointment in the emphasis of such techniques over plot and character development.

At the same time that more digital elements are being incorporated into making movies, films of the time are being exhibited in a world that is suddenly including elements of that digital innovation into "real life," allowing for greater possibilities of interaction with entertainment media. People can watch and manipulate through playback options of digital copies of their favourite films or television shows on their laptops or in laserdisc and dvd players and they can see advertisements for their favourite films on the new and ever-expanding internet. It is into this new world of digital advancement and special effects elements that *The Matrix* sequel set is born: *The Matrix* (Warner Bros., 1999, Andy and Larry Wachowski), *The Matrix Reloaded* (Warner Bros., 2003, Andy and Larry Wachowski,), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Warner Bros., 2003, Andy and Larry Wachowski).

Blockbusters offer a "constant superseding of hitherto available attractions" (Stringer, 5) such that we can see a return to the "cinema of attractions" of early cinema. The "cinema of attractions" is a title coined by Tom Gunning and references "the curiosity-arousing devices of the fairground[;] the term denoted early cinema's fascination with novelty and its foregrounding of the act of display" (Gunning, 4). It is this focus on display and the need to supersede earlier "attractions" that has driven cinema throughout its history and now drives the blockbuster. *The Matrix* films are no exception to this drive as they incorporate many new elements of digital media and even develop their own elements, such as "bullet time,"[11] in order to tell the story in a more intriguing way. This addition of current elements of special effects solidifies their position as a blockbuster in many ways but this sequel set takes the attraction of the digital effect even further by allowing its story to be told through multiple media.

The Matrix franchise is innovative in its expansion of the move toward synergy begun with previous sequel sets. This means that Larry and Andy Wachowski, the creator/writer/director team of brothers behind *The Matrix* phenomenon, want consumers (both in terms of products and content) to experience *The Matrix* through as many media as possible and to gain knowledge about the world and characters they have created across several media without being limited to just one. An examination of *The Matrix* film set's production will offer a greater understanding of the Multi-Media Sequel Set.

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[11] This concept has been used in many films since but originated, without the use of virtual cameras, on the set of the first *Matrix* film where the Wachowski brothers used a format similar to Edward Muybridge's early experiments with capturing motion using still cameras (Bordwell:2003: 15). Many cameras were placed around the scene and set to record at specific time intervals. This system allows the directors to show high-speed elements (such as a bullet in mid-flight) while moving around that object in real time (Oreck: 2001, n.p.).

Thus far, *The Matrix* set of films is the only set in this study that has fully attempted to make such extensive use of multiple media platforms.

Like the *Back to the Future* series, the first *Matrix* film was shot independently but the following two sequels were shot simultaneously. The reasons for simultaneous filmmaking were partly economical and partly due to hesitation on the part of Time-Warner executives. The Wachowskis promoted their story as a three-film franchise with the possibility for additional markets in other media, but their relative inexperience directing suggested to the Time-Warner executives that caution in supporting the venture was the prudent path to follow. As a consequence, none of the actors were locked in for more than one film. In this respect, the Wachowskis and producer Joel Silver were very lucky the actors and crew enjoyed their experience making the first film so much that they signed on for the sequels.

Once *The Matrix* was proven to be a hit with the film-going public the Wachowskis were given the opportunity to make both sequels as well as expand the story to other media. They decided to shoot both movies simultaneously and in conjunction with footage for the video game *Enter the Matrix* (EON Digital Entertainment, 2003, Andy and Larry Wachowski). In fact, actors were often unsure whether they were shooting scenes for the second or third movie or the video game. *The Matrix* sequel set makes extensive use of media other than film in order to both build its fictional world as well as tell all aspects of the story. With such a complex plot the Wachowskis chose to extend it over many media, turning to animation with *The Animatrix* (Warner Bros., 2003, multiple directors) collection of shorts, video games: *Enter the Matrix, The Matrix: Path of Neo* (Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment, 2005), comic books (*The Matrix*

Volumes 1 and 2), and online gaming communities through the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) entitled *The Matrix Online*. Many participants experience *The Matrix* across all media as "one big movie" making this, as Joel Silver suggests, "really the first story told in multiple mediums [sic]" (Oreck: 2001, n.p.). This type of transmedia storytelling is meant to make use of different media so that the whole story can be told while allowing for narrative trajectories that are distinct each medium. These "additions" to the traditional film franchise are not afterthoughts in a true transmedia story; they are planned from the beginning and developed with the film itself. With *The Matrix* series, for example, the *Enter the Matrix* video game runs parallel to the films telling Captain Niobe's (Jada Pinkett-Smith) story and journey, while *The Matrix Online* continues the story where the films end, and some of the animated shorts, most notably, "Final Flight of the Osiris" (Warner Bros., 2003, Andy Jones) and "Kid's Story" (Warner Bros., 2003, Shinichirô Watanabe), provide background material for the second film, *The Matrix Reloaded*.

A more in-depth look at the synergistic model of the Time-Warner conglomerate will follow in the next section, but for consideration of *The Matrix* set of films it is important to note that among its holdings is the internet service provider giant AOL. Transmedia storytelling now also includes the internet and all that it entails, for the Wachowskis and Joel Silver this includes "[using] the Web as a way to reach [the] fans, not just [in] a promotional fashion [but] mak[ing] things available to them" (Joel Silver qtd in White: 2003, n.p.). It is for this reason that the Wachowskis and Silver used the internet to introduce many of the anime shorts as well as the comics, not to mention the online game. Silver states that "[t]he one good thing about AOL, and our whole situation,

is they have a very powerful server, and they can have … 250,000 downloads in an hour or something [like] that. If they didn't have the AOL server we couldn't be doing that," and he goes on to say that "[i]t's a town crier for the movie" (White: 2003, n.p.)

The idea of transmedia storytelling incorporates the merchandising example set by George Lucas and *Star Wars* and propels it to new heights. It is this prototype that has the most enduring influence on other films as transmedia stories offer both greater narrative possibilities as well as the opportunity for greater profit across an entire conglomerate. In many ways it is difficult to determine when, or even if, a transmedia story has ended which, from a studio perspective, suggests unlimited income potential. Newer film sequel sets are now also following the example set by *The Matrix* and attempting to embody transmedia storytelling. The newest incarnation of the *Batman* series [namely *Batman Begins* (Warner Bros, 2005, Christopher Nolan) and *The Dark Knight* (Warner Bros, 2008, Christopher Nolan)] includes a DVD of six animated stories by six different directors cumulatively entitled *Batman: Gotham Knight* (Warner Bros, 2008, multiple directors). This set of animes is meant to continue the story of Batman's creation and growth from *Batman Begins* in preparation for the character that is already developed by the time the story opens in the newest film, *The Dark Knight* in almost exactly the same way as *The Animatrix* set helped to connect *The Matrix* and *The Matrix Reloaded*. It is too soon yet to suggest that the Batman series will continue along the same transmedia storytelling track as *The Matrix*, though it seems likely as this franchise has an even more established history. It is also unclear whether such an attempt will be successful or not. It is enough to say that the trend continues and that Larry and Andy

Wachowski and Joel Silver have tried something new that has affected the industry enough to be copied by the already well-established *Batman* franchise.

The Saga Sequel Set

Another newer type of sequel set is that of the Saga Sequel Set. This type of sequel set offers plot and story that are continuous over the entire set of films and the whole thing could be viewed as a unified work split into individual feature films/sections. With the Saga Sequel Set missing one of the earlier films can confuse the viewer, as plot elements are not repeated. In addition, often at least two of the films in this type of set are shot together, and occasionally all of the films.

By the early 2000s not only were film technologies developing quickly and changing the face of film, but the traditional industry was reordering quickly as well. Studios have all become part of larger conglomerates, many of which include all three levels of the industry (production, distribution, and exhibition) and rely on other elements of the conglomerate just to support their filmmaking efforts. For many studios this synergistic business model has saved them from complete bankruptcy. On average, however, audience members have been largely unaware of the industry's financial troubles as new films are still made, advertised, and exhibited on a weekly basis. Meanwhile, some of the highest grossing opening weekends have occurred in the 2000s, including the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, *The Matrix* sequels, and *The Lord of the Rings* films. These high returns are due, in part, to inflation and the massively wide release most blockbuster-potentials are given, but it is also a result of the new forms of marketing available to films that operate as part of a conglomerate. The Saga Sequel Set has benefited the most from corporate synergy as it has opened up greater possibilities for

story ideas as well as broader marketing opportunities. Additionally, because this type of film involves a greater commitment from the outset—as production companies are investing in more than one film from the beginning—the financial benefits and increased start-up funds offered by synergy enable greater opportunity for the Saga Sequel Sets to be made. By examining the production and corporate connections of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy we can achieve a better understanding of the new trend.

When George Lucas conceived of the original three *Star Wars* films he saw them as three parts/acts of a larger and more complete story but, as we have seen, for a variety of reasons, he was forced to film them separately. Unlike the *Star Wars* films, *The Lord of the Rings* films were not only envisioned as three parts of a whole, they were also filmed as such, with all three parts being shot simultaneously. Unlike the *Back to the Future* or *The Matrix* films, however, the decision to shoot the films at one time was not an afterthought, but a conscious decision almost from the beginning of New Line Cinema's acquisition of the project. In order to understand how the synergistic elements of the new media conglomerates are connected to the creation of the Saga Sequel Set type and have contributed to the success of *The Lord of the Rings* films, it is important to understand something about the production history and the company behind these films: *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* (New Line Cinema, 2001, Peter Jackson), *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (New Line Cinema, 2002, Peter Jackson), and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (New Line Cinema, 2003, Peter Jackson).

Originally, director Peter Jackson wanted to film J.R.R. Tolkien's book *The Hobbit* with the hope of shooting a version of *The Lord of the Rings* later if the first film did well. With this end in mind, he asked his agent, Ken Kamins, to find the owner of the

movie rights to the book. In conjunction with Harvey Weinstein of Miramax who had a first-look agreement with Jackson (Thompson: 2007, 22; Pellerin: 2007, n.p.), he began the negotiations for the rights to make a film treatment of Tolkien's classic. Ultimately, the owner of those rights, Saul Zaentz and his Tolkien Enterprises, only controlled partial rights for *The Hobbit* but a deal was made with Miramax for the rights to *The Lord of the Rings*. At that point, Jackson put Weta Ltd., the New Zealand company that he helped to create, to work designing and creating models and digital creations for Miramax's production of *The Lord of the Rings*. The decision was made to produce two films as Weinstein and Jackson felt that there was too much material in the three-volume book to fit into just one film. By 1998, Jackson and his writing partner Fran Walsh had written a two-part script for Miramax and Weta Ltd. had spent about eighteen months in preproduction for the films. At this time it became apparent that the proposed $70 million budget for the two films combined would be insufficient; in fact, the suggestion was that the proposed budget for both films would only be enough for one film. Ultimately, each of the final three films exceeded this initial amount substantially. We can see below the relationship between the estimated budgets and the box office returns of the three films of *The Lord of the Rings* sequel set. Harvey Weinstein attempted to secure more funding by looking to the other arms of film production within the larger corporation to which Miramax belonged at the time: that of Disney.

Table 3

Film	Domestic Lifetime Box Office Returns	Worldwide Lifetime Box Office Returns	Production Budget
Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring	$314, 776, 170	$871, 368, 364	$93, 000, 000
Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	$341, 786, 758	$926, 287, 400	$94, 000, 000
Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	$377, 027, 325	$1,119,263,306	$94,000,000
Totals	$1,033,590,253	$2,916,919,070	$281,000,000

Table Information provided by Box Office Mojo. Last visited on 28 January 2008.

Unfortunately, Bob Weinstein with Dimension decided to pull financing from the project and Michael Eisner with Disney Studios overall, refused to offer increased funding. It was at this point that Harvey Weinstein grudgingly agreed to put the film into turnaround, meaning that it would basically be put up for sale to the film company that could satisfy the demands of the original production company. In this case, Weinstein set the requirements unusually high with the hope that Jackson would not be able to take his project elsewhere. The 'lucky' production company would have to "pay within twenty-four hours a lump sum of around $12 million … Harvey and Bob Weinstein would be credited as executive producers, and Miramax would receive five percent of the gross international box-office receipts. Zaentz would also receive a significant percentage of the gross" (Thompson: 2007, 27). The deal would only be on the market for three weeks so Jackson had to work fast, a daunting task that Jackson approached in an innovative manner. He produced what has essentially been called by co-producer Rick Porras in the special features of the films, a "making-of documentary for a film that did not yet exist" (Pellerin: 2003, n.p.). This mini-film was meant to promote the proposed two films while

"[showing] that special-effects technology could cope with Tolkein's story, that the money spent so far had gone for worthwhile film elements, and that Jackson was capable of directing the project" (Thompson: 2007, 27).

After showing this short to the heads of New Line, Bob Shaye, its president, suggested that, just as Tolkien himself had demonstrated, the material called for three films/parts as opposed to just one or two (Thompson: 2007, 29; Pellerin: 2003, n.p.)[12] This is an unusual decision in the first place because the tradition in film until recently is certainly not to greenlight three films without an established blockbuster as source material and proof of a large audience. In the second place it was highly unusual for the head of a smaller production company to greenlight a three-part set up front. In fact, previous treatments, such as Ralph Bakshi's animated *J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings* (Fantasy Films, 1978, Ralph Bakshi) had limited the story to one film because "[its] critical and commercial failure meant that the intended second part wasn't made" (Thompson: 2007, 20). Producer Saul Zaentz and Bakshi discovered that making one film open-ended with the hopes of creating a sequel does not always ensure a sequel is made.[13]

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[12] It was not Tolkien who suggested the break into three volumes. He actually opposed this option initially saying that "it was a single, unified work, and should be published as such" (Grotta-Kurska: 2000, 67). This was a publication decision, but still occurred in a very similar way to Peter Jackson's filmic representation in that "Raynor Unwin [of Allen & Unwin] wanted to minimize the risk that a single large volume would not sell out even a modest first printing ... so he decided to split Tolkien's single large work into *three* small books ... [i]n addition, publication dates of the three books would be staggered over a three-year period so as not to incur so large a loss at one time" (Grotta-Kurska: 2000, 66). In terms of sequel sets, we can see that the overall *Lord of the Rings* set of films is often referred to as a complete story, while the three chapters or volumes were released separately in an attempt to increase income to offset the costs overall. Similarly, film audiences would not be interested in one large film with six to nine hours worth of material; however, they would likely welcome three films of two to three hours each.

[13] It is also likely that the failure of this film is related, in part, to the fact that it was animated, suggesting a children's film. The advances in technology allow Peter Jackson to create a form of realism for the fantasy elements of Tolkien's story and this realism opens the films up to a larger demographic that includes teenagers and adults.

Regardless the popularity of the source books, the existing fan base would not be enough to secure blockbuster status or to justify the large production budget required to produce all three films while still doing justice to the source material. The decision to make the films without a large guaranteed fan base was made even more unique by the suggestion to shoot all three films simultaneously and then edit and release them over three consecutive years. There are many reasons New Line may have agreed to this release schedule, not the least of which are financial. As Kristin Thompson suggests, "making three films simultaneously ... saved an enormous amount of money. Not having to start up three separate films reduced expenditures" (Thompson: 2007, 31). In addition, making all three films at once reduces the problems and costs of ensuring the actors are able to reprise their roles. For *The Lord of the Rings* films, in particular, the complications of acquiring actors for three separate shoots would have been very difficult due to the remote New Zealand filming locations as well as the large central cast of characters and it would be practically impossible to guarantee that all of those actors could be available at the same time. Also, some of the central actors were virtually unknown before making *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but they were in high demand after that first movie broke. As often happens with casting in sequels, those actors would have been in an advantageous position to negotiate better contracts (Thompson: 2007, 32-33). By shooting the films simultaneously, New Line and Peter Jackson were able to avoid being forced to accept any contract with an actor, no matter how outrageous, to complete the sequel set while ensuring the same actors would be playing the central roles throughout the films. This way of controlling actors has become a goal of other production companies hoping to create a film franchise through a set of sequels. When

signing the actors for the *X-Men* movies, for example, Twentieth Century Fox required them to commit to three films at the outset of the first and as part of the original contract (Hayes: 2000, n.p.). In this way, we can see that film production companies such as New Line are anticipating a film franchise through multiple sequels in a set. When all of these factors are considered, New Line's decision to shoot all three films simultaneously is actually very savvy.

Once the decision was made to shoot three films simultaneously, the problems involved in this massive undertaking had to be approached. These are problems that could work to discourage many companies from following the example set by *The Lord of the Rings* films. However, the ways in which Jackson's team worked to overcome some of those problems also makes this way of making films more accessible for others. For example, some of the problems created innovations in story-telling. With *The Lord of the Rings* films, "Jackson, Walsh, and [Philippa] Boyens were confronted with the task of telling a single, continuous story across three lengthy parts released at one-year intervals and also shaping each individual part to create a sense of satisfaction in itself" (Thompson: 2007, 65). This way of storytelling is something that is not regularly done, though this study hopes to show that films such as *The Lord of the Rings* set of sequels are opening up more possibilities for filmmakers. Whereas "[m]ost traditional Hollywood films use considerable redundancy to make sure that as many of the audience members as possible will be able to grasp names, temporal relations, and plot points" (Thompson: 2007, 72), these films did not have time for that much redundancy. The writers had to assume that their audience was capable of understanding a great deal of information without a lot of repetition.

The work of previous films, such as *The Matrix* sequel set which offers very little in the way of reminders of past story events for the audience, helped Jackson and his team to feel secure in relying on their audience's ability to follow a large number of main characters and a complex plot over three films. In addition, the release of dvds in between each film allowed audience members to review the plot and characters just before watching the next sequel, or even continuously watch them for new information, if desired. The internet also offers the ability to connect users (and potential filmgoers) with updates regarding the filming and release of the upcoming sequels as well as allowing them to interact with other users and share the entire film experience through online discussion boards. As the box office returns for all three of *The Lord of the Rings* films show, audience members returned to theatres in increasing numbers for the continuing parts of the saga which can suggest that the audience had no problem following the complex storyline (See Table 3). These developments contrast sharply with previous franchises. For example, Lucas and Fox had to re-release the original *Star Wars* in theatres in 1979 in anticipation of the release of the sequel *Empire Strikes Back* in 1980. The re-release helped to build excitement for the upcoming sequel as well as reacquaint the audience with the main characters and story of the burgeoning franchise. The home dvd market in the early 2000s was such that fans could relive *The Fellowship of the Ring* many times before waiting in line to see *The Two Towers* in theatres. If the franchise had experienced dwindling returns, we could question whether part of the problem was in the inability of the audience to successfully follow the story, but that was not the case here. In fact, the successive instalments of *The Lord of the Rings* earned more money than the first film. (See Table 3)

Another innovation brought about by *The Lord of the Rings* franchise, occurs in the management of the marketing of the trilogy. While it must be acknowledged that virtually every blockbuster, especially those as part of sequel sets, owes a great deal of its marketing strategy to the boundaries broken by both Lew Wasserman with *Jaws* and George Lucas with the original *Star Wars* films, *The Lord of the Rings* took those strategies and radically expanded them. It is from a marketing perspective that we can see the influence and importance synergy in the film industry has played in the creation of megablockbuster sequel sets. It is likely that without the interconnectedness that is possible within media conglomerates Jackson's vision of the film world of *The Lord of the Rings* would not have made it to the screen so realistically. Along with the other major film production companies, Warner Bros. and New Line Cinema are now part of a much larger multi-media corporation. Time Warner Inc., as mentioned previously, is the result of a merger between AOL, Time Inc, and Warner Bros. As described in Time Warner's 2006 Annual Report, there are five basic sections within the corporation: AOL, Cable, Filmed Entertainment, Networks, and Publishing. While these sections work separately with individual companies in each area, they also often complement each other in many different and occasionally confusing ways. Within the AOL segment of Time Warner falls AOL.com as well as various other online businesses such as MapQuest and Moviefone. The online resources are extremely useful in terms of marketing within the overall corporation as they can provide advertising space for an upcoming film, for example. In addition, however, AOL has an agreement with Google Inc. that allows "AOL to sell search advertising directly to advertisers on AOL-owned properties, [and] provide[s] AOL with marketing credits for promotion of AOL's properties.on Google's

network and other promotional opportunities for AOL content" (Time Warner 2006 Annual Report, 3). This agreement allows Time Warner to reach many more online users than just those on the AOL network.

The Filmed Entertainment section of Time Warner is obviously the most important for this discussion of blockbuster films and includes a number of different production and distribution companies. The entire section is overseen by Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. which breaks down into New Line Cinema Corporation (producers of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy) and Warner Bros. Entertainment Group. This second "group" also includes Warner Bros. Pictures, Castle Rock, and Warner Independent Pictures. In addition, New Line and Home Box Office have combined to create the production company of Picturehouse. Any of the films made by these production and distribution companies can be advertised on any other film title, as part of the "Coming Attractions" on dvds or during theatrical release. Also included in the Filmed Entertainment section of Time Warner is the Warner Bros. Home Entertainment Inc. group that encompasses both Warner Home Video and Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. Various television production companies under the Warner Bros. banner are included in this section and Warner Bros. Animation Inc. that "oversees the creative use of, and production of animated characters" (Time Warner 2006 Annual Report, 8). Warner Bros. Animation Inc. and Warner Bros. Consumer Products Inc. were created with the purpose of acquiring rights to create ancillary products of intellectual property (for example, film characters) owned by the parent conglomerate to which they belong. In this case, these corporations acquired rights to the film *The Lord of the Rings,* also owned by Time Warner, increasing the profits from ancillary products that would return

to the parent conglomerate. The knowledge that the rights to ancillary products are readily available and could prove to counterbalance any losses in the Filmed Entertainment section of Time Warner makes it easier for studio heads to approve risky films. In addition, this section of the corporation includes DC Comics which provides a virtual wellspring of licensed characters and storylines perfectly suited to film adaptation and sequelized franchise creation.

Within the Networks section of Time Warner, Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. oversees various other stations such as Home Box Office, Inc., TBS, TNT, the Cartoon Network, Turner Classic Movies, as well as CNN and Headline News stations. Along with these television stations are their related websites, all of which provide prime advertising space for the other elements of the overall corporation. In keeping with this idea of interaction between companies, "[p]rogramming for these entertainment networks is derived, in part, from the Company's film, made-for-television and animation libraries to which Turner or other divisions of the Company own the copyrights, plus licensed programming, including sports, and original films and series" (Time Warner 2006 Annual Report, 8-9). Using material created in other segments of the corporation provides advertising for those products as well as reducing costs of programming material for the networks.

Finally, the Publishing segment of Time Warner is overseen by Time Inc. which includes more than 145 magazines worldwide and their respective websites. This list includes such popular magazines as *People, Sports Illustrated, In Style,* and *Entertainment Weekly*. The connection to magazine companies allows for a great deal of cross-promotional advertising in favour of the filmed entertainment of Time Warner. For

example, "[*Entertainment Weekly*] brought out a special edition devoted to *Rings* just as the theatrical DVD of *Return* was about to hit stores" (Thompson: 2007, 111). Without the in-house connection between *Entertainment Weekly* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the costs of setting up such a special edition for New Line may have prevented such a marketing ploy. Saga Sequel Sets can and are being made now because there is a market capable of sustaining and supporting the high costs of such an undertaking. A great deal of the initial production funds for the film came from pre-selling the rights for licensed products to such companies as Burger King. These rights were sold shortly after New Line took over the project meaning that those companies were buying rights to characters that would not even begin to pay dividends for another three years and would then be spread out over a three year release schedule. Obviously some of the faith in this particular product must be placed in its existing reputation and popularity as a series of novels. As Janet Wasko states, "the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy represents an ideal franchise for a diversified entertainment conglomerate because of its already established popularity, the appeal across demographic groups and the evident merchandising potential" (Wasko: 2006, 23). However, the possibility of a three film series must still be seen as a viable product if it can be sold sight-unseen for an extended period of advertising. With the expanded/extra funds that synergy and the creation of media conglomerates bring, sequel sets such as *The Lord of the Rings* set will likely become more popular with those same media conglomerates as time goes on.

A New Studio System

During the months of May through to August of 2008, eight sequels to previous blockbuster films opened in theatres across North America as can be seen in Table 4. This season saw the resurgence of older sequel sets the likes of *Indiana Jones* and *Batman* along with, in a more complex situation, the fourth in a set of sequels and prequels based on a remake of an older film with *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (Rob Cohen, Universal, 2008). Recent years have jockeyed for the title of "Summer of the Sequel" in industry and entertainment media (Diorio: 2003, n.p., McClintock: 2006, n.p.), as such, we can see that the blockbuster sequel has become a large and strategic part of the summer release pattern in Hollywood.

Equally important is the genre of these blockbuster sequels. All of the films listed in Table 4 can be defined as members of the sci-fi/fantasy genre with some elements of action and comedy films incorporated as well. This is significant for two main reasons: (1) genre rules and language are consistent across the blockbuster sequel releases allowing for greater comprehension, and (2) greater special effects are possible with these types of films. By consolidating the majority of the blockbuster sequels into a specific genre it is possible to educate the audience on specific genre conventions. This genre language that the audience learns through viewing such films can then be used as a shorthand so that filmmakers can show/tell more of the story with fewer expository elements. The lack of required exposition can also then be translated into special effects and the complex world-building that is common to these types of films. As with the "cinema of attractions" in the early days of film, the appeal of bigger and greater special effects is still an important element in drawing an audience to a film.

Amid this flurry of blockbuster sequels, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise:

Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl (Disney, 2003, Gore Verbinski),

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest (Disney, 2006, Gore Verbinski), and

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End (Disney, 2007, Gore Verbinski) offers an

example of the changing sequel set. While these movies are similar to the *Back to the*

Future films and to more traditional sequels in that *Dead Man's Chest* and *At World's*

End were definitely afterthoughts following the success of the first film, the trilogy stands

as an example of the move toward the other types of sequel sets previously discussed. In

other words, these films illustrate the new and still tentative industrial practices involved

in sequel set production and promotion. Within this new system the franchise, rather than

the individual film, is the desired goal and sequel sets that incorporate other media in the

telling of their stories are seen as the key to financial success.

Table 4

Film Title	Director	Production Studio	Release Date
The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian	Andrew Adamson	Buena Vista (Disney)	May 16, 2008
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	Steven Spielberg	Paramount	May 22, 2008
Hellboy II: The Golden Army	Guillermo del Toro	Universal	July 11, 2008
The Dark Knight	Christopher Nolan	Warner Bros.	July 18, 2008
The X-Files: I Want to Believe	Chris Carter	Fox	July 25, 2008
The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor	Rob Cohen	Universal	August 1, 2008
The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants 2	Sanaa Hamri	Warner Bros.	August 6, 2008
Star Wars: The Clone Wars	Dave Filoni	Warner Bros.	August 15, 2008

Table Information provided by Box Office Mojo. Last visited on 25 July 2008.

The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films began not as comic books or novels (as with *Superman* or *Lord of the Rings*) or even as a completely independent and original story (as with *Star Wars*, *Back to the Future*, or *The Matrix* films), but as a "Disney theme park attraction that has enchanted generations since its 1967 debut at Disneyland in Anaheim" (Singer: 2007, 18). It is fitting that this ride should then become the massive franchise that it is today as it was "one of the last rides in which Walt Disney personally had a hand in conceiving and designing" (Singer: 2007, 31). And in true Walt Disney fashion, the Pirates of the Caribbean brand has grown and now appears on almost every possible piece of merchandise imaginable for both adults and children. In addition, the opening of the first film was a monumental success "amass[ing] a worldwide box office total surpassing $653 million and defying some less than enthusiastic anticipation for a 'movie based on a theme park attraction'" (Singer: 2007, 18). By the time the sequels were released records were rapidly being broken, most notably, "*Dead Man's Chest* was the first movie in history to break the sacred $100 million mark in forty-eight hours" (Singer: 2007, 21). The unmitigated financial success of these films is so great and so unexpected that it is among a select few franchises jealously desired by other production studios. While the costs to create this hit are certainly not low, the massive profits returned more than compensate for those fees. The *Pirates* trilogy offers the unpredictability of earlier sequel sets as they did not expect to make the two sequels but chose to capitalize on the success of the first film.

The *Pirates* films are also a break from the Disney "tradition" of taking virtually every popular movie and recreating it in other direct-to-video films and formats; for

example: *Aladdin* (Disney, 1992, Ron Clements, John Musker). That animated film was part of the resurgence of Disney's animation department in the 1990s and was a huge hit for the company earning $19 289 073 in the opening weekend of its wide release and $217 350 219 domestic gross (Box Office Mojo, n.p.). *Aladdin* spawned two direct-to-video sequels: *The Return of Jafar* (Disney, 1994, Toby Shelton, Tad Stones, Alan Zaslove) and *Aladdin and the King of Thieves* (Disney, 1995, Tad Stones), various direct-to-video music specials, at least one video game: *Aladdin* (Virgin, 1993), a television show: *Aladdin* (Disney Channel, 1994-1995), a skating television special: (Disney Channel, 1995, Steve Binder), and various other merchandise still widely available on Disney's own website, family of channels, and line of stores. This sort of saturation of the market for one particular children's film was typical of the 1990s resurgence of Disney and extended to films such as *The Little Mermaid* (Disney, 1989, Ron Clements, John Musker), *The Lion King* (Disney, 1994, Roger Allers, Rob Minkoff), and *Beauty and the Beast* (Disney, 1991, Gary Trousdale, Kirk Wise). Unlike these other sequel sets however, Disney chose to headline the *Pirates* sequels as well as the initial film rather than create more "direct-to-dvd" fare. This decision was based on many factors, not the least of which is the fact that the *Pirates of the Caribbean* set appeals to many age groups as opposed to children alone. With this set of films we see a desire to capitalize without saturating the market with more and more ancillary materials for parents to purchase for their children. This is not to say that the market has not been saturated with *Pirates* merchandise, it is just that more was invested in the production of the *Pirates* sequels in terms of money and narrative structure than in those animated films of the 1990s. Another reason we may see this move toward larger sequels from Disney released in

theatres may be a trend that is developing where production companies are witnessing that sequels can be just as profitable as the original film. We are seeing more and more sequels, even those marketed at children, being given a wide release and busy opening weekends including the *Shrek* (Dreamworks, 2001, Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson) set of films, *Madagascar* (Dreamworks, 2005, Eric Darnell, Tom McGrath) and *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (Dreamworks, 2008, Eric Darnell, Tom McGrath), and, in an interesting move by Disney itself, the theatrical release of *High School Musical 3: Senior Year* (Disney, 2008, Kenny Ortega). The *High School Musical* set of sequels had previously been limited to release on Disney channels, but the company has recognized its earning potential and presumably the audience's receptiveness to big-budget theatrical sequels and has decided to release this final film in the set on the big screen. While this set of films is not very narratively diverse, it is interesting to note that it has made the jump from small screen to big, a jump bolstered by the success of other sequels.

With the first *Pirates* movie producer Jerry Bruckheimer has continued the "tradition" he started with former co-producer Don Simpson in the 1980s of fairly simple stories with a focus on the visual element of film. As with those early films that "embodied the 'high concept' approach to moviemaking [and] were punched across by aggressive editing and a skilful blend of visual imagery and popular music" (Prince: 2000, 210), the *Pirates* movies are event films that can be enjoyed by all. The story of *Curse of the Black Pearl* itself is not all that complex, certainly not as inundated with depth and layers of alternate meaning as *The Matrix* sequel set. In this manner the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films follow what Jay Epstein has determined as the "Midas Formula." This formula suggests that all high-earning films since 1999 follow a particular formula

that ensures massive success. These films are all based on children's stories, comic books, serials, cartoons, or theme park rides and feature a young protagonist. They have a fairy-tale-like plot where the weak youth transforms into a purposeful hero. Any relationships depicted in these films is always chaste and the conflict is bloodless in order to maintain a PG-13 rating (ensuring younger viewers can enjoy the film and contribute to the box office returns). There are always odd-looking supporting characters who are easily marketable as toys along with some sort of animation for action and elaborate settings. These films are peopled with a cast of relative unknowns who will not command large salaries or gross earning percentages. Finally, all of these films feature a happy ending where the hero is victorious with just enough ambiguity to make room for a possible sequel (Epstein: 2005, 236-241). With this formula in mind, a familiar storyline is essential for the success of the first *Pirates* film.

In fact, the base story of *Pirates* lies in the search for treasure for one man and a sort of "boy-meets-girl" story for another. By keeping the story simple the film easily appeals to a larger audience and allows for narrative development on the part of the writers. While those writers, Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio, state that the first film was meant to be a closed story ("Charting the Return": 2006, n.p.) they were able to find a way to develop the story into two more chapters, due partly to the simplicity of the base story. But the audience would not have accepted these new chapters so readily if there was not also some complexity and character development. This is one of the greatest differences between these new longer sequel sets of today and the serial films of the past; it is no longer simply enough to have Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) again in search of his ship and Will Turner (Orlando Bloom) again trying to woo Elizabeth Swann (Keira

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Knightley) from a distance. These characters must be allowed to develop and the story must be given other layers and additional plotlines to maintain audience interest. As film has grown as a medium from the days of the sideshow carnival attraction to the multilayered and recognized industry/technology/entertainment/art form that it is today, so have the tastes of its audience. Truly successful films have found a way to incorporate a well-developed story full of complex layers with visually stunning imagery. This combination of simplistic story with complex plot and film world seem to be what the general filmgoing audience asks for, as can be witnessed by the ticket sales of such films (See Table 5).

Pirates of the Caribbean is no exception to the rule. This film offers some visually very stunning images of the supernatural pirates that incorporate both CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) and live action movements to create some very realistic "monsters" (Bernstein: 2003, n.p.). At the same time, the filmic world and plot are complex enough to offer multiple layers of meaning, yet the story is simple enough at its base that even children enjoy the film.

Table 5

Title	Production Company	Year	Director	Domestic Box Office Returns
Star Wars	Twentieth-Century Fox	1977	George Lucas	$307 263 857
Empire Strikes Back	Twentieth-Century Fox	1980	Irvin Kershner	$209 398 025
Return of the Jedi	Twentieth-Century Fox	1983	Richard Marcquand	$252 583 617
Back to the Future	Universal	1985	Robert Zemeckis	$210 609 762

Back to the Future: Part II	Universal	1989	Robert Zemeckis	$118 450 052
Back to the Future: Part III	Universal	1990	Robert Zemeckis	$87 727 583
The Matrix	Warner Bros.	1999	Andy and Larry Wachowski	$171 479 930
The Matrix Reloaded	Warner Bros.	2003	Andy and Larry Wachowski	$281 576 461
The Matrix Revolutions	Warner Bros.	2003	Andy and Larry Wachowski	$139 313 948
The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring	New Line Cinema	2001	Peter Jackson	$313 364 114
The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	New Line Cinema	2002	Peter Jackson	$339 789 881
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	New Line Cinema	2003	Peter Jackson	$377 027 325
Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl	Disney	2003	Gore Verbinski	$305 413 918
Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest	Disney	2006	Gore Verbinski	$423 315 812
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End	Disney	2007	Gore Verbinski	$309 420 425

Table Information provided by Box Office Mojo. Last Visited 12 November, 2008.

We can see many similarities between other sequel sets previously examined in this study and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* sequel set. It is these similarities that help us to highlight the changes that have developed in the industry in terms of sequel sets. While both the original *Star Wars* films and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films are monumentally popular and successful sequel sets, the large gap of approximately thirty years between them seems to have created more differences than similarities. The three *Star Wars* films show some character growth and plot extension but they are essentially three different stories about the same characters, while the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films offer a fairly continuous plot, as well as character development. Most importantly, however, are the differences in marketing. These differences are a result of technological possibilities, changes in advertising practices over the entire industry (as well as other American industries), and the growth of the home video-dvd market.

While George Lucas, along with his Lucasfilm and Industrial Light and Magic companies pioneered many of the technological advances we now take for granted in film, he did not have access to new digital media that now play a large part in film advertising. Film trailers and teaser trailers are now available everywhere. It is possible to view trailers as banner advertisements on many different websites. They can even be downloaded individually to watch on your laptop or smartphone. They play on wall screens while we wait – in the mall, at a hockey game, or buying popcorn at the movie theatre. These images are in addition to the more traditional methods of viewing movie trailers on television or at the movie theatre as part of the "Coming Attractions." On a daily basis we are saturated with advertising information and, often, a large percentage of

that is for films. When George Lucas and Fox were preparing to release episode five of the original trilogy, *Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back*, they had television and radio, as well as print media, available through which to promote their product, however, as stated earlier, they also chose to re-offer the first film as an attraction in many movie theatres. This form of advertising was useful as it allowed audiences to reacquaint themselves with the story by placing the film back in the public eye, or, especially for younger viewers, to experience it for the first time. Had George Lucas and Fox had access to the same technology available today we can only assume they would not have felt it necessary to re-release the first film in theatres. And, in fact, Lucas has proven this by releasing his most recent *Star Wars* film, *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (Lucasfilm, 2008, Dave Filoni), in keeping with other release practices of the day, that is, alone and without re-releasing any of the previous films.

In terms of changes in the way in which the industry advertises, it should be mentioned that the first *Star Wars* film came out only two years after Lew Wasserman's successful advertising experiment with Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*. Suddenly it was acceptable to promote a possible blockbuster with weeks of television advertising and other forms of saturation marketing but not all studios were following this trend. In fact many, including Fox, continued to market their films to the specific audience for which they felt each film was aiming. It was not until *Star Wars* had proven itself a hit that Fox really opened up its advertising campaign. Also, at the time, George Lucas was just starting to experiment with the idea of advertising films through ancillary products; Lucas knew that offering film-related products helped to keep the film itself fresh in people's minds.

In contrast, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, combined saturation advertising and film-related merchandise for the first film but, by the second and third films, the marketing department of Disney realized that they could rely on the strength and popularity of the *Pirates* name to keep people coming to the theatre rather than spend the extra money overwhelming possible audience members. President of Buena Vista Marketing (a subsidiary of Disney), Oren Aviv, oversaw the release of *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* and felt that "'[w]hen a movie does $600 million-plus worldwide, awareness is not a problem'" ("Entertainment Marketers of the Year," n.p.) so they "relied on 15-second TV spots that launched two weeks before the sequel's debut rather than the usual four-week kickoff … [and] MySpace was used to launch the movie's trailer, and promotional partners … tied in to the film with their own marketing efforts" ("Entertainment Marketers of the Year," n.p.). While the *Star Wars* films had to break ground and sell themselves **as** a franchise, by the time the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films were made, marketers were relying on the franchise to sell itself.

The boom in the home video-dvd market has played a huge role in the marketing of sequel sets and in allowing marketers to rely on the power of the franchise as a way of advertising. If George Lucas and Fox could have had access to the home video market available now they would not have needed to re-issue the first *Star Wars* film to theatres, they would have been able to assume that their audience had access to the film and could reacquaint themselves with the story and they may have even re-released a "special edition" video of the original film, complete with all new deleted scenes and behind-the-scenes footage. In 1977 and 1980, however, this kind of exposure for the film was not possible. There was no guarantee that anyone would even buy a video copy of *Star Wars*,

besides the fact that the two markets (home video and theatrical release) were still wary of each other. Today we know that the majority of a film's income is actually derived from the home dvd market, and with the technological and interactive possibilities of blu-ray this is only likely to increase with time. Franchise creators can assume that viewers will come to a theatrical screening of a sequel having fairly recently re-viewed previous entries in the set while in the comfort of their own homes. They can also ensure that a sequel set remains in the public eye during intervening years by releasing more material onto newer, "special," dvds or collected sets. For example, each time a new *Harry Potter* film is made they re-offer a new version of the "complete set." In this case, there is the potential to own eight different "complete sets" of the *Harry Potter* set of sequels by the time they complete the last film. This development of the home viewing market has allowed the marketing of films to expand in ways not possible during the making of George Lucas' initial *Star Wars* set.

While the *Pirates* films and the *Star Wars* trilogy also share a similar form of swashbuckling action, in many ways the *Pirates* films appear to have the most in common with the *Back to the Future* films. In both cases, the first film was meant to be a closed story or the only film, but the popularity of the first prompted its producers to create sequels. Both sets had their second and third movies filmed back-to-back, although the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise was quicker to get the process started[14] and slower to release the final film[15]. And, in both cases, the storylines of the films are fairly

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[14] There being a break of four years between *Back to the Future* and *Back to the Future: Part II* but only three years between *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*.

[15] *Back to the Future: Part II* and *Back to the Future: Part III* were released only six months apart while *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* had a full year between release dates. This is presumably because both the CGI and other editing techniques took longer

straightforward, this is certainly true of *Curse of the Black Pearl* though later stories have incorporated more complex plots as we shall see later. In fact, it is storylines such as those of the *Back to the Future* and *Pirates* films that are labelled as "juvenile" by some critics and charged with the simplification of modern Hollywood films (Goldstein: 2007, n.p.).[16] It is at that point that the similarities between these two sets of sequels stop.

With the *Back to the Future* films we were able to recognize a repetition of the storyline of the first film in the two sequels, almost to the point of duplication for some scenes but that is not happening with the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. Even though the first film was very popular, the writers and directors resisted the urge to take that popularity and copy it exactly, choosing instead to build on the rich world and vibrant characters they had created for *Curse of the Black Pearl* and look to that world for further plot development. By examining the titles of the two sequel sets we can begin to see how plot development is represented. The titles of the *Back to the Future* films suggest that they are repetitions of the same story, while the titles of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films give us insight into the plot of each film. *Curse of the Black Pearl* refers to both the curse upon the pirates aboard the Black Pearl as well as, more subtly, referring to Jack Sparrow's cursed desire for the ship. *Dead Man's Chest* is speaking of the living-yet-dead Davy Jones and his chest complete with still-beating heart, while *At World's End* warns us that our characters will reach the end of their world, both physically and metaphorically as it turns out.

than *Back to the Future* for this set of films to complete and the studio would have wanted to make use of the prime summer release date.
[16] A point that is disputed much more eloquently than I could manage by many different film scholars such as David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Henry Jenkins in their professional blogs (please see Works Cited list for the website information for these blogs).

This difference in naming is an important, if small, change in the creation of sequel sets. The move from numbered sequels to titles more relevant to their subject matter suggests a change from making numbered copies of a film to expanding upon the world, characters, and story of a film. We can see this form of titling films as a way of differentiating new volumes (*Dead Man's Chest*, for example) in a completed work (*Pirates of the Caribbean*). This sort of change is only possible if the sequels themselves have something more and somewhat different to say than the first film in the set and that is most definitely the case with *Pirates of the Caribbean*. While all of these films are definitely part of the same story and franchise, the different volumes or chapters can be seen as the variation on the *Pirates of the Caribbean* theme. Though the plot of the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, even with the required twists and turns, may be fairly basic, the second and third films are more complicated and, overall, the plot and definitely the world of the three films taken together is more complex. As we have already seen, this complexity in sequel sets is a newer trend that offers audiences the ability to experience extended storylines and more connections between the films they watch. The *Back to the Future* films did not offer this connection or complexity but by the time the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies are made, these interconnectivities are commonplace, visible in such films as the *X-Men* movies.

The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films also have many connections, and differences, with *The Matrix* films. Again, the production of the sequels was back-to-back and we can see that the story was basic while the world built within these films grew more complex as the sequels progressed so that the three films together make one complete story; however, the real connection here is with the transmedia aspects of the storytelling. What

the Wachowski brothers and Joel Silver attempted with *The Matrix* sequel set is true transmedia storytelling; the story is not complete without watching or experiencing many different media. Plot points that are only mentioned in the films are explained in full in a comic book or an animated short or a video game or even on the internet. The user-audience member that traverses the various media is rewarded with a more complex understanding of the entire plot and story. This new way of experiencing a story did not work for all members of the audience. With the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, Disney wanted to incorporate elements of the transmedia storytelling introduced by *The Matrix* without losing viewers. They attempted this merger with the "interactive" websites for each film[17] and the online game *Pirates of the Caribbean Online* (Walt Disney Internet Group, 2007-present). Along with these products we find all of the usual ancillary fare, including books, games, costumes, etc., that do not develop the *Pirates of the Caribbean* story in any way. In fact, neither the websites nor the online game, offer any new insight into the plot; they do, however, allow the user-audience member to experience more of the world developed in the films. Though the transmedia experience is not fully developed by Disney with the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, the recognition of its importance and of new opportunities in storytelling is there. The recognition of the need to expand horizons in terms of storytelling suggests that more franchises or sequel sets are interested in developing their stories over more than one medium; this is certainly more common than with previous films and is akin to the many series of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* books that tell the stories of minor characters, or further develop the main

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[17] These websites appear to have been online only as promotional material leading up to the release of each film as they are not readily available on the Disney website (http://disney.go.com). The websites each offered images from the individual films with hidden objects (all of which proved important upon viewing the film) that could be selected to open another scene from the film.

characters but which function tangentially to the completed films. Admittedly, the fact that transmedia storytelling is more popular now than in previous years is due in large part to the availability and popularity of new media today. However, when combined with the move toward complex world-building and more involved plots that carry over more films (rather than a single story repeated or even three single stories about the same characters) we can suggest that the use of other media would not have been effective even if available.

The world-building that occurs in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films is very similar to that of the *Lord of the Rings* films. In both cases, the density of both visual and story elements offers rich source material for fans and fanfic.[18] In actuality, the extent of the material available in the first film made it possible for the writers to expand the story for the sequels (Charting the Return:2006), regardless their intention for a closed story. The act of building a full and well-populated world allows for greater depth of meaning and arguably more enjoyment on the part of some viewers. As Henry Jenkins suggests: the third film "wants to explore a world and much of its complexity emerges from the fact that we have been able to accumulate and master more information about that world through the first two films" (Jenkins: 2007, n.p.). The difference between the density of information available in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films as opposed to that of the *Lord of the Rings* films lies in the source material for each story. At the root of the *Lord of the Rings* films is a three volume novel, itself richly conceived while the *Pirates of the*

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[18] Fanfic can be defined as fiction created by fans of a particular movie, book, or television show (though, increasingly, characters "cross-over" and interact with characters from other shows, movies, or books). This fiction is not authorized by the creators of the cultural object but it is often read by many other fans. There has been a great deal of academic work that focuses on this element of fan culture in recent years. For example, work done by Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills addresses these issues.

Caribbean films are based on a simple theme park ride. In a form of transmedia entertainment, both the ride and the films have had an effect on each other with individual characters and elements of the ride providing source material and humorous moments for the film and main characters from the films, such as Captain Jack Sparrow, now appearing in the ride (Singer: 2007, 33). However, the richness of the films is not a result of its source material. In this way, we can see that the successes of those that have gone before (*Lord of the Rings*) have influenced the current round of sequel sets. While the intense and complex world of the *Lord of the Rings* films was there to begin with, that of the *Pirates* films was created. Basically, it is possible to suggest that *The Lord of the Rings* has created such an extensively populated world in an attempt to replicate its source material while the creators of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films have recognized the popularity of such world building and incorporated it, with great success, into their films.

Another important lesson the creators of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films can learn from the *Lord of the Rings* model is that of synergy within the industry. Through franchises and sequel sets such as these we can see that production companies are better prepared and more readily willing to invest in possible sequel sets just as though they were investing in individual films. Without the connections of the entire conglomerate attached to a production company, the financial support for such ventures would not be available. Though *The Lord of the Rings* was approved and shot as a three-picture deal from the outset, and sequels to *Pirates of the Caribbean* were not approved or even officially thought of until the unexpected success of *Curse of the Black Pearl*, we can still suggest that the tendency toward shooting or approving sequels together is increasing.

Remember that Disney was the larger conglomerate to which Miramax belonged and it was Disney that denied Harvey Weinstein's request for more money for Peter Jackson's original two-film *Lord of the Rings* proposal. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* situation suggests that the company learned something from its experience in missing out on *The Lord of the Rings* windfall, though the hesitation was still apparent. It is possible that, had Disney been surer of itself in terms of blockbuster experience and success, the company would have been more likely to have filmed more of the *Pirates* movies together. In addition, it is possible to see how Disney's hesitation in this case may have been related to its nature as a conglomerate whose overall focus has traditionally been children's entertainment. While creating spin-offs and direct-to-dvd fare for its animated successes was already common practice for Disney, its success with live-action films, and live action blockbusters no less, has a more troubled history. In actuality there are no such films in the company's history. It is, therefore, expected that a company be cautious when branching out into new territory, particularly when millions of dollars are concerned. It is to Disney's credit though, as well as an indication of industry trends that the company chose to produce both sequels at once instead of following the more traditional format of releasing one film and then awaiting box office success before beginning the next.

The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films represent a new industrial model and a new way of making sequels. While sequel sets with a reasonably secure likelihood of success for the entire set—such as the *Lord of the Rings*—are always desirable, there is no way to ensure the success of any franchise. As MGM chief operating officer Rick Sands is quoted as saying: "[i]f it were possible to predict the creation of a franchise, you would shoot three of them back to back, but no one does that because it's not possible"

(McClintock: 2006, n.p.). The alternative is to lock cast and crew in to possible sequels with the contract for the first film, as is the case with many comic book movies. In this way we can see a variation on the "stable" of actors and other talent kept on salary by specific studios popular during the studio era of the 1930s to the early 1950s. Today, however, instead of remaining with a studio for an entire career, actors are connected to a film project for an extended period of time. This offers the possibility of a franchise based on the success of the first film while actors' paycheques are kept in check by the contract they signed, regardless their growth in popularity. In addition, we see a revival of star producers taking precedence, certainly over many directors and often over even some actors. This is visible in new sequel sets that change directors between films but seem to maintain the same trajectory and overall vision. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, for example, were advertised as "Jerry Bruckheimer" films as opposed to "Gore Verbinski" films. Finally, more sequels are produced in the same way as the *Pirates* set. Besides tying actors in for sequels at the outset of the first film, more studios are opting to film two sequels at one time once the franchise has been deemed viable; essentially offering a compromise between the possibly more desirable *Lord of the Rings* way of making a franchise and the apparently more economically feasible traditional format. Additionally, studios are more willing to extend the plot over more than one film without completely resolving the story in any one of the previous instalments in a set. Studios feel more sure that audiences are not only capable of understanding and remembering the extended plot (often with a full year or more between instalments), but viewers also desire the complexity this offers. It is the success of such films as the *Pirates of the*

Caribbean sequel set that have allowed this new era in tentpole filmmaking to arrive and flourish.

Conclusion

In terms of blockbuster sequels we can now see a move from the more conventional, or Traditional, sequel sets to larger stories split into separate films. These larger groups of sequel sets should really be viewed in their entirety as with the *Lord of the Rings* films. These changes suggest a move toward more complex world-building and plotting in sequel sets. This is especially true the more transmedia a story becomes, for audiences are capable of, and relish, reading the story across many media and enjoy "discovering" the story interactively more than being told and retold relevant plot points. The increased popularity of Saga and Multi-Media Sequel Sets shows that we have reached a new stage in Hollywood blockbusters where experimentation with plot and character development is commonplace even with mainstream film production companies. Audiences seem poised for complex plots – some in Hollywood at least are taking that chance. Sequels are just one element of this growth in plotting. Hollywood has the ability to expand its narrative because audiences are more film literate due to exposure. This literacy also stems from consistently watching those genres common to blockbusters (action, thriller/suspense, sci-fi/fantasy, and comedy) and this has increased the cinematic vocabulary with which audiences are familiar. Genre conventions offer shorthand for both filmmakers and film viewers. As Kristin Thompson explains:

> "Audiences have learned a wide range of genres and forms, and presumably many are able to follow relatively complicated stories told in moving images. Such familiarity may well account for the increase in multistory television series, as

well as the development of the multimedia saga, such as the many interlinked *Star Trek* tales told in television, film, print, and the Internet. It seems plausible that as people exercise skills of narrative comprehension, they expand their powers of grasping and appreciating such complex stories. In short, at least some spectators may have become fairly sophisticated consumers of narrative" (Thompson: 2003, 79).

This is not to say that Traditional Sequels will soon cease to exist as Saga or Multi-Media Sequel Sets gain popularity and come to overwhelm the earlier type. In fact, it is likely that Traditional sequels will always exist in film. Traditional sequels will continue to provide steady income for all of the studios due, in part, to the cheaper advertising that brand recognition can bring. However, it is likely that the other types of blockbuster sequel sets will draw greater audiences as they develop. These are the types of sequels that studios are looking to produce and, increasingly, they attempt to follow the same format as the *Lord of the Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* films: that of Saga Sequel sets. Ultimately, the sequel itself remains an important part of industry decision making. Non-blockbuster sequels, often of the Traditional style, continue to be made in all genres as a reasonably stable source of income.

Through this study of Hollywood film releases we can see that the industry has entered a new era where sequel sets have been reconfigured as potentially huge profit-making opportunities. While not every studio is willing to gamble millions of dollars on a set of films without an initial successful blockbuster as New Line Cinema did with Peter Jackson and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, most are, at the very least, providing for the possibility of a sequel set. We can see this tendency in talent contracts that require

signing on for a multiple film deal even when those proposed films have not even been formally planned and might never be made. More than that, we can see that the industry is actually making financial and film production decisions based on the earning power of the blockbuster sequel. This new element to film production is one reason we have seen the "sudden" rise of the Comic Book or Super-Hero film; these stories that fit the "Midas Formula" are easily expandable into multi-film sequel sets even when a traditional cliffhanger-style connection has not been written in to the first film. A comic book series offers a multitude of possible storylines to be developed should the initial film prove successful enough; additionally, such comic-based series often remain open-ended offering a large variety of possible sequels should the producers succeed. Studios are buying up the rights to successful multi-book series such as *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Harry Potter* books, or *The Chronicles of Narnia* with hopes for long sequel sets. While these book series may not offer infinite story arcs and unlimited sequel sets as with comic-based series, they still provide the possibility of a successful franchise with a complex, yet finite, collection of sequels.

Multi-story sequel sets are impacting popular culture through their focus on basic storylines that feature more complex plotting and world-development. These types of stories are increasingly chosen by producers based on their potential as sequel sets as well as their ability to offer fantastic special effects. We see a growing desire for these Multi-Media and Saga style sequel sets such that, two films telling the prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, are soon to begin production, a fourth *Pirates of the Caribbean* film is in the works, and George Lucas continues his *Star Wars* saga with his new television show, *The Clone Wars*, ensuring that more than three decades of children and

adults alike will experience the adventures of "a galaxy far, far away." The studios are able to produce such films with multi-stories because the audience is more aware and trained in film language and generic conventions from their multimedia experiences with television, film, and the internet. It is this experience and desire for multiple stories, coupled with the lower costs of filming and marketing sequels as well as the great financial returns possible that have created the sequel as a blockbuster phenomenon rather than another direct-to-dvd product. As a result, we have a production system that anticipates large franchise sequel sets by buying book rights and film ideas based on their potential for multiple special-effects-laden films. In this way we can see a reordering of the Hollywood industry such that the power of the sequel-based narrative can influence the production of a possible film as much as, or more than in some cases, talent and star power.

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