# WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT?

WITH JIM SOTO

"In development" is the messy place of ideas where they float around like public domain but are owned by certain people, business meetings last months but nobody gets any work done, scripts are written and then promptly thrown away, and whatever initial purpose the movie might have originally been becomes something the exact opposite... or nothing at all, just like the 1992 James Cameron's Spider-man movie! The one that was never filmed!

DEVELOPING A MOVIE
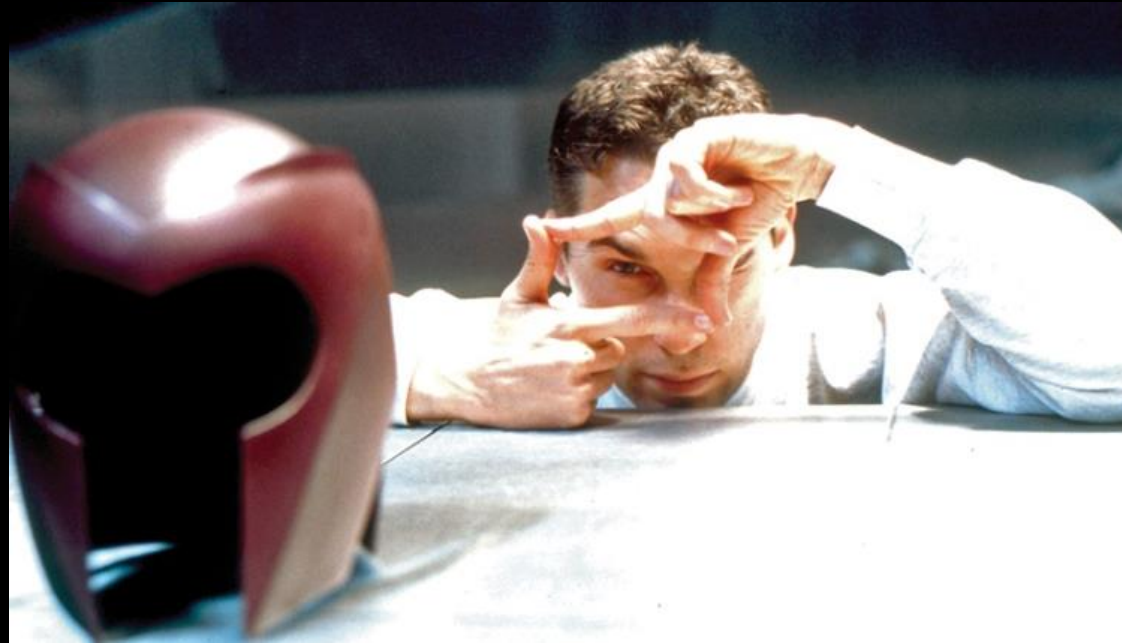
The development stage takes the longest time within the filmmaking process. It includes acquiring the rights to a story idea by either buying it or "optioning" it, polishing the script, finding the right talent (director, cast and crew) and ultimately, sourcing and securing the production financing. Sounds simple. It's not.

In the development stage, a person decides a movie must be made, and starts looking into what needs to happen for the movie to happen. This stage typically belongs to the producer, who starts gathering the ideas of the film-rights from books, plays etc., if needed – until a final draft of the screenplay is completed.

Often an intellectual property (IP) is optioned or purchased, but in the case of original ideas, a treatment or maybe even completed screenplay floats around to potential producers, investors, and executives, ideas are worked out, and finally someone forks the money and the project moves on to the next stage.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

The best and most professional approach is this. You should have a script, have an idea of what actors you want to get (or have a screening session scheduled), and have what are called "production photos" of locations, props, sets, make-up, and actors you want to use. By the way, learn how to schedule screen tests, and quickly. It really involves finding an open room somewhere, setting up a video recorder, and having actors walk in for auditions. Then you choose the best one. Once you have stuff like this together, and maybe even some financial interest in the project, then you are officially "green-lit" and can enter Pre-production.

Development can last for months or years. More often than not, a project trapped in this state will be abandoned or cancelled by all interested parties. As Hollywood starts 10 times as many projects as are released, many scripts will end like this. This happens most often with projects that have multiple interpretations and affect several points of view.


The Halo movie, anyone?

"ABANDON ALL HOPE, MOVIES WHO ENTER HERE..."

Projects that don't move on are said to have fallen into "**development hell**", where nothing about the project actually "caught" and the idea ends up getting put aside for later. In other words, a project, concept, or idea that remains stuck in a stage of early development for a long time, is probably facing serious legal, technical, or artistic challenges. Hell.

This can occur when the extent of an ambitious project is underestimated during the designing phases of a film. It can also be triggered by:

- poor planning

- bad time management skills

- the lack of lead talent

Of course, different scenarios lead to different results regarding development. A project can shift between crews, scripts, or studios before moving forward. If it does at all.
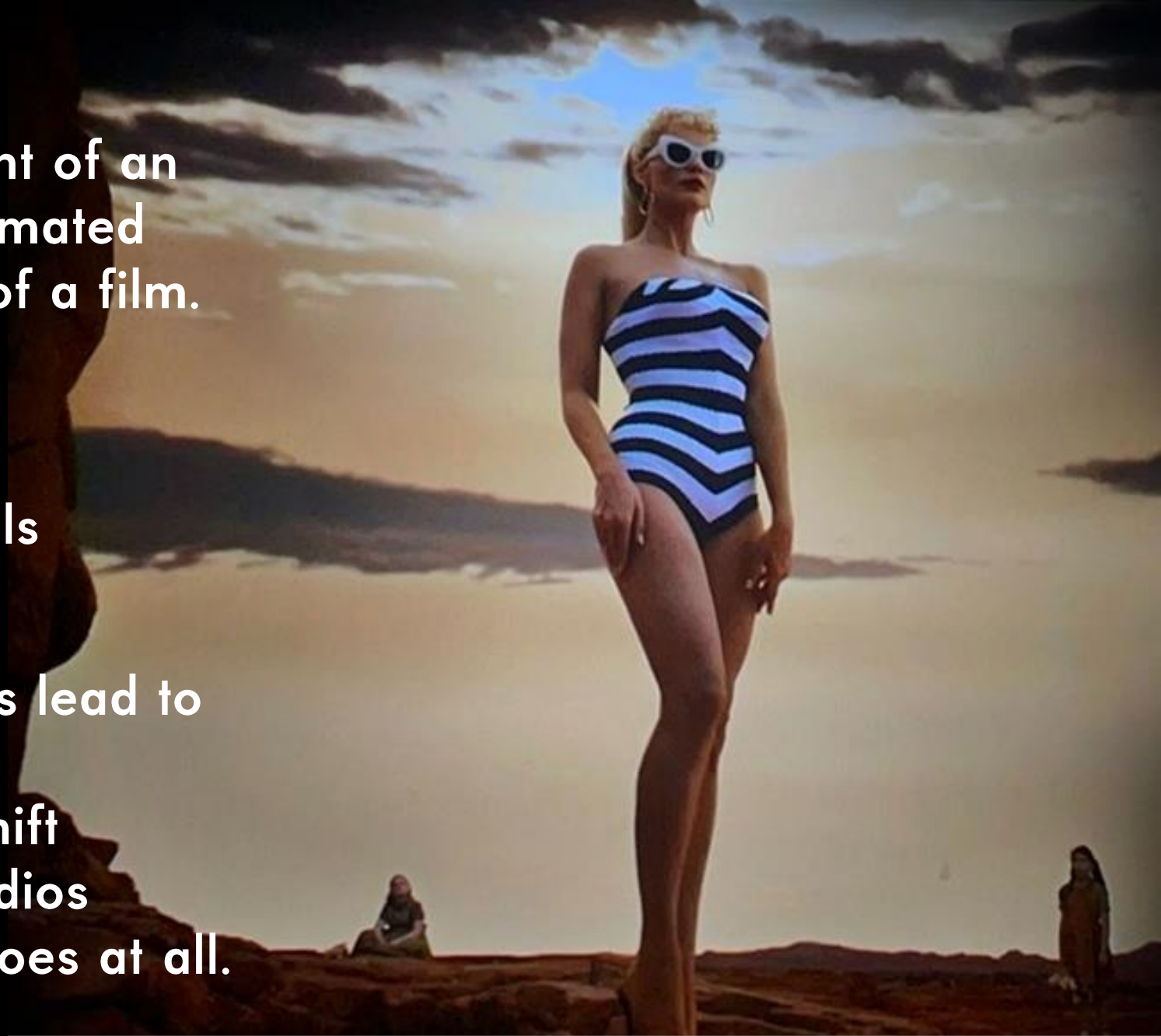
In works since 2009, the live-action 'Barbie' finally hit theaters in July 2023.

FAMOUS FILMS THAT SPENT TIME IN DEVELOPMENT HELL
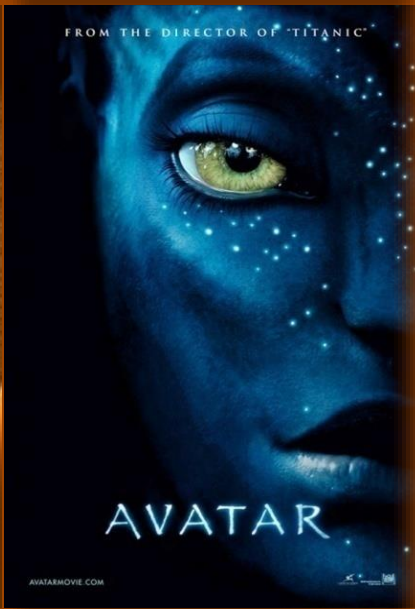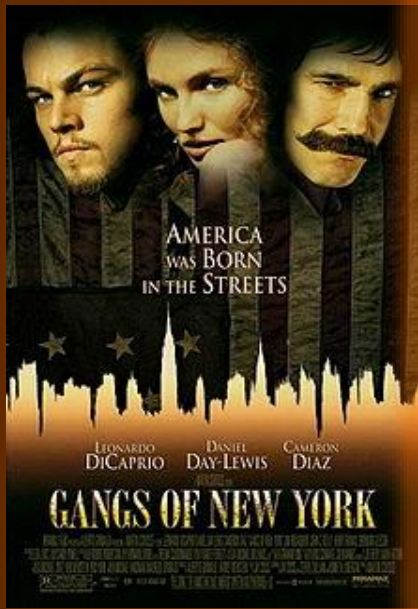
SHOULD HAVE STAYED IN HELL!

Hancock is an example of a project that survived development hell, but worse for wear. Initially an idea for an antihero superman movie where the good guy ends up doing more bad than good and finally has to just stop, was interesting. Hancock finally got picked up and pulled on its feet, thrown at Will Smith, and became.... whatever the hell that was. It certainly was NOT what it was supposed to be. So sad!
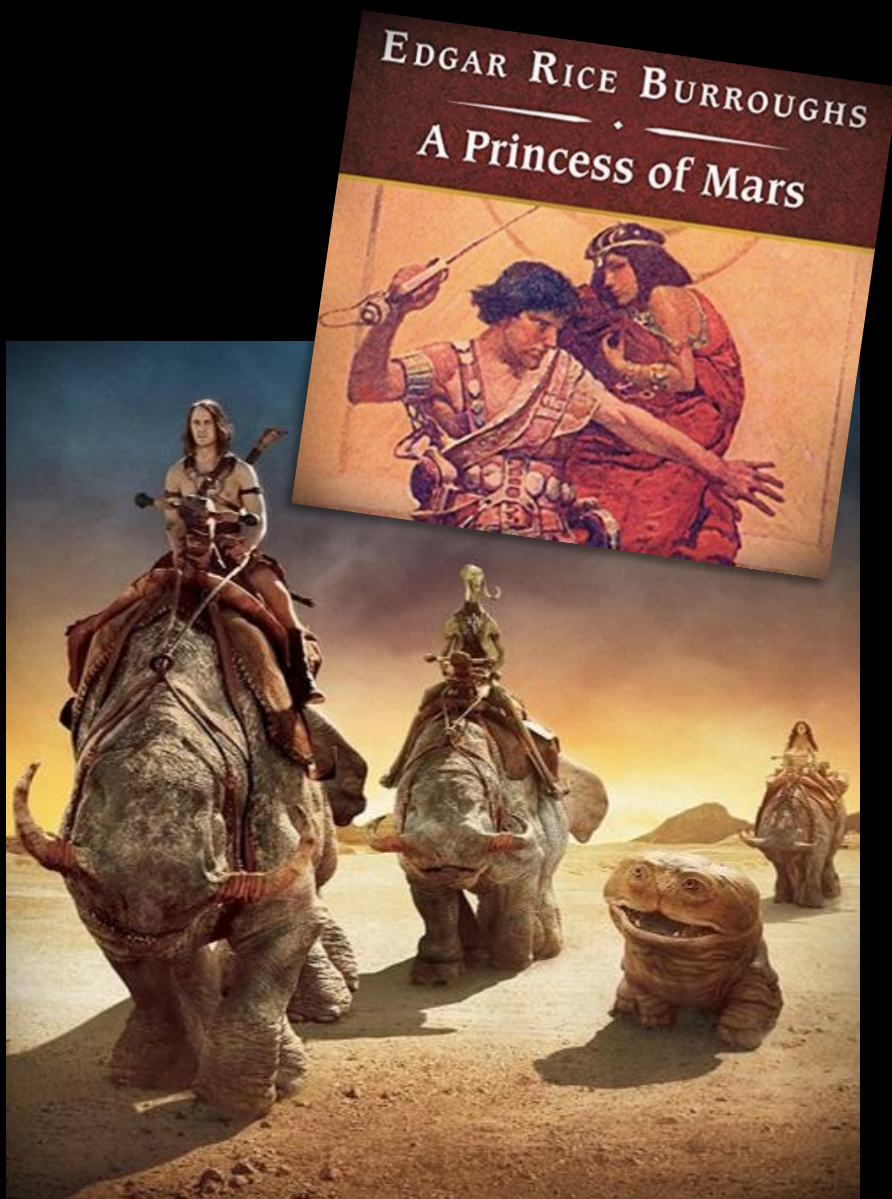
An adaptation of Edgar Rice Burroughs' A Princess of Mars began initial development in 1931! Rights passed through many studios with interest expressed by Disney in the 1950s. They acquired the rights in the 1980s, but these later reverted to the Burroughs estate, and were re-bid by Paramount and Columbia. Paramount gave it a try in the early 2000s, but stalled and eventually the rights were repurchased by Disney leading to the final released film in 2012. That's 81 years! Oh, and it flopped.

MOVIES TRYING TO ESCAPE...

AKIRA

Warner Bros. have been developing a live-action American version of this Japanese animated film for years. As of January 2012, Warner had "shut down" production for the 4th time. In 2015 WB made a push to sign director George Miller onto the project. Most recently, the studio has met with Justin Lin regarding the live-action remake, though for the moment, Akira remains stuck in Development Hell.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S 'AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS'

This is a classic H.P. Lovecraft story about a team of Antarctic explorers who uncover otherworldly horrors buried beneath the ice. Years ago, horror maestro Guillermo Del Toro was attached to direct a film adaptation. Some test footage was produced, but the project ultimately foundered. It's been rumored that Del Toro is thinking about reviving it as a stop-motion animated movie after seeing Mad God

STEPHEN KING'S 'THE LONG WALK'

Stephen King's novel centers on a group of teenagers who participate in a disturbing annual event. The rules are simple: walk at a steady pace and never drop below a certain speed, or face dire consequences. Last one still walking wins. Director André Øvredal was set to direct, but the project seems to have stalled. It's really good book, and has the potential to be a hit.

This is where the project is birthed. It is the creation, writing, organizing and planning stage of a project. In development, a preliminary budget is made, key cast are attached, key creatives chosen, main locations scouted and multiple script drafts may be written.

It's all the groundwork to show what the project will be and what it's cost will be. It starts the moment a Producer thinks of a project or a Writer starts writing it.

Development can take months, even years to get the project green-lit by a studio or independent funding and move into pre-production. Green-lighting a film means the studio has approved financing the project.

RESHOOT

1. What is developing a film?

2. What could the four most important goals of his process be ?

3. What is "development hell"?

4. What does the jargon term "greenlit" mean?

5. Which of the projects mentioned would you like to see released? Why?

Next:

WRITING A SCRIPT

Jim Soto © 2023