

# 1

## defining development

**DEVELOPMENT:** *The act of developing. The state of being developed. A significant event, occurrence, or change. Determination of the best techniques for applying a new device or process to production of goods or services. As in music: Elaboration of a theme with rhythmic and harmonic variations. The central section of a movement in sonata form, in which the theme is elaborated and explored.*

**PROCESS:** *A series of actions, changes, or functions bringing about a result: the process of digestion; A series of operations performed in the making or treatment of a product: a manufacturing process; leather dyed during the tanning process. Progress; passage: the process of time; events now in process.*

**DEVELOPMENT PROCESS:** *Hell*

Most people in the motion picture industry know what development is, but few truly understand the process of development. Most hate it, as it can be long and arduous—years and years may go by, drafts replace other drafts of the same screenplay, writers come and go; talent is attached, falls out, and is then re-attached; projects get placed into turnaround, languish for years, get picked up again and fast-tracked, and, sometimes—if you’re lucky—your project is developed to the point where it gets the coveted greenlight. That is what every producer, director, writer, or development executive hopes for—to see the movie they’ve labored over for years become a reality on celluloid. Over 80 percent of the scripts in development at the studios are waiting to see the light of day. So how does this all work? How does it begin, this elusive process, this journey into development hell—a term used often by producers and writers to explain the lengthy amount of time it takes to get a movie produced—where does it all begin? Back in the late eighties and early nineties, a number of scripts were sold for a million dollars (thus starting the million-dollar spec sale bandwagon). Among them was *The Ticking Man*, by Brian Helgeland and Manny Coto, which was submitted to the studios with a ticking clock in 1990. The clock’s still ticking, the film *still* hasn’t been made! *The Cheese Stands Alone*, by Kathy McWorter, also sold for a million dollars and had the auspicious footnote of being the first million-dollar spec for a comedy, let alone for a female writer. Lastly, Lee and Janet Batchelor’s *Smoke & Mirrors* followed suit as another million dollar spec. There are countless others that have not made it to the theatre, although *Smoke & Mirrors* has been periodically listed in pre-production for years. It must be hell to have a high profile script deal and ten or fifteen years later, still no movie credit. However, hell can be filled with pleasure as well as pain—mothers explain birthing a child as the most painful and yet most wonderful experience they’ve ever had. Birthing a

screenplay and getting a movie made is equally painful, equally powerful, and both miraculous in the end.

It all begins with an idea, an article, a book, a true story, and/or a screenplay. Sound easy? Well, once you identify the story you want to sell, what do you do with it? Who do you go to? What happens to it once it's in the Hollywood system? Who are the players involved? How can you help the process along? Exploring the different facets of the development process and the people involved will help you get a better handle on how to maneuver your project through Hollywood. It takes a lot of time, a lot of tenacity, and no small degree of perseverance, but in the end, there can be great satisfaction knowing you collaborated with others to make a great movie.

So, if that's the case, why does everyone complain about the movies being made in Hollywood? You have so many people working together to get it right, how can there be so many turkeys?

No one starts out wanting to make a bad movie. However, there are so many movies released each year, which means that they all can't be A+ fare, though quite a high percentage are good and some are actually quite brilliant. There are also many kinds of movies: specialty films, art house films, or independent films (those that have limited releases but are strong character-driven stories), high concept films (concept driven—does it have a hook to it that can be described in one line?), action/adventure, horror or thriller, romantic comedy, sci-fi or fantasy, western, musical, docudrama...and the list goes on.

With so many varieties of genre, sometimes Hollywood panders to the commercial aspect, sometimes to the highbrow film. Sometimes a film is just a programmer (a movie that has a target audience and fills a void for their release schedule). Other times, it's a tentpole release (a movie that's anchored to the seasonal schedule and intended to be a blockbuster, i.e., *The Day After Tomorrow* [2004], *Pirates of the Caribbean* [2003], *Harry Potter* [2001-2008 and the books keep coming], *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* [2001-2003], *Spider-man* [2002 and 2004 so far] to name a few). No matter what kind of movie is made, it has been treated with a lot of consideration and care through what is known as the development process in an effort to make it the best product the studio and/or independent filmmaker can produce. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but the one thing that remains clear is the intention to entertain an audience with a compelling, enlightening, shocking, amusing, or enjoyable story. Maybe the story takes you on a journey to a place you've never been. Maybe the story is more accessible and identifiable to an audience—something that we've all experienced or gone through. Or, maybe we laugh or cry at a story that mirrors our own successes, failures, or flaws. Development gives the opportunity to flesh out all the nuances and layers of our humanity to make a cohesive tale that an audience might respond to and embrace.

It is a necessary evil where many professionals add their two cents worth of suggestions in order to:

- Make a story better and stronger.

- Dig deeper into characters so that their arcs or journeys truly go from Point A to Point B determining the growth of that character (we like to call this “peeling the onion”).
- Heighten the *turning points* in a story, which might surprise the audience and thereby make the story less predictable.
- Execute a story in a way we haven’t seen before.
- Entertain or enlighten an audience.
- Shed light on a subject matter in order to provoke a response.

These are the goals of most producers and development executives.

It’s a known fact that most writers feel that the latest draft of their screenplay is the best. It’s ready to go out into the world and be made. Ask any writer and they will tell you horror stories of what happened to their screenplay as it went through the development process at a studio and how it was perfect before *those people* got their hands on the project. It’s an equally well-known fact that most of the time the screenplay is *not* ready to be shot. There’s still a lot of work to be done to bring the script up to a level that warrants a studio writing a hefty check for its production.

Enter the development executive. When the project is bought by a studio and the final round of development notes are given to the writer, the development executive might be viewed as the villain—but in essence, if writers and producers would realize that the development executive wants to get the movie made just as much as they do, then they might be able to view the process as less adversarial and consider the executive as a champion of their work and on their team. And who is the team? It takes many people to write, sell, develop, and eventually produce a story on film. Who are they? What do they actually do? How do they all fit into this process? When and where did it all begin?

To understand the creative process, you have to look at the beginning of film, when motion pictures were in their infancy and history was being made.

**The creative process doesn’t stop after you’ve written  
a script. In Hollywood, it just begins!**