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Why the Marvel Cinematic Universe Can Show Us a Story, But Can't Tell Us a Plot

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Avengers: Infinity War confirms the domination of mass culture by the franchise: what ever happened to narrative closure?



Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, *Avengers: Infinity War*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Marvel Studios

For decades mass culture was dominated by the form of the trilogy, which takes its audience on a journey from the initial presentation of a fantasy (the emergence of a farm boy's special destiny in *Star Wars: A New Hope*)

through the grim deconstruction of that fantasy (the unhappy revelation of his sinister parentage in *The Empire Strikes Back*) to the rehabilitation and restoration of the fantasy in a happy ending (the defeat of evil through a redemptive act and the promise of a better future in *The Return of the Jedi*). But in our time the trilogy has been largely superseded by the form of the franchise, best registered by the huge success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) but also in such diverse generic contexts as *The Fast and the Furious* films (eight and counting), *Harry Potter* and its vast transmedia universe, the upcoming expansion of *The Lord of the Rings* to Amazon Prime, and of course the return of *Star Wars*.

As with *Star Wars*, the MCU seems to maintain some vestigial interest in the trilogy as a concept. There have been (so far) three *Iron Man* films; three *Captain America* films; three *Thor* films; and three *Avengers* stories, with the last one told in two parts – this year’s *Avengers: Infinity War*, and a still-untitled follow-up to be released next year. But rather than organically building its narratives to a definitive climax and catharsis, as the trilogy did, the contemporary franchise is predicated instead on a logic of permanent expansion that refuses to ever end at all.



Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, *Avengers: Infinity War*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Marvel Studios

The MCU’s innovation of the post-credits sequence in *Iron Man* (2008) was the earliest registration of this refusal. The film ends not with Tony Stark’s personal growth and his acceptance of his new role in the world as a hero, but with his meeting with Nick Fury, who tells him about ‘the Avengers Initiative’: the explosive expansion of his position into a much larger narrative sphere for which the film has not prepared us and for which it does not provide closure, only renewed suspense. Since *Iron Man*, the MCU has only intensified this feeling of perpetual, unyielding expansion; the MCU films are by now primarily advertisements for future MCU films, habitually introducing new characters and new situations (often still in those signature post-credit sequences, sometimes coming two or three per movie) who will ostensibly receive their due in some film yet to come – which will itself, when it arrives, likewise only ever be an advertisement for still another future film. In this sense, the MCU films are without question the best comics adaptations of all time: they have perfectly replicated, in cinematic form, the perpetually delayed gratification of open-ended comics narratives.

I spoke in my last piece for *frieze* about how the ecstatic celebration of black genius in *Black Panther* (2018) will ultimately be [compromised by its embedding within the MCU](#): by the need to constrain its Afrofuturist imaginary within the profit engine of the franchise, which is driven by the endless return of the same. *Avengers:*

Infinity War, released last week, exemplifies that tendency to an even more hypertrophic degree; the film telegraphs its own undoing and the restoration of the *status quo ante* so aggressively that one wonders how the sequel will manage to fill two hours telling a story we all already know in advance. At the same time, *Avengers: Infinity War* undoes any sense of narrative closure that might have accidentally emerged from previous installments in the franchise, negating the triumphant endings of each of the MCU films of recent years (*Dr. Strange*, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, *Black Panther*) to make sure those characters are all available to play the sour roles assigned for them in this one.



Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, *Avengers: Infinity War*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Marvel Studios

One of the major in-joke references in *Avengers: Infinity War* is to James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), but just as crucial to understanding the film is David Fincher's 1992 *Alien³*: the way that film opens with the perfunctory death of all the characters who survived *Aliens* besides Ripley, the way everything that happened in *Aliens* is jettisoned in the name of propelling Ripley headlong into yet another roller-coaster death trap. (She doesn't actually make it out of that one alive, but don't worry, they bring her back for another film anyway.) To varying degrees *Avengers: Infinity War* takes this attitude towards all of its predecessors, perhaps most aggressively in the way it summarily disposes of the Asgardians Thor spent all his time in last year's *Thor: Ragnarok* rescuing before the film has even begun – literally the exact same thing *Alien³* did to poor Newt, and with about the same overall importance in the narrative that followed.

None of the choices anyone makes in *Avengers: Infinity War* can matter, just like the choices and events characters made that brought them to *Avengers: Infinity War* do not matter, just like *Avengers: Infinity War* itself will soon not matter. Events in a meta-cinematic narrative franchise are absolutely provisional and 'stick' only insofar as they do not conflict with the needs of future installments.



Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, *Avengers: Infinity War*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Marvel Studios

The only logic that finally governs significance in the MCU – the only guideline we have to tell us which events ‘actually matter’ and which don’t – is entirely extra-textual: whose contracts are up, and whose sequels have been green-lit. For that reason we can be certain that most of the characters who appear to die in *Avengers: Infinity War* will return, because they currently have sequels in production, while many of the characters who appear to live will actually die, retire, get stranded in a pocket universe, ascend to godhood, get turned to stone, and so on, in order to explain their lack of participation in future Marvel films (at least until they sign a new contract for more films, at which time *that* resolution will itself be immediately undone, and the character will triumphantly return).

The result is a franchise that, in E.M. Forster’s famous terms, can show us a story, but can’t tell us a plot. That is: the MCU can narrate a raw sequence of events – *the king died, and then the queen died* – but is unable to imbue this sequence with any sense of causality or meaning: *the king died, and then the queen died of grief*. MCU films are not about characters, choices, consequences; they are only ever about the permanent extension of the MCU itself as a franchise.



Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, *Avengers: Infinity War*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Marvel Studios

Why does supervillain Thanos attack Earth? Because the post-credit sequence of *The Avengers* (2012) said he would. Why does he attack Earth now? Because the contracts of the original cast are nearly up. Why can't the good guys stop him? Because there's a sequel already in production. Even taken solely in its own terms, without reference to the prequels or to the sequels, the film conspires to rob events of any sense of significance: the nihilistic moral universe of the film robs the heroes' choices of any lasting effectivity beyond immediate emotional manipulation of the audience, as over and over again the characters are tortured into making impossibly heroic sacrifices that, seconds later, are revealed to count for nothing. Meanwhile, moment-to-moment Thanos has whatever abilities, resources, immunities, and motivations are required in a given scene to set up the eventual cliffhanger, while our heroes arbitrarily gain and lose intelligence, superpowers, and emotional control as needed. And so with the fate of the universe ostensibly at risk, and with a decade of MCU stories infusing every interaction with a long and complicated backstory, nothing in the film has any actual weight.

That *Avengers: Infinity War* is so successful as a blockbuster despite this relentless self-cannibalization – not just in terms of its gigantic box office success, but simply from the perspective of the viewer, who is perfectly entertained by all the madness on screen, and only realizes in the parking lot how little sense any of it made, either practically or philosophically – is in its own perverse way a remarkable achievement. It suggests just how fully the form of the franchise has crowded out traditional notions of narrative closure. We should expect future MCU films to be just as engaging and spectacular and intensely suspenseful, even as they too prove just as instantly forgettable, and even as they continue to drag the same miserable, consequence-free sequence of non-events on and on and on into infinity: *New York was attacked, and then New York was attacked, and then New York was attacked, and then...*