

The Spiel about Spielberg - Presented by Joe Frankel

Tuesdays, January 6 to February 24, 2026

January 6, 2026: *Duel* (1971) – A prodigious beginning

From the start of his career, the studio system rewarded him for his preternatural command over the technical aspects of filmmaking. On the page, *Duel* was a seemingly routine TV movie until Spielberg transformed it into a master class in edge-of-the-seat suspense. Witness how Spielberg's early days in television (directing pilot episodes of *Columbo* and *Rod Serling's Night Gallery*, among others) gave rise to the narrative economy, breakneck pacing and visual eloquence for which he would be celebrated.

January 13, 2026: *Jaws* (1975) – Earning final cut

It was never intended to be anything more than a B movie, but in Spielberg's hands it became the biggest box-office hit of all time and won the young director "final cut" approval over his subsequent movies. The making of *Jaws* was fraught with technical and logistical challenges that forced the production over budget and over time, but Spielberg persevered and was able to rescue the movie thanks to his uncommonly resourceful storytelling abilities and a particularly fruitful collaboration with editor Verna Fields and composer John Williams.

January 20, 2026: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) – A blank cheque movie

Following the success of *Jaws*, Spielberg is given a "blank cheque" to make a personal statement with a film based on the screenplay that he himself writes. Despite the fantastical subject matter, *Close Encounters* is a surprisingly intimate character study filled with several directorial signatures that would carry throughout his career. Every shot and edit in the film is artfully calibrated for maximum impact. The movie is instantly hailed as one of the most thoughtful and moving science fiction films of all time – and yet Spielberg goes on to rethink and re-edit it three times.

January 27, 2025: *Indiana Jones* (1981 – 1989) – Achieving technical mastery

Following the uncharacteristic box-office failure of *1941*, Spielberg collaborates with George Lucas, Lawrence Kasdan and Philip Kauffman to create a "sure thing" based on the iconic titular character that audiences have called the #1 hero of all time. Flirting superficially with his interest in World War 2 and drawing inspiration from numerous pre-existing and eclectic sources, Spielberg and company reshape older material into something dazzlingly new: *Raiders of The Lost Ark*. The film represents the crystallization of Spielberg's storytelling techniques and proves his deftness as an action director – able to juggle an array of different tones without losing sight of character.

February 3, 2026: *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) – The adult world through a child's eyes

Working from a script by Melissa Matheson, Spielberg creates one of his most moving and iconic films. Once again, his interest is in intimate human storytelling on an epic scale. *E.T.* posits a child's fantasy of alien contact, while also speaking to the destabilizing effects of divorce and the human search for meaningful connection. Thoughtful analysis will reveal the surprising complexity and nuance beneath the dazzling surface of a movie that has endured in the culture for more than 40 years.

February 10, 2026: *Empire of the Sun* (1987) A child's world through adult eyes

Spielberg inherits Tom Stoppard's adaptation of J.G. Ballard's true-life memoir from his hero and mentor, David Lean. It is his first serious attempt to engage with the trauma of World War 2. His stated intention is to make a film that runs counter to the sentimental and populist persona that he's known for, but the film is largely ill-received and misunderstood – only now beginning to enjoy a critical renaissance and reappraisal.

February 17, 2026: *Schindler's List* (1993) – Artistic paradox

After 10 years of avoiding his heartfelt calling to adapt Thomas Keneally's incendiary novel, Spielberg finally endeavours to faithfully recreate the horrors of the holocaust insofar as any film can. Adopting new practices more typically associated with documentary filmmaking, he abandons the classical storytelling techniques he had mastered and profited from. The resulting film is both a problematic masterpiece and a provocative illustration of the limits of cinema.

February 24, 2026: Spielberg today

The success of *Schindler's List* lit a fuse under Spielberg and inaugurated yet another unprecedented wave of creativity. Moving into the 21st century, Spielberg leveraged his influence to inspire and mentor scores of popular filmmakers, founded a movie studio, and continued to reinvent himself with remarkable dexterity. His many subsequent achievements include *Saving Private Ryan*, *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, *Minority Report*, *Catch Me If You Can*, *Munich*, *War of the Worlds*, *Lincoln*, *War Horse*, *Bridge of Spies* and finally (his own origin story) *The Fabelmans*. We close with a survey of his later works and an appraisal of what can be learned from both his craft and his career.