

PRO

The Disney+ Curse: How the Streaming Service Hurt Marvel, Star Wars and Pixar Brands

Marvel and Star Wars shows have seen declining streams while MCU and Pixar movies are feeling the box office hurt



Drew Taylor August 4, 2025 @ 6:00 AM

It was meant to be a cozy, celebratory get-together, with journalists gathering at Marvel Studios' office in the Frank G. Wells building at Disney's Burbank headquarters. At the event, held in early July, Kevin Feige, producer and president of Marvel Studios, was supposed to prime the pump for Marvel's next big bet: "The Fantastic Four: First Steps."

But Feige wound up talking about something that his superheroes avoid at all costs: failure.

The producer explained that the period after 2019's "Avengers: Endgame," which capped off a period of the movies known as the Infinity Saga and wound up being one of the most successful movies of all time, was about experimentation. But the demands of Disney+, Disney's direct-to-consumer streaming platform that launched in November 2019, was also about expansion.

Feige specifically pointed to "The Marvels," the sequel to 2019's $1 billion-grossing "Captain Marvel," which brought in $206 million globally, as the movie that was "hit hardest" by the new emphasis on Disney+ and the inclusion of characters from Marvel shows. "People are like, 'OK, I recognize her from a billion-dollar movie. But who are those other two? I guess they were in some TV show. I'll skip it,'" Feige said of the story that paired Brie Larson with Marvel TV stars Teyonah Parris and Iman Vellani.

Later, Feige got more blunt: "The expansion is what devalued [the Marvel brand]. It was just too much. It was a big company push. And it doesn't take too much to push us to go. There was a mandate that we were put in the middle of."

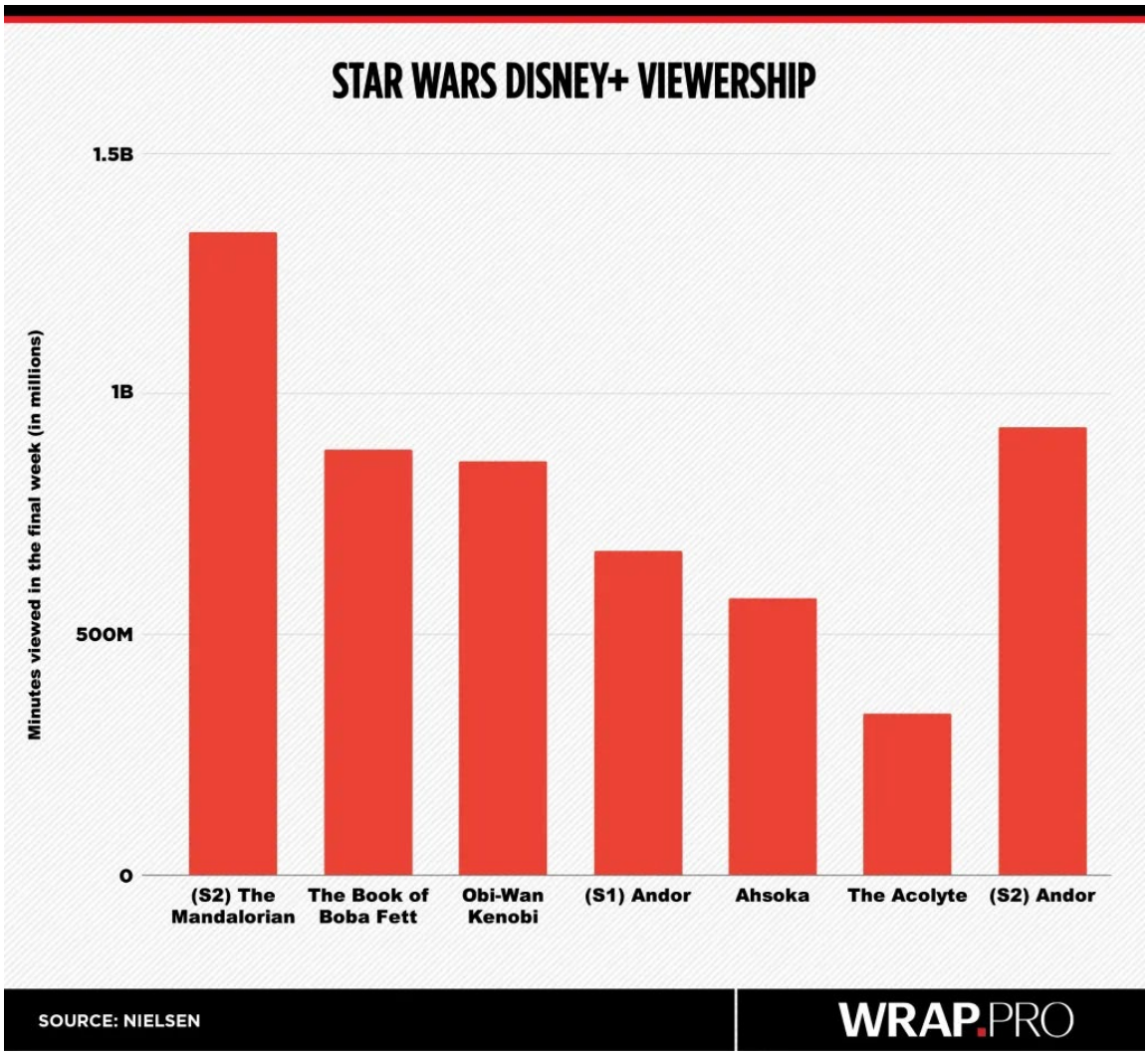


Pedro Pascal in "The Fantastic Four: First Steps" (Credit: Marvel Studios)

Feige's admission that Disney+ — with its countless streaming series, animated shows and "special presentations" — had actively damaged the Marvel Studios brand is startling but also unsurprising.

Nearly every one of Disney's core brands – in addition to Marvel Studios, Pixar and Lucasfilm – have been diminished by the company's direct-to-consumer streaming platform and that platform's insatiable thirst for fresh content.

Over the last five years, Marvel and Star Wars Disney+ shows — with some exceptions — have seen declining streaming minutes as each subsequent series debuts, with Star Wars peaking with the second season of "The Mandalorian" in 2021 through "Skeleton Crew" in 2024, which failed to even make the weekly top 10 for Nielsen.



There were ripple effects at the box office, with Marvel's "Captain America: Brave New World," which brought in $415 million globally, and "Thunderbolts," which did $382 million, both disappointments compared to previous franchises and when factoring in their respective budgets (both cost around $200 million to produce). And just this past weekend, "The Fantastic Four" dropped a huge 66% from its $118 million opening weekend, dashing hopes that this film would get Marvel back on track at the box office. On the Pixar front, "Elio" has been a catastrophe, bringing in $138.6 so far at the global box office, making it the worst performing Pixar film in history, ranking below even "Onward," a movie that opened right before the pandemic lockdown began.

It's impossible to compare what those box office results might have been in the absence of Disney+, or how other factors like audiences getting accustomed to staying home during the pandemic may have impacted the desire to go to theaters to see these

movies. But overall, TheWrap spoke to half a dozen executives and experts who agreed that the imperative to drive content to Disney's streaming service hurt the company's most cherished brands.

"Given the quality of the Marvel Disney+ output has been incredibly mediocre, it's dragged the entire brand down and diluted its creative," said a producer with franchise experience. "People don't care now."

That these once-beloved properties are landing with a *meh* for audiences now suggests that there is a potential long-term cost to the strategy of driving a fire-hose of content to retain Disney+ subscribers. It's one of the key lessons that the media companies have learned from the decision to follow Netflix into streaming, with these brands particularly noteworthy casualties.

As Disney+'s shows have landed with subsequently less and less buzz, subscribers are starting to see the service as less of a must have. In the first quarter, Disney+ lost 700,000 subscribers, the first time it saw a decline, although it was partly attributed to price hikes (Disney reports its second-quarter results this week, so we'll see if that's a one-off or start of a trend).

Disney's brand has also taken a hit. According to Brand Finance, which tracks the brand value of top global companies, the value of the Disney name fell 5.6% to $46.72 billion from a year earlier.

A Disney spokesman declined to comment for the story.

Iger's legacy

In 2019, when CEO Bob Iger was both on the precipice of launching Disney+ and planning to retire, he positioned the new streaming platform as a key part his legacy — the thing that would carry the company through its next era and reposition the company not only as an entertainment juggernaut but also a tech giant.

"The decision to disrupt businesses that are fundamentally working but whose future is in question – intentionally taking on short-term losses in the hopes of generating long-term growth – requires no small amount of courage," Iger wrote in his book, "The Ride of a Lifetime."

The service launched on November 12, 2019, with a ton of Disney catalogue titles and a handful of new ones.

The new shows and movies all had ties to legacy Disney hits, including "Lady and the Tramp" and "Toy Story." But the headliner was "The Mandalorian," the first-ever live-action "Star Wars" series.



(L-R): Grogu, Din Djarin (Pedro Pascal) and Greef Karga (Carl Weathers) in Lucasfilm's THE MANDALORIAN, season three on Disney+. (Credit: Lucasfilm)

Every lever was pulled to help support the launch of this new initiative. There were activations in the Disney Parks, an elaborate press junket where journalists bopped from room to room interviewing talent from shows debuting with the service and countless articles written about the platform. At the time of launch, The New York Times said that Disney+ "is the industry's equivalent of Thor's slamming down his magic hammer: a quake that changes everything."

And while the service started strong, it really took off during lockdown when the COVID-19 pandemic turned the entire industry upside down. Disney+ served as a lifeline for the entire company, which had its theme parks closed and cruise ships grounded. A year after the launch, Disney announced that it had over 94.9 million subscribers. It beat its four-year goal in just 14 months. As an economic engine, Disney+ did what it was supposed to do.

But creatively, it would sap the company's brands of their singular *oomph*.

A galaxy far, far away

"The Mandalorian" kicked off Disney+ and it was an undeniable hit. People went crazy for Jon Favreau's lone gunslinger and, in particular, his diminutive sidekick, who people quickly referred to as Baby Yoda. It arrived a month before the ninth film in the "Star Wars" film saga, "Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker," hit theaters. In its first week, it racked up 791 million minutes watched, according to Nielsen.

That early success opened the floodgates for multiple "Star Wars"-centered projects a year.

“When you went to a Star Wars movie, it used to be special,” said a marketing exec from a rival studio. “But there’s a difference between *let’s have a movie every four years* versus *let’s have three shows on the air all the time and have a movie every year*.”

A year after the premiere of “The Mandalorian,” during the Investors Day event, the company unveiled a host of “Star Wars”-related content coming to Disney+ — much of which, 10 years later, has yet to materialize.

But at that point, Disney was in a groove. “The Mandalorian” had just returned two months before the event, and the first week of Season 2 saw 1 billion minutes watched. The show averaged more than a billion minutes watched every week through the rest of the year and peaked in the week of its season finale at 1.34 billion minutes.

Then came the first red flag. “The Book of Boba Fett” debuted a year after that. At first glance, the show’s premise of fleshing out a fan-favorite character seemed like a sure-fire hit. But its uneven story and mixed pacing turned off viewers, and despite the re-emergence of the Mandalorian and Baby Yoda towards the end, it wrangled 885 million minutes watched in its final week — a good number, but nowhere near the heights of “The Mandalorian.”

Subsequent series like “Obi-Wan Kenobi” would start off strong (1.02 billion minutes in the first week) before tapering off (860 million in the final week).

“Obi-Wan” would kick off a trend that the two other Star Wars shows would follow: views that would fall week to week, suggesting flagging interest. “Ahsoka” started with 829 million views in its first week, with views falling by 31 percent by the finale. Likewise, “The Acolyte” similarly lost nearly a third of its viewership over the span of its 10-week run. Despite setting itself up for another season, it was quickly canceled. “Ahsoka” will be back for a second season, at least.

“Skeleton Crew,” a “Goonies”-like take on Star Wars featuring a young cast getting into hijinks with space pirates that debuted at the end of 2024, never even made the top 10, so there isn’t data available from Nielsen.

Finally, there’s “Andor,” the rare critical hit that proved to be the exception to the Disney+ curse. It ended the first season with 674 million minutes streamed in the final week having steadily built up its audience. By the end of its second season, the number leaped to 931 million minutes streamed as critics and audiences alike heaped praise upon its mature themes.

What’s important to keep in mind, is that throughout this whole period when Lucasfilm emphasized “Star Wars” series on Disney+, not a single “Star Wars” movie was released theatrically. At its height, following the acquisition of Lucasfilm by Disney and the successful relaunch of the franchise with 2015’s “Star Wars: The Force Awakens,” Disney was releasing a new “Star Wars” movie every year.

“The biggest problem with Disney+ is not the quality of the material,” said Dan Zehr, the host of the Coffee with Kenobi podcast and an author who has written books for Lucasfilm. “It’s that less is more. The less Star Wars we have, the more it builds the anticipation.”

Next year, we’ll finally get a new “Star Wars” movie and instead of an original story or a continuation of the saga installments, it will be an expansion of “The Mandalorian” – a big-screen movie directed by creator Jon Favreau called “The Mandalorian and Grogu.” In 2027, “Star Wars: Starfighter,” directed by Shawn Levy and starring Ryan Gosling, will arrive in theaters.

But besides a second season of “Ahsoka,” there are currently no new live-action “Star Wars” series that have been announced. After years of being bombarded with “Star Wars” series on Disney+, to diminishing returns, the franchise is returning to the big screen. Will “Star Wars” be special again?

Or, as Zehr put it, “To me, Star Wars is a dining experience, it’s not fast food. When you make it like fast food, it suffers.”

Trouble in the MCU

The first year that Marvel Studios started producing series for Disney+ there were *four* big budget live-action series (“WandaVision,” “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier,” “Loki” and “Hawkeye”). In 2022, there were three (“Moon Knight,” “Ms. Marvel” and “She-Hulk: Attorney at Law”) with two in 2023 (the second season of “Loki” and “Secret Invasion”). There were two shows in 2024 (“Echo” and “Agatha All Along”) and there have been two so far this year (“Daredevil: Born Again” and “Ironheart”), with a third on the way later this year (“Wonder Man”).

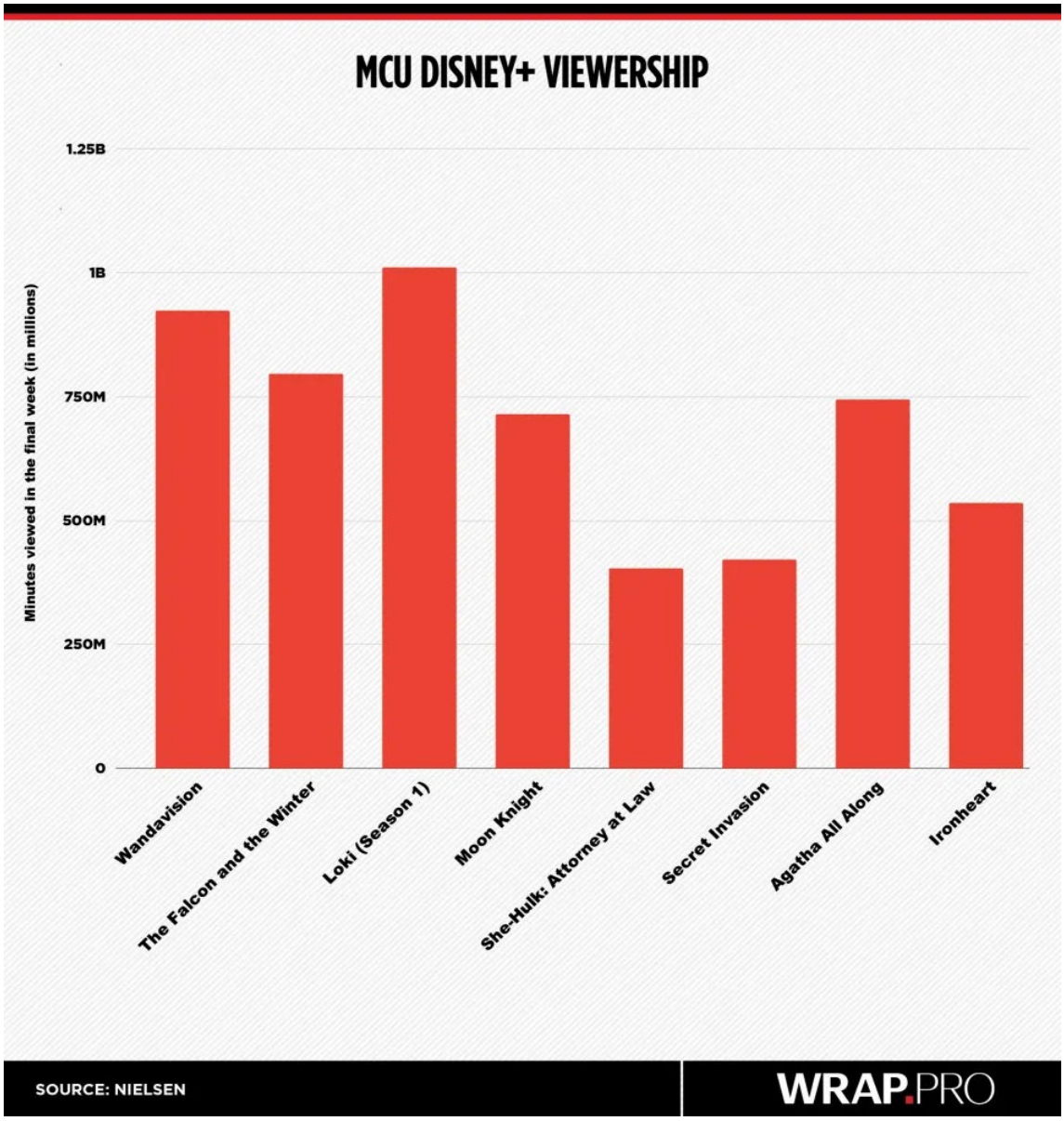


Hulk and She-Hulk training for action in “She-Hulk: Attorney at Law.” (Credit: Marvel Studios)

“I do think that it has eroded the branding,” said Dave Gonzales, the co-author of the indispensable history of Marvel Studios, “MCU: The Reign of Marvel Studios.” “All of the sub-brands have been eroded.”

For Marvel, he said, it’s particularly interesting because it followed a period of being at the top of the industry. “They were finally getting to do what they wanted to do – put everything in development.”

Feige acknowledged this at the press event, saying that they suddenly had access to big stars who wanted to do more esoteric projects with the studio, citing Oscar Isaac wanting to do “Moon Knight” as a reason to greenlight it. Other projects, like “Hawkeye,” started off as features before being reconfigured, just as “Obi-Wan Kenobi” had been, into a limited streaming series. There were also specials (dubbed “Special Presentations”) like “Werewolf by Night” and “The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special.”



Before the Disney+ era began, Feige promised that the entire thing would be connected – series would lead into movies and then back to series, in a giant, interconnected loop. But they ran into problems almost immediately, with the global pandemic impacting productions and even the rollout of series (for instance, "WandaVision" was originally meant to come out after "Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness" and then had to be reconfigured to tee up that sequel, which also starred Elisabeth Olsen).

"Marvel remade how they made franchise movies but they thought they could do the same thing with television – you can't," said Gonzales. "They think they're more nimble than they actually are." With "WandaVision," Gonzales said, they moved the movie pipeline to a television pipeline and ended up with shows that cost hundreds of millions of dollars. "We'll never have TV shows that cost that much again," he added.

And while there have been a handful of hit Marvel Studios series on Disney+, most notably "WandaVision," which on its most watched week pulled down an impressive 924 million minutes streamed, per Nielsen, its spinoff "Agatha All Along," which racked up 744 million minutes in its final week, plus "Loki," with two episodes from its first season topping 1 billion minutes streamed, the majority of them failed to make waves.

"Ironheart," the latest MCU show featuring a tech-savvy armored heroine based in Chicago, garnered just 563 million minutes streamed in its final week in July.

The chilling effect of these shows have extended to the films, with "Captain America: Brave New World" ($415 million) and "Thunderbolts" ($380 million) both underperforming at the box office. Notably, "Deadpool & Wolverine" ($1.3 billion) and "The Fantastic Four: First Steps" ($118 million opening weekend) have performed well because they're so detached from the rest of the MCU and Disney+ shows, but even "Fantastic Four" is showing cracks with its drastic dropoff at the box office in its second weekend.

Feige said that the studio felt the residual effects of people thinking, "I had to have seen these other shows to understand who this is."

But when looking at what happened to Pixar, the Avengers should consider themselves lucky.

Pixar's problems

Back in 2019, Disney corporate leaned on Pixar to supply new material for the streaming service, which is difficult when the pipelines for Pixar's features and shorts are so rigidly solidified. At first, the contributions were minor, such as the micro-length Toy Story spin-off "Forky Asks a Question," with total running time coming in at around 30 minutes per series.

Disney+'s demands for content got more ambitious. The company, under CEO Bob Chapek (who was subsequently replaced by a returning Iger), sent three Pixar original films (2020's "Soul," 2021's "Luca" and 2022's "Turning Red") directly to Disney+. There was the sensation that families were concerned about going to movie theaters, so Disney delivered new Pixar movies directly into their homes.

But when "Lightyear," an expansion of the "Toy Story" franchise but ostensibly a new IP, was released in the summer of 2022, it underperformed, making just $226.4 million globally. "Elemental," another Pixar original released the following summer, underperformed initially before making nearly $500 million worldwide through strong word of mouth. And while last year's "Inside Out 2" was a phenomenon, making $1.69 billion worldwide, this summer's "Elio" has struggled, making just $139 million worldwide and becoming the first Pixar movie not to break $100 million domestically. ("Onward," released a few days before the pandemic in 2020, didn't meet that mark but if it had stayed in theaters, it would have.)



Meilin Lee, a 13-year-old Chinese-Canadian student, transforms into a red panda in "Turning Red" (Credit: Disney)

In 2023, the New York Times proclaimed that "Pixar is damaged as a big-screen brand." Elsewhere in the same article, the report noted that "as some box office analysts speculated, Disney had weakened the Pixar brand by using its films to build the Disney+ streaming service."

"When you had an original Pixar movie, it was like, *It's going to be huge*," said the marketing exec at a rival studio. "The brand is so devalued because they put those movies on Disney+, not every Pixar movie is a theatrical event."

Like Marvel Studios and Lucasfilm, Disney has pumped the brakes on Disney+-specific Pixar material.

Last year saw the release of “Dream Productions,” a three-episode spinoff of “Inside Out 2” focused on the studio that produces Riley’s dreams. It was followed by “Win or Lose,” which streamed on Disney+ earlier this year. It’s one of the best things that the studio has ever made — eight half-hour episodes about a softball team, with each installment told from a different player’s point-of-view (or their coach or their parent…)

The show fared OK — Nielsen said that it earned 6.2 million viewers in the U.S. over the first 35 days – but making a direct-to-streaming show disrupted Pixar’s pipeline, pulling resources away from features and costing as much as one of those bigger projects.

A long-form streaming series that was meant to follow “Win or Lose” was quietly canceled and may get reworked into a feature at Pixar. And there hasn’t been anything announced, long or short, on the Pixar side of things. The damage has been done.

The survivors

Not every Disney brand has taken a huge hit.

Disney’s live-action slate has been largely unaffected, thanks to a combination of approaches.

The service used to have a robust line-up of original movies, from a live-action Lady and the Tramp” to “Hocus Pocus 2.” Some even drifted off the 21st Century Fox assets like “Home Sweet Home Alone.”

But none of these films encroached on any of its brands. If there had been a new live-action adaptation of a beloved Disney animated movie appearing regularly on Disney+, it might have bitten into that business. But they knew, from the beginning, that less was more.

And after a while, Disney decided to simply remove most of the movies from Disney+ entirely – you can’t find “The One and Only Ivan,” co-starring and produced by Angelina Jolie or sci-fi adventure “Crater” or the charming “Timmy Failure: Mistakes Were Made” on the platform. These were big-deal titles that Disney touted as being key to their service.

They also decided to move some of these projects to theatrical. A “Moana” series was reconfigured as “Moana 2,” which was released theatrically last year and made over $1 billion. This summer’s live-action “Lilo & Stitch” was originally planned as a Disney+ original but debuted in theaters and has become the only western movie to make more than $1 billion this year.



Maui, voiced by Dwayne Johnson, stands at the ready in "Moana 2." (Credit: Disney)

Walt Disney Animation Studios actually benefited from Disney+. After "Encanto," the first post-pandemic Disney animated movie to get a full theatrical release, saw a successful run after debuting on Thanksgiving 2021, Disney decided to throw the movie on Disney+ for Christmas. That's where it became the most-watched film of 2022 with 27.4 billion minutes viewed. Soon after, Disney started referring to it as the company's "newest franchise." It inspired a live show at the Hollywood Bowl, entertainment offerings at the Disney Parks and a full-on attraction that is being built at Disney's Animal Kingdom.

What's next

Walt Disney Studios used to think of projects as "brand deposits" or "brand withdrawals."

"Brand deposits" added to the value of the company's brand, either monetarily or through prestige. These were the projects that embodied Disney – either in their wholesomeness, their entertainment value or their desire to push things forward, technologically or storytelling-wise. "Brand withdrawals" were projects that actively took away from the Disney brand, either because they didn't fit tonally or didn't deliver on the Disney promise.

The brand withdrawal of Disney+ is huge. The company seems to be taking the right steps to course correct – chiefly, to not put out as much product on the streaming service and to re-emphasize the importance of theatrical exhibition. There are far fewer new things on the service. So far this year, there has been a single Disney+ original film and far fewer Lucasfilm and Marvel Studios projects.

These numbers will get even smaller, as the streaming service puts its weight behind a handful of projects that hopefully more will enjoy.

And just as “Encanto” found new life on Disney+, the company, if it is smart, will emphasize the platform as a library of all things Disney. This is partially how the product was sold back in 2019.

In a way, this might be the easiest way of rehabilitating the company’s brands – by reminding people of how good things used to be.

Umberto Gonzalez contributed to this story.