

## 'Despicable Me's' Chris Meledandri: Animation Market Is Cannibalizing Itself

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- 104
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The founder and CEO of Illumination Entertainment warns that studios release "too many films and there's not enough room."



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Justin Stephens  
Chris Meledandri

**Chris Meledandri** felt terrible after losing \$100 million making 2000's underperforming sci-fi animated title *Titan A.E.*

"That failure was the price of admission for the rest of my career," admits the founder and CEO of Illumination Entertainment, the studio behind one of the year's biggest successes, *Despicable Me 2*, which is poised to clear \$900 million worldwide.

"Looking back, I don't know if it was a blessing or a curse that I didn't get fired," he said, speaking Saturday at the Visual Effects Society's annual summit at the W Hollywood. "It was very painful and very lonely. [Colleagues] think failure is contagious. On the flip side, I had lived terrified of failure. So for me, the fact that I was still standing was very freeing. My faith in my filmmaking changed on the heels of *Titan*. It allowed me to pursue things that I previously would have questioned."

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Addressing the volatile state of the industry, he warned that the animation community "releases too many films and there's not enough room. They are going to cannibalize each other; we are already seeing that. We are also competing against the big live action films."

Another concern is the impact of new platforms. "What I worry about the most is the competition for young eyeballs. We have so many other competing forms of media. I don't take any audience members for granted," he said.

To face these challenges Meledandri asserted that "quality storytelling is our only safety net."

"It starts with characters, and audiences leaving the theater feeling a bond with the characters," he said. "We start with strong characters and build the movie from there. That not to say we don't struggle with story — that's the most challenging part."

"For the kind of films we make, comedy is an important part of character," he added. "Why do they appeal to wide audiences? I think they are dimensional, and the comedy is written by adults for adults, but not in a way that it's inappropriate for kids."

The theme of the story is also highly important to Meledandri. "Critical questions are 'why are we telling this story?' What is it that it is worthy enough for the work of over 1000 people and asking for the attention of so many people to spend money to see it," he said.

He commented that the theme he returns to in his projects is family, noting that in *Ice Age* (which he exec produced), the characters "don't look like your traditional perception of family, but they are a family. ... *Despicable Me* in a more obvious sense redefines what we think of family."

Lastly, he added that marketability also needs to be kept in mind to achieve box office success. "I have to understand how we are going to market the movie," he said. "We view marketing as an extension of content creation. ... Every time a consumer sees our movie, in whatever form, our obligation is to entertain the audience."

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