

'Star Wars' Dominates Christmas Box Office

The Christmas box office champion has already been crowned.

That "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" will dominate movie theaters for a second straight weekend is a foregone conclusion. After all, the seventh film in the sci-fi franchise has passed from hit into cultural phenomenon. The question is how much money it will make as moviegoers flood multiplexes during one of the most lucrative times of year for Hollywood studios.

There's a wide range of predictions. It is conceivable that "The Force Awakens" could pull in anywhere from \$140 million to \$180 million in its second weekend – a massive spread, but a testament to how difficult it is to assess how firmly the latest tale of Jedi Knights has burrowed into the zeitgeist. Either would be an impressive hold after a weekend that saw "The Force Awakens" torch records with its \$248 million domestic launch. There's a reason that some box office sages have been predicting the film has "Avatar" and its \$2.8 billion global haul in its sights.

But "The Force Awakens" isn't the only game in town. Paramount will reunite Will Ferrell and Mark Wahlberg in "Daddy's Home." The actors successfully partnered on 2010's "The Other Guys," and this latest entry finds them back in their sweet spot – Ferrell plays a dweeby step-father, while Wahlberg is the rebellious, hog-riding biological father. The film cost \$50 million to make and is on pace to pull in between \$20 million to \$22 million when it premieres Friday across 3,200 locations.

Warner Bros. and Alcon will counter with a remake of the 1991 cult hit "Point Break," that finds an FBI agent (Luke Bracey)

trying to infiltrate a group of extreme sports enthusiasts/bank robbers. The film carries an \$105 million price tag and is projected to make \$15 million to \$17 million when it kicks off across 2,910 locations.

Fox will test Jennifer Lawrence's star power, teaming "The Hunger Games" actress with David O. Russell – the filmmaker who guided her to Oscar glory in "Silver Linings Playbook" – for "Joy," a shaggy biopic about the mogul behind the Miracle Mop. A debut in the \$10 million to \$12 million range seems plausible when "Joy" hits 2,896 locations. It cost \$60 million to make.

"Joy" is expected to be a major player when Oscar nominations are announced next month. It won't be the only awards hopeful entering the marketplace. Sony is fielding "Concussion," a social issue drama with Will Smith that takes on the NFL for its alleged cover-up of the long-term consequences of traumatic brain injuries on football players. The film cost \$35 million to produce and will test America's appetite for having its regular Sunday afternoon pastime placed in the hot seat. It is expected to debut to between \$8 million to \$10 million when it hits 2,820 locations.

With "Concussion" taking the fight to football, "The Big Short" will square off against Wall Street. The \$28 million adaptation of Michael Lewis' best-selling chronicle of a few Cassandras who foretold the coming financial collapse has been a hit in limited release. Paramount will move the comic tale from eight venues to 1,600 locations beginning Wednesday. The three-day estimate is \$8 million and the five-day projection is \$10 million. The plan is to add theaters on Jan. 8.

In addition to "The Force Awakens," these films will feel pressure from holdovers such as "Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Road Chip" and "Sisters," which should do \$14 million and \$10 million, respectively.

Among limited releases, the Weinstein Company is orchestrating a road-show for Quentin Tarantino's blood-soaked "The Hateful Eight." The spaghetti western will debut in 70mm projection, which cinephiles argue offers, brighter, cleaner images, in 100 theaters where it will likely generate between \$3 million to \$3.5 million.

Matching "The Hateful Eight" body bag for body bag is Fox's "The Revenant." The revenge drama stars Leonardo DiCaprio as a guide who is left for dead after a bear attack. Director Alejandro G. Inarritu's drive to film the picture in remote locations and shoot in natural light pushed the production over budget, with costs reportedly hitting \$135 million. It bows in four locations this Christmas before expanding next month.

Exhibitors are feeling more festive. The return of the "Star Wars" crew and the influx of new holiday contenders should result in crowded theaters. It's a welcome rebound after a fall that saw critically lauded films like "Steve Jobs" sputter out and heavily-anticipated sequels such as "Spectre" and "The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2" fail to match previous films in their franchises.