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Vassar College

The Marvel Media Method:
Negotiations in Transmedia Franchise Structure and Fan Participation

A research thesis submitted to
The Department of Film

Jonathan Hazin

Fall 2019

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Introduction

In the second act of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), Earth's mightiest heroes desperately plan a "time heist" to steal the all-powerful Infinity Stones from different points in the past and use them to reverse the damage done by cosmic tyrant Thanos in the climax of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). For franchise fans, *Endgame*'s time travel offers a return to familiar moments and settings of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Iron Man, Captain America and others travel back to the alien invasion of New York City in *The Avengers* (2012); War Machine and Nebula disrupt Star-Lord's opening quest in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014); and Hawkeye and Black Widow return to the planet of Vormir, the location of *Infinity War*'s memorable midpoint. It is obvious how re-experiencing some of the MCU's most iconic moments in the culmination (thus far) of its twenty-two-film universe would be rewarding to longtime fans of the franchise. Less clear and more complicated is why the Avengers' final time heist team, consisting of Thor and Rocket, would revisit the events of *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), one of the MCU's lower-grossing releases, comparatively poorly received by critics and fans alike. *Endgame*'s screenwriters, aware of *The Dark World*'s smaller audience as compared to those of *The Avengers*, *Guardians* or *Infinity War*, allowed time for the downtrodden Thor to explain the events of his second film to the other Avengers and, by extension, the viewers. The many comedic beats of Thor's exposition hold the interest of viewers familiar with *The Dark World* and lessen the plot-heavy burden of the scene.

What value did *Endgame*'s filmmakers see in such an expository monologue about one of the MCU's most overlooked films? It may seem contradictory to draw attention to something a viewer *does not* know about a franchise in which they

participate. But a fan's perception of an expansive narrative universe can be attractive if one is eager to participate in the building of a fictional world. In the introduction to her book, *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, Marta Boni evaluates the building of fictional worlds as an "intrinsically human activity" rooted in "children's creative play."¹ Much like in the real world, where no one can possibly know everything happening in all places, narrative gaps exist in fictional worlds and in their totality construct a sense of realism. Some gaps will forever remain unfilled, while creators of these worlds will foreshadow the filling of others at later dates. Others still are left for fans to fill themselves, with the hope that the authors of their world will one day validate these creations and consider them as part of the narrative world's official canon and governing worldview.²

As "storytelling has [increasingly] become the art of world building," so too have Hollywood studios and their media conglomerate parent companies expanded their focus from theatrical cinema releases to multiple "controlling interests across the entire entertainment industry."³ Certain extensive narrative worlds or diegeses, known as transmedia universes, extend the production of a given franchise across multiple forms of media and thereby offer consumers a multitude of exhibition forms by which to engage with the franchise media. For Henry Jenkins, transmedia storytelling, simply put, is "the art of world making."⁴ Martin Flanagan, Mike McKenny and Andy Livingstone, authors of *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe*, elaborate on Jenkins' connection and view the transmedia universe "as a single commercial entity... built by [an] aggregate" of authors, either all under the same corporate umbrella or working under a single negotiated contract."⁵ A transmedia universe's combination of

film, television, streaming and content from other media forms ultimately “converge[s] together in a fluid unity” that audiences can consume either as individual, related pieces of media or holistically as a transmedia universe.⁶ The conglomerates who produce Hollywood’s biggest franchises, The Walt Disney Company chief among them, are not merely film producers or television producers, but media producers. With this larger control over a diversity of media forms—from theaters nationwide, to millions of living rooms, to millions more mobile devices—comes the possibility of an unprecedented integration of narratives and characters within a single franchise, available in a multitude of ways for fans to consume.

Hollywood studio films have a long history of producing cinematic universes, from Classical-era successes like Universal Pictures’ monster-movie cycle to director Kevin Smith’s ongoing View Askewniverse of independent films starting in the 1990s. American broadcast television networks have also aired their share of connected series, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and its spin-offs produced by MTM Enterprises. Hollywood’s “first high-profile transmedia universe,” as noted by Liam Burke, arrived with *The Matrix* (1999) when Warner Bros. released an animated anthology, two video games and a comic book series to “extend the film trilogy’s core narrative.”⁷ While the Matrix franchise is undoubtedly a pioneer in transmedia storytelling, declining audience appreciation for its two sequels ended interest in what could have been a far longer-lasting transmedia franchise. What the Matrix franchise did first, the MCU has exceeded to become the “most ambitious experiment in cinematic world building to date.”⁸

The MCU represents a shift in the production, distribution and exhibition of Marvel Entertainment's lengthier involvement in audiovisual media. Captain America alone appeared in several different live-action media before his popular appearances in the MCU, from a Republic Pictures 1944 film serial, to a pair of TV-movies in 1979, to a low budget, Yugoslavian-American co-production in 1990. By the late-1990s, to aid in the comic publishing company's "post-bankruptcy financial restabilization," Marvel Entertainment licensed out several of their most popular characters to different film studios: Sony Pictures purchased Spider-Man and 20th Century Fox received the X-Men, the Fantastic Four, Daredevil and others.⁹ For Marvel to have constructed a shared narrative universe while several different conglomerates owned their A-list characters would have been an especially daunting task given their limited "control of the characters' depictions" on-screen, though one ultimately unsuccessful attempt was made to give Hugh Jackman's Wolverine a light-hearted cameo in director Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002).¹⁰

Marvel Entertainment's steady accrual of licensing revenue encouraged the company "to finance production on its own and recapture creative control and box-office profit from its studio partners."¹¹ Marvel Studios, the production company formerly charged with the licensing of characters to other studios, began in-house production of *Iron Man* (2008) with film producer Kevin Feige as the studio's President of Production. In December 2009, convinced of the financial potential of a shared universe of connected comic book films, The Walt Disney Company purchased Marvel Entertainment for \$4.24 billion and further encouraged the growth of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.¹² The MCU is technically not Marvel's first shared universe outside of print media; that distinction

belongs to the loosely shared world of several animated Marvel series that aired on Fox Kids in the 1990s.¹³ The Fox Kids universe featured crossovers between series with consistency in character design and voice actors (like the animated *Spider-Man* series' three-part adaptation of Marvel event comic *Secret Wars* in November 1997) but did not prioritize serial narrative continuity throughout the different shows. The MCU, on the other hand, has consistently emphasized its narrative continuity as one of the most important elements for fans to follow.

Analysis of the MCU as the preeminent transmedia franchise of today examines “opportunities to drill deeper into fan communities” and their behaviors as they seek investment in narrative worlds “that cross media boundaries.”¹⁴ Transmedia storytelling has become such a phenomenon within American media industries precisely because of its distinctive relationship with the convergence of media forms and how this convergence has affected traditional power dynamics between media producers and consumers. Transmedia worlds like the MCU have “become spaces of cultural experimentation and interpreters of [the] communities” that watch, purchase and engage with their content in all its media forms.¹⁵ Skillful negotiation between the interests of producers and consumers, especially when considering the many different degrees of investment between different fans in a given fandom, is essential to the high-grossing profitability and multi-generational longevity that any transmedia franchise seeks to attain.

In one respect, “the ready-made worlds of comic book mythology” are an asset to producers' expansive transmedia storytelling of comic book properties.¹⁶ Decades of source material and an already formed fan base provide producers with iconic intellectual

property to adapt and a deeply loyal audience of primed consumers hungry for adapted content. But at the same time, comic book iconography breeds rigid expectations based on years of familiarity with beloved characters and stories. Many of the MCU's characters, and certainly all of the universe's prominent superheroes, were not "introduced so much as reintroduced" to many viewers.¹⁷ As much as comic book iconography has helped the MCU in its appeal to Marvel fans, deeper understandings of adapted comic book characters imbue many fans with a sense of shared authorship, despite Marvel and Disney's actual corporate ownership of the MCU.

A transmedia universe as successful as the MCU cannot benefit from its comic book source without also experiencing the negative consequences of its already constructed fandoms. But while other adaptations of comic book source material have struggled to maintain this balance, the MCU has generally excelled through intentional and respectful management of its fans and the cultivation of earned authorship for Marvel Studios, with Kevin Feige as its creative head and Disney as its corporate parent. Armed with a positive relationship with its fans, Marvel Studios has become "the first company to fully utilize a conglomerate structure to develop a sustainable transmedia story."¹⁸ Moreover, the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe carries "great deal of weight in setting the agenda for industrial and popular conversations" about the future of franchise media and the multitude of ways by which audiences will consume it, both in theaters and at home.¹⁹

Since the box office and critical success of *The Avengers*, 20th Century Fox rebooted their series of X-Men films to better align in structure to the MCU, Paramount Pictures formed an MCU-style writers' room of creative executives for its *Transformers*

properties, and Universal Pictures has twice attempted to re-launch a new cycle of horror films to eventually result in a team-up film of the studio's most famous movie monsters. DC, Marvel's principal rival in the comic book industry, began its own cinematic universe with *Man of Steel* (2013) and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) but has struggled to enact the same consistent, organizational success of the MCU. The MCU has also influenced television and streaming content from competitors like DC, who produces a "rather wide collection of [superhero] television serials" and multi-series crossover events that make up the "Arrowverse" on television network The CW.²⁰ Marvel Studios and Disney's artful management both of their many media assets and their consumers are chiefly responsible for the continued success of the MCU and the wider method of transmedia storytelling that the franchise demonstrates.

Thoughtful analysis of the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a transmedia franchise must consider two equally important facets: the franchise structure across multiple media forms and how fans and consumers interact with the franchise and influence its ongoing production. This thesis' first chapter highlights the "strong organizational arrangement" needed to manage the MCU's many transmedia components.²¹ However, Marvel Studios does not position these components as equals, instead situating the feature films of the MCU as the transmedia universe's primary texts. Since the inception of the MCU's ever-expanding "horizontal distribution of content," the MCU's producers have structured their films as the center of their universe and relegated other media—namely television, video games and comics—to a subordinate tier.²² New MCU content on Disney's streaming service, Disney+, may complicate this transmedia universe's cinematic

primacy, as the platform's MCU series media will have a far closer creative and financial relationship to the films than any other non-cinematic media yet.

With the possibilities of Disney+ in mind, this thesis' second chapter examines the role of Marvel Television in the MCU's pre-Disney+ broadcast and streaming content. With series on ABC, Hulu, Freeform and Netflix, Marvel Television further fleshed out the diegetic world of the MCU films until Disney phased out the division, along with its head, Jeph Loeb, in late-2019.²³ Contrasts in corporate production management between Loeb's Marvel Television and Feige's Marvel Studios foreshadow the differences to come in the new MCU content on Disney+.

This thesis' third chapter considers the public-facing role of Kevin Feige and other producers and how these cultivated personas support productive relationships between producers and fans. Film, television and streaming cameos from the legendary Stan Lee, longtime editor-in-chief and brand ambassador of Marvel Comics from shortly after World War II to his death in 2018, offer MCU producers a sense of Lee's canonical authority and help to validate new Marvel media among fans. Direct appeals to a fan's narrative knowledge and commercial experience of the MCU better ensures a level of "audience participation that extends the commercial viability" of the transmedia franchise.²⁴

Lastly, this thesis' final chapter applies Henry Jenkins' observations on a growing culture of media convergence to the MCU's fan communities and "the power of the media consumer [to] interact in unpredictable ways" with the actions of MCU producers.²⁵ In a media ecology founded on principles of cult comic book fandom, the circulation and cultural value of MCU content relies on the continued active participation

of its consumers, which impacts how Marvel Studios and Disney evaluate different degrees of activity in the participation of their fans. Once again, the introduction of new, exclusive MCU content on Disney+ may catalyze “a change in the way media is produced and a change in the way media is consumed,” or at the very least a change in how fans of the MCU interact with the next decade of Marvel superhero media.²⁶

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is a central part of Hollywood’s modern fixation on “the construction and enhancement of entertainment franchises” and stands unequalled in narrative achievement for its “tightly coordinated long-term continuity.”²⁷ Amid a sea of big-budget, studio competition, the MCU continues to release box office and critical successes that counter the “repetition of the familiar” found in most media franchises with a growing cast of characters and storylines and a willing embrace of long-term Marvel Comics fandom.²⁸ Much remains unknown about the next phase(s) of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but with a closer look at its transmedia narrative, corporate structure and public relations, one can wager an educated guess about the sustained success of the Marvel media method.

Chapter 1 – Cinematic Primacy in Marvel’s Transmedia Universe

For every hour of film content in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there are five hours of television content. Dozens of tie-in comics, books, video games, theme park attractions and other media are responsible for the MCU’s secure establishment as a transmedia universe, as a film series on its own would not qualify as such. Though several films have grossed well over a billion dollars, theatrical releases generate less revenue than Marvel’s lucrative paratextual merchandizing.¹ With this in mind, The Walt Disney Company could have centrally positioned MCU merchandise, the franchise’s most profitable division, and based narrative decisions on how they would affect the design, marketing and reception of toys and other commercial products. They could have principally drawn attention to the vastness of the MCU’s range of media forms and minimized the unique importance of any one of its components. Instead, Disney and Marvel Studios have consistently positioned the MCU’s cinematic releases as more important and more necessary to consume (and re-consume) than any of its non-cinematic content. Eleven years in, the Marvel Cinematic Universe firmly remains the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*.

As of the end of the MCU’s third phase, there have been twenty-three films released between 2008 and 2019. Paramount Pictures distributed the first five films, save for *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), which was distributed by Universal Pictures. In 2009, the Walt Disney Company purchased Marvel Studios and began to distribute its films in 2013. Since then, Disney has produced and distributed all of the MCU films, though Spider-Man’s two solo films were co-produced with Columbia Pictures and distributed

by Sony Pictures.* Three series have aired on Disney-owned broadcast network ABC: *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020), *Agent Carter* (2015-2016) and miniseries *Inhumans* (2017). On Netflix, there have been five series and one miniseries, *The Defenders* (2017), which mirrored the narrative construction of the MCU's first phase of films in its build up from different solo series to a Netflix-wide crossover in the style of *The Avengers*. Whenever possible, Disney exhibits MCU content on owned or partially owned platforms. Teen drama *Runaways* (2017-2019) airs on majority-owned streaming service Hulu, and *Cloak and Dagger* (2018-2019) can be viewed on Freeform, Disney's basic cable channel. This vertical integration further establishes the company's many footholds within a diverse media market and promotes greater corporate synergy around fandoms, Marvel and otherwise, that Disney has methodically acquired in the past decade.

From 2011 to 2014, the home releases of five MCU films each included one of a series of shorts called Marvel One-Shots that expanded on the events of previous films. Some of these shorts, like those that featured S.H.I.E.L.D. agents Phil Coulson and Peggy Carter, served as proofs-of-concept for their subsequent television shows. *All Hail the King* (2014) responds to the divisive creative decision made in *Iron Man 3* (2013) that revealed Iron Man supervillain the Mandarin to be merely an actor employed by the film's true antagonist. The more comic accurate version of the character teased in the following One-Shot responded to complaints from Marvel's most ardent fan base and

* Marvel Studios initially brokered a deal with Sony Pictures to incorporate Spider-Man into the MCU, both in solo releases and *Avengers* films, for "5% of first-dollar grosses and all merchandising revenues." After tense contract renegotiations in Fall 2019, Spider-Man remains in the MCU for at least two more films to be co-produced by Marvel Studios for "roughly 25% of the profits" and merchandising rights. Sony Pictures plans to continue releasing their own Spider-Man films, like sequels to *Venom* (2018) and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) that exist outside the MCU franchise. See Lang, "Spider-Man Will Stay in the Marvel Cinematic Universe," 2019.

kept the door open for future appearances. Filmed acknowledgements of fan opinion such as *All Hail the King* encourage fans to express their frustrations and hopes in ways that Marvel Studios and Disney find productive, namely ones that will hopefully generate interest and box office success in future projects.

Though home releases remain a critically important piece of Marvel Studios' content, as they encourage continued viewing and purchasing by fans across multiple distribution windows, downward trends in DVD and Blu-Ray sales have prompted Disney to release its newest MCU shorts online.² These shorts, such as the non-canon mockumentary short *Team Thor* (2016) and episodes of *WHIH Newsfront* (2015-2016), a diegetic news channel within the MCU, were released for free on YouTube and official social media pages. The greater accessibility that came from these shorts' exhibition on free sites, as opposed to exhibition on DVD/Blu-Ray or behind a pay wall like Hulu, allowed these newer MCU shorts to function just as much as digital marketing campaigns for upcoming film releases as they did additional narrative content for fans to enjoy.

Despite strong presences in film, television and streaming markets, the MCU has not established a consistent market presence in video games. This is due, in part, to Marvel Entertainment having licensed out its video game rights across multiple companies in the late-1990s and early-2000s. Rights for the comics' most popular characters, like Spider-Man and the X-Men, were split among Sega Games Co., Activision Publishing Inc. and other developers. While Activision published Marvel content unrelated to the MCU, such as games for Sony's *The Amazing Spider-Man* franchise, Sega produced tie-in content about each of the MCU's five pre-*Avengers* films across multiple home gaming consoles. Their plots expanded on scenes shown in the

films but fit only loosely into the MCU's wider continuity.³ The addition of dozens of comic characters that had yet to make their cinematic debuts "resulted in a continuity calamity... that made matching the [film and video game] properties together as a cohesive district of the shared universe impossible."⁴ Had these games continued past the infancy of the MCU, when Marvel Studios was still figuring out early issues of cinematic world building, these pressing issues of continuity would have proved a greater challenge for a fan's transmedia experience of the franchise.

Before its closure in 2016, Disney's in-house video game developer and publisher, Disney Interactive Studios, produced only one Marvel-related title: *Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes* (2014). The open-world sandbox game modeled some of its more prominent Avengers on MCU character designs but did not situate itself within the universe's continuity. Despite the growing narrative capacity of sprawling open-world video games, Disney's sole self-developed Marvel title acted more as an "ancillary product" and a means of "stamping [the] franchise logo" onto related media in an effort to promote the greater Marvel brand across different media.⁵ Had Disney consistently owned Marvel's video game rights throughout these critical early years of the MCU, the capacity for their games to "explore ideas that couldn't fit within two-hour films" could have been fully realized and understood as another comparable narrative branch of the transmedia franchise.⁶ Instead, Disney continues to license additional cross-branded games, like *Lego Marvel's Avengers* (2016), that evoke the iconography of the MCU through visual aesthetics and parodic narrative adaptation but irrefutably do not fit within it. Without concentrated efforts by producers to highlight the MCU's re-watchable qualities through planted Easter eggs and interconnected story beats, audiences would not

be as familiar with the iconography parodied in the Lego games and in the posts and memes of online fan communities.

The MCU's official tie-in comics, published as "preludes" to upcoming films, definitively take place within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, distinct from Marvel's regular comic universe.⁷ The prelude for *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), for instance, features an illustrated two-part adaptation of the events of the preceding film, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), followed by three reprinted stories from the regular Marvel comics universe that relate to the film, like one of Spider-Man's early encounters with Mysterio (*Far From Home*'s antagonist) and a story where Spider-Man travels to London (the location of *Far From Home*'s climax.) These transfictional texts, that is to say texts that do not directly acknowledge or interact with one another but are related by their content, encourage consumers to engage with a wider range of connected texts all owned by the same parent company.⁸ They also allow for Marvel to generate new revenue by repackaging already published comics, some written nearly fifty years ago.

These transfictional connections to Marvel's vast catalogue reward fans of both MCU media and Marvel comics with a sense of knowledge and a claim to authority valued in the fan community. How one negotiates the contradictions and changes made during a character or story's adaptation from page to screen can be "a fundamental part of a reader's pleasure" and encourage dialogue and argument among fans that only ensure their continued media consumption.⁹ Reading how supervillain Mysterio is portrayed in the comics may inform how he will be portrayed in the films, but the two portrayals cannot be correctly interpreted as congruent entities. These transfictional discrepancies are advantageous for the MCU, as they guarantee points of debate among fans of both

media forms who understand that not all things Marvel are meant to be read as a unified collective. Such debate is especially valuable for Disney in their efforts to keep MCU interest alive between the releases of new content.

The prelude comics' original MCU material includes scenes referenced but not explicitly shown in other media that fans would recognize as part of the MCU's wider narrative continuity. Only readers of the prelude to *Avengers: Infinity War* see what Captain America's team had been up to between the events of *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and their reappearance in *Infinity War*. Otherwise unseen moments such as this reward close viewings and readings of the MCU without disrupting overall continuity or drawing too much attention to this gap in knowledge of casual fans.

Throughout this extensive breadth of inter-connected content, it remains clear that the flow of related information within the MCU almost exclusively travels outward from its films and into its other transmedia properties. What happens in the films is often explicitly referenced in the MCU's television series and other content. But while television and streaming media generally position the films as necessary viewing material for fans, the inverse is almost never the case so that "should one prefer to ignore the transmedia 'extras' ... the system [i.e. the universe as a whole] still functions."¹⁰

Marvel Studios structured the MCU as a "hexology of films" within a larger narrative arc that builds off of the expansive serial nature of comic books, a narrative structure that would have been familiar not just to comic readers, but also to viewers of modern serial television dramas.¹¹ In a retrospective of the MCU's first five or so years written in February 2014, William Proctor argued that each "sub-series of the MCU unfold[ed] sequentially and linearly," so that, for example, "one can watch the *Iron Man*

series in a causal ‘straight line’” without regard to the other films released in between.¹² Yet, such an argument does not account for Tony Stark’s significant character development in between his second and third films, namely his near-death experience in the climax of *The Avengers*, which manifests as a series of panic attacks Stark has in *Iron Man 3*. And in subsequent years, the MCU has placed less and less emphasis on these “causal straight lines” and has instead increasingly valued cross-film interconnection.

Proctor does account for this shift in character development and writes that alongside these “causal straight lines,” the MCU “unfolds non-linearly with parallel narratives that all inter-weave within the same story.”¹³ Iron Man has not had a solo film since 2013, and yet he has appeared in five films since (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Captain America: Civil War*, *Spider-Man Homecoming*, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*) and remains one of the franchise’s most prominently marketed characters, due in no small part to the MCU-generated star power of Robert Downey, Jr. This cross-film narrative strategy has also proved useful for the Hulk, whose solo film rights continue to be tied up in a messy deal with Universal Pictures.* Instead of producing a sequential follow-up to *The Incredible Hulk*, Marvel Studios has strategically paired the Hulk with other prominent characters in each of the four Avengers films and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and promoted his crossover film appearances as a strength of the MCU’s narrative structure.

* Marvel Studios regained film production rights to the Hulk in 2006, but distribution rights remained with Universal Pictures. To date, Universal Pictures retains “the right of first refusal to distribute” any Hulk solo film produced by Marvel Studios. To produce another Hulk film, Disney would either need to acquiesce distribution rights to Universal Pictures or buy them back for a hefty sum. See Hughes, “Details of Marvel’s ‘Hulk’ Film Rights – Fans Can Relax About Sequel,” 2015.

The MCU complicates Proctor's "causal straight lines" by telling its parallel and interweaving stories not only across different films but also across the universe's many media forms. For this reason, Martin Flanagan, Mike McKenny and Andy Livingstone, authors of *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe*, outright question "the continued use of the term *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, as opposed to *Marvel Transmedia Universe*."¹⁴ Similarly, Liam Burke calls the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* a misnomer, a name "no longer adequate to describe a narrative that has been extended across a number of media platforms."¹⁵ Marvel Studios has consistently highlighted the transmedia nature of its franchise and promoted the "higher visibility of [the MCU's] components and their interconnections;" the first official guidebook for the MCU series that aired on ABC is aptly titled *It's All Connected*.¹⁶ Behind the scenes, while senior creative executives like Kevin Feige, Victoria Alonso and others oversee the wider narrative universe, Marvel Television designated a transmedia producer, Geoffrey Colo, to assure that their non-cinematic media maintains interconnectivity with the more popular and profitable films. Web series produced with Colo's involvement, such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: Slingshot* (2016), expanded on the activities of popular secondary characters in MCU television, while documentaries that aired on ABC, like *Marvel 75 Years: From Pulp to Pop!* (2014) and *Captain America: 75 Heroic Years* (2016), covered the MCU's transfictional relationship with their comic book source material.

Despite how much time, money and labor Marvel Studios and Disney put into the construction and maintenance of this transmedia franchise's many non-cinematic components, they continue to position the cinematic releases as the MCU's primary texts. This suggests that Marvel Studios and Disney are convinced that the financial benefits of

preserving cinematic primacy in the MCU outweigh the potential narrative and creative benefits of embracing a differently prioritized system such as one that would prioritize broadcast or streaming content. Janet Wasko organizes Disney's corporate structure as "a wheel, with [a given] brand at the hub and each of the spokes as a means of exploiting it," a model that allows for "multiple, synchronous productions."¹⁷ After Disney's purchase of Marvel Studios in 2009, the MCU adopted same wheel-like shape of Disney's corporate structure. In the wheel, the films of the MCU act as the hub and the franchise's other in-canon media, mainly broadcast series, streaming content and tie-in comics, extended outward from the films. Disney recognizes that coordinated diversity in media forms can bring new audiences into the MCU by way of a variety of avenues and offer already familiar ones the opportunity to further engage with the franchise across multiple types of content. Simultaneously, producers remain aware of the greater cultural capital of cinematic releases for the general public compared to that of television, streaming content and other media.

The first season of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, which premiered in September 2013 on ABC, features several characters already introduced in the films (like series protagonist Phil Coulson, S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury and Asgardian fighter Lady Sif) and directly ties its serial plots into those of the films released during their seasons. For instance, Episode 8, "The Well," acts as "an extension of the narrative of *Thor: The Dark World*."¹⁸ The season's last few episodes run simultaneously to the climax of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), whose long-lasting effects (i.e. the disbandment of S.H.I.E.L.D. and resurgence of terrorist organization HYDRA) are shown in later seasons.¹⁹ In Seasons 3 and 4, legislation introduced in *Captain America: Civil War* to

restrict unauthorized superhuman activity becomes a central plot point; in Season 5, the team is warned of galactic despot Thanos in Episode 19, which aired the same night as the theatrical release of *Avengers: Infinity War*, in which Thanos is the main antagonist. These select examples represent *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s most obvious efforts to connect to MCU film chronology, though there are numerous smaller allusions and references throughout the series.

The same film-to-television flow exists on Netflix, Hulu and Freeform. New Yorkers in the first seasons of *Daredevil* (2015-2018), *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), *Luke Cage* (2016-2018) and *Iron Fist* (2017-2018) frequently reference the alien invasion that occurred in the climax of *The Avengers* but only in passing and with little bearing on seasons' plots. Most of the streaming series' connections to the films come in the form of background references to locations, companies and other world-building elements of the MCU, like Jessica Jones' threats to send criminals to superhuman prison The Raft and mentions of energy corporation Roxxon and the Dark Dimension on *Agent Carter* and *Cloak and Dagger*. Series on different platforms have referenced one another in passing but do little more than assure viewers that these disparate stories do vaguely take place within the same narrative universe, as when the climactic Harlem fight between Luke Cage and his villainous half-brother, Diamondback, was mentioned in season two of *Cloak and Dagger*.

Other crossovers serve to build interest for an upcoming series on the same channel or platform, such as Peggy Carter's flashback appearance in the second season of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Crossovers can also retain the fan base of a cancelled series, as with *Cloak and Dagger*'s crossover in the third season of *Runaways*. Still, even the

biggest-scale events on television do not impact the films in any noticeable way. The emergence of Inhumans in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s second season, revealed by the hundreds in a worldwide mutational outbreak, did segue into an *Inhumans* miniseries two years later, but no Inhumans have yet to make any cinematic appearance or even be referenced as something lurking in one of the MCU's many corners.

Only once have the actions of television characters significantly impacted the characters of the films, albeit subtly, when Phil Coulson's team repaired an old S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier to help the Avengers' evacuation of Sokovia in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). However, in the film their role is not directly acknowledged; when asked where the helicarrier came from, Nick Fury explains that he "pulled her out of mothballs with a couple of old friends." This throwaway line validates the time and effort of television viewers that had kept up with the weekly ABC show without interrupting the comprehension and enjoyment of fans who have only seen the films, or even just *Age of Ultron* in particular.

As fans dissect these transmedia connections, they engage in "multiple and close viewings of the films themselves, particularly in their home video" releases.²⁰ Engagement in home video markets has kept profitable for Disney a sector of media exhibition that is overall trending less popular in a digital age, uplifted further by behind-the-scenes content packaged exclusively with DVD and Blu-Ray releases of MCU films and series. Because of home releases and available streaming content, not to mention the carefully staggered releases of television and online media in between film premieres, it not difficult for a fan to continuously consume MCU-specific content. This year-round fan spends their time not only watching (and re-watching) MCU content but also

hypothesizing and theorizing on what could be coming next, what references were cleverly laid into the backgrounds and foregrounds of certain scenes, and how the different components of the MCU transmedia world connect to one another—interactions that each translate to specific dollar values for Disney.²¹

The greatest counterargument to cinematic primacy of the MCU has yet to come: the release of exclusive Disney+ MCU content starting in 2020. These series have cast many of the films' recognizable stars, a difference from previous shows who, at most, featured one supporting film character as a series lead (i.e. Peggy Carter) accompanied by a few as guest stars, like Carter's World War II army unit, the Howling Commandos, from the *Captain America* films. By comparison, the Disney+ series will feature a roster of film characters and actors with relatively higher name recognition like Jeremy Renner as Hawkeye and Tom Hiddleston as Loki. A more expensive cast and a level of special effects purported to be comparable to those of the films will reportedly result in episodes that cost up to \$25 million each, well beyond what any broadcast or cable show has spent per-episode in the past.²² These increased budgets and familiar character rosters, both publicized heavily by Marvel Studios, serve to reassure film fans that they should expect the same quality from Disney+ content as they do from the films. The Disney+ series will not only be connected to the films but harmoniously so. With such harmony in mind, Disney likely expects a significant portion of its subscribers to have joined primarily, if not exclusively, for new MCU content and unlimited access to already released films and series.

Aside from online press releases, Marvel Studios producers have marketed the Disney+ series at San Diego ComicCon, D23 and other live events open to press and fans

alike. Producers describe them in a similar fashion to how Marvel Television producers had described previous shows, as connected additions to the MCU that fans should watch in order to form a more complete picture of the narrative universe. Previous television-related announcements, delivered by Marvel Television producers (who technically operated outside of Marvel Studios but made efforts to maintain universe continuity—more to come on this in the next chapter), were presented to the public in smaller fan venues, typically at New York ComicCon. In contrast, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige revealed the upcoming Disney+ series at the same San Diego ComicCon event where he announced upcoming films, a much larger venue than New York. The Disney+ releases were even featured the same on-screen timeline graphic as the films of the MCU's fourth phase, a distinction not shared by any of the franchise's previous non-cinematic content.

Feige emphasized a notable distinction between previous MCU television and the Disney+ series, namely *WandaVision* (2020), which features cinematic supporting characters the Scarlet Witch and Vision. Previous shows situated their characters as having spun-off from the films with little to no planned cinematic presence going forward (i.e. Phil Coulson or Peggy Carter) or having lived entirely out of view through the events of the films (i.e. Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, etc.). In contrast, the characters in *WandaVision*, particularly Elizabeth Olsen as the Scarlet Witch, will be “changing, evolving, growing in [her] event series and then those changes will be reflected in [her] next film appearances,” namely *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* (2021).²³ Some weeks later, Feige revealed the sequel to *Doctor Strange* (2016) will have a similar connection to Disney+ series *Loki* (2021), setting the expectation that this streaming-to-

film connection will not be an isolated occurrence but rather the norm going forward.²⁴ While Marvel Television stressed connection in their projects, Marvel Studios has stressed intersection and interaction in what they promise Disney+ MCU content will bring to fans in the coming years. Not only does Disney assume that the service will offer enough quality content for MCU fans to justify a subscription fee, but the company must also intend for further stressed transmedia interaction between film and streaming content to result in a greater number of franchise-wide consumers moving eagerly and frequently between Marvel Studios' offerings in theaters and at home.

Whether audiences will consider the MCU's theatrical and streaming releases as comparable media more fully integrated with the films remains unknown. Even as Marvel Studios elevates Disney+ streaming content above the current subordinate status of MCU non-cinematic content, the films could still remain primary above all. The most important reason for the MCU's cinematic primacy remains as true in 2019 as it did eleven years earlier, when Marvel Studios prioritized a film's unique "ability to command larger audiences and build greater exposure" for an emerging franchise within the studio's creative hierarchy.²⁵ What have changed are the specific executives who oversee the film and television spokes of the MCU: Kevin Feige and Jeph Loeb respectively. With the release of streaming service Disney+, Feige has transitioned from an exclusively cinematic producer to the MCU's overall content producer, in the model of a Classical Hollywood studio mogul like Darryl F. Zanuck, managing both future film and television releases. If the cinematic primacy of the MCU is in part perpetuated by which creative personnel control a given media form, then the promotion of Feige and

departure of Loeb would indicate that the possibility of the MCU films relinquishing their unique primary state has never been as high as it is now.

Chapter 2 – Marvel Television Before Disney+

The cinematic primacy of the Marvel Cinematic Universe establishes a clear, subordinate tier for the transmedia franchise's many other texts. Janet Wasko's model of the corporate wheel ably positions the films at the center of that wheel but it does not account for any hierarchy among the franchise's remaining transmedia components. Such an unofficial hierarchy does exist within the MCU and at its top, second only to the films, sits the MCU's broadcast and streaming television content. How Marvel Studios positions Disney+ in relation to the films may complicate this arrangement and prove to be the most significant challenge yet to the primacy of the MCU's theatrical releases. Moreover, because of the different ways in which consumers interact with online and broadcast content, the relationship between followers of MCU television and its producers are likely to change significantly. But before one speculates on the impacts that Disney+ will have, it is worth understanding the landscape of the MCU's television content before the release of Disney+, more specifically the MCU-related content produced by Marvel Television under executive producer and head of television Jeph Loeb.

Despite years of already amassed credibility among comic book readers brought with him to Marvel Television, Loeb has not cultivated the same widespread, positive image for himself among MCU fans as has Kevin Feige, his counterpart at Marvel Studios. Despite Loeb's acclaimed background as a writer of Marvel (and DC) comics, he was unable to foster and manage the same level of perceived authenticity and right of authorship that fans bestow on Feige. This relative lack of credibility consistently tainted fan reactions to Marvel Television content and left many just as eager for Marvel Studios

personnel to have a greater creative say on television as they were to see the film characters interact with series regulars.

Marvel Television, Marvel Entertainment's former broadcast and streaming division, produced the MCU television series since its founding in 2010. Marvel Television, though also owned by parent company Disney, operated independently from Marvel Studios, the producers of the MCU films. In 2019, Marvel Studios took over Marvel Television's production duties for all upcoming MCU Disney+ content and cancelled all ongoing series. For nine years, the two divisions worked in conjunction, with frequent consultation between Loeb, Feige and other producers. The two also shared crossover talent from the films, both on screen and behind the scenes. Most notably, Joss Whedon, director of the first two *Avengers* films, co-developed *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* with several Marvel Television producers; Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely, writers of the *Captain America* trilogy and the third and fourth *Avengers* films, co-created *Agent Carter* for Marvel Television to produce. Despite such cooperation between Marvel Studios and Marvel Television, Loeb himself affirmed that "the television division is its own division; it has its own identity."¹

Marvel Television did not exclusively prioritize the extension of the MCU franchise into transmedia territory but did make efforts to draw wider Marvel audiences toward MCU content. Loeb and Dan Buckley, president of TV, Publishing and Brand for Marvel Entertainment, constructed Marvel Television "to take advantage of the greater cross-promotional opportunities offered" by the simultaneous and continuous release of a wide range of Marvel-related content aimed at various overlapping audiences.² Animated children's shows produced concurrently with the *Avengers* films, like Disney XD's

Avengers Assemble (2013-2019), adopted the same character roster as the film and introduced new heroes to coincide with their first MCU appearances to “create synergy with the [MCU] brand.”³ These synergistic goals may have aided Disney’s revenue stream, but a lack of consistent brand identity from Marvel Television’s MCU content left fans with unclear public images of the studio and its head, Jeph Loeb. Without the cohesive, positive perception enjoyed by Marvel Studios and its head, Kevin Feige, Marvel Television and Loeb relied on its associations and connections with the MCU films to engender fan validation of their claim of authority over Marvel characters and stories.

Marvel Television producers hoped that the transfictional relationship between their non-MCU media and the MCU, though unable to be read as part of the same universe, would nonetheless create larger brand awareness for all things Marvel and generate profitable consumption of Marvel-related merchandising. This last advantage is especially salient as it relates to Marvel’s youngest consumers, whose parents might hesitate to take them to a movie theater but will likely let them watch television at home and purchase action figures and other merchandise. Toys and other branded products play “a constitutive role in the production, development and expansion of” a franchise’s media texts, often to a point where, as argued by Jonathan Gray, they should be considered as texts themselves.⁴ By design, no single piece of MCU merchandise will appeal to every consumer and that even if a given product is not a runaway sales success in one market, it ideally “mean[s] a great deal to other audiences at other points in time.”⁵ Play sets and toys encourage younger consumers to explore their own narratives throughout and between the releases of new MCU content, while Disney manufactures limited edition

figurines and other collectors' items for older consumers who treat them not as interactive texts but as static totems of their fandom. A wide scope of paratextual products better ensures that different ages of fans can engage with the MCU despite the general PG-13 tone of the franchise's media texts.

The independence of Marvel Television from Marvel Studios did have one significant beneficial effect on the narratives of their series. Due to their freedom from the PG-13 constraints of Marvel Studios' films, the MCU's Netflix shows, all rated TV-MA, allowed for more graphic violence and a grittier tone that matched the realistic aesthetic of its street-level heroes.⁶ Without these tonal aspects, the Netflix shows would not have been able to "carve [their] own distinctive identity" within the MCU.⁷ Similarly, there is a diversity of tone among the MCU's film releases that assures a significant degree of product differentiation between one character's films and another's; one could hardly argue that galactic road-trip comedy *Thor: Ragnarok* takes itself as seriously as spy-thriller *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Although criticism that the films too often punctuate dramatic beats with comedic interjections (i.e. anticlimactic insertions of "bathos" to lighten thematically darker moments) are generally well founded.⁸ Other Marvel films like *Deadpool* (2016) and *Logan* (2017), produced by 20th Century Fox and free from the tonal constraints of the Disney-owned MCU, have successfully found profitable, R-rated audiences within a crowded market of PG-13 comic book films.* It is

* Marvel Studios distributed Lionsgate Films' R-rated *Punisher: War Zone* (2008) under the banner of "Marvel Knights", an imprint borrowed from the comics meant to highlight darker and more mature characters. Only one further film was released under the "Marvel Knights" banner, Columbia Pictures' *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* (2011). Both films were set outside of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, though both the Punisher and Ghost Rider would later appear in MCU media once their production rights reverted back to Marvel Studios.

hard to imagine that the MCU's Netflix shows would have been able to keep their mature elements if they had instead been produced as films more overtly under the Disney brand. Had they been, the absence of tonal maturity for characters like Daredevil, the Punisher and others would have raised serious concerns of adaptation fidelity for fans of the characters' most notable comic runs.

Some level of independence from Marvel Studios may also have afforded Marvel Television more freedom in addressing fan concerns. When "fans raised awareness of... whitewashing of an Asian American character in a proposed film adaptation of the *Runaways* comics series, Disney and Marvel moved quickly to reverse their casting call" and eventually cast a more "race appropriate" actress in the Hulu series.⁹ Yet, when met with similar public backlash for casting white actor Tilda Swinton to play the Ancient One, a Tibetan character, in *Doctor Strange*, Disney and Marvel Studios did not reverse their initial casting decision and featured Swinton in the film as well as again in *Avengers: Endgame*.¹⁰ There were surely many factors at play in both decisions, chief among them concerns of discouraging award-winning actors from appearing in future MCU projects. But above all others, Marvel Studios, as a company whose profitability relies significantly on international revenues, had to consider how the inclusion of a Tibetan character would harm the film's chances of entry into China's exclusive foreign import film market and its success in the nation's lucrative box-office.¹¹ Marvel Television, whose primary revenue stream comes from American broadcast, syndication and streaming, did not have to concern itself with the reaction from China's exclusive cinematic import market.

While Marvel Television appealed to a mainly American audience in broadcast, their online content reached a wider range of consumers, both through legal and illegal means of streaming. Adept online consumers have utilized the Internet's "different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control" in a digital space where it is easier to "interact with other consumers" than it would be for broadcast television viewers to organize behind a sizeable majority opinion.¹² While there had certainly been fandoms before the development of online communities, these communities have facilitated easier and quicker communication among their members. National letter-writing campaigns and press fanfare about the casting of high-profile roles has a long history in Hollywood—think Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara or Michael Keaton as Batman. Successfully organized fan campaigns, like the one that prevented CBS' cancellation of *Star Trek* in 1968, have substantially grown in number and now progress at a quick enough pace to be able to revise creative decisions mid-production.

The growing abundance of CGI effects used in post-production makes it possible for fan communities to pressure changes to footage already shot, as long as producers believe the eventual box office results and positive fan reception will outweigh the extra effort. Marvel Studios exhibits a pre-release cut of each film to confidential, typically in-house test audiences and schedules reshoots and other post-production modifications based on their reactions, a standard practice for big-budget Hollywood productions. In *Avengers: Endgame*, confusion around the Ancient One's magical presentation to the Hulk on the mechanics of time travel prompted reshoots that not only altered these mechanics but also changed the stakes of the film's resolution and Captain America's final mission through time.¹³

So far, the MCU's post-production modifications have not yet demonstrated a fandom's full potential in altering a studio's final product, though such a demonstration has happened for Paramount Pictures' *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020), an upcoming film based on the eponymous Sega video game franchise. Its first trailer, released in April 2019, was met with an outcry of negative fan responses "over the appearance and design of the titular blue hedgehog – particularly his teeth and lean legs."¹⁴ Instead of adhering to the character's rounded, cartoon-like video game design, producers opted for a more realistic Sonic with accentuated anthropomorphized features. The character redesign ultimately cost Paramount Pictures a little under \$5 million in addition to the box office revenue delayed by pushing back the film's release date by three months.¹⁵ Whether or not *Sonic*'s gamble will ultimately work in the studio's favor remains to be seen. Still, the overall more positive reception of the film's second trailer suggests that the value of receiving and negotiating fandom critiques has only increased for studios in recent years.

The cost of re-shoots prompted by a franchise's passionate fans can balloon a project's budget if mismanaged and would have been especially difficult to undertake in productions as tightly budgeted as those of Marvel Television. Disney did provide *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* with a relatively high budget for a primetime ABC program, but critics decried that the series still "struggled to live up to [the] promise" of delivering a similar quality of digital and practical effects as the films.¹⁶ Each season's reliance on good ratings and advertiser revenue made planning for the future an uncertainty. Unlike Marvel Studios, whose almost spotless track record of profitability has engendered enough confidence in Disney for them to green-light films several years in advance,

Marvel Television developed their series one season at a time.* Despite only garnering “modest first season ratings” from a small, yet passionate fan base, the Disney-owned ABC renewed *Agent Carter* because of “the broadcaster’s relationship with its corporate partner, Marvel.”¹⁷ The show performed poorly, but Peggy Carter as a character had garnered enough acclaim from fans for Disney to initiate the corporate “coordination and support necessary to sustain” this character’s place in the MCU.¹⁸

There are limits to how helpful this in-house corporate structure can be for a struggling series, as the series was cancelled after two seasons when ratings dipped even lower. To reward fans of the short-lived series, and the larger audience who had followed the *Captain America* films, Peggy Carter appeared again in *Avengers: Endgame* to provide a resolution to her relationship with Steve Rogers. Peggy Carter remains one of only a few characters to have transitioned from television to film, though she did first appear in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). The other is Howard Stark’s butler Jarvis, a supporting character from *Agent Carter*, who also has a brief cameo appearance in *Avengers: Endgame* in another effort by Disney to reward fans of the cancelled television series and assure them that they had not misspent their time and money in following the MCU’s non-cinematic content. Phil Coulson, whose early MCU appearances cemented the interconnectivity of the universe’s different heroes, has since only appeared in a brief supporting role in *Captain Marvel* (2019) as a younger version of himself in the 1990s, not a continuation of the character’s story in the present day.

* As of 2019, no film sequel in the Marvel Cinematic Universe has grossed less worldwide than its direct previous installment, except for *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Still, with an international gross of just over \$1.4 billion, compared to *The Avengers*’ \$1.5 billion, the film was an indisputable box office success for Marvel Studios and Disney.

All of the content produced by Marvel Television can be considered as a “hyperdiegetic mode of storytelling” that simultaneously adopts a wider scope of the MCU’s diegesis and delves deeper into what precipitates and follows certain universe-changing events.¹⁹ In its two seasons, *Agent Carter* alluded to the founding of the Soviet Union’s Black Widow training program and the aftermath of Captain America’s involvement in World War II. These links to previously released MCU films encourage the re-viewing, if not re-purchasing of content so that fans can piece everything together in hindsight. The MCU’s Netflix content in particular acted as a “world-builder” for New York City, the most important focal location in both the MCU and the comics. Marvel Television announced and initially marketed their Netflix shows as a unified pocket of the MCU that comprised of solo series *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage*, *Iron Fist* and team-up miniseries *The Defenders*. Marvel Television later released *The Punisher* (2017-2019), spun-off from *Daredevil*’s second season, though the series made less effort than the others to connect itself to the events of the others. The Netflix pocket’s lead-up to *The Defenders* employed *The Avengers*’ “enormously successful [cinematic] business strategy, namely the solo introductions of several heroes who would eventually feature in a team-up crossover.”²⁰ This repeated formula provided Marvel Television with a release strategy already proven to be cinematically successful and also led viewers to expect long-term pay offs for their continued fandom.²¹

Each Netflix series embraced a somewhat different tone and genre—*Jessica Jones*, for instance, was a feminist film noir, whereas *Iron Fist* borrowed from martial arts films of the 1970s—and thus appealed to different audiences. As Netflix sequentially released each new series, portions of each series’ audience moved from one to the next,

joined by those in the wider Marvel fandom along Disney's intended path from each individual series to the team-up.* Marvel Television structured *The Defenders* so that fans of any individual series would understand the miniseries' plot, while those who had viewed them all would feel rewarded for their time with Easter eggs and other peripheral references. Viewers of *Luke Cage* did not need to see the character's previous introduction in *Jessica Jones* to understand the plot of his solo series. But for those who had seen both in sequence, the serial nature of the Netflix shows, which unfolded more or less in real time with their releases, would afford them additional knowledge about the histories and motivations of characters. This strategy was a shrewd one for Disney to deploy on Netflix, whose "continual availability" of online content "does not support the 'traditional' modes of seriality" of broadcast television.²² If one can watch any episode or series at any time, then any franchise that expects fans to consume it years after its original release must provide enough incentive for consumers to experience its content in the order in which it was intended to be consumed.

Marvel Studios' upcoming Disney+ content will face the same issues of consumption, not only in regard to viewing order but also in how the content fits chronologically within the release of MCU films. The ability to plan out streaming series alongside and intertwined with the films is made significantly easier when both are produced by Marvel Studios and exhibited on the same streaming platform. Instead of semi-autonomous television produced in loose coordination with the filmmakers, Marvel

* Unfortunately, Netflix does not share specific details on viewership and audience behavior of its original series. Exactly how much of *Daredevil*'s audience segued into *Jessica Jones* upon its release is unknown, but the reasons behind their release strategy speak clearly to Disney and Marvel Television's intentions for the MCU's Netflix content.

Studios' Disney+ series will fit “precisely [into] how the universe will look at [the] point in time” of each season, potentially even week to week.²³ If, as advertised, the visual aesthetics and special effects standards of the series are on par with that of the films, the consistent, year-round MCU presence that Disney+ will create with the films will lessen the distinction between film and television content.

New characters will be introduced both in films and streaming content, as already recognizable names, like the Scarlet Witch, Loki and Hawkeye, move between the two media forms. Their movement will demonstrate the greater narrative investment possible for viewers to attain through the consumption of shared characters and stories across several simultaneous media forms. The passing of the Captain America name from Steve Rogers to Sam Wilson, as seen in *Avengers: Endgame* after the character's evolution in the comics, acts as an updating function for longtime fans of the MCU who Disney hopes will follow the new Captain America from film to streaming content. The transmedia universe of the MCU may begin to resemble the Marvel Comics print universe more and more, with streaming series to cover the simultaneous lives of certain characters and films to display their crossovers and larger-scale events. Instead of the MCU's television properties simply “fill[ing] the gaps between blockbuster cinema events,” they may interact and converge with them in unprecedented ways.²⁴

At the center of the MCU's expansion into Disney+ comes an assertion from the studio that these newest series are distinctly theirs, unique from any past MCU television and streaming content. Preempting the release of MCU series on Disney+, Netflix, Hulu and Freeform cancelled all of their ongoing MCU content in a matter of months, as if to avoid any confusion over where the future of MCU streaming media will be located. To

complement the diegetic and budgetary distinctions between Marvel Television and upcoming Disney+ content, Marvel Studios has reinforced standardization in branding that prominently displays their studio's ownership of the series' productions. The MCU-related series produced by Marvel Television, whose titles all technically start with *Marvel's* (i.e. *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Marvel's Daredevil*, *Marvel's Runaways*, etc.), began their episodes with the standard media logo used by Marvel Entertainment since the early-2000s.* To honor its comic roots, the logo flips through pages of Marvel comics before it settles on framed white letters on a red background. Until 2016, each MCU film featured the same logo, albeit with "Marvel Studios" written in white instead of simply "Marvel". Starting with the release of *Doctor Strange*, Marvel Studios changed their logo to further distinguish their films from other Marvel releases. The new logo begins with the same flipping comic pages but quickly introduces screenplay pages, then transitions from comic imagery to hand-drawn versions of the film characters and finally to images from the films themselves. These images exclusively come from the films distributed by Marvel Studios (i.e. no clips from *The Incredible Hulk* or either Spider-Man solo film), another sign of cinematic primacy within the transmedia franchise. With each new film, the logo was updated to include newly introduced characters, and after the events of *Avengers: Infinity War*, when Thanos snapped away half the universe's population, so too have half of the logo's characters disappeared. In addition to distinguishing the Marvel Studios films from other Marvel content, the usage of film clips in the studio logo reward the eagle-eyed fans that can connect them to larger scenes within the MCU.

* The appendix of this thesis charts the visual evolution of Marvel Studios' cinematic logo, from its pre-MCU releases through *Avengers: Endgame*.

The branding of Marvel Studios' Disney+ streaming content positions itself on equal terms to the films and connotes a sense of authorship for the studio and its producers.²⁵ In the individual series logos of the Disney+ series, the *Marvel's* prefix is gone. Instead, the "Marvel Studios" logo, identical to that of the films, is placed above the titles. This effort to positively "manage the relationships between the producer, product and consumer" would have little effect on fans if the reputations of Marvel Television and Marvel Studios were not as starkly different as they are.²⁶ In part because of Loeb's relative lack of positive rapport with fans, news of Feige's promotion to Chief Creative Officer at Marvel Entertainment, and Loeb's subsequent stepping down from his position at Marvel Television, were generally met with praise and excitement.²⁷ Articles heralding the corporate change highlight Feige's "most enviable track record" in entertainment and paint his upcoming Disney+ shows as "so far beyond anything Marvel TV has been able to do."²⁸ The same articles acknowledge Loeb, at best, as a "veteran producer," with several successes under his belt but whose best days at Marvel seem to be behind him.²⁹ Despite an established career in the comic industry, a career longer than Feige's in film production, Loeb did not define himself at Marvel Television as a craftsman, nor an artist. His lower-profile and inconsistently publicized role as a creative executive lent themselves to fan perceptions that did not distinguish Loeb from the typical image of a corporate, Hollywood producer. For a fan base as focused on creative credibility as Marvel's, the lack of a clearly publicized creative role for Loeb significantly hurt his standing with fans of MCU television and streaming content.

Along with the content itself, the personal reputations of Feige and Loeb that have been manufactured by Disney and Marvel Studios play a substantial role in the building

of a positive, sustained and profitable relationship between producers and consumers by removing as much distance between them as possible. This effort is often reflected in the films and television series themselves, perhaps most interestingly in the upcoming Disney+ series *What If...?*, (2021) which positions its producers in the same role as fans, capitalizing on extensive knowledge of Marvel continuity and theorizing all the many ways the MCU could have been like were one thing to have changed for the weirder.³⁰ For more consistent evidence of Marvel Studios' manufactured image, one need not look further than the wealth of Stan Lee cameos for which the Marvel Cinematic Universe has become famous.

Chapter 3 – Credibility in Creator Cameos

Cameos of a film's director have a long history in Hollywood. The most notable director cameos come from Alfred Hitchcock, who appears briefly in the majority of his American releases. By the latter half of his career, audiences had come to expect these typically comedic beats in each new film, so Hitchcock deployed them shrewdly, typically before the plot truly kicks off at the end of his films' first acts so as to not distract from the dramatic action of the story. Why these cameos appealed to Hitchcock's audiences may seem counterintuitive at first, as they had the capacity to distract viewers from the story and draw "attention to the constructed nature of the fictional world."¹ Hitchcock believed that the value added by these "troublesome gags," as he put it to François Truffaut, outweighed their negative role as distractions from the diegesis.² Moreover, the acclaimed director knew that his small, yet memorable roles would reward those familiar with his cinematic catalogue and affirm (or re-affirm) his bond with the audience.³

For modern filmgoers, a Marvel movie's Stan Lee cameo holds much of the same appeal for fans that a Hitchcock cameo did decades ago. Through a paramount "claim [of] authority in the [comic book] industry" built from sculpting the modern Marvel comics universe in the 1960s, Lee accumulated a media presence and industrial celebrity status greater than any of his industrial peers or followers.⁴ Lee's cameos were not exclusive to the Marvel Cinematic Universe; he appeared in films released by Disney, 20th Century Fox, Sony and others, as well as several appearances on television and in animated form between 1989 and 2019. Some of his film cameos share Hitchcock's affinity for early appearances, such as in 20th Century Fox's *Fantastic Four: Rise of the*

Silver Surfer (2007), where in the first few minutes he unsuccessfully attempts to crash the protagonists' superhero wedding. Others, like an appearance with his wife, Joan, in 20th Century Fox's *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016), suffer from their distracting placement within the film's dramatic climax. Similar to how he wrote directly to his "true believers" as editor-in-chief and publisher of Marvel Comics in the 1960s and 1970s, Lee appropriately appeared as a narrator on television. Lee's episodic narrations guided viewers into the worlds of animated series like *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends* (1981-1983) and *The Incredible Hulk* (1982-1983). His self-promoted claim of authorship for the Marvel universe as a whole, though problematic in its minimizing of other artistic and editorial voices present in Marvel Comic's most formative years, placed Lee in the perfect position to establish Marvel's "sense of identity and distinct worldview" in various media.⁵

Stan Lee's cameos in the Marvel Cinematic Universe aided in establishing that particular universe's identity and worldview, but they also helped comic fans accept the MCU as an ever-expanding transmedia universe. Every MCU film and television series thus far has credited Lee as an executive producer and television series, despite the fact that Lee was not significantly involved in any of their productions outside of having written some of the comic book source material on which the projects were based. Instead, Lee's primary impact on each of the MCU's projects lay in his cameo appearances and in his capacity as an unofficial "brand manager" for the MCU and the Marvel name as a whole.⁶ By enlisting Lee to cameo in each of their films and series, Marvel Studios hoped that not only would audiences enjoy seeing a familiar face pop up for a quick in-joke or reference but also that the authority and authenticity that Lee had

amassed over decades of direct address to comic readers would be transferred onto their new cinematic universe.

Lee is not the only comic creator to have appeared in the MCU, just the franchise's most prominent one. Writer J. Michael Straczynski attempts to lift Thor's unmovable hammer in the Norse god's eponymous debut film. In a later scene, another *Thor* writer, Walt Simonson, eats a few tables away from Thor and his friends at a diner. Ed Brubaker, comic book creator of the Winter Soldier, appears as the character's HYDRA handler in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Writer Kelly Sue DeConnick, who introduced pilot Carol Danvers as the new Captain Marvel, waits for a Los Angeles train in the superheroine's solo film. And Jim Starlin, creator of cosmic antagonist Thanos, attends Captain America's support group at the beginning of *Avengers: Endgame*. The MCU's more esoteric creator cameos were not as pronounced nor publicized as Lee's and rewarded a smaller group of fans for their very deep knowledge of comic history. Overall, these cameos granted a level of "legitimacy to fan identities that are reverential and respectful" of the source material on which the creators have worked.⁷

The Stan Lee cameo should not be dismissed as worthy of filmic analysis because of its often-tangential relationship to the plot of a given MCU film or series. Instead, his cameos serve as an extra-narrative tool with which Marvel Studios compounded its franchise legitimacy with comic fans in need of assurance (or reassurance) that the MCU's producers are fans themselves and therefore valid in their efforts to produce Marvel content. Lee's cameos make up one way in which MCU producers accept and work with fans' feelings of ownership over Marvel characters and stories despite their

lack of legal ownership. Of course, Marvel Studios and Disney enforce their ownership of Marvel's intellectual property with copyright laws and anti-piracy protection.* The balance sought between these two corporate responsibilities is difficult to manage, but efforts as public facing and pleasing to fans as Stan Lee cameos have alleviated some of the pressure on MCU producers to address both concerns.

In his MCU cameos, Lee encompasses an inconsistent variety of identities that highlight his extra-narrative relationship to the ongoing narrative of the universe. Most of Lee's characters go unnamed and hold a number of different occupations, from a U.S. Army General to a museum security guard. In some instances, Lee specifically plays another individual, such as in the first two *Iron Man* films, where Tony Stark jokingly mistakes Lee for Hugh Hefner and Larry King respectively; in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, a Queens woman explicitly addresses Lee as Gary, her chatty neighbor. Two of these roles, an unlucky soda drinker in *The Incredible Hulk* and a Sakaaran barber in *Thor: Ragnarok*, do have limited diegetic capacities and move the plot forward for the films' protagonists.

Lee's cameos in television and streaming content convey a multilayered appeal for fans with different levels of Marvel knowledge. Lee appears in person in Hulu's *Runaways*, ABC's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Agent Carter*, each time in an unnamed, comedic role similar to the majority of his film appearances. To meet fan expectations despite a far smaller budget than the films, Freeform's *Cloak and Dagger* subtly features

* In 2013, Marvel Entertainment requested that independent filmmaker Mike Pecci cease production on the pilot for a potential web-series, *The Dead Can't Be Distracted*, to star Marvel vigilante The Punisher. Pecci elaborates on this example of copyright enforcement in "A Better Punisher: The Story of My Fan Film," published on his website in 2013.

Lee in an Andy Warhol-style painting. Similarly, each of Marvel's Netflix series features Lee's picture on police posters and legal ads throughout New York City. Print cameos avoided the difficulties of inviting Lee to travel across the country for on-location shoots on the east coast. These efforts would be made for certain films, but the subordinate status of the Netflix and Freeform series impeded such an undertaking.

In each Netflix series, Lee's posters and ads identify him as Irving Forbush, a nod to the protagonist of Marvel's first parody comic, *Not Brand Echh*. While the reference to a 1960s satirical comic was undoubtedly planted only for the most observant of fans, plenty of casual Marvel fans would have recognized Lee's face in the backgrounds of scenes and been rewarded enough by recognizing him even without understanding the deeper meaning behind his character's name. Without decades of Lee's previous media and press appearances, producers would not have been able to reasonably expect that most fans, let alone casual viewers, would value Lee's cameos as rewards.

The most intricately plotted of Lee's cameos comes in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017), which features him twice as an informant to the Watchers, a race of all-seeing aliens who in the comics keep an eye on superhero activity across the cosmos. To the disinterested Watchers, Lee describes his time as a FedEx deliveryman, his cameo identity at the end of *Captain America: Civil War*. In continuity, *Guardians Vol. 2* takes place in 2014, whereas the events of *Civil War* occur two years later. While this reference by Lee seemingly breaks in-universe continuity, the cameo directly acknowledges the assumed viewing continuity of its audience, as Disney released *Guardians Vol. 2* one year after *Civil War*. Lee speaks to the Watchers, but his cameo speaks to the audience and rewards fans that have paid the closest of attention to the MCU's real-time

development. This reward allows for a fan's temporary suspension of narrative focus to acknowledge and celebrate a familiar figure like Lee. Moreover, reinforcing Henry Jenkins' observations on the converging flows of fan and producer creative power, Lee's identity as a Watcher informant originated as a fan theory in MCU-related online communities, one that Marvel Studios producers and the film's director, James Gunn, adapted for the film and acknowledged after its premiere.⁸ There have been other instances of fan reaction spurring future production decisions in the MCU, but this one reassured online communities the most that their considerations as fans were noticed by those with the power to change the fictional world that they followed so closely.*

Clearly reliant of Lee's unique ability to project credibility and authenticity to Marvel's most loyal fan bases, Marvel Studios filmed several of Lee's last cameos back-to-back in 2017.⁹ The organizational effort and production costs that came with such a coordination of multiple films, each with their different directors and crews, were undoubtedly high. And while Lee's revered position among Marvel fans and employees surely warranted a higher level of expense than most cameos, it is difficult to believe that this was Marvel Studios' singular motivation in featuring the nonagenarian in MCU media for as long as possible.

In *Captain Marvel*, the first MCU film to be released after Lee's death in December 2018, the Marvel Studios logo, the franchise's specific "hallmark of quality control" and brand iconography, replaced film clips of its heroes with ones of Lee's many cameos.¹⁰ *Captain Marvel* also marks the only time in the MCU that Lee explicitly plays

* Other examples include Peter Parker's retconned appearance in *Iron Man 2* (2010) and the threat of a more comic-accurate Mandarin in *Iron Man 3*'s home release short film *All Hail the King*.

himself, here reading a copy of *Mallrats* (a 1995 Kevin Smith comedy which features an extended cameo from Lee in its third act) on a Los Angeles subway train. As much as *Captain Marvel*'s tributes paid homage to the life of Marvel's most publicly known creative figurehead, they also assumed correctly that viewers of the MCU's twenty-first film would have already been intimately familiar with the public persona of "Stan the Man", as he is credited in *Thor* (2011) and other features.*

To the public, Stan Lee positioned himself as the creator and author of much of the Marvel Comics universe through his catchphrase-ridden, omniscient narration in comics and hundreds of live appearances where he spoke with the same zeal and love for the fans. While the directors and showrunners of each MCU project add their individual touches to the wider universe, authorship of the MCU as a whole most clearly rests with producer and president of Marvel Studios Kevin Feige. His claim of industrial authority is justified not only by his title but also by his extensive resume of producer credits that began with several pre-MCU Marvel films from the early-2000s like 20th Century Fox's *X-Men* (2000) and Sony Pictures' *Spider-Man*. How much fans interpret Feige's industrial resume as a sign of credibility is less clear. Some fans do choose to engage with what limited segments of the production process are made available by Marvel Studios through online communities, interactive Q&As and other venues. Fans of the MCU exhibit "a greater investment in the institutions and practices of networked culture" and behind-the-scenes developments than fans of most other franchises.¹¹ Still, the primary modes in which fans evaluate the credibility of those behind Marvel Studios'

* The appendix's final entry features *Captain Marvel*'s opening tribute to Stan Lee in comparison with the typical MCU logo.

productions are generally limited to press junkets, live convention appearances and what they present on social media.

At these venues, all meticulously planned by Disney and Marvel Studios, Feige and other creators “deploy their fan identities... to position themselves as ideally suited” to helm the MCU franchise.¹² Because each entry within the franchise is at least loosely adapted from comic book sources, the fan credibility these positions create centers around a producer’s ability to oversee the “recreation of an existing franchise” and adapt what fans already considered to be successful in comic book form.¹³ The projection of familiarity and passion of Marvel comic book source material is a must, along with a palpable level of respect, even admiration, for fans that take the material seriously.

Feige’s appearance and demeanor mirror that of Marvel’s “fanboy audience of adult and adolescent males;”¹⁴ his trademark logo-embroidered baseball cap, business-casual black polo shirt and gray blazer complement his easy-going confidence and comfort in speaking to fans. With each tease of the MCU’s next phase, released every other year or so at San Diego ComicCon or Disney’s own D23 expo, Feige expresses how he wishes he could tell fans everything he has to share but wants to save a few surprises for later. He mimics the inviting nature and hype-man role of Lee’s original Marvel Comics editorials and occasionally toys with audience expectations. At a press conference in 2014 introducing the MCU’s third phase, Feige misleadingly announced *Captain America: Serpent Society* (named for a group of inconsequential snake-themed villains from the comics) as the next film in the series, before revealing the true subtitle as *Civil War* to raucous cheers. To highlight Feige’s managed media persona is not to suggest that any particular aspect of it is facetious or duplicitous. On the contrary, the

careful manufacturing of the MCU's business face assures fans that Feige's quality understanding and respect of comic book source material and the universe he shepherds matches, if not exceeds, the level of understanding and respect from the fans.

Marvel Studios distinguishes itself from other film franchises in its courting not only of casual action and superhero genre moviegoers but also of the existing community of comic book fans whose known interests already “predispose them toward the kinds of conversations [Marvel Studios seeks] to facilitate.”¹⁵ The Marvel Cinematic Universe and the narrative universe of the Marvel Comics are two distinct entities in more than just what media form they take, but the crossover appeal from page to screen is clear. When Feige flaunts “his fanboy credentials during interviews” and other press events, he speaks directly to this page-to-screen crossover audience but not in a way that may explicitly alienate casual fans or new viewers.¹⁶ Feige is aware that Marvel Comics fans, longtime or otherwise, “constitute only a small part of the potential audience for Marvel film” and accordingly tailors his messaging for fans as both a reward for insider knowledge and an invitation for those less familiar with the Marvel world to delve deeper.¹⁷ The superfans present at exclusive ComicCon and D23 events are privy to footage and in-person appearances by Marvel talent that the average Marvel consumer will not experience. As the exclusive presentation transpires, Marvel Studios shares each announcement in real-time on official social media feeds (video footage of the event is not released until at least following day), astutely aware of the much larger group of fans that remain outside the superfans' bubble. These casual fans sometimes enter into sites of fan culture and debate but never participate as actively as those who traffic firmly inside them.

Other studios have looked to how the MCU publicizes their future film releases and have hoped to find success in variations of the same formula. Warner Bros.' DC comics film franchise, unofficially labeled the DC Extended Universe (DCEU), shared to the public in October 2014 what its first phase of superhero films would look like, with upcoming features like *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, *Wonder Woman* (2017) and their Avengers-style team up film *Justice League Part One* and *Part Two* (2017 and, as envisioned, 2019).¹⁸ Aside from which specific comic characters would soon don their capes and spandex, Warner Bros. handled their release differently than Marvel Studios in two key ways. Firstly, the studio's presented these upcoming releases at a Time Warner investors meeting, not an exclusive fan event like ComicCon or D23; only afterwards was all information published online for fans communities and the press to dissect.¹⁹ Secondly, unlike Marvel Studios' unique panels within ComicCon or larger Disney events, the reveals of the DCEU's future were lumped in with several other of Warner Bros.' licensed franchises, like Harry Potter and the LEGO films. Executives made little effort to intersect these announcements to appeal to crossover audiences of multiple Warner Bros. franchises. How the DCEU's films were initially announced may not have had an exorbitant effect on their relative lack of critical or box office success compared to the MCU franchise. Even so, they did exhibit flaws in Warner Bros.' relations with comic book fan that the studio has since spent time and money trying to repair. In contrast, Kevin Feige and his team have instead been able to focus on expanding their universe to new, diverse audiences instead of worrying about retaining the audience it already had.

Producers, creators and actors who do not look or act like Feige, in addition to those who hold lower-ranking roles within the executive hierarchy of Marvel Studios,

undoubtedly face more obstacles when convincing fans that they too share a quality understanding and respect for all things Marvel. Comic book and superhero fandoms continue to skew white and male, as does participation in the film industry more generally.²⁰ As a more diverse range of directors have begun work in the MCU, like Taika Waititi of *Thor: Ragnarok*, Ryan Coogler of *Black Panther* (2018) and Chloé Zhao of *The Eternals* (2020), they have modified the Feige appeal to connect with wider range of viewers and fans, with the goal of assuring both high quality comic book adaptation and greater representation of the previously marginalized.

Many actors of the MCU, at least those cast as titular leads, similarly undertake coordinated efforts to build credibility with the comic book fan base. After she was cast as Captain Marvel, Oscar-winning actress Brie Larson posted a picture on Twitter in August 2016 of herself reading *Captain Marvel Vol. 1*, written by Kelly Sue DeConnick, which served as the screenwriters' main inspiration for their upcoming film.²¹ In the photo, Larson reclines casually on a couch dressed in Captain Marvel-themed sleepwear, indistinguishable from what fans could purchase from the merchandising spoke of Disney's corporate wheel and wear themselves. The post asks her social media viewers to consider her celebrity status alongside the signs of fandom she displays. In short, she negotiates her public persona to appear among Captain Marvel fans, not merely as the actress who plays her.

Benedict Cumberbatch, cast as Doctor Strange in December 2014, is similarly featured on Twitter reading a *Doctor Strange* comic book, though unlike Larson he wears his full film costume.²² Cumberbatch also visited a New York City comic book store while filming nearby and posed with a trade paperback of one of Doctor Strange's most

celebrated comic book runs, a detail that longtime fans of the character would not have missed.²³ These efforts by Cumberbatch, Larson and others are more than just attempts to ingratiate Hollywood A-listers with the archetypal comic book nerd, “the token figure of the fan.”²⁴ They make up a small, yet significant part of Marvel Studios’ consistent marketing strategy to deemphasize as much as possible the corporate nature of their status as a multi-billion dollar studio.

Disney supposes that the typical comic book fan, as well as most casual moviegoers, will more easily identify with Marvel Studios if it projects an “outsider... renegade status” as opposed to openly embracing its role as a subsidiary of the Disney media empire.²⁵ Again, none of this is to suggest that the actors in question are not “true” comic book fans; there is already enough of a bigoted, toxic culture in fandom about who is and is not, who can and cannot be considered a true fan. But to fairly and wholly evaluate the world’s most successful producer of a comic-based transmedia universe, one must not overlook the calculated public relations strategies of Marvel Studios’ producers and talent that lie both within their films and television series, in press events and on social media.

Chapter 4 – Producers → Content → Fandom → Producers

As designated by Henry Jenkins, three fundamental criteria shape the concept of media convergence: the “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences.”¹ Media convergence is by no means synonymous with the structuring of a transmedia franchise, but the examination of these three criteria does reveal how the presence of one facilitates the other.² Any transmedia franchise depends upon one continuous diegesis played out across multiple media platforms, at least “three or more,” according to transmedia writer and producer Jeff Gomez.³ This exact number is to some extent arbitrary, but with an increase in the number of different media platforms comes greater clarity that a given franchise is indeed a transmedia universe.

Disney has made a concentrated effort, more than most studios, to purchase or produce their own means of online exhibition instead of licensing out their intellectual property to other companies. Alongside the development of Disney+, the studio assumed full control of Hulu in May 2019 in an effort to, as announced by Disney chairman and CEO Bob Iger, “completely integrate Hulu into [Disney’s] direct-to-consumer business.”⁴ Similarly, Disney’s March 2019 acquisition of 20th Century Fox prevented the need for complicated co-production rights negotiations between the two companies over Fox-owned Marvel characters like the X-Men and the Fantastic Four. Even with such integration, the transmedia structure of the Marvel Cinematic Universe depends on multiple media industries not owned by Disney’s media conglomerate, like New York City-based production resources for the MCU’s Netflix content or toy manufacturers for branded merchandizing. Disney would not have invested so heavily into their upcoming

MCU Disney+ streaming series without the expectation, that film viewers will migrate to online content behind a monthly pay wall. In addition to subscription revenue, any greater awareness of the Disney brand (either explicitly so, or under the guise of one of its subsidiaries like Hulu and ESPN+ bundled as a new streaming package) only serves to increase revenue in other areas of Disney's converging media empire.

Not every example of media convergence constitutes a transmedia universe. However, in tandem the two are growing as an industrial practice, as more and more studios look replicate Disney and Marvel Studios' highly effective production model. By negotiating media convergence and transmedia storytelling, studios hope to extend engagement with their franchises across platforms they largely or totally own, and turn a hopefully large number of casual viewers into brand "loyals," fans obsessed "with participating in properties in their totality."⁵ Disney values the fandom of "loyals" not only as their content's "correct, inevitable audience" but also as an audience with consistent, bankable patterns of consumption and reconsumption.⁶ The goal of these studios' transmedia universes, at least as they relate to their audience, is to ensure that "everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience" than those who invest less but can still enjoy the universe on a simpler level.⁷ For the Marvel Cinematic Universe, this goal relies just as heavily on the active participation of "loyals" as it does on the industrial behavior of the studio and its producers.

Since the late-2000s, "dramatic increases in youth media production," particularly media published online, suggest "a trend toward increasingly active participation" by young media consumers.⁸ Lower costs in production equipment, from cameras to editing

software, combined with more accessible sites of distribution like YouTube and Vimeo have removed or mitigated many of the obstacles of media production for young producers. For Marvel Studios, a company whose intellectual property already resonates strongly with young consumers, particularly young men, this trend may explain why its fans are substantially more active in their participation than fans of other transmedia universes.

A counterpoint to the ongoing success of the MCU, Universal Studios' Dark Universe, a cancelled modern reboot series of their Classical Hollywood horror film catalogue, did not find an active, participatory audience. This is due in part to the fact that its source material, while well known by multiple generations in popular culture, did not bring with it an already established active participatory system. Moreover, much like Universal's original horror films, the Dark Universe was not a transmedia universe, as its media content did not extend beyond cinemas.⁹ The Dark Universe's first (and to date, only) entry, *The Mummy* (2017), teases an expanded universe with hints of other monsters and characters from horror lore but hopes to elicit excitement from an audience less familiar with the mechanics of world-building than Marvel's. Without the multiple points of entry offered by a transmedia universe, the Dark Universe's strictly cinematic universe restricted the avenues of potential fans to actively participate with Dracula, Frankenstein's monster and the rest.

Active participation by audiences did not begin with the advent of the Internet. Amateur radio broadcasting and home movie production throughout the twentieth century predate online forums, social media and YouTube by decades.¹⁰ Written fan fiction, circulated in print at meet-ups and conventions before fans published texts online,

extended the story worlds of sci-fi and other cult texts into new directions and possibilities.¹¹ What has changed as more and more people have logged on is the speed at which content is distributed, altered and commented on. Media texts produced by Hollywood studios act as starting points for online discussion but very rarely encompass the entirety of a fan community's focus. Studios release teasers and trailers on official YouTube channels and social media pages. Within a matter of days, sometimes only hours, an entire ancillary industry of online fans and "loyals" will closely analyze the narratives, themes, characters and production details of pieces of studio-released content in media of their own. This user-generated content takes many popular forms: teaser and trailer breakdowns, plot speculations, "10 Things You Might Have Missed..." and so on.

The trailers and teasers that Disney releases for the MCU have a different relationship to the cinematic texts they advertise than promotional material typically does. Traditional promotional media "sets up, begins and frames [an audience's] interactions" with an upcoming film and serves as an introductory point to a given cinematic text.¹² In the case of the MCU, trailers and teasers introduce comic book characters, narratives and themes to audiences unfamiliar with them and minimize the gap in knowledge between "loyals" and other fans, which helps with the cohesion of a wider fan community. Traditional promotional media, as John Ellis argues, functions as if the trailer or teaser were "part of the [main text's] narrative" and a distillation of its core themes and tone.¹³

While Ellis' second quality holds true for the promotional media of the MCU, one cannot read some recent trailers and teasers of the MCU as parts of the franchise's narrative continuity. Trailers released prior to *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers:*

Endgame contained scenes deliberately altered in post-production by producers as to avoid certain spoilers for the films' plots. A purposeful omission of pivotal scenes to avoid spoilers is standard practice for many cinematic releases, but alterations of special effects in Disney's recent MCU trailers are a relatively new practice aimed at "protect[ing] the rights of... consumers to have a 'first time' experience of the unfolding series."¹⁴

Some changes are relatively minimal, like adding back half of Captain America's broken shield to preserve a surprise in *Endgame*'s climactic battle, or maintaining a single haircut for Black Widow to hide the five-year time jump in *Endgame*'s first act. Some are more significant, chief among them the final shot of *Infinity War*'s first trailer, which was not only omitted from the final film but also fabricated solely for the trailer itself. The triumphant tone of the trailer's falsified last shot, which featured Captain America, Black Panther, the Hulk and others running to meet their enemies on the Wakandan battlefield, set up audiences to expect the Avengers' victory over Thanos instead of *Infinity War*'s ominous cliffhanger ending.*

At first glance, the producers' deception of the audience might appear to harm their relationship. Instead, with the transfictional relationship these deceptions create between promotional material and the films, Disney opens up a unique space for fans to participate with their content, both speculatively before a film's release and retroactively when comparing the two pieces of media as incongruent entities and discussing these

* The appearance of the Hulk in the trailer's final shot additionally preserved the reveal that Bruce Banner's monstrous form would not appear in *Infinity War* past the film's opening scene. In the climax, Banner instead operates one of Tony Stark's Hulkbuster suits, which both delayed the resolution of the Hulk's character arc into the next film, *Avengers: Endgame* and allowed an already popular piece of merchandise to be resold as the armor of a different character.

incongruities with other fans in person and online. This ability to engage with trailers and teasers even after the release of the film they promoted allows the MCU's promotional material to retain the value they would have otherwise lost once audience members had watched the film.¹⁵ The online content generated by consumers of the MCU elevates the teasers and trailers that are too often dismissed by fans and academics alike on the basis of their commercial functions and imbues in them a "hyperdiegetic" quality that befits their unique narrative relationship to the films.¹⁶

On a financial level, this user-generated content will surely "remix and circulate the [studio] content," build hype for an upcoming release, and increase the likelihood of healthy theater turnout or viewership ratings.¹⁷ Everything from fan-made trailers and teasers to analyses of official promotional content fuel speculation and anticipation in the months, sometimes up to full year or more, before a film's premiere. Despite these positive consequences, studios remain wary about the use of their content by fans, as in the case of Mike Pecci's Punisher unproduced web-series, and conflate media piracy with activities covered by the legal fair use of copyrighted materials.¹⁸ With this concern in mind, producers negotiate the enforcement of their profit-oriented ownership rights at the risk of alienating fans and "loyals" who wish to actively participate in the creation, re-creation and modification of producer content.

On the whole, franchise "loyals" are far from blindly loyal. Though their actions defy broader trends of migratory consumer behavior and "declining loyalty to networks or [studio] media," MCU franchise "loyals" are just as passionate about positive developments as they are negative ones.¹⁹ Encouraged by the efforts of Marvel Studios producers, most prominently Kevin Feige, to seem relatable and approachable to fans,

MCU “loyals” are “likely to call for changes in corporate behavior or products when they think a company is acting in ways contrary to” their interests as fans.²⁰ These desires cover a wide range of social and political issues, like the lack of openly LGBTQ+ superhero leads or the firing and re-hiring of creative staff, namely director James Gunn, for problematic online conduct. “Loyals” familiar with Marvel history are acutely passionate about issues of adaptation fidelity, namely how closely something to be introduced in the films or television series will match what they have come to expect from the comics.

Those who can recognize the differences and similarities between the print and cinematic media forms of Marvel stories, as well as their industrial and commercial histories, can flaunt such knowledge as prestige within Marvel fandoms. Comic books and their adaptations into other media have mainstream appeal, due in part to the financial and critical success of the MCU, but their fan practices remain rooted in norms of cult media, where the marginalization of a given fandom produces a sense of ownership among fans of the sidelined media they consume. This feeling of ownership is compounded further by how early fans typically begin consuming comic book material, often as children or teenagers. Decades of personal experiences with constantly evolving characters and stories shape many fans’ beliefs that they know what is best for intellectual property that remains nonetheless owned by Marvel Comics and its parent company, Disney. Because of this feeling of ownership, a “franchise’s most ardent supporters are also [often] its harshest critics,” but their cultivation by producers remains undoubtedly advantageous.²¹

Certain fan practices, if sufficiently popular among fans and visible to producers, force “producers to recognize them and include them in the canon,” like the revisionist One-Shot *All Hail the King*, Stan Lee’s identity as a Watcher in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, or the retroactive inclusion of Peter Parker as a masked child in *Iron Man 2*.²² Producer-recognized retcons (retroactive changes to continuity) such as these are relatively rare in the MCU and only occur after producers evaluate the difficulty of retroactive inclusions with how significantly fans would embrace such a change. In the absence of retcons, producers and other industry talent will publicize smaller-scale affirmations of “loyal” activity, like the sharing of user-generated content on official social media. Some of these social media accounts are dedicated exclusively to Marvel Entertainment or Marvel Studios, but just as many attract broader audiences under the Disney umbrella.

Fan communities like D23, the official Disney Fan Club, bring together fans of Disney’s animated, live-action and theme park-related content, as well as fans of recently acquired franchises, like Pixar, Star Wars and Marvel. This cultivation of Disney’s crossover appeal, aided by a library of modern content almost entirely rated PG or PG-13, results in the linkages of different fan communities with much in common. Unlike Disney, Warner Bros. licenses several of its most successful PG-13 franchises, namely Harry Potter, LEGO and Middle Earth; the studio’s parent company Time Warner does own DC. Consequentially, the studio has not offered the same spaces for crossover appeal among their multiple isolated fan bases in part because coordination among franchises becomes significantly harder when they are not owned by the same parent company. This lack of ownership among Warner Bros.’ intellectual property, and a lack

of interplay and convergence among fans of the different franchises, helps explain why the Warner Bros. studio brand conjures up a less clear image than the Disney brand does for the average media consumer, let alone family viewers. With such strong brand appeal across all of Disney's largest PG-13 franchises, the studio can reasonably assure their consumers that "investments in the *Avengers* franchise" and others will lead to a viewer's "cultural participation in an interconnected community" of likeminded, active transmedia participants.²³

With the proliferation of new technologies, new interactive transmedia content enables franchise producers to cultivate interactive audiences of "loyals" and other fans. As virtual reality technology develops as a commercialized, in-home technology and becomes less expensive to manufacture and exhibit, transmedia franchises like the MCU have positioned this new media form as the ultimate avenue for fans to fully experience their crafted story worlds. Despite this rhetoric, *Avengers: Damage Control*, Marvel Studios' first on-location VR exhibition, which opened in Fall 2019 in several U.S. cities, was still "designed [by media creators] and, consequentially, [offer] users... limited freedom" within a "top-down experience."²⁴ To counter the technological restrictions of *Avengers: Damage Control* that confine the freedom of its users, the VR experience's advertising has prioritized the user's feeling of interactivity—"you'll be able to touch and feel things"—and immersion within broad stroke film continuity—"travel to iconic locations throughout the MCU"—over specific narrative concerns of the MCU timeline.²⁵ On the surface, it is difficult to argue that the MCU's first VR experience does not offer fans a heightened sense of personal agency within the franchise and their closest opportunity yet to actively participate quite literally within the story world. Nonetheless,

Avengers: Damage Control is yet another specifically manufactured space in which fans may participate in the MCU (notably only environments from the MCU films, none from television or streaming content) without questioning the rules and concerns that govern the transmedia universe as a whole. The experience does offer a higher “level of collaborative authorship,” but even a VR version of the MCU falls short of a fully participatory culture.²⁶

Active participation is not the only lens through which one can evaluate a transmedia franchise’s relationship to its consumers and fans. In their essay “Wikinomics and Its Discontents,” José Van Dijck and David Neiborg equate active participation with the creation of user-generated media. They suggest that one evaluate the overall number of fans that a franchise attracts regardless of how actively the fans participate. In addition, they speculate that passive participants, not active ones, remain a more “appealing demographic to site owners and advertisers,” and presumably the franchise producers above them.²⁷ Van Dijck and Neiborg state that “52 percent of people online” inactively or passively participate in media culture and only 13 percent generate their own related content; Henry Jenkins cites a similar number, around 10 percent, when discussing how mainstream models of audience participation “depict media production as [its] highest form.”²⁸

Jenkins does not critique of this mainstream model, but Van Dijck and Neiborg do. They conclude that media creators may have misplaced their priorities in efforts to attract more active participation, abandoning a larger audience in favor of one significantly smaller.²⁹ The merit of this argument lies not in its criticism of those who prioritize active participation but in its recognition that studios and other media creators

have disregarded supposedly less active forms of participation in their quest to attain only the most active. When producers disregard the “evaluation, appraisal, critique and recirculation of material” like the ancillary industry of YouTubers and other online “loyals” that comment on a franchise’s released media, studios risk losing key middlemen within online fan communities.³⁰ YouTube content “acts as a hub to further creative activity by a wide range of participants,” like the delta of a river of content that facilitates the separation of fans down several smaller waterways.³¹

Fans and participants may follow these ancillary “loyals” closer than they do the original media texts on which they comment often because of the greater perceived intimacy between YouTuber and viewer compared to the distance between a multi-billion-dollar studio and its consumers. By choosing to label these YouTubers as passive, when in fact I would label them as *indirectly active*, studios risk discounting large swaths of participating fans, the very people responsible for turning their media texts into “material that drives active community discussion and debate” that can generate for any franchise the lasting social relevance every producer desires.³²

As much as fans shape the social relevance of a company and its media in their consumption and analysis, producers still endeavor to project a consistent company brand to consumers. Disney has built and continuously reinforces its peerless reputation with family audiences by producing a high volume of family-friendly content that from the outset has sought to broaden its appeal as more inclusive media. Traditional, conservative industrial practices are increasingly met with more politically active online participatory communities and those producers “who fail to make their peace with [them] will face declining goodwill and diminished revenues” for the latest releases.³³

Online political posturing should not inherently be read as a sign of active participation, but the two practices do overlap. True active participation emerges from within a fandom and internally responds to perceived successes and mistakes made by producers in their content. While fans bring along personal political views into any fandom—even the choice of which fandom is often reflective of one’s political ideology—there is a distinction between an internal, politically-related development in a fandom’s participatory culture and the infusion of outside, politically-motivated pressure into an existing group. It is easier for media producers to receive and potentially incorporate ideas from the former than from political pressure that seems to originate from outside the bounds of a given fandom. The same perceptions of authenticity and prestige that affect how fans evaluate other fans’ claims to fandom similarly affect a media company’s justification in choosing which political participation to accommodate in their franchises.

How a multibillion-dollar media conglomerate like Disney negotiates its existing corporate structure with the concerns of its participatory audiences will inevitably shape what their content looks like in years to come. Industrial culture continues to shift in an age of increasing media convergence and consolidation, as the “promise of making companies more responsive to the needs and desires of [its] consumers” becomes a primary concern for active participants looking for the next franchise to follow in theaters or to which exclusive streaming service they will subscribe.³⁴

In his introduction to *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins proposes a thought experiment he calls the Black Box Fallacy. In this experiment, “sooner or later... all media content is going to flow through a single black

box” and reach all consumers everywhere; if only media producers knew what this black box would be, they could “make reasonable investments for the future.”³⁵ Since Jenkins wrote his introduction in 2006, companies like Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and Roku have invented several literal black boxes through which consumers can access vast amounts of media content for monthly or annual subscription fees. Disney has yet to release a similar piece of hardware, instead (for now) opting to release their streaming service, Disney+, for access on all four of these devices and others. Jenkins wonders astutely about how powerful media producers would become if only they knew toward which Black Box consumers would soon gravitate. With this foresight at a producer’s disposal, they could meet the concerns of fans and “loyals” with greater efficiency. On the other hand, with this power a producer could also ignore fan concerns by pressuring consumers to purchase the inevitable Black Box regardless of their participatory feedback.

In certain cases, to circumvent the risks of principally basing new production and acquisition on responses to market trends, companies will develop or purchase hardware to create a new, exclusive space for the exhibition of their content, such as Facebook’s \$2 billion purchase of Oculus VR in 2014.³⁶ They hope that, based on brand loyalty generated before new hardware hits the market, consumers will desire to consume content of a trusted brand on the hardware of that same brand. It helps if the company can offer consumers exclusive savings on subscription fees or hardware-content bundles, as Apple has announced for the November 2019 release of its streaming service, Apple TV+.³⁷ Disney+ similarly appeals to consumers both through the offering of exclusive content and bundle savings with two other Disney-owned platforms: Hulu and ESPN+.

With an expansive and ever-growing library of transmedia content, Marvel Studios and Disney could capitalize on such a centralized way for consumers to receive and interact with their content. It is not hard to envision a one-stop shop for all things Marvel, one that could look like DC Universe, Warner Bros.' all-things DC streaming service released in Fall 2018. A singular place for curious viewers, fans and "loyals" alike to consume the Marvel Cinematic Universe in all its media forms—film, broadcast, streaming, print, video games, audiobooks, VR experiences and more—alongside other transfictional Marvel content digitized for recirculation in a new generation. The Marvel brand is certainly substantial enough on its own to support a Black Box that is exclusively Marvel. Instead, Disney has decided to package their Marvel content within a company-wide, OTT (over-the-top) Black Box in the style of its Hulu/ESPN+/Disney+ bundle. For now, Disney+ offers an incomplete library of MCU content, let alone all Marvel multimedia content more widely. The question remains: going forward, how closely will Disney+ align with Jenkins' proposed Black Box?

As more studios look to consolidate their content within in-house streaming platforms, the inevitable conflict within media industries will not emerge between one Black Box and the wider media landscape. Nor does it seem that in an age of decreasing government regulation of media industries there will be an insurmountable opposition from federal regulatory agencies. The oligopoly of production that Jenkins proposes is indeed a fallacy, but recent developments by media companies, especially Disney in the studio's capacities as an active agent of change and the franchise-building trendsetter within its industry, suggest a brewing conflict between two or three Black Boxes battling for dominance in living rooms across the world.

Conclusion

Transmedia storytelling is a powerful tool for media producers to wield in their efforts to turn casual viewers into invested, repeated consumers of their content. To imagine a transmedia franchise, like the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as “a playground where... artists could experiment and fans could explore” has its merits but remains an incomplete picture.¹ Fans of the MCU do far more than simply explore its media components and Marvel Studios producers hold fans that embrace opportunities to actively participate in the MCU’s development in higher regard than most. When producers, actors and other studio figures interact with fan-made content and community dialogue online and at live events, their mutual investment in success of the franchise grows stronger.

This thesis’ four main observations of the Marvel Cinematic Universe each highlight specific areas of change, cooperation and tension between studio practices of transmedia franchising and their franchises’ fan communities. The cinematic primacy of the MCU’s transmedia organization indicates Disney’s financial priorities and reading of the entertainment landscape. In a subordinate tier relative to the MCU films, the history of Marvel Television provides a point of comparison to what impact new MCU streaming content on Disney+ may have on audience expectations of non-cinematic media. Public-facing Marvel personalities like Stan Lee and Kevin Feige demonstrate the importance of fan acceptance and their powerful perceptions of authorship. Much like fans revere the Marvel Studios logo not just as a sign of ownership but also as “a hallmark of quality control,” Feige and other producers show appreciation for fans that come to the MCU’s latest release not with expectations but with hypotheses.² And by connecting transmedia

storytelling to the convergence of media forms, one better understands how to evaluate the changing role of consumers and how media industries can theoretically leverage that change into productive, profitable and ideally ethical production and consumption habits.

There are far too many additional factors to explore here, but two specific ones stand out as points worth addressing. As “one of the world’s most prominent character-based entertainment companies [with] over 5,000 characters,” Marvel Entertainment entered into the production of a transmedia universe with a significant advantage over other companies with a smaller pool of recognizable intellectual property.³ An expansive roster of characters to feature in new story worlds helps to assure fans that the worlds’ creators will fill any narrative gaps in due time, if confronted with enough fan interest. In marketing, superhero characters that display unique logos or costumes are “well equipped to thrive in a transmedia landscape that places an emphasis on spreadable imagery” through high-concept branding in clothing, like Kevin Feige’s trademark hats and other merchandise.⁴ Moreover, structuring the focus of new content “not in terms of specific media platforms, but instead in terms of the iconic characters Marvel had on offer” afforded creative executives flexibility in the adaptation of specific storylines as long as they stayed consistent in the adaptation of the MCU’s principal characters.⁵ The plot of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* has little connection to the 2013 comic book miniseries of the same name, but fans generally celebrated the perceived authenticity of the Avengers the film stars, each with their own eponymously-titled solo films or series.

One final factor worth questioning is how The Walt Disney Company will apply their traditional methods of exhibition to the future of the MCU. Since the late-1940s, Disney has strategically recycled their films “back into cinemas every seven years or so”

and staggered the home releases of previous films in the same schedule.⁶ A limited rerelease strategy preserved the “Disney reissue as a cultural event” that rewarded older “loyals” as much as, if not more than, they attracted new generations of child viewers.⁷ Just as streaming platforms, like Disney+, do “not support the ‘traditional’ modes of seriality” due to their hundreds of offered options available to watch at any given time, they may also complicate Disney’s traditional rerelease strategy.⁸ As the sole owner of Disney+, the company has complete control over when to offer a given film or series online. However, current consumers expect a constant abundance of streaming content based on their past experiences with other platforms like Netflix. In response, Disney+ offers an “Out of the Vault” category of animated films on its homepage, capitalizing on fan expectations that this new service will finally offer all that Disney has produced on a singular, convenient platform. The release of certain new MCU content may very well result in “cultural events” to the magnitude of Disney’s theatrical rereleases—one could very reasonably argue that *Black Panther* and *Avengers: Endgame* did—but consumer expectations have changed so significantly that reevaluation of Disney’s rerelease strategy may be in order.

As different media forms continue to converge and “interact in ever more complex ways,” more entertainment studios will attempt, and sometimes succeed, in producing long-running, culturally significant transmedia franchises.⁹ As important as following this industrial trend is, it is just as important to consider the human consequences of transmedia franchises like the MCU. Media producers desire fan communities for their profitability and “increased customer loyalty,” but the fans themselves “form strong social bonds through common affinity” and shared values.¹⁰ The

strength held by fans in their relationship with producers only increases as fans participate actively, communicate with one another and organize around a change they wish to see. Any increase in audience empowerment would be a productive change for American media industries, but it would be especially productive for consumers and fans whose identities have not yet gotten proper time in the spotlight. Without the vocalization of fan communities, Marvel Studios might not have started production on *Captain Marvel*, *Black Panther*, *The Eternals* and other efforts to have the diversity of the MCU reflect that of the real world. Rare are the opportunities for media producers to satisfy their lucrative commercial goals and the communal aspirations of media consumers with the same product. Transmedia franchises like the Marvel Cinematic Universe operate by no means outside of Hollywood's many problematic behaviors, but its unique position within them encourages the hope that this superhero world can lead its contemporaries and competitors in a brighter direction.

Appendix

A. The pre-MCU opening Marvel Entertainment logo in *Spider-Man 2* (dir. Sam Raimi, Columbia Pictures, 2004.) Flipping comic book pages fade into the red background. White “Marvel” text remains.



B. The early MCU opening Marvel Studios logo in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (dir. Joe and Anthony Russo, The Walt Disney Company, 2014.) Flipping comic book pages rush by within the raised letters of “Marvel” and in the background. The background fades to red and the letters fade to white. At the logo’s end, under the white “Marvel” lettering appears “Studios”.



C. The current MCU opening Marvel Studios logo in *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler, The Walt Disney Company, 2018.) The flipping comic book pages of past logos transform into hand-drawn characters of the MCU, and then into live-action footage projected on the sides of each “Marvel” letter. As the “Marvel” text comes into view, “Studios” appears on its right. From *Doctor Strange* onward, “Marvel Studios Fanfare” by composer Michael Giacchino triumphantly plays in the background of most opening logos.



D. The opening Marvel Studios logo in *Avengers Endgame* (dir. Joe and Anthony Russo, The Walt Disney Company, 2019.) Note the absence of Doctor Strange in the logo’s “V” and Groot in the “E” after their demises in *Avengers: Infinity War*.



E. The modified opening Marvel Studios logo in *Captain Marvel* (dir. Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, The Walt Disney Company, 2019) in honor of Stan Lee's death before the film's release. The logo features many of Lee's cameos in the films, as well as red carpet and behind-the-scenes footage of Lee to acknowledge his role as brand ambassador and his creative guidance on the Marvel cinematic adaptations. At its end, the logo fades to black and a brief message appears from producers and fans alike: "Thank you Stan."



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