

The Lion, The Witch, And The Franchise

Disney is counting on *Narnia* to reel in an audience of kids, gamers, and Christians

The residents of Narnia live in an enchanted land of hope populated with talking bears, dwarfs, and fauns. But in 2001, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the much-beloved seven-book series written by British author C.S. Lewis, was a lost cause to Hollywood studio executives.

Even as blockbuster hopefuls like *Harry Potter*, *X-Men*, and *The Lord of the Rings* were coming to life, Paramount Pictures dropped *Narnia* after five years of false starts and rising budgets. "It was a great project that couldn't seem to get going," recalls David Weil, CEO of Anschutz Film Group, the family-friendly movie unit owned by Denver billionaire Phil Anschutz that picked it up from Paramount. Anschutz, a onetime Sunday school teacher, was drawn by *Narnia*'s spiritual underpinnings. Holed-up in New York's Four Seasons Hotel after months of negotiating, Weil made an offer to C.S. Lewis' stepson that he couldn't refuse. "We laid out a 15-year plan to create a franchise out of *The Chronicles of Narnia*," recalls Weil, "and wouldn't let him out until he agreed."

When *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* hits theaters on Dec. 9, it will represent Hollywood's latest venture -- and one of its most costly yet -- to create a franchise, which is, after all, the celluloid Holy Grail. The stakes are enormous not just for Anschutz but also for Walt Disney Co. ([DIS](#)), the film's distributor, which is paying half its production costs. "It was an expensive bet," says Disney studio Chairman Richard Cook, who was first approached about the project by Anschutz executives two years ago. "But with books that have as many as 90 million readers, it was a bet worth taking."

Unlike some studios, Disney in recent years has been without that signature movie that just keeps giving. Time Warner Inc. ([TWX](#)) and Sony Pictures Entertainment ([SNE](#)) have boosted their financials through *Harry Potter* and *Spider-Man* sequels, respectively. But Disney, which still has no new deal with its longtime animation partner Pixar Films, desperately needs a gusher. "Disney doesn't have that predictable film like a *Harry Potter* that you know will do great business at the box office and sell a ton of DVDs," says former Columbia Pictures executive Peter Sealey, a marketing professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

Still, these special-effects-driven productions can be budget-busters -- the first *Narnia* will cost north of \$200 million to make and market -- and there is no guarantee that they will ever catch fire. *Narnia*, in particular, comes with a ready-made marketing tinderbox: The series is a lightly disguised Christian allegory about four children who find a magical wardrobe and are transported to an eternal world. In the film, the Christlike lion Aslan dies to protect a child but then is resurrected. Says Sealey, "If Disney markets it too heavily as a Christian film, others may take a walk."

Just the same, the makers of *The Chronicles of Narnia* have followed a detailed blueprint to assemble their franchise. Anschutz' Walden Media outfit, which is making the film, has the rights to make movies for all the *Narnia* books. It selected as its director 39-year-old Andrew Adamson, who directed DreamWorks' *Shrek* and has been a *Narnia* fan since childhood. And it teamed up with Disney, which will share half the \$150 million production budget and deploy its famed marketing operation to plug the film. Disney's ABC ([DIS](#)) network will feature promotions appearing in the corner of the screen during its hot shows like *Commander In Chief*, says Oren Aviv, the studio marketing head. Already, the studio has sent out trailers on about 20 million DVDs, including those for the first season of the ABC hit *Lost*.

CHURCH SCREENINGS

A sustainable mega-hit would give a big boost to Disney's movie unit, which lost an estimated \$300 million during the summer. The studio, which has treated its animated films as big-event franchises, may soon lose its 13-year partner, Pixar Animation Studio. And before its 2003 hit *Pirates of the Caribbean*, for which it is making two sequels, it had never had a series of successful live-action films. (Ironically, its Miramax unit decided to pass on *Lord of the Rings* in the late 1990s.)

Disney is gearing up with the same kind of marketing muscle it used for its 1994 film *The Lion King*, which turned into a \$1 billion business with consumer products, DVDs, and a hit Broadway show. It has licensed more than 60 products, including a \$249 replica sword. But *Narnia* will require a masterful marketing balance among Christians, video game players, and Disney's core audience of family and kids.

So Disney marketers have courted every possible constituency. They hired Christian-identified Motive Marketing, the firm that helped turn Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* into a hit, to hold *Narnia* screenings at churches. Hoping to wow action fans with the film's hefty special effects, the company hosted a reporting team from gaming Web site IGN on the movie set in New Zealand, from where it filed news accounts online. Disney and Anschutz' Boston-based Walden Media, which works with schools to promote reading, has even shipped more than 100,000 teachers' editions of the book. Florida Governor Jeb Bush launched a contest to promote reading the *Narnia* books.

So far, it looks as if Disney has reason to be upbeat. Early reviews have been generally supportive. After a recent screening, Internet movie site Ain't It Cool News ran one favorable review and one that was lukewarm. The site's owner, Harry Knowles, a trusted sage to the sci-fi fans coveted by *Narnia* marketers, raved about the film. Disney sent special-effects master Howard Berger with a 10-minute segment to Knowles's sci-fi film festival in Austin, Tex. "When the footage was over, the audience began cheering," Knowles wrote on his site. "My sweetie, who absolutely is gaga for *Narnia*, had to go to the bathroom to touch up her mascara."

Not content to rest on early kudos, Disney is lining up corporate heavyweights for help. McDonald's ([MCD](#)), General Mills ([GIS](#)), and others are ponying up an estimated \$150 million in promotional support for the film, says Aviv -- considered a record. Shopping mall owner Taubman Centers Inc. ([TCO](#)) has set up wintry tableaux from *Narnia* at 11 high-end malls.

Clearly, the presell is in place. It's the movie itself that is creating the most stress now. With 1,600 special effects, last-minute editing fixes are running behind schedule to deliver a final print. It's now curtains up on the drama of Disney's long-awaited franchise.