

6 Underground is Netflix's next questionable attempt to build a blockbuster movie franchise

Netflix is still looking for its big blockbuster franchise, but it seems unlikely that Michael Bay and Ryan Reynolds' new spectacle, *6 Underground*, is the answer.

6 Underground is Peak Bay. The story is, frankly, difficult to parse, but focuses on six specially skilled people tasked with taking down a dictator in the Middle East. None of this matters. Instead, *6 Underground* is defined by its 15-minute chase scene, an exuberant number of explosions, self-satirizing quips, and parkour. It's a movie that feels like it should have premiered in 2007, but instead was forgotten and handed over to Netflix more than a decade later.

Critical appeal is subjective, but the lack of hype around a \$150 million movie – Netflix's most expensive franchise play to date – encapsulates the company's blockbuster problem. Creating a franchise out of thin air is hard. It's the *Bright* conundrum, Netflix's first attempt at developing a film franchise with the 2017 sci-fi film starring Will Smith. Nielsen estimated that 11 million people in the United States watched *Bright* within the first three days of its release. But critically, the movie was an expensive mess most deemed bloated. *6 Underground* lives in a similar gray area; a blockbuster by definition, but deemed another Netflix original bloatware by critics.

Acclaim isn't always necessary for an action or franchise film

to succeed. Taking the average movie ticket price of the time of a little over \$8, that's an \$88 million opening weekend – more than *Logan*, and just under *Justice League*. *Logan*, a highly praised film, went on to be the first superhero movie to win an Academy Award for writing. *Justice League*, a critically underwhelming movie, developed a fandom so intense people are still fighting over a proper director's cut more than two years later. *Bright* fizzled out. No one's anxiously waiting for news about *Bright 2* the way they are the next Marvel, DC, or *Fast and Furious* film.

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6 Underground isn't just another movie for Netflix to add to its collection. It represents the company's next attempt at developing a blockbuster franchise that could stand among Disney and Warner Bros. Establishing blockbuster franchises that drive hordes of subscribers within the first month isn't just important to the company's development, but something that CEO Reed Hastings and chief content officer Ted Sarandos also want.

"I think established IP has a leg up with consumers," Sarandos said during a recent investors call. "They know what they're getting into, there's pre-built in excitement, it makes the marketing a little easier. But in general, don't forget the power of brand creation. What is the value of a franchise? It's really the value of brand creation and how you scale off of it."

Maybe it's unfair to compare Netflix to Disney. Heck, it might be unfair to compare any studio to Disney. The company has spent nearly \$90 billion on four major acquisitions over the last 13 years. Marvel, which Disney acquired for \$4 billion in 2009, has already generated more than \$28 billion at the box office alone. Netflix has only been in the original content game for seven years.

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"Netflix should be proud of how far they have come in just a few years," Jon Rogers, strategist at Global HQ and former head of live-action franchise development at Disney, told *The Verge*. "The cycle to develop and release a feature film can take years, and a world-class team needs multiple cycles of experience."

The company is working with IP from Paramount, Nickelodeon, and possibly Sony to make its own mark with characters people already know. Netflix's astonishing content budget is good, but it doesn't matter if Netflix invests in the wrong projects.

"One of the most significant competitive differentiators between the old Hollywood studios and the new studios is the competency to institutionalize learning," Rogers said. "Old Hollywood is notoriously bad at self-reflection. This not the case at Netflix. You can see Netflix's culture of continuous improvement at work with each original film. Their employees and systems are getting better with each cycle."

Netflix doesn't have the decades of tested IP that other studios are currently remaking to soar past \$1 billion at the box office, but the company does have Scott Stuber. Stuber, head of film development, is arguably *the* blockbuster guy. He developed the *Fast and Furious* franchise – a move Netflix should aspire to. The franchise started off as a low-budget (\$38 million!) film about street racing in Los Angeles, but through Vin Diesel, diverse casting, and giving creators control, it's become Universal's most profitable and beloved franchise to date.

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"Our movie was an R-rated movie, and I wanted to keep it R-rated, but the price point was a little high for an R-rated movie," Michael Bay told *Variety*. "One studio kind of balked

at the costs. They said, 'We want to do it so bad, but it's just a little too expensive for us.' But Netflix just said we'll do it."

Series like *Stranger Things* are proof Netflix can develop a popular, cross-platform franchise on the TV side. The streamer is still relatively new to original film development, even if it feels like the dominant powerhouse in Hollywood right now. With \$15 billion in content spending this year and reportedly releasing 160 movies worldwide, no one comes close to Netflix's output. But it's not how much money a studio spends, it's where that money is being spent. The cast is already talking about a sequel. Netflix's \$1 billion movie is coming. It just might take a few more misdirected flops to get there.

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