

## **Taking a risk - Walt Disney and the creation of Snow White**



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Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is arguably one of the most important animation films in history. Worldwide, it is the top-earning animation film to date when adjusted for inflation. The film was made in the 1930s. It premiered at the Carthay Circle Theatre in Los Angeles, California on December 21<sup>st</sup> 1937 and was released across the USA in February 1938, and internationally soon after.

It took three years to produce at a cost of US\$1.4m (much higher than the original budget) – which put it on a par for costs with most Hollywood movies of the era. The daring animated film that resulted proved to be a spectacular success on its release, grossing nearly US\$7m and becoming the most watched movie with sound until *Gone with the Wind* came out in 1940. It received an honorary custom-made Oscar in 1939, made of one standard Oscar statuette alongside seven miniature statuettes (representing each of the dwarfs).

Whilst the financial success of the film was key (much of the profits generated would be re-invested to enable Walt Disney to make new animated films), *Snow White* also proved to be a vital driver for the Disney brand to grow into the global success story, with merchandising and other aspects, that we know it to be today.

How Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs came into being is a story of ambition, the pursuit of a dream, and astute taking and managing of risk to achieve an ambitious goal. It required a commitment to the highest level of quality and a mindset of “chronic unease” to think through all aspects of what could go wrong and to take action to prevent negative outcomes from occurring.

## **Snow White – a First of a Kind**

Walt Disney was no stranger to taking risk. Disney founded the Walt Disney company with his brother, Roy, in 1923 in Hollywood. They started their business making short animation films, which was the most appropriate medium of the time, given the technology available.

The Walt Disney company was founded after Walt’s prior business, the Laugh-O-Gram Studio based in Kansas, went bankrupt in 1923. Walt moved to Los Angeles, where Roy was recovering from tuberculosis. While there, he sold a short film produced by Laugh-O-Gram, Alice’s Wonderland, and signed a contract to make six similar films. In order to produce the films, the brothers founded their now famous company, and by the late 1920’s they would achieve huge fame with cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse.

By the early 1930s, Walt wanted to move beyond making short cartoon series. He felt that a new approach was required. In his pursuit of new ideas, a “light bulb” moment occurred – to create a full-length animated feature film. This was something that had never been attempted before. After a period of detailed research and exploration of ideas for his goal of creating an animated feature film, he settled on using the story of Snow White and Seven Dwarfs, a Brothers Grimm tale which was first published in Germany in 1812.

The origins of the Brothers Grimm tale is a story in itself. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were German scholars, researchers, and authors who collected folktales that had been passed down from generation to generation. In 1812 (after waiting two years for a famous German storyteller to do something with the tales they collected), they published a collection themselves called Nursery and Household Tales (which also included stories such as Sleeping Beauty, Rumpelstiltskin and The Frog Prince). The book was not intended for children when it was published. Some of the tales, including Snow White, contained moments of violence. Disney removed the violent elements and made various other changes (which would prove to be crucial in the film’s success) in his remodelling of the story as an animated feature film.

## Calculating the financial risk

The availability of finance was crucial to creating the film. Raising money meant proving that the commercials would stack up. Walt's brother, Roy, was concerned about the financial risks of making a full-length animated feature film. Knowing that it would require a large amount of money and time, and that it was a bold First of a Kind, it had the potential to result in financial disaster for the studio. Bankers were hesitant to lend money to fund the production. Despite requests made to Walt to drop the plan, which he rebuffed, the money was found, and he pursued his dream.

Walt knew of evidence showing that feature films costing a few hundred thousand dollars to make could generate rich rewards at the box office. In 1928, Warner Brother's released *The Singing Fool*, a musical starring Al Jolson, which grossed US\$5 million, breaking box office records. He also knew that the only animated feature film of the time, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) which was produced by Lotte Reiniger in Germany with a running time of 65 minutes, was a box office flop.

Some felt that animation could not entertain an audience for the length of a feature film. Many thought that watching animation for too long would hurt people's eyes.

Walt budgeted *Snow White* at US\$150,000-250,000 to make – which was low enough to make his money back if the film was not a hit. The original budget implied a running time of 40-50 minutes at a cost of \$50-75 per foot of film. By the time it was finished, *Snow White*'s budget was similar to an expensive feature, and the average cost per foot of film was much higher than first anticipated.

## Focusing on quality and the experience to make it a success

Whilst many people were worried about the potential failure of the movie and how this would affect Disney Studio's brand and finances, Walt had different concerns. He was more occupied with how to translate his idea to the big screen in a way that would captivate the audience such that no animation had ever done before.

Looking at this situation with risk appetite, it could be said that Walt's appetite for the financial requirement was large, because he was confident of success. Equally, his risk appetite for ground-breaking new ways of achieving animation was high – there was no concept of playing safe with this new venture.

## Crafting an approach

The cartoons that Walt and his team had made until tackling this new animated feature film were short, of 10 to 15 minutes length. In these cartoons, jokes were the primary focus because their purpose was to make people laugh. A feature film had to be different in approach. Walt believed that people would become tired of non-stop jokes over 90 minutes. A feature needed to tap into a wider range of emotions. He asked himself an important question: *can you make people cry with a drawing?*

In effect, Walt reframed his “problem statement”, which created a new perspective through which to see the objective. If he could make people laugh, cry and feel sad in an emotional journey, he would not be selling a story or movie to his audience, he would be creating an emotional experience for them.

### **Acting out the objective to inspire others**

For a few months, Walt developed the story and the characters, and constantly thought about the experience that the proposed film would provide to his customers. To realise his dream, he knew that he needed the support of his animators. He needed to find a way for his animators to create the right experience for their audience in a way that connected them to the emotional journey.

One evening, Walt Disney assembled his core group of artists in the sound stage at the Disney studio on Hyperion Avenue. Walt proceeded to perform the story of what would become *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Adopting the voices and gestures of each character, Walt moved across the stage and acted out the scenes. “We were spellbound,” Art Director Ken Anderson remembered; “He was all by himself and he acted out this fantastic story.”

This was the storyteller and the leader in action. Having gone through the plot and worked things out in fine detail, he felt this story would be unlike anything an audience had seen. He wanted to project this sense of enthusiasm to his team.

Research shows that our emotions play a large part in our decisions. Walt’s visual display with his team spoke directly to their emotions and they bought into his dream. This was a crucial risk to turn into an opportunity, and Walt succeeded in doing so.

### **Managing production risks**

*Snow White* took an enormous amount of effort (and a lot of money) to make. It was the first feature-length animation film made in America. Animated film-making in the 1930s was very different to today’s techniques. The technology available was very different; digitisation was decades away from being invented.

Walt knew that in order to provide his audience with a memorable experience, he and his team would have to work out each and every detail in great depth and with great care. Actors were hired to create real-life movements, to help with character design. The way they moved and their every detail had to be thoroughly thought through to create the best experience (all of this expense led to the eventual budget).

Guided by the vision of Disney, 32 animators, 107 inbetweeners, 10 layout artists, 25 background artists, 65 special effects animators, 158 inkers and painters, 1032 assistants and countless production staff were involved in creating the film.



In the summer of 1937, whilst Walt and his crew were still hastily working to finish production, people's excitement about the film was growing. In July of that year, a reporter from the Philadelphia Enquirer wrote of his tour of The Walt Disney Studios. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was costing Walt one hundred dollars for each foot of film produced, a sizeable portion of which was created with the new multiplane camera system, what the reporter called "an amazing machine that would baffle Einstein." Apparently won over by what he had seen, he ensured the readers that the film would gross some four million dollars upon its release, a figure not too far off from the eventual gross figures.

### **Constantly wondering whether it would succeed: a mindset of "Chronic unease"**

Hollywood had the first opportunity to see *Snow White* when the film premiered in December 1937 at the Carthay Circle Theater. Before the screening commenced, Walt was perched on a ledge, anxiously smiling for the camera. Like Mickey Mouse's debut nearly a decade earlier, *Snow White* was a major bet on which Walt's future and that of his studio depended – which he and his brother Roy were fully aware of. His humility that evening contrasted the presentation onscreen that stunned the glitz and glamour of the Hollywood elite in attendance.

The rest of the USA, and the world, would have to wait until 1938 to see the film. As the Reno-Gazette Journal put it, "Only in Hollywood, where a dazzling, formal premiere is being planned, will the completed film be seen by Christmas. Weeks more will be required to make prints for nationwide distributions." To say that anticipation for it was high is an understatement.

On Sunday morning, December 5, 1937, subscribers to the Baltimore Sun would read, "[...] the picture represents Walt Disney's greatest ambition. The creator of Mickey Mouse and the Silly Symphonies could have gone on and on, devising new absurd stunts for his madcap menagerie. He was sure of universal applause. But applause wasn't enough. He had to have more room to permit the creatures of imagination to disport themselves for the edification of others. The only way to do it was to present the world with a full-length animated feature picture."

Ever since its release, much has been said and written about *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. It's a testament to the film's long-lasting impact. In every scene and drawing of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* there are hints of Walt's first solo performance to his team. Key to its success was the ingenuity and perseverance of all artists and technicians involved working diligently to deliver the picture on time.

*Snow White*'s success created the confidence and financial standing for Disney to move ahead with new feature-length animated films. Disney used much of the profits from *Snow White* to finance a new US\$4.5 million studio in Burbank, Los Angeles – the location on which The Walt Disney Studios is located to this day.

## Being smart with licensing rights

The Disney brothers licensed 147 companies to promote Snow White, with a total merchandise line of 2,183 officially-endorsed items. 16.5 million Snow White drinking glasses, and 2 million dolls were sold within fourteen months of its release. Over the decades since, Disney has expanded its marketing techniques. In 2016, the Walt Disney Company made US\$56.6 billion from licensed merchandise around the world.

## Think big, start small and scale

With its origins in producing successful short cartoons and receiving a massive confidence boost with the success of Snow White, the Walt Disney Company stands today as one of the world's most recognised brands. Since Snow White, Disney has produced dozens of highly acclaimed animation films. It has evolved into a holding company for a broad spectrum of media and entertainment, including its famous theme parks which span the world and dozens of companies acquired in the 1990s and 2000s. Disney today owns and operates ABC, ESPN, Pixar, Marvel Studios, Lucasfilm and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox.

## Conclusion

Walt Disney took a daring risk to make *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. He staked his personal fortune and reputation, and the future of his company, in making the animated film. His commitment to the highest form or quality, and to his customer's experience, made it the enduring success that it remains to this day. The film succeeds because it brings out a range of emotions in its audience. We laugh, we cry, we become sad and then happy. Perhaps the only emotion we don't experience is being grumpy – indeed, Grumpy often makes us laugh!

Walt's commitment to provide a new experience and to take and manage the risks to doing so made the film the success that it continues to be today.

## About the author

[Gareth Byatt](#) is an Independent Risk Consultant and owner of [Risk Insight Consulting](#). He is based in Sydney, and has 20 years experience in international risk and project management, and is also an avid follower of film and cinema.



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