

# *Avengers: Endgame*: A waste of time, money and talent

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*Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, written by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely*

*Avengers: Endgame*, which opened April 26, concludes the central storyline in the so-called Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) while, of course, leaving room for future Marvel films and ticket sales. It combines the central features of earlier Marvel installments—special effects, bombast and atrocious dialogue tying the unrelenting action scenes together—into a 3-hour assault. One leaves the theater grateful it is over, even if semi-sequels will continue.

The film follows the Avengers, a group of superheroes, as they seek to rectify the damage done in the previous main installment, *Avengers: Infinity War*, in which the “Mad Titan” Thanos (Josh Brolin) succeeds in eradicating half of all life in the universe (including half the Avengers) by using the Infinity Stones. *Endgame* begins with the Avengers ambushing Thanos, finding out that he has destroyed the Infinity Stones to prevent anyone from undoing his scheme, and summarily executing him. The upside of this is that we are largely spared his Malthusian rantings.

Five years pass, and the remaining Avengers hatch a plot to go back in time, retrieve past iterations of the Infinity Stones, and use them in their present to undo Thanos’ actions. *Back to the Future* is referenced more than once, and at one point we are witness to characters listing movies in which time travel plays a role.

The finer points of the plot—involving alternate timelines and predictable reunions—are too convoluted and unedifying to summarize.

Of course, the “time heist” goes awry, past-Thanos is brought to the Avengers’ present, and a final, epic battle begins for the fate of the universe, which includes those whom Thanos had eradicated in the previous installment.

This is strung together with dialogue that alternates between quips that largely land flat, descriptions of time travel and overwrought lines like this one from Captain America (Chris Evans) about their plan, “I know it will [work], ‘cause I don’t know what I’m gonna do if it doesn’t.”

Even on its own terms, *Endgame* is unconvincing. The greatest possible stakes are ostensibly involved, and yet only two named characters die, both through noble self-sacrifice. One is expected to care about the fate of dozens of characters, none of whom could conceivably be meaningfully developed within the scope of the movie, with the possible exception of Tony Stark/Iron Man (Robert Downey, Jr.).

The film’s structure, which results in the version of Thanos being fought at the end not having experienced the events of *Infinity War*, also produces some absurdities. After all, to the extent that dramatic content during an explosion-laden fight scene is possible, it relies on the characters’ histories with one another.

Instead, we are confronted with the silliness of Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen)—whose boyfriend Vision (Paul Bettany) was killed by the *other version* of Thanos in *Infinity War*—telling *Endgame* Thanos, “You took everything from me!” Thanos merely replies, truthfully, “I don’t even know who you are.”

The exchange is one of the funnier moments in the film, perhaps unintentionally, yet it also reveals something of the convoluted and unpersuasive character of *Endgame* itself.

Amid this mess, there are many talented actors who should, by rights, be doing something better. Downey Jr., Olsen, Brolin, Mark Ruffalo, Scarlett Johansson, Paul Rudd, Benedict Cumberbatch, Zoe Saldana, Michael Douglas, Bradley Cooper, Chris Pratt, Tilda Swinton and others are hardly demonstrating their

talents—or better judgment—here. Tom Holland as Peter Parker/Spider-Man is charming, but only present for the final battle.

*Endgame* is more of a business enterprise than a work of art. The studio executives at Marvel, which is now owned by Disney, are of course focused on the bottom line above all. The movie has grossed more than \$720 million in the US, with more on the way, making it the third-highest grossing movie domestically.

*Entertainment Weekly*, which calls *Endgame* a “juggernaut” (in ticket sales, not cultural distinction), notes, “Internationally the film banked another \$102.3 million bringing its global total to \$2.5 billion, which puts it in spitting distance of the all-time record of *Avatar*’s \$2.9 billion.”

One may note that few can recall the name of a character in *Avatar* a decade after its release.

Worldwide, all told the MCU films have grossed over \$20 billion.

The MCU has gained a following largely through intense fan-base interest, on the one hand, and popular inertia, on the other. There have been 21 Marvel movies since *Iron Man* (2008), including *Endgame*, and a number of television shows in the same universe. Eventually, one may be drawn in and continue watching the films out of morbid or even more benign curiosity.

However, there is more at work here. Above all, of course, there is the dire situation of American filmmaking and culture more broadly. What else is distributed to cinemas nationally, has a long theater run and gets marketed so extensively? If nothing else, the MCU movies guarantee their viewers spectacle and something approaching entertainment.

Increasingly unable and unwilling to say something of emotional or social substance, Hollywood has turned to shouting at the top of its voice. It is full of technical talent—both in special effects and acting skills—but adrift in other respects.

There is also the question of the audience. It would simply be wrong to blame moviegoers for the Marvel films, under conditions where a handful of conglomerates largely decide what audiences will see and hear. At the same time, the miserable level of filmmaking has an impact, lowering popular standards and expectations. Moreover, living in a brutal, difficult reality, many turn to fantasy, a world in which good

and evil are delineated and good usually triumphs.

While hardly high fantasy along the lines of J. R. R. Tolkien, the MCU does provide an expansive universe to experience and piece together in the nearly two dozen films plus associated media.

One anticipates that as the situation changes—with crises and, above all, the intervention of the working class—audiences and artists alike will find a better use of their time, money and talent.

For now, though, the MCU will slog on. *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, the last of the MCU movies in this narrative arc, is due out July 5. A *Captain Marvel* sequel may yet be in the works for fans who prefer their unrelatable superbeings to be women.



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