

Zachary Bucholtz  
Writing 410  
Research Proposal  
April 25, 2012

## INTRODUCTION

As an aspiring screenwriter of major motion pictures, and as a student of screen arts, I have already been presented with an interesting conundrum: do I make movies that I want to make, ones that tell stories near and dear to my heart, or do I make movies that will give me a better chance of making a lot of money?

This is a question that many working filmmakers have faced. Some movies just make more than others. And, what is most frustrating about it is that it is very difficult to predict what a movie will make. Movies usually cost millions of dollars to produce, and nearly half of the gross ticket sales go to the individual theaters, so movies must earn a multiple of their production costs in order to make money, and many films do not.

There really is no rhyme or reason to how movies make money, at least on the surface. In the top 25 highest-grossing films in the US, adjusted for inflation, there are musicals (*Mary Poppins*, *Fantasia*), animated films (*Snow White*, *The Lion King*), book adaptations (*The Godfather*), dramas (*The Sting*), adventures (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*) and science-fiction films (*Star Wars*, *ET*). To say genre is a determining factor is not accurate (although you have to go all the way down to number 32 to find one: *Ghostbusters*) (Boxofficemojo).

Some big-budget, high-concept blockbusters are huge financial failures. See this year's *John Carter*, for example. Some critically-acclaimed, Oscar-worthy movies don't make much money, either (*Up*, a recent Best Picture nominee, comes in at

Zachary Bucholtz  
Writing 410  
Research Proposal  
April 25, 2012

number 164). Some low-rated, cheaply made movies become overnight box-office success stories and earn millions in profit for the filmmakers. There is just no saying what will make or break a film in terms of making money.

There are many factors that go into making a film. There are the actors, the writing, the director, the budget, the genre, the way it is promoted, and the time of the year in which it is released, among many other things.

What makes me curious is if it is possible to find a common thread in all movies that have made a lot of money. It is easy to get information regarding box office receipts, as well as production costs, and basically any other statistic about the movie. But, not much research exists that links this information together.

Several online resources exist that provide information for all of this. The International Movie Database (IMDB), for example, has just about every statistic for every movie ever made and every person who worked on those movies. Charts like the one referenced earlier from Box Office Mojo list the gross receipts for movies and rank them, and can adjust for inflation. Wikipedia, for all its faults, is great for this information, too.

But one area of filmmaking that has not been researched much is the art of the screenplay. Sure, books have been written that explain how to write a screenplay, and they give pointers. I would recommend The Screenwriter's Bible by David Trottier for anyone interested. But little research exists that explains what makes a good screenplay. Typing "what makes a movie sell" into Google Scholar yields nothing remotely related to the topic at hand.

Zachary Bucholtz  
Writing 410  
Research Proposal  
April 25, 2012

The problem is that so much of that is subjective. Different people like different things, and screenwriting is such a formulaic craft anyway. Every story has the same basic structure and basic elements, it's just a matter of how the writer creates within the "rules" of screenwriting.

So the one variable, as I see it, is the writer. Again, it's difficult to judge the quality of writing objectively, but what if there is a statistical correlation between the experience of a screenwriter and the success of the movie? That can be measured, and so far it hasn't been.

My hypothesis is that the screenwriter gets better with age and with experience. Was *The Godfather* earlier or later in Francis Ford Coppola's career relative to how far *Inception* was in Christopher Nolan's?

Ideally, then, this research would be useful to producers looking to hire writers for their movies. If the hypothesis is supported, then perhaps it will encourage them to hire more experienced screenwriters (which, admittedly, would hinder my chances of breaking into the industry, so I'm rooting for the hypothesis to be disproved.

## METHODS

My proposal is to conduct a research study that answers the question: does experience matter in writing a successful, money-making movie?

There are two ways to approach this question: through the perspective of the screenwriter and through the perspective of the movie. Two sets of data will be

Zachary Bucholtz  
Writing 410  
Research Proposal  
April 25, 2012

collected. One is the list of all-time highest-grossing movies (in USD, adjusted for inflation), with the experience of the screenwriter(s) beside it. "Experience" refers to the number of screenwriting credits of the screenwriter(s) at the time of release of that particular movie on the list.

The other set of data is a list of popular screenwriters, chosen subjectively through research and interviews with industry insiders, and graphs detailing how each of their movies fared at the box-office.

For the first, movie-based approach, there are three steps.

The first step of the process is to establish a list of movies and screenwriters to be studied. The list of US highest-grossing movies, adjusted for inflation, would be a good start. That list eliminates the element of international tastes and markets, making sure that everyone seeing the movie is from the same culture. The list also takes inflation out of the equation. Unadjusted, the top of the list is clouded with not only more recent movies, but a slew of sequels and chapters of series (*Harry Potter*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Twilight*, *Toy Story*, *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, etc).

Obviously, with those films, there is already an established fan base and even a terrible movie would still make a lot of money because people want to see it before it's even been released.

I want to do a deep, comprehensive study, so I would go 200 movies down the list to get a pretty good sample size to work with.

The next step of the process is to identify the writers of the screenplay for each of those movies. For some, a team of writers worked on the movie; in those

Zachary Bucholtz  
Writing 410  
Research Proposal  
April 25, 2012

cases, each of the credited writers will be added to the field for this study. If there are screenwriters who appear more than once, a note will be made to go back to them multiple times.

The third step of the process is the step that will take the most time and involve the most research. It requires researching and documenting the total number of movies written (and produced) by the screenwriter (their number of writing credits), and then plotting that number with the rank of the movie of the highest-grossing list. So, for example, when the *The Godfather* was released, it was Francis Ford Coppola's eighth screenplay credit and Mario Puzo's first.

With that data, a lot can be done. A double bar graph comparing income to the number of credits of the screenwriter is one way to represent it. Another is a bar graph with the x-axis being the names of the films, in order of their place on the highest-grossing list, and the y-axis being the number of credits of the screenwriter. A third way is to have a bar graph where the x-axis represents the number of credits of a screenwriter at the time of these particular movies, with the y-axis being the average adjusted gross income for all movies in the top 200 whose screenwriter had that number of credits. And there are more possibilities, too.

The second method of approaching this research is to focus on screenwriters, and how their experience relates to how much money their movies make. The goal is to make a line graph that easily shows how screenwriters' movies fare as their careers go on (x-axis: number of films written, y-axis: how much the films earned). For this approach, I would compile a list of the 25 "best" screenwriters of all-time.

Zachary Bucholtz  
Writing 410  
Research Proposal  
April 25, 2012

Of course, there is no way to know who is the best, but since we already have a list of those whose movies have made the most money, this will, in effect, test the data against the perception and subjectivity of ranking screenwriters.

The list of writers will be composed simply by interviewing and polling industry experts. I will send a poll to a list of respected producers, directors, and writers, and ask them to name the 10 best screenwriters. From that data, I would make a list of 25. It's not perfect, but it serves the purpose of this study.

Next, I would take each of those screenwriters and chart how each of their movies fared at the box office, using gross domestic income adjusted for inflation, as before, and make that line graph. The result would be an easy-to-digest statistical analysis of how experience the writer relates to making money for movies.

Naturally, there are flaws with this plan. No study is perfect. The data does not take into account the time period, and the changing tastes of the audience. Most people would probably agree that *The Sound of Music* would not be as popular today as it was when it was released, as people expect movies in the present day to look more like *Avatar* or *The Dark Knight*.

The study also doesn't take into account the many other factors that contribute to the success or failure of a movie, mostly because many of these aspects are qualitative and therefore much more difficult to study and use statistically. They include, but are not limited to: the quality and reputation of the actors, the knowledge and skill of the director, the amount of money paid to advertise the movie, the genre, the year, the competition at the box office, characteristics of the

Zachary Bucholtz  
Writing 410  
Research Proposal  
April 25, 2012

movie such as gender stereotypes and topic matters, reviews by critics and word-of-mouth fan effects, and whether or not the screenwriter was hired to write that movie or if the script was a spec script written by the writer and then purchased by the production company.

Another, final flaw is that it is a well-known fact that many movies are re-written prior to production by uncredited “script doctors.” Their contributions are not deemed significant enough to be given credit, but they still may have contributed to the success (or lack thereof) of the movie, financially speaking.

Doing a research study like this is necessary for this topic because it would be near-impossible to test such a hypothesis with an experiment. That is because any good experiment on the subject would require multiple movies to be made based on variables decided for the experiment. No producer would ever pay for such a thing and no company would go for it, because they want control over who they hire and what they produce.

The benefit of doing it this way is that it would be very cost-efficient. The only costs would be for the time of the person doing the research, the cost sending out the survey for the list of screenwriters, and the cost of producing and publishing the collected data.