THE A-LIST

Twenty-five years ago a Brit armchair cinephile turned his love for cataloguing the films he watched into a database – now it’s one of the most valuable tools in the film industry. Total Film meets unassuming IMDB creator turned Hollywood royalty Col Needham. Words: Simon Kinnear

35 IMDB


And now IMDB, one of the most influential innovations in modern movies, is 25 years old. The story of IMDB – a global sensation before Facebook or YouTube were even invented – is a parable of success in the internet age, an amateur pastime that became a multi-million dollar business without sacrificing its founding principles. Not bad for a venture founded by a British film geek who simply wanted to share his passion with the world.

“Twenty-five years of great fun and building something people seem to love very much,” admits Col Needham, the 48-year-old founder and CEO of IMDB. “It’s been quite an adventure.” When he speaks to Total Film to discuss IMDB’s past, present and future, Needham has just returned to the UK from the Sundance Film Festival, where he served on the World Cinema Dramatic Jury. In total, he racked up 33 screenings. “It sounds great,” Needham explains, “except I got beaten by Edgar Wright. He and I...”
ALL ABOUT THAT 'BASE

The future of IMDb at a glance.

PLATFORM EXPANSION

IMDb is no longer just a website; half of all visits now come via its mobile and tablet apps, while the Amazon Fire TV set-top box uses IMDb data as standard.

X-RAY

Every song, goof and actor's entrance has been time-coded to allow viewers with compatible devices to access the relevant information while the scene is playing. Crucially, the feature is second-screen friendly, so you can browse the data on a tablet without interrupting the movie.

PRO CASTING

Launched in 2014, this tailored application of the IMDb Pro service is designed specifically to assist casting directors and actors alike, via advanced search functions, demo reel uploads and other tools.

VIDEO CONTENT

We're not just talking about trailers; IMDb is now a regular producer of original content such as recommendation show What To Watch. Needham is especially proud of “the nice kind of symmetry in the fact that of course What to Watch has an IMDb title page in IMDb!”
were having an informal competition as to who was going to see the most movies at Sundance and he beat me by one!"

If you’re wondering how Needham finds the time, it’s because, by his own admission, "I’ve been obsessed by film for my entire life.” His conversation is littered with ‘wees’ and punctuated by giggles, still at heart the movie junkie who, aged 14, watched Alien 14 times in 14 days. Needham began to list his viewing habits in the early ’80s and still keeps a running tally. Today, “I’m heading to that 9,000 mark, very soon.”

Crucially, Needham didn’t simply note the titles but rewound his VHS tapes to log the credits of key cast and crew. "It was just for my own use to track what I was watching and who was making these things," Needham explains – except his hobby coincided with a computing boom that would help it go viral. An unabashed technology nerd, Needham was 12 years old when he built his first computer and had an email address since 1985. By the late 80s, Needham found like-minded cinephiles online in the Usenet film discussion group, rec.arts.movies.

As more credit crunchers shared their lists, they needed a tool to manage the increasingly complex data. "One thing led to another," Needham explains – a humble description of IMDb’s genesis. On 17 October 1990, Needham published the inaugural IMDb software, which users downloaded and (in the days before the world wide web) installed on their own computers.

It wasn’t immediately obvious, but the fledgling Internet Movie Database chimed with the times. The vast data storage echoed the wider shift in cinema towards digitisation. Just as Needham was popularising the benefits of knowing who starred in what film, Quentin Tarantino was putting the same trivia up on the screen. Meanwhile, laserdisc and DVD extras confirmed the commercial value of film facts. Fuelled by Needham’s small army of “super-passionate” volunteers, growth was rapid. The first IMDb website, one of the earliest 100 ever to launch, arrived in 1993. The business was incorporated in 1996, the first time Needham met any of his fellow directors was in the lawyer’s reception before signing the paperwork. The same year, IMDb.com was launched and the site began to sell advertising space, with 20th Century Fox becoming a notable early adopter to promote Independence Day. Only then did Needham quit his day job at Hewlett-Packard to become IMDb’s first full-time employee.

Already, IMDb was becoming the world’s de facto source of credits, goofs and other trivia, its one-click access like finding the Holy Grail for cinephiles hitherto confined to printed guides. In turn, IMDb’s user-generated star ratings overrode critical orthodoxy to create a truly populist canon where The Shatner Redemption outperforms critical faves like Vertigo... even if the latter, ironically, is Needham’s personal favourite. But he doesn’t mind. "I’m a great believer that every film, every show, has an audience. It’s just a case of making sure that the audience can find that content.”

It wasn’t only the fans who had taken notice. In 1998, Needham was approached by fellow online entrepreneur Jeff Bezos, who needed a site partner to help launch Amazon’s expansion into selling movies. Needham agreed to an acquisition, enabling IMDb to put all its volunteer shareholders on the payroll as a subsidiary of Amazon, and propelling the site into a new era where visitors could not only discover a film but then buy it online. Needham has no regrets. "Jeff’s such a visionary looking forward into the future. Here we are now with things like Amazon Prime Instant Video and Amazon Studios producing TV shows. IMDb fits very nicely within that Amazon family.”

Yet Needham realised that, in addition to audiences, the data could also benefit filmmakers. Even during IMDb’s infancy, Hollywood had given its seal of approval. “There was no resistance at all. If anything, it was completely the opposite. People in the film industry would be like, ‘Oh thank goodness we can finally get information about the films that we’ve made.’”

So in 2002, Needham launched IMDbPro, the commercial subscription service for entertainment professionals that provides contact information, detailed box office data, the proprietary STARMeter and MOVIEmeter tools, which track the popularity of people and titles over time. Needham believes the latter two have played a crucial role in shaping modern Hollywood. “Pro subscribers can do searches based on current STARMeter, they can look at historical trends, they can see who’s been who and who might be an up-and-coming star.”

Twilight offers proof of STARMeter’s power. After conventional casting had failed to find a suitable Edward Cullen, STARMeter was used to “find someone who’s perhaps been in a Harry Potter film, who would meet these criteria to play Edward. [The producers] went out for lunch, came back and there’s an IMDbPro print-out
Despite IMDb having offices in Seattle and Santa Monica, Needham prefers to control his empire from his Bristol home. “My secret plan, which obviously can’t be too secret if I’m telling you, is to make everybody as big a film and TV buff as I am!” If so, he’s succeeding. In 2014 alone, more than 300,000 titles were added to IMDb. The mobile app has 15 million downloads and counting. IMDb has 200 million unique monthly visitors.

The latest innovations at IMDb are devoted to extending what Needham calls “that wonderful loop,” whereby each new discovery “leads you on a journey to build up your watch list, so you watch more great movies and more great shows and more great web series, and then of course that informs your next view.” Pro Casting beds IMDb further into the creation of movies by providing a platform to help producers find cast members. Similarly, the X-Ray function on smart TVs and tablets deepens the audience’s ability to harness IMDb’s data by offering pop-up, real-time trivia while watching a movie at home.

Certainly, like his creation, Needham thinks in terms of film. Before meeting his hero Steven Spielberg, for example, he couldn’t help but recall a famous movie moment. “I’m thinking, ‘Oh my goodness, I’m Luca Brasi waiting to meet Don Corleone in The Godfather!’” The irony is that Needham himself has become the don: it was Spielberg who wanted to shake Needham’s hand, telling him, “I use IMDb all the time!”

Power would never go to Needham’s head, though; he recounts meeting a novice 15-year-old director with the same delight as his close encounter with Spielberg. It is this ongoing crusade to promote and preserve film culture that has led to Needham securing an unexpected credit on his own IMDb page: as an actor. “There was a charity auction to raise money for the BFI Archive, and one of the lots was to win a credited non-speaking role in Suffragette directed by Sarah Gavron,” he explains. “It’s the first film that’s been allowed to shoot at the Houses of Parliament since the ’50s and my scene was shot there.”

Needham might well end up back in Parliament one day; an honour is surely overdue. All that’s stopping him is how few people realise that IMDb is run by a Brit. Then again, even Needham downplays his nationality. “The way I think about it, IMDb is really headquartered on the internet!”

Meanwhile, the mission – to find great new movies – remains unchanged, and Needham leads by example. “My current 2015 watchlist has 295 titles in it. I’m getting to the point where there are fewer days left in the year than there are 2015 movies to watch.” Somehow, you suspect he’ll find the time.

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CHRIS PRATT

After breaking out big-time as the roguish, Han Solo-esque star of Marvel’s Guardians Of The Galaxy, Pratt’s stock is set to soar even higher as the raptor-wrangling hero of Jurassic World. With Guardians 2 in the pipeline and current reports pegging him as Indiana Jones in Disney’s upcoming reboot, the future is looking very bright.

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GILLIAN FLYNN

With Gone Girl giving David Fincher his biggest hit yet, author/screenwriter Flynn will reunite with the Seven director and star Ben Affleck for a classy remake of Hitchcock’s Strangers On A Train. Before that, there’s two more Flynn adaptions on the way – thriller Dark Places and Jason Blum-produced TV show Sharp Objects.

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THE HUNGER GAMES: MOCKINGJAY – PT 2

Catching fire on the dystopian YA series, one that’s already taken $2.3bn worldwide. Expect Mockingjay – Part 2 to carry on that success, using all the book’s best bits (Beasts! Bombs! Betrayal!) to send the series out with a bang.

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THE MARTIAN

Ridley Scott’s rekindled passion for film continues apace with this story of an astronaut (Matt Damon) stranded on Mars and struggling to send an SOS home support too, with (deep breath) Kate Mara, Jessica Chastain, Kristen Wiig, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Sebastian Stan, Jeff Daniels and Sean Bean filling out the impressive ensemble cast.

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JENNIFER KENT

The Babadook may have been a sleeper film, but the director is destined for bigger things. Starting as an actor, later for Lars von Trier, Kent’s debut earned her multiple awards, though she has yet to be confirmed for another project. She has two films in the pipeline, with an option to see what she’d do with a Marvel film.