



The Case for Mid-Budget Star Wars

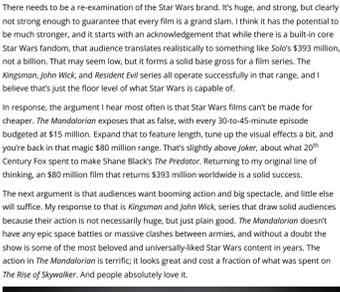
Posted on February 5, 2020 (<https://eleven-thirtyeight.com/2020/02/the-case-for-mid-budget-star-wars/>) by Ryan Fitzmartin (<https://eleven-thirtyeight.com/author/ryan-fitzmartin/>)

Star Wars is at a crossroads. While *The Rise of Skywalker's* worldwide box office will gross over a billion dollars, that's a far cry from *The Force Awakens'* two billion. RDS will end up below every Avengers film, both Jurassic World films, and even its predecessor *The Last Jedi*. Perhaps most shocking, the finale to the Skywalker saga could well end up with a lower total gross than DC's *Joker*. Uncertain, the future is.

Imagine it's 2016, and someone says to you an R-rated psychodrama would make more money than Episode IX of Star Wars. How would you react? You'd probably tell them to lay off the death sticks. Yet as I type these words, *Joker* stands ahead. There is, for sure, a large confluence of factors that led to this upset. Both films are divisive, but controversy boosted *Joker* while deflating Star Wars. Critical reviews for RDS were tepid at best, while *Joker* has been nominated for eleven Oscars, including Best Picture. Regardless, it can't be ignored that *Joker* has made its production budget of (at most) \$70 million back at least fifteen times over. RDS, with a price tag of \$275 million, has returned less than four times as much. A billion dollars is nothing to sniff at but as a return-on-investment that's far from a home run.

2019 was the year the mid-budget film struck back. *Joker* leads the top of a wide pack, followed by *It: Chapter Two*, *Us*, *John Wick: Chapter 3*, *Knives Out*, *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*, and many more. Audiences flocked to smaller films and studios saw strong, sometimes enormous, returns on budgetary investments of less than \$100 million—while tentpoles like *Dumbo*, *Alita: Battle Angel*, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* and *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* floundered.

What does this mean for the future of Star Wars? The lowest-grossing Star Wars film (not counting *The Clone Wars*) is *Solo: A Star Wars Story*. With a worldwide gross of \$393 million and a production budget of \$275 million, when factoring in other expenses it's **estimated (<https://deadline.com/2019/04/box-office-bomb-2019-solo-a-star-wars-story-mortals-groves-wrinkle-in-time-robin-hood-nutcracker-1202591271/>)** to have lost around eighty million dollars, an albatross-scale disaster for Disney. For a minute, though, let's place ourselves in an alternate universe: in that alternate universe, *Solo* is smaller and more intimate—a western heist film instead of a CGI extravaganza. In this universe, *Solo* costs \$125 million instead of \$275. When this *Solo*, let's assume, also falls to a huge worldwide audience, it still turns a mild profit—or at the very least, doesn't lose a dime.

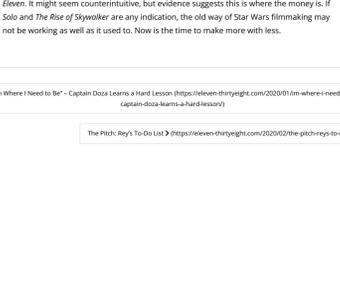


The conclusion that many seem to have drawn with *Solo* was that there wasn't an audience for the film. I disagree. I think there was an audience, albeit a far smaller one than Disney and Lucasfilm expected. Bob Iger and Kathleen Kennedy were hoping for *Rogue One* numbers, or something similar to that film's billion-dollar gross. If you're expecting to make a billion, spending almost three hundred million isn't bad. However, I disagree that a total gross of almost four hundred million equals no audience. Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood's run is ending in that range, and that film has been lauded as a massive success.

There needs to be a re-examination of the Star Wars brand. It's huge, and strong, but clearly not strong enough to guarantee that every film is a grand slam. I think it has the potential to be much stronger, and it starts with an acknowledgement that while there is a built-in core Star Wars fandom, that audience translates realistically to something like *Solo's* \$393 million, not a billion. That may seem low, but it forms a solid base gross for a film series. The *Kingsman*, *John Wick*, and *Resident Evil* series all operate successfully in that range, and I believe that's just the floor level of what Star Wars is capable of.

In response, the argument I hear most often is that Star Wars films can't be made for cheaper. *The Mandalorian* exposes that as false, with every 30-to-45 minute episode budgeted at \$15 million. Expand that to feature length, tune up the visual effects a bit, and you're back in that magic \$80 million range. That's slightly above *Joker*, about what 20th Century Fox spent to make *Shane Black's The Predator*. Returning to my original line of thinking, an \$80 million film that returns \$393 million worldwide is a solid success.

The next argument is that audiences want booming action and big spectacle, and little else will suffice. My response to that is *Kingsman* and *John Wick* series that draw solid audiences because their action is not necessarily huge, but just plain good. *The Mandalorian* doesn't have any epic space battles or massive clashes between armies, and without a doubt the show is some of the most beloved and universally-liked Star Wars content of years. The action in *The Mandalorian* is terrific; it looks great and cost a fraction of what was spent on *The Rise of Skywalker*. And people absolutely love it.



Audiences don't just want action, they want other genres as well. Horror films from *It*, *The Conjuring* and *A Quiet Place* series have pulled massive numbers around the world. Musicals (*Bohemian Rhapsody*, *La La Land*, and *A Star Is Born*) are even bigger. Audiences want rhodourms like *River's Out*, comedies like *Deadpool*, and they even want to see *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood* in L.A. hangout movie that doesn't follow traditional plotting.

There are many talented producers, writers and directors out there willing to make these films—imagine Scott Derrickson's *Death Wish*, Damien Chazelle's *A Complete Unknown*, Kenneth Branagh's *Murder on the Orient Express*, and Steven Soderbergh's *Londo's Eleven*. It might seem counterintuitive, but evidence suggests this is where the money is. If *Solo* and *The Rise of Skywalker* are any indication, the old way of Star Wars filmmaking may not be working as well as it used to. Now is the time to make more with less.

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