

The formula for a hit film sequel

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Have you seen any of these films?

Spider-Man 2

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End

Ice Age 2

Star Trek (2009)

Shrek 2

Slumdog Millionaire

Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back

b. Which of the films above is the 'odd one out' (i.e. different to the others) and why?

2 Key words

Find the key words in the article and write them into the sentences below.

1. a verb which describes how well a film did _____ (para 1)
2. a verb which describes how badly a film did _____ (para 1)
3. A film _____ is an intellectual property involving the characters, setting and trademarks of an original work of fiction, such as a film or a series of books, e.g. *Harry Potter, James Bond*. (para 1)
4. two inexact methods of measuring things based on experience and feeling _____ (para 2)
5. When somebody is _____ they are involved in a project. (para 3)
6. to earn a particular amount of money before taxes or costs have been taken out _____ (para 3)
7. to fail financially and lose all your money _____ (para 4)
8. a film without a sequel or an ongoing storyline _____ (para 6)
9. Something that makes a large amount of money is _____. (para 7)
10. the process of becoming successful or popular again _____ (para 9)
11. a four-word phrase meaning *a good reputation based on what has happened before* _____ (para 9)
12. a phrase meaning *to make someone very angry* _____ (para 11)
13. a new blended word made up of two known words to describe the unwanted growth in the number of sequels. _____ (para 11)

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- 1 Ever wondered why *Spider-Man 2* triumphed and *Basic Instinct 2* bombed? Now a group of academics have come up with a formula to predict the fortunes of a film sequel.
- 2 Hollywood has long known a follow-up is a fairly safe bet and franchises from *Pirates of the Caribbean* to *Star Wars* have dominated cinema schedules for years. But, until now, decisions about what to invest in a film sequel or how much to pay for the rights to a franchise have been based on some simple rules of thumb and gut feeling.
- 3 Based on factors such as whether key stars are still on board, how long it has been since the last film and how that performed, the researchers now say they can calculate what producers can expect to gross relative to a film in the same genre that is not a sequel.
- 4 "It is the industry of dreams, an industry of illusions, and lots of people go bust. The idea here is to put some more analytical thinking into the process," says Professor Thorsten Hennig-Thurau, of Cass Business School in London.
- 5 With follow-up films enjoying widespread box office success and strong DVD sales, financial investors and film companies compete aggressively to acquire sequel rights. The *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* franchise was recently sold for \$60 million (£36 million). "I want this industry to recognize that it is not as different to other sectors as it thinks it is. What we are talking about here is brand extension," says Hennig-Thurau.
- 6 The research, which will be published in the *Journal of Marketing* this month, examined data from all 101 movie sequels released in North American cinemas between 1998 and 2006 and a sample of stand-alone films with similar characteristics. According to the formula, upcoming sequel *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* should be expected to return \$34 million more for the producers in its US run than a comparable vampire/ teen romance movie with the same characteristics that is not a sequel.
- 7 "Movies like the *Twilight* sequel *New Moon* are highly lucrative and relatively safe bets if key parameters, such as original cast, are maintained," explains Hennig-Thurau. Star continuity is where *Basic Instinct 2* went wrong – no Michael Douglas. "The time difference between the two films was very, very long and actor continuity was halved in that you only had (a much older) Sharon Stone."
- 8 On the whole, however, sequels do well and often outperform the original. That is especially true now studios are presenting films as a franchise with a narrative woven throughout several instalments. "We are not really talking about sequels any more. We are talking about films that are conceived of as longer plays than one film. You are saying to the audience: 'This is a story, you have got to stick with it,'" says David Hancock, head of film and cinema at media research company Screen Digest. Underlining that audience loyalty, Hancock notes that in the US last year, just 4.2% of releases were franchise films but they accounted for 20.6% of box office takings.
- 9 The revival of the *Star Trek* franchise this summer saw JJ Abrams's new film gross £21 million in UK cinemas, which is more than double the return of any of the previous 10 *Star Trek* feature films. "There is clearly a public appetite for new stories taking favourite characters on new adventures and from an industry point of view, there is less risk in investing in the production and release of a film which has a proven track record," says Mark Batey, chief executive of the Film Distributors' Association.
- 10 For film producers fighting poor DVD sales, sequels bring an added benefit. Hennig-Thurau's research showed that DVD sales of the original movie often peak when a sequel hits the cinema screens. Once that sequel is out on DVD it also has a good chance of strong sales.
- 11 DVD charts and cinema rankings containing sequels such as *Shrek the Third*, *Transformers 2* and *Ice Age 3* have, of course, incited the

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wrath of film critics worried about a lack of creativity. Cinema-goers have also complained of "sequelitis". Such criticism may have been justified in the days when making a sequel was a relatively lazy process but sequels are now produced in a more thoughtful manner.

12 The Film Distributors' Association is keen to argue that sequel mania does still leave room for original stories. *Slumdog Millionaire* is one

of the top films of 2009 while *The Full Monty* remains one of the most successful British films ever released. "With 500 films released in UK cinemas each year, the blockbuster sequels tend to do well but there's plenty of other choice for film fans during the year," says Batey.

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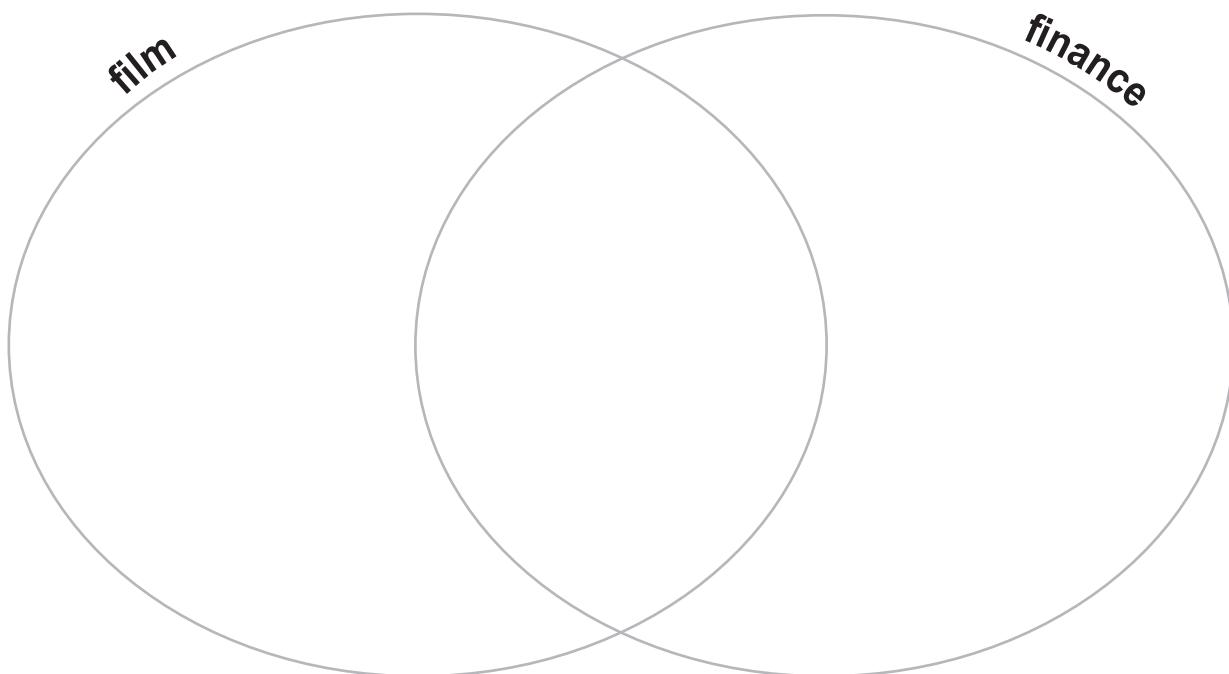
3 Comprehension check

Write answers to these questions based on the information in the article.

1. What qualities does a film sequel need to make it success?
2. What attracts the public (movie-goers) to watch sequels?
3. What effect do sequels have on DVD sales?
4. What did the researchers compare in order to come to their conclusions?
5. How is the film industry described?
6. Is this the end for original stories and stand-alone films?

4 Language: Vocabulary fields

Find words and phrases from the article that relate to 'film' and 'finance' and write them in the correct ovals below. Write words that relate to both subjects in the central field.



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5 Discussion

Do you like to watch sequels? Why / Why not?

Are there any stand-alone films that do not have a sequel but that you would like to have a sequel?

6 Webquest

a. Choose one of the films mentioned in the article and find the official trailer for it on the internet using these websites:

<http://movies.yahoo.com/trailers/>

<http://www.apple.com/trailers/>

You could also visit the film's official website and/or YouTube.

Explain to your class what the film is about (as you understand it from watching the trailer).

b. Find a chart of the current top 20 films in your country. How many of these are sequels?

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KEY

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b. *Slumdog Millionaire* is the odd one out as it is not a sequel and is not likely to have a sequel in the future.

2 Key words

1. triumphed
2. bombed
3. franchise
4. rule of thumb; gut feeling
5. on board
6. gross
7. go bust
8. stand-alone film
9. highly lucrative
10. revival
11. a proven track record
12. incite the wrath of
13. sequelitis

3 Comprehension check

1. star continuity, a short time between the original and the sequel, and the success of the first film
2. The public have an appetite for new stories taking favourite characters on new adventures and/or continuing storylines.
3. DVD sales of the original movie often peak when a sequel hits the cinema screens. Once that sequel is out on DVD it also has a good chance of strong sales.
4. The researchers examined data from all 101 movie sequels released in North American cinemas between 1998 and 2006 and a sample of stand-alone films with similar characteristics.
5. the industry of dreams and illusions
6. No, the recent success of *Slumdog Millionaire* proves that stand-alone films can still be successful.

4 Language: Vocabulary fields

(some suggested answers)

1. Film: blockbuster, ranking, actor, sequel, cinema, audience, instalments, movies, critics, stars, features, screen
2. Finance: calculate, gross, fortunes, go bust, return, lucrative, invest, pay
3. Both: triumph, bomb, sales, franchise, box office success