

Blockbuster. Redbox. Netflix

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There was a bright moment in the late 90's when physical repositories for movies had their own buildings. Blockbuster, the most successful of these businesses, was a staple in most communities sometimes accompanied by the competing family video and other posers. One would walk into an outpost of this great institution, and be immediately presented with rows and stacks of films; a library for movies. Wandering the aisles often served to curiously present movies that one perhaps would not be normally inclined to learn about through traditional advertising pathways or word of mouth. Upon selection, a quick walk to the counter would subject someone to a trial by will and only the strongest would prevail. Popcorn, candy, and all other ritualistic staples required for proper film digestion would parallel the checkout lines. After leisurely waiting for the customer ahead, a person would be greeted by another human being working in the blockbuster, they were a rare breed of creature that no longer graced this earth. As custodians of the artform and arbiters of the realm, these employees could ask for someone to be the proper age before renting a film – they would also make keen suggestions for others that they had a personal preference for, bypassing aggregated online review scores that show how a population felt, but not how an actual person might feel. When someone had completed all of the proper moments in the ritual, they would exchange in a fiscal trade, and be greeted with the words, "thanks for coming to blockbuster, please bring the movie back in a week or you'll get a late fee. Please be kind, and rewind!"

The 2000's were a dark time for video rental stores, Netflix had risen to prominence, at this time it was a similar company, but rather than having a physical location, existed as a catalogue of mail-in movies that someone wouldn't get a late fee for if they sent it back late. But there were also other new contenders in the fight for home video – apple had just begun to sell small easily scratch-able devices that played digital video and could fit in a pocket, they call it iPod. Perhaps the most dastardly of these was a refrigerator called 'Redbox' that lived outside of every Walgreens and Supermarket. Redbox was similar to Netflix in that people could have movies for a few days, place them back in a cartridge and return them, but differed in the manner with which they were returned. Redbox also had the constraint that each physical vending machine could only dispense so many movies, and people like to avoid going anywhere if they can. From this intense conflict on every street corner in the city, one had clearly prevailed. Netflix.

But this wouldn't be so simply because of a mail feature or due to a much more massive catalogue than any propagated physical location could store. The final nail in the coffin was a new stream feature, which is what Netflix is known for today. Once someone was able to watch whatever they wanted to without having to leave their home, there seemed to be no reason to do so. Furthermore, with the rise apple's second series of shiny devices – the iPhone – which only had a single port, Netflix was left to capitalize on the digital format that mobile devices could use. This left services with physical locations to wither away while people could consume entire series of a tv show without even standing up from the couch. The Blockbusters closed their doors for good, and the Redboxes continued to exist with a new emphasis on videogame rentals.

The moral of this narrative is one of warning and reflectance. By harnessing the power of a placeless network rather than physical locations, a mail-in movie service was able to become a ubiquitous home staple – despite the human advantages or moral high ground that a normally structured business could have. While some video stores still exist they do so in the same way that a record store does, as a relic for those who adore the qualities of a prior format and more of a gathering space for people of shared interests. Looking forward, it brings into question the fate of libraries, movie theaters, post offices, printshops, or grocery stores and their abilities to compete with prevailing digital formats.

In the year 2000, Blockbuster was given the opportunity to buy Netflix for \$50 Million dollars and declined. As of 2017, Netflix is estimated to be worth \$88.17 Billion Dollars.

The CEO was quoted in 2008 saying - “Neither RedBox nor Netflix are even on the radar screen in terms of competition,” he said. “It’s more Wal-Mart and Apple.”

Sometimes it hurts to be wrong.

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