# Like it or not, the Marvel empire redefined cinema this decade



There are few phrases that evoke a reaction as strong as “Marvel Cinematic Universe.”

Over the last decade, the MCU changed cinema. According to *The Irishman* director Martin Scorsese, it also changed the term cinema. Is *The Avengers* cinema? Classic Shakespearean tales of power, family, and corruption took form in *Black Panther, Captain America: Civil War*, and *Thor*, but are they cinema?

Truth be told, it doesn’t matter. Whether the MCU is a 23-piece collection of cinematic tales or a decade of theme park rides, few come close to the cultural touchstone the MCU has left. With $22.6 billion in global box office sales, scores of merchandise, theme park attractions, and a universal phrase understood around the world – “I love you, 3000 – the MCU is practically a religion. While it technically started in 2008, the real moment the MCU arrived was in 2012 with Joss Whedon’s *Avengers*.

The MCU started in 2008 with Robert Downey Jr.'s *Iron Man,* spun as counter-programming to gritty, adult-oriented superhero movies like *The Spirit and* Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight.* Thanks to Downey Jr.'s charm, it worked. A movie about a B-list Marvel hero who wasn't particularly well-known by mainstream audiences at the time made $585 million at the box office.

Under Kevin Feige, who became Marvel Studios' head of production in 2007, *Iron Man* set up more than just an ordinary sequel: Samuel L. Jackson's Nick Fury in a post-credit sequence, talking about something called "the Avengers Initiative." The initiative was teased again in *The Incredible Hulk*, released just a few months after *Iron Man*, which saw Downey Jr.'s Tony Stark meet up with General Ross – Bruce Banner's biggest foe – to talk about the program.

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The two movies arrived a year before the Walt Disney Company, still under relatively new leadership from CEO Bob Iger, bought Marvel Entertainment for $4 billion. While Disney wouldn't officially distribute any Marvel movies until *The Avengers*, the company was in it for the long haul. That included supporting Feige's vision of an interconnected universe, woven through five movies – *Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk, Iron Man 2, Captain America: The First Avenger,* and *Thor* – before the big setup could pay off.

Arriving in 2012, *The Avengers* expected viewers to have seen at least a few of the standalone titles in order to understand the team dynamics. But the end result was more than a superhero movie. It was *the* superhero movie. Intergalactic enemies, magical powers, ridiculous action sequences, and Steve Rogers yelling at people to "suit up." For millions of fans, *The Avengers* felt like what a comic book movie should be.

It was the end of the movie, the scene where Earth's mightiest heroes go out for shawarma, that set up what the next seven years looked like. Unlike *Spider-Man, X-Men,* or *The Fantastic Four*, *The Avengers* represented a world beyond one or two movies. The biggest scenes were made more impactful by the tiny character interactions, and those interactions worked all the more because we got to spend time with the heroes individually before *The Avengers* ever hit.

By this point, Disney managed to turn Marvel into a merchandising juggernaut. Research firm License Global estimated that Marvel merchandise brought in $41 billion alone, which is more than every Marvel movie combined. Like *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*, Disney saw the potential for endless merchandise around Marvel's heroes. Iger even noted in a 2018 investors call that being able to "leverage [brands] across all business units" was key to the company's success.

To keep that momentum going, Marvel went bigger under Feige's leadership. *Guardians of the Galaxy* helped the MCU leave Earth, *Doctor Strange* ushered in psychedelic time manipulation, and *Black Panther* brought in unexpected gravitas and cultural savvy. Staying true to the Disney brand, Marvel never dipped into the gritty revisionism of Zack Snyder or the gleeful toilet humor of *Deadpool*. Even as new filmmakers put their spin on the formula, Marvel movies would continue to feel like Marvel movies and mostly remain Disney-friendly.

*The devastation was necessary, both creatively and for business reasons*

Instead, the second and third phases of Marvel's movie empire dug deeper into its own television-like drama. Steve Rogers and Tony Stark, the patriarchal figures of the Avengers ragtag group, come to a head in *Captain America: Civil War.* Their fight, which centered on the ethical and moral quandaries they have as superheroes following the devastation seen in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, separates the Avengers crew. It was simply devastating.

The devastation was necessary, both creatively and for business reasons. Tony and Steve's fight was a punch in the gut for longtime fans who had kept up with the franchise for eight years. *Civil War*, based on Marvel's popular comic of the same name, sent everyone off on their own journey again. A few would pop up from time to time: Tony Stark appeared in *Spider-Man: Far From Home,* and Thor went on an adventure with the Hulk in *Thor: Ragnarok*, but the third phase was mostly left for developing new characters.

Spider-Man, Black Panther, and Captain Marvel received their own standalone films, helping fans find new favorite heroes just before heading into the long-awaited conclusion to the epic Feige dubbed the "Infinity Saga." Their success promised a successful world beyond Iron Man and Captain America, whose contracts were coming to an end. *Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* marked the two-part conclusion to everything that Feige, Downey Jr., Chris Evans, and the rest of the team wanted to do in 2008.

Almost impossibly, *Infinity War* and *Endgame* created a cultural impact not seen since *The Avengers*. Thanos' lines in both films became instant reference points, and Tony Stark — the heart of the Marvel Cinematic Universe who kickstarted it all — became the guy to throw himself on the live grenade. *Endgame* wasn't loved by critics (it ranks as the second-worst film of the decade on *Vulture*'s recent list), but with $2.8 billion at the box office and millions of devoted fans, it's hard to imagine Feige or Iger were disappointed.

After *Endgame*, Marvel is entering its fourth phase, moving beyond the movie theater. Now, the tie-ins won't simply expand from movie to movie, but from platform to platform. As Thor, Spider-Man, and Doctor Strange have sequels in movie theaters, they'll be tying in with Disney+ appearances from Hawkeye, Falcon, Loki, and the Scarlet Witch. And as the biggest companies in the world try to jump-start their streaming services, there will only be one streaming service where you

can watch Marvel’s universe unfold. (Industry watchers will note that Marvel’s shift into streaming coincides with Feige taking the reins of Marvel Studios writ large, as Jeph Loeb’s Marvel TV banner closes up shop.)

It can be hard to remember that Marvel is just one of the cards in Disney’s hand — but somehow, none of them have proven quite as useful as Marvel. *Star Wars* is going away for a few years, *Avatar 2* is still two years away (at minimum), and Pixar can only do so much. Marvel has proven that, if nothing else, it’s the constant we now have in our lives. If anything, it’s going to become more predominant, more constant, and harder to escape.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/12/21011381/marvel-decade-cinema-mcu-iron-man-captain-america-disney-endgame