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How 'Lilo & Stitch' Became One of the Most Profitable Movies in Years

The film was originally aimed for Disney+. But it was rerouted to a theatrical release and is on a pace for at least \$950 million in ticket sales.



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By **Brooks Barnes**

Reporting from Los Angeles

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Call it Stitch's vindication.

For 23 years, the rowdy blue agent of chaos lived as a second-class citizen at Disney. The animated “Lilo & Stitch,” released in 2002, was [made in near secret](#), partly because the character and art style didn't fit the Disney mold. One poster for the movie depicted classic Disney characters like Pinocchio, Jasmine and Belle recoiling from Stitch in horror.

Ticket sales were so-so. Stitch got a couple of direct-to-video sequels and a TV cartoon in the 2000s. A modest Disney World ride opened in 2004 and closed in 2018, leaving the snaggletoothed character to scamper along as a [consumer products property](#).

And now? Almost overnight, Stitch has become one of the biggest movie windfalls in years, not just at Disney but in all of Hollywood.

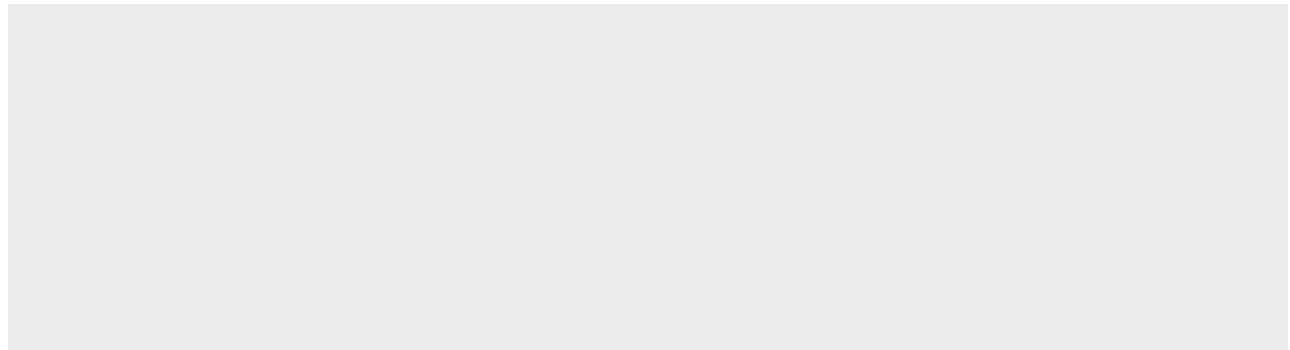
Disney's live-action "Lilo & Stitch" remake — made for \$100 million and initially planned as a straight-to-streaming release — has collected \$610 million worldwide after just 10 days in theaters. The PG movie, which cost at least \$75 million to market, should sell about \$950 million in tickets by the end of its run, box office analysts said on Saturday. Depending on the response to "Lilo & Stitch" in Japan, where it opens on Friday, there may even be a path to \$1 billion.

That means Disney, which splits tickets sales with theaters, will make \$300 million or more in profit just from the box office.

The astounding turnout further validates a U-turn that Disney made in 2023, not long after Robert A. Iger came out of retirement to retake Disney's helm. He cut back on streaming originals and reprioritized theatrical releases. In November, "Moana 2," assembled from what had been planned as a Disney+ television show, collected \$1.1 billion in theaters. "Lilo & Stitch" was similarly rerouted.

"Going theatrical, getting that footprint across the entire world, lifts everything — streaming, consumer products, the theme parks," Alan Bergman, co-chairman of Disney Entertainment, said by phone on Friday. "It's harder to do that when you start on a service."

Nine months ago, when Disney scheduled “Lilo & Stitch” for release in theaters on Memorial Day weekend, Mr. Bergman was cautiously optimistic about its chances. Even with no new content, Disney’s consumer products group had managed to expand sales of Stitch merchandise to \$2.6 billion in 2024 from \$200 million in 2019. Young adults clearly had nostalgia for the property.



Maia Kealoha, left, and Sydney Agudong star in “Lilo & Stitch.” Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, via Associated Press

Perhaps the sunny “Lilo & Stitch” could succeed as counterprogramming to Tom Cruise’s serious “Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning,” also scheduled for Memorial Day weekend. Maybe — *maybe* — Stitch could even beat Mr. Cruise. Such an outcome, albeit unlikely, would be a nice bit of payback; Mr. Cruise’s “Minority Report” outdid the original “Lilo & Stitch” when they opened on the same weekend in 2002.

In the end, the face-off wasn’t even close. “Lilo & Stitch” took in \$183 million over the holiday weekend in the United States and Canada. “Mission: Impossible,” which cost \$400 million to make, not including marketing, took in \$79 million.

“Disney did everything right on this,” said [Kevin Goetz](#), chief executive of the film research company Screen Engine/ASI. “They made a movie that people

love. They made it for the right price. They picked a perfect release date. The marketing, publicity and social campaigns. I could go on and on.”

Disney celebrated last week with champagne toasts at its headquarters in Burbank, Calif. Mr. Bergman’s office was decorated with Stitch balloons. David Greenbaum, president of Disney Live Action, donned a blue lei.

“Lilo & Stitch” did so well that it served as a clap back to Ted Sarandos, the Netflix boss, who recently called theatrical movies an “outdated” concept. Pointing to the then-struggling box office — Disney’s expensive “[Snow White](#)” had just flopped — Mr. Sarandos had said: “What does that say? What is the consumer trying to tell us? That they’d like to watch movies at home, thank you.”

All over Hollywood, film producers and studio executives started to do back-of-the-envelope math to guesstimate “Lilo & Stitch” profitability.

Consider: In the last 15 years, only three live-action movies that cost \$100 million or less, excluding marketing, have reached \$950 million in ticket sales, according to IMDBpro, a film industry database. They are “Oppenheimer” (Universal Pictures), “Joker” (Warner Bros.) and “Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle” (Sony Pictures Entertainment).

All those movies, however, were built in ways that reduced the profit that flowed to their studio makers. Christopher Nolan, who wrote, directed and produced “Oppenheimer,” received a cut of ticket sales, for instance. Warner Bros. offset “Joker” risk by bringing in a financing partner, Village Roadshow, which received a share of the riches.

With “Lilo & Stitch,” Disney does not have to pay filmmaker or star bonuses. Nor does Disney have a financing partner to pay.

In addition to ticket sales, analysts expect “Lilo & Stitch” to make tens of millions of dollars in profit from digital rentals and sales (known as premium video on demand). While hard to quantify, “Lilo & Stitch” will create Disney+ value by helping with subscriptions and ad sales.

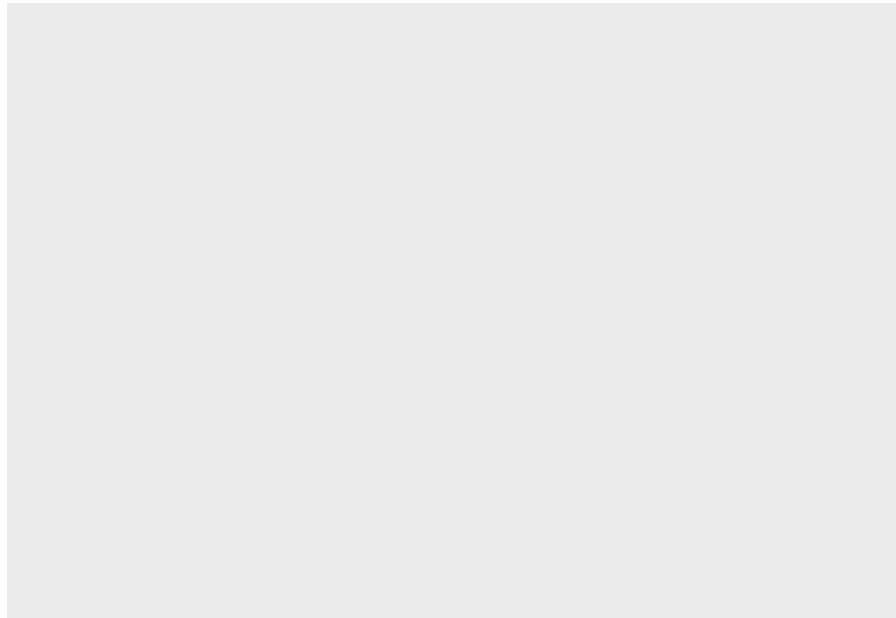
Analysts estimate that sales of related consumer products will add up to \$400 million in profit annually.

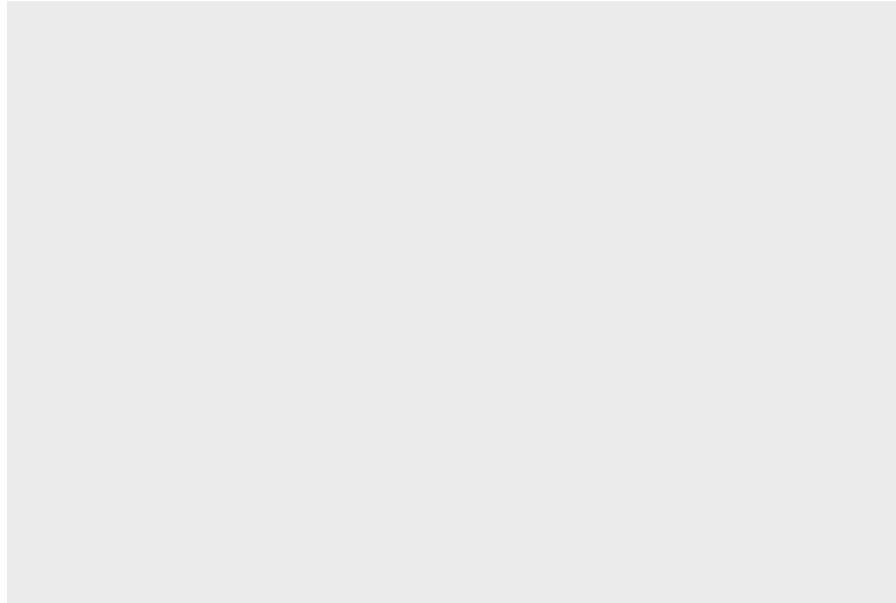
And don’t forget the inevitable sequels.

“There’s certainly a lot of room to tell more stories,” Mr. Bergman said.

The new “Lilo & Stitch” got started in 2018, when a team of producers approached Disney with the idea. At the time, Disney was focused on turning animated classics like “The Little Mermaid” and “Aladdin” into live-action movies.

“The response was, ‘Oh, yeah, Stitch — no one’s asked about this title,” said Jonathan Eirich, one of the producers. (Another “Lilo & Stitch” producer, [Dan Lin](#), became Netflix’s movie chief in April 2024.)





Jonathan Eirich, a “Lilo & Stitch” producer. It wasn’t until February of this year, he said, that “Lilo & Stitch” started to look like a potential blockbuster. Jesse Grant/Getty Images For Disney

The movie encountered its share of troubles as it trundled along. (Notably, the 2023 writers’ and actors’ strikes delayed production.) It wasn’t until February of this year, Mr. Eirich said, that “Lilo & Stitch” started to look like a potential blockbuster.

The turning point was a Super Bowl stunt, orchestrated by Disney marketers, that found Stitch seeming to [break onto the field](#) shortly after the coin toss and evade capture by stadium staff. In the months after, Disney continued to market the film by emphasizing Stitch’s naughtiness; he [popped out](#) of popcorn buckets and turned up in shopping malls driving a pink car with the license plate “2 FAST.”

As bigger-than-expected crowds poured into theaters on opening day, Disney increased its internal estimates for the weekend haul. Mr. Eirich said he had asked the studio to keep the new math from leaking to the Hollywood

community.

“Don’t jinx it! Don’t put the bigger estimates out there,” he said he had told Disney. “I didn’t want any headlines saying we fell short.”

He didn’t have to worry.

Brooks Barnes covers all things Hollywood. He joined The Times in 2007 and previously worked at The Wall Street Journal.

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