

LESSONS FROM ARENDELLE

The Cultural
Phenomenon of
Disney's *Frozen*



On 19th November 2013, Walt Disney Animation Studios premiered its 53rd animated feature film. *Frozen* was the directorial debut for Jennifer Lee (the scriptwriter behind Disney's 2012 hit, *Wreck-It Ralph*); she shared directing duties with long-time Disney veteran, Chris Buck (whose previous credits include *Tarzan* and *Pocahontas* amongst others). To date, the film has earned an astonishing US\$1.285 billion – and this figure will undoubtedly increase further as the original film is destined to return to the big screen for a limited time from October 13th 2023 to celebrate its 10th anniversary.

Frozen was not only the highest grossing film of 2013, it remains one of the highest grossing animated films of all time and, until 2023, it was the highest grossing film ever directed by a woman, a testament to its enduring popularity. What's more, *Frozen* has created a snowball effect where the franchise spawned a second movie *Frozen 2* (2019), several Disney Plus spin-offs, *Frozen: The Musical* on both Broadway and in the West End with the London edition having hosted over 1.5million *Frozen* fans as of August 2023, plus an all new first-of-its-kind podcast that extends *Frozen's* storytelling with new characters and an original storyline which launched in October 2023.

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THE SUCCESSES OF FROZEN

While *Frozen* was a massive hit in the UK and North America it also dominated global box offices, spending an unprecedented 16 weeks at the top of the Japanese film chart whilst the *Frozen* fever created by the first movie led to *Frozen 2* breaking box office records in China and South Korea. The film was also critically successful, winning two Academy Awards® (Best Animated Feature and Best Song), winning Best Animated Feature at both the British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA) and the Golden Globe Awards all in 2014, as well as numerous other awards, accolades and nominations across world. When it was time for the DVD release, a record breaking 3.2 million units were ordered before it had even hit the shelves. *Frozen* has become one of the most recognisable and prevalent media products of the early 21st Century, successfully bridging generations of audiences with a story that was simultaneously timeless yet timely.

Beyond the box office, *Frozen* is so much more than just a movie, it is a cultural colossus which has become a 21st century cultural phenomenon. The *Frozen* phenomenon has led to the creation of a variety of official *Frozen* merchandise since the film's first release. Both traditional play and story-led products such as dolls, jigsaws, books, and dress-up sets remain vital and hugely popular components of the merchandise whilst recent product launches include a set of three *Frozen* character Izzy Wheels covers designed for wheelchair users. The *Frozen* merchandise portfolio shows no signs of slowing down; in EMEA and North America regions on average 40 *Frozen* dolls were sold every minute from 2020 – 2022, whilst in 2023 Mattel relaunched its *Frozen* range with innovation into new colours which Lisa McKnight, Chief Brand Officer of Mattel, said was demonstrative of the appeal for new, trend-based formats as the *Frozen* characters characteristics of courage and kindness appeal to kids of today. Research by Disney (2023) found that Elsa was the dominant #1 most like and most popular character among Early Girls in the UK, France, Germany, Italy and

Spain. Beyond traditional play formats, *Frozen* quickly gathered pace in digital and technological spaces with video games, podcasts and VR experiences amongst the official content, as well as a plethora of fan-driven sites, pages and materials that were and continue to be created in homage to the film.

Perhaps, the central driving force of the *Frozen* phenomenon can be attributed to the immense scale of its global fandom. The impact of the film's popularity has been led in particular by fan created content, with viral videos amassing millions of views as fellow fans share in the delight of *Frozen* through song, dress-up and storytelling. Amongst the most popular type of fan content are dad and daughter videos, with a 2019 Facebook video by comedian Ørjan Burøe singing 'Let it Go' dressed up with his daughter amassing over 1million views. Additionally, Youtuber Chris Price amassed 3.3million views singing 'Let it Go' in the car with his daughter. Whilst fandom exists largely on social media, for seven-year-old Ukrainian Amelia Anisovych, her video singing 'Let It Go' (2022) in a bomb shelter showed how *Frozen* inspired a moment of hope nine years on from its release. The video reached wider attention and led to her performance on the National Lottery with a surprise appearance from Elsa. With a multitude of viral videos and over 18 million posts under #Frozen on Instagram, *Frozen's* fandom continues to drive the film's popularity in 2023.

It was the powerful combination of Disney's iconic storytelling combined with a modern reconfiguration of the traditional fairytale tropes in ways that foregrounded contemporary themes of self-discovery, bravery, sisterhood, and empowerment through the Queens Elsa and Anna that resonated with audiences across the globe. During the creation of the first film, Jennifer Lee commented that the story started as a very simple idea about the power of family but grew into something more grand than they could have ever envisioned. A decade on, it is not an overstatement to claim that Elsa and Anna are amongst some of the most popular and iconic Disney leads of all time.

FROZEN'S AUDIENCE EFFECT

In a set of interviews undertaken in summer 2023, participants were asked why they felt that *Frozen* had retained such a level of cultural significance and popularity. Many of them were quick to enthuse about how, when they watched the film as younger children, they were captivated by it and recognised it as being something different and special. Best friends Maddie and Annika (UK, 18) were in agreement that *Frozen* felt like a 'landmark' film in their childhood. Maddie described how the film made her think about social expectations and how, like Elsa, she 'had the choice and the power to not follow these social rules,' but be true to herself. Annika agrees and takes up the conversation to explain how the message of the film was foundational in her own experience of coming to realise the importance of 'trusting yourself, knowing that you can do it.' This is something that Elsie (Hong Kong, aged 22) concurred with, adding that for her, the focus on the sisterhood as opposed to romance that impacted on her as a young viewer as she could relate it directly to her own family relationships and the bond between herself and her younger sibling.

ELSA & ANNA

In research conducted by Disney in 2020, a number of parents were asked about the ways in which their daughters interacted specifically with the central characters of Elsa and Anna.

Becca, a mum of a daughter aged between 6 and 8 in the UK describes the combination of bravery, kindness and sweetness as being key to Anna's appeal, a comment that Lucy, another British mum of a similar aged daughter agrees with, saying 'it's that little bit different, it's not the traditional princess love story, she likes the friendship between Elsa and Anna.' While Inés, from Spain, whose daughter is also in the 6-8 age range, describes how her own daughter's engagement with the film has morphed as she has grown. She explains, 'My daughter liked Anna but now she likes Elsa. Anna was the brave one, the fun one and now she wants to be Elsa, she wants to sing like her, she wants to be like her.' Marianne, from France notices this theme also, reporting that her daughter also



loves Elsa not just because of her magical powers and beauty but because of 'the questions she asks herself'. Clearly then, the values of self-knowledge, friendship, sibling love and loyalty, authenticity and embracing your own power and destiny are ones that resonate widely for the Gen A audience (those born in the late 2000s onward) and their parents.

The centrality of sisterly love over romantic love was something that interviewee, Amelia (UK, 18) found to be particularly resonant when she first watched the film as an eight-year-old. She remembers being struck by Hans' betrayal of Anna and by the fact that climax of the film centred on the love between the two sisters. She reflected on how, as a young girl, the messages of the film impacted on her in many ways explaining that she enjoyed the visual spectacle of the dresses and the ice castle but that it was the values of believing in yourself, accepting yourself and that true love comes from within that were the elements that stayed with her as she grew older.

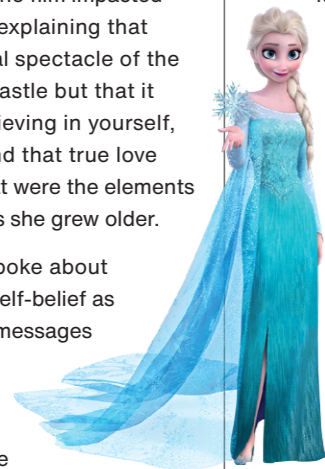
All the participants spoke about self-acceptance and self-belief as being among the key messages in the film with Luke (UK, 23) describing how Elsa in particular resonated with him. He explained how, as a person with Autism, he recognised his own outsider status in her character and that through watching her journey of self-acceptance and learning to believe in herself inspired him to have the courage to do the same as he was approaching his mid-teenage years. Each of the respondents agreed that ideas, values and messages that they took away from watching the film stayed with them in various ways throughout their adolescence and into early adulthood.

FROZEN DOLLS

Participants Maddie and Annika explained how, as children, they played with their Elsa and Anna dolls in a variety of ways, either recreating their favourite moments from the film word for word, or spot of the National Retail Federation by dreaming up

new scenes and scenarios. One constant theme within these independently created moments was the emphasis on self-belief, self-discovery and the unbreakable bond between the sisters. Reflecting on their childhood memories, both agreed that the dolls were important components in working through their understanding of the messages in the film and the application of these within the world around them. In the US, Elsa and Anna dolls were the 'must have' Christmas gifts of 2014, taking the top chart that year while in the UK, the dolls were invariably snapped up before they had even reached the shop floor.

While the range of *Frozen* merchandise is expansive, the dolls remain a perennial



favourite because of the ways in which they allow young fans to explore the story and the values of the film through play. Research by Disney in 2023 found that of those who bought merchandise, 33% bought a doll whilst 33% also bought dress-up items. Embodying the characters has been key to *Frozen's* success and one of the most important features of any Queen Elsa is, of course her iconic side braid; YouTube features countless tutorials dedicated to the art of achieving the look and there are many thousands of pins on

Pinterest featured under the Elsa Hairstyle tag. Anna's more traditional braids are also enduringly popular as well as practical and a number of celebrities such as Anna Taylor Joy, Emma Roberts, The Olsen Twins, Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift have all been spotted sporting hairstyles inspired the *Frozen* Queens of Arendelle.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

As much Elsa and Anna remain central characters across much of the *Frozen* multiverse, the proliferation of media spin-offs has enabled other characters to become more developed and the demand for this is testament to the franchises popularity. Olaf, the naïve but sincere snowman created by Elsa's magic powers, has been foremost amongst the supporting characters that have emerged as stars in

their own right. From short films such as *Once Upon A Snowman* (2020) to TV Specials and series including Olaf's *Frozen Adventure* (2017) and *At Home with Olaf* (2020), the adorable snowman has become a cultural icon in his own right, winning legions of fans who are unable to resist his indefatigable optimism, his humour, innocence, and of course, his enduring fascination with anything to do with summer. In addition to his own series, Olaf has a strong merchandising profile replete with books, games and even an Olaf waffle maker; alongside Elsa, Olaf remains one of the bestselling Funko characters with particularly strong sales in the UK, France and Spain. Olaf's popularity has grown so much that he was selected by Disney for its Annual Festive Plush Donation in 2019, which saw 20,000 Olaf soft toys being given to seriously ill or socially isolated children across Europe.

FROZEN WAS THE HIGHEST GROSSING FILM OF 2013



FROZEN LIVE EXPERIENCES

Off-screen, the *Frozen* phenomenon continued to evolve in exciting and innovative ways. From immersive live storytelling experiences from the Tony-nominated musical to inclusions within several Disney on Ice Touring shows. In March 2018, *Frozen: The Musical* opened on Broadway where it attracted over 1.3 million spectators and grossed over US\$150 million before a COVID-induced hiatus. Since 2021, six productions of *Frozen: The Musical* have played across the world in the UK, Japan, Singapore, Germany, the US, and Australia. *Frozen: The Musical* opened in London's West End in August 2021 and is about to celebrate its 1000th performance, having been seen by a staggering 1.5 million people to date. Combining favourite moments from the original film with a number of new songs, *Frozen: The Musical*



45% AGREED IT HAS HAD A HIGH GLOBAL IMPACT

centres on themes of self-discovery, acceptance, bonds of friendship, sisterhood, and empowerment, all of which created an opportunity for the Disney Theatrical Group to put *Frozen* values into practice by developing a well-being resource for educators. Using familiar characters, the resource gives pupils a framework to explore emotions and is specifically designed to celebrate the values of friendship, resilience and the celebration of individuality and uniqueness that are at the heart of the story.

FROZEN AND EDUCATION

While such a creative educational outcome might be an obvious connection, *Frozen* has also been employed by primary school teachers in Australia as a way of harnessing pupils love of the film to explore a range of mathematic related ideas. The Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers published an article by two American-based scholars, Katrina Poatek-Jimenez and Christine M. Phelps entitled 'Using Disney's *Frozen* to motivate mathematics: Bringing fractals into the classroom'. The 2016 article provides a series of exercises and ideas for teachers that 'bring art, primary mathematics and the movie, *Frozen* together' in order to create innovate ways of learning fractal geometry and 'concepts like rational numbers, measurement, properties of shapes, similarity, and symmetry.'^{iv} By encouraging pupils to explore these ideas in a practical way and by linking the exercises to *Frozen* the authors present models of mathematics that are designed to stretch pupils while making the teaching of fractals using *Frozen* 'fun and rewarding.'

The real-world impact of *Frozen* reaches far beyond the classroom. For example, the film created a surge in popularity of the name Elsa, where it returned to the top 100 in the UK for the first time in nearly 100 years and the number of babies being given the name almost doubled between

2013 and 2014. Perhaps more surprisingly, 52 British-born babies were given the name Olaf in 2014 and a further 76 the following year, a jump from under 20 in 2012 a statistic that seems in keeping with the cultural influence of *Frozen*.

VISITING FROZEN

Inevitably, the film is also making its mark on the various Disney parks where fans visit with the specific purpose of immersing themselves within the fantastical world of Arendelle. From November 20, visitors to Hong Kong Disneyland will be among the first to experience the new World of *Frozen* attraction, which promises an immersive themed landscape where visitors will be able to experience life in the kingdom of Arendell.

Tokyo Disney Resort and Disneyland Paris, which currently boasts the popular *Frozen: A Musical Invitation* show based on the first film, are also getting *Frozen*-themed expansions. Currently under construction, Arendelle in Paris will feature Elsa's Ice Castle, which will stand at the top of a snow-covered mountain, and many new experiences including a new attraction that will take guests on a journey accompanied by the iconic *Frozen* characters.

THE THEME OF SISTERHOOD RESONATED WITH 52% OF KIDS



In 2024 at Fantasy Springs in Tokyo DisneySea the new *Frozen Kingdom*, set after the events of *Frozen*, is a place of happiness where Queen Elsa has embraced her Ice Magic. During Anna and Elsa's *Frozen Journey*, a new boat ride, guests will relive the tale of two sisters and how they discovered that true love can thaw a frozen heart alongside fan-favourite songs from the film.

In the US resorts and parks, fans can enjoy a variety of *Frozen*-themed experiences,

from meeting their favourite characters to younger fans having the opportunity to be transformed into either Queen Elsa or Queen Anna, replete with professional hair and makeover session, choice of outfits and keepsake photo session. Experiences such as these, which are fan-centred but led by trained personnel encourage the young participants to re-enact, re-connect with and re-embody the positive characteristics of self-acceptance, friendship and perseverance for themselves, while making memories that will stay with them for a lifetime.

Keen to capture the imaginative interest that *Frozen's* success had sparked for all things Scandinavian, the Norwegian tourism promotor, Innovation Norway collaborated with Disney to use the movie as part of its campaign to bring fans of the film to the country.^v As a direct result of the popularity of *Frozen*, Norway reported an impressive 20% rise in tourism by 2016 and the Norwegian town of Bergen - the real-life inspiration for Arendelle - continues to draw tourists who are keen to see the likeness between the two such as the Southern port of Arendal - which formed the basis for the harbour where Anna first encounters the duplicitous Hans (of the Seven isles) - and Bryggen, the quayside town which provided inspiration for the Arendelle architecture.



While research participant, Luke hasn't been to Bryggen, he experienced Disney Cruise Line's Arendelle: *A Frozen Dining Adventure* cruise aboard the Disney Wish liner. Designed to replicate the interior of the castle in Arendelle, replete with family portraits and other artefacts from the film, the magnificent restaurant is the setting for Queen Anna's engagement to Kristoff. Luke described how the immersive experience was enhanced by the food, the music and by the appearance of the various characters, saying that the opportunity to get up close and talk to the characters was one of the biggest highlights in creating a truly unique immersive experience that cemented his affection for the film even more.



LET IT GO: HOW THE MUSIC OF FROZEN CONTRIBUTES TO ITS SUCCESS

While the sartorial influence of the Queens Elsa and Anna creates a considerable volume of material online, it is dwarfed in comparison to the behemoth that is the soundtrack. Officially certified as eight times platinum and having been streamed (as of August 2023) an incredible 31.6 billion times which, to put it in context, equates to roughly 4.148 million years of listening.

Foremost among the score is the multi-award winning Let it Go, Elsa's Cri de Coeur - a powerful song that has been co-opted by numerous groups and marginalised communities for its message of resilience and self-acceptance, a track that has had (at the time of writing) over 8 billion views on YouTube, 284 million views on VEVO, 3.2 billion plays on Spotify, been translated into 41 languages and earned co-writer Robert Lopez, the accolade of being the youngest person ever to have completed the critical awards sweep of Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony. The [cover by Demi Lovato](#) featured in the credits also received 6 million views on YouTube in its first three weeks and over the past 10 years has amassed over 625 million views.

Much like the film, the soundtrack took on a life of its own, becoming a standalone behemoth in its own right, transcending into popular culture in a magnitude of ways. Audiences and fans such as Amelia, Luke, Maddie, Annika, and Elsie are unanimous in their opinion that the soundtrack was key to their engagement with the film from the outset - whether this was through role-playing and laughing along at Love is an Open Door, or partaking in a rendition of Let it Go. As Amelia notes, the soundtrack is a vital part of the film's iconic status, explaining that while they help audiences to understand and engage with the characters, they are also catchy songs that are enjoyable to sing-along to, and they have a quality that transcends beyond the film itself.

It is not an understatement to claim that the *Frozen* soundtrack practically invented the sing-along video streams that have

proliferated on various video platforms. Much like the film, the soundtrack took on a life of its own, becoming a standalone behemoth in its own right, transcending into popular culture in a magnitude of ways. Audiences and fans such as Amelia, Luke, Maddie, Annika, and Elsie are unanimous in their opinion that the soundtrack was key to their engagement with the film from the outset - whether this was through role-playing and laughing along at Love is an Open Door, or partaking in a rendition of Let it Go. As Amelia notes, the soundtrack is a vital part of the film's iconic status, explaining that while they help audiences to understand and engage with the characters, they are also catchy songs that are enjoyable to sing-along to, and they have a quality that transcends beyond the film itself.

It is not an understatement to claim that the *Frozen* soundtrack practically invented the sing-along video streams that have proliferated on various video platforms since the film's release. On YouTube alone there are (at the time of writing) colossal 2.6 billion videos dedicated to fans singing along to their favourite *Frozen* numbers. It is no surprise that Let it Go proved to be a firm entry within the canon, with renditions from choirs, children, community groups and even a room full of US Marines, singing along with the film while on a break.^{vi}

The lip-sync trend which started with amateur videos on YouTube soon became a media sensation and *Frozen* was, of course, a highlight. In 2016, Channing Tatum appeared on Lip Sync Battle in competition against his wife at the time, Jenna Dewan. As the familiar notes rang out, Tatum emerged from a mock-up ice castle, replete with a blonde wig and replica gown in order to perform Let it Go.^{vii}

In 2019, as part of a celebration of the release of *Frozen 2*, James Corden decided that the time had come for a *Frozen* Crosswalk Musical; he convinced Kristen Bell, Idina Menzel, Josh Gad and Jonathan Groff to take part, bringing traffic to a standstill for condensed renditions of some of the biggest hits Angeles.^{viii} Corden is, of course not the

only celebrity *Frozen* fan, Taylor Swift also decided to incorporate some *Frozen* musical magic into one of her live sets in 2015 when she donned an Olaf costume and invited Idina Menzel on stage to perform a duo to 55,000 fans. She later spoke of the moment "*Frozen* totally happened tonight. And 55,000 people sang Let It Go so loudly it nearly took my breath away." British TV star, Stacey Solomon is another dedicated fan, she wore an Elsa costume when Menzel appeared on the chat show Loose Women and the pair performed a brief duet.^{ix}

CONCLUSION

As *Frozen* reaches its 10th anniversary, the story feels as timely as ever. A film that provides a message of self-empowerment, self-acceptance, and bravery, and does so with clever but endearing comedy moments while also offering a twist on traditional fairy tales in order to centre a narrative about sisterhood and self-belief remains as vital and relevant as it did when it first hit the screens.

(i) <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/why-frozen-was-huge-japan-720193/>

(ii) Study undertaken by Dr Sarah Godfrey of the University of East Anglia, in August 2023

(iii) National Retail Federation, 2014 - <https://www.ft.com/content/ec6a29b6-8b7a-11e4-ae73-00144feabdc0>

(iv) Piatek-Jimenez, K., & Phelps, C. M. (2016). Using Disney's *Frozen* to motivate mathematics: Bringing fractals into the classroom. *Australian Primary Mathematics Classroom*, 21(2), 18-25. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.191414957961085>

(v) <https://www.dailyscandinavian.com/innovation-norway-joins-forces-with-disney/>

(vi) <https://nypost.com/2013/11/23/frozen-soundtrack-set-to-join-the-ranks-of-disney-greats/>

(vii) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ER4srD951bw>

(viii) https://youtu.be/tqn_e0bMjr0

(ix) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZeHmnpnlhY>

(x) <https://www.hellomagazine.com/celebrities/2017061639890/stacey-solomon-idina-menzel-loose-women-vid/>



WHEN FROZEN 2 WAS RELEASED IN 2019, ELSA AND OLAF WERE TWO OF FUNKO'S BEST-SELLING CHARACTERS



FACTS RECEIVED FROM DISNEY

40 *Frozen* dolls were sold every minute in EMEA and North America regions combined in the last 3 years on average (Based on CY20-CY22)

Frozen is the 7 most liked and claimed purchased character among Forming Girls in ALL G5 markets - Research conducted Feb 2023

Frozen is the dominant #1 most liked and most popular character among Early Girls in ALL G5 markets - Research conducted Feb 2023

Frozen is the 4 spontaneous favourite and most liked character among Established Girls in ALL G5 markets - Research conducted Feb 2023

Frozen was the #1 film of 2013, quickly becoming the highest-grossing animated release of all time, at \$1.28 billion until *Frozen 2* surpassed it in 2019

Frozen was the highest-grossing feature film to be directed by a woman of all time, only surpassed by Barbie in 2023

Frozen was the recipient of two Academy Awards®, including Best Animated Feature and Best Original Song (for "Let It Go"), a BAFTA award for animated feature as well as a PGA Award, Critics Choice Award, four Visual Effects Society Awards, five Annie Awards including Best Animated Feature

Frozen became a viral sensation on the burgeoning YouTube platform, with a multitude of people around the world, of all ages, posting their renditions of *Frozen* songs

When released, *Frozen 2*, the animated feature sequel to *Frozen*, became the highest-grossing animated release of all time, with \$1.45 billion