



Assembling a Storyworld

A Layered Analysis of Narrative
Construction in the Marvel Cinematic
Universe

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Abstract

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is a large entertainment franchise that engages in transmedia storytelling, or the spreading of narrative content over multiple media. This implies both transfictionality (the sharing of story elements over multiple texts) and transmediality (the spreading of texts over multiple media). As transmedial franchises become increasingly prevalent, a thorough narratological analysis is needed in order to understand the way in which their stories are told. This thesis attempts to develop a method for describing the narrative structure of this transmedia storytelling by means of Marie-Laure Ryan's idea of the storyworld as a guiding framework. We begin by outlining key theoretical definitions of transmediality and storyworlds as explained by Ryan in order to establish a theoretical foundation. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is then introduced as a solid case to explore these concepts. First, we focus on the notion of transfictionality within several individual subfranchises of the MCU, diachronically tracing how self-contained narratives gradually converge into a larger shared universe, forcing the audience to constantly rethink the MCU's storyworld. We analyse the impact of this phenomenon by looking at the converging of the subfranchises' ontologies in a narrative content – such as film, television, theme parks, video games and comics – to understand their role in building and complicating the storyworld. We conclude that some formats are canonically more central than other formats, and that contradictions can arise between these and the dominant cinematic narrative. Finally, we explore the impact of the multiverse as a narrative device within the MCU, particularly its role in integrating alternate storyworlds – including storyworlds from different media or unrelated cinematic franchises. A conclusion presents a view of the MCU in which we should distinguish the notion of the storyworld on several narrative levels, highlighting the complexity of a narratological analysis in a transmedia context.

Keywords: storyworld, transfictionality, crossover, transmediality, multiverse, shared universe, Marvel Cinematic Universe, transmedia storytelling, worldbuilding

Disclaimer: chapter 4.1.1 of this thesis contains a few passages from the research paper I wrote in academic year 2024-2025 in the course Verhaaltheorie, as part of the Masters in Western Literature: *“Avengers... Assemble!” An analysis of expanding storyworlds in the first phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*. This thesis draws on some conclusions made in this paper, and broadens the storyworld research to the entirety of the MCU. The work has been duly cited.

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1. Introduction

“*Avengers, assemble!*” This quote will probably sound familiar to fans of the multimedia conglomerate that is Marvel, an entertainment company set on bringing superhero-centred stories to mass audiences. When the quote is uttered, several superheroes – who are usually the protagonists of their own story and have little interaction with each other – come together to defeat a common evil. In the massively popular *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the few surviving heroes enter the battlefield and face an almost certain death at the hands of the all-powerful Thanos and his alien army, before they are ultimately joined by a variety of characters that have all “arisen from the dead”. Spider-Man slings into frame, followed by the Guardians of the Galaxy. Black Panther salutes the beaten-up Captain America, and Doctor Strange gathers an army of sorcerers. The Hulk, Ant-Man and War Machine escape from under the rubble and take in battle positions. A wide shot shows the massive amount of heroes and allies, all conjoined to finally put an end to the tyranny of the Mad Titan. Captain America stands front and centre, ready to charge, but not without saying the words the audience is waiting to hear (A. Russo and J. Russo).

Marvel Entertainment has been continuously publishing stories with various superheroes as the protagonists since the 1960s, and throughout the past few decades, their library of characters, stories and settings has expanded drastically. The shared universe of the titular heroes expands with every new release and therefore has no definitive or final form. To investigate the scope and ramifications of this (shared) universe, the term *storyworld* offers a useful starting point in categorizing the scope and ‘sharedness’ of its storytelling, i.e. the existence of plots, characters or settings of various different stories in the same narrative universe. It fundamentally refers to the conceptual universe in which a (fictional) story takes place (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 63). A storyworld has its own set of ontological rules that may very well differ from the ontological rules in our real-life world, but it must be consistent throughout the storyworld as a whole (66). The storyworld of the Marvel Universe can be reinterpreted with pretty much every new story release, as the titular characters often operate in storyworlds characterized by their own distinct narrative properties, yet also engage in stories with a much larger narrative scope. The latter can be seen as a ‘convergence’ or blending of several storyworlds to form one overarching storyworld or narrative universe. The term *storyworld* was introduced by famous narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan and is a suitable device to start from when talking about the often rare and unique decisions and turns in Marvel stories. Because there is always a possibility of adding relevant information or introducing new elements to the story, a storyworld is inherently incomplete (74). However, the stories of the Marvel universe take this idea of incompleteness to a higher level, engaging in several interesting methods to increase the capacity of its universe and reinvent the notion of the storyworld.

Throughout the past decades, Marvel has vastly diversified its markets and its way of telling stories – making the universe a great example of transmedia storytelling, a term coined by Henry Jenkins (Baroni et al. 375). Transmedia storytelling consists of two distinct elements; first, transfictionality supposes that story elements are shared throughout multiple texts. This includes the return of a character or a setting in a later

instalment. Secondly, adaptation points to the use of multiple media to spread narrative content (378). A common example is adapting a (comic) book into a visual medium, like film. As for Marvel, their stories are most widely known as movies or comic books, but they also actively create TV series, tie-in novels, artwork,... the Marvel superheroes even have their own campus in several Disney theme parks, extending the storyworld even further. Specifically, we will take the movies of the so-called Marvel Cinematic Universe – or MCU, in short – as our starting point, from which other media and other storyworlds can be considered. The films have always served as Marvel Studios' primary medium for forging a shared narrative, with its high stakes-stories and crossovers all appearing primarily in its purely cinematic component.

The goal of this thesis is to analyse how the storyworld of the Marvel Cinematic Universe can be conceptualized across its transmedial and complicated narrative structure. We will attempt to map the MCU's narrative structure while focusing on its internal coherence and relative complexity. To achieve this, the focus will primarily lie on the notion of the storyworld as specified and elaborated on by Ryan. The storyworld(s) of the Marvel Cinematic Universe serve as a textbook example for the case of storyworld interaction. The approach of this research will be diachronic; we will follow the MCU as it progresses through time and expands its storyworld step by step. As multimedial entertainment franchises are continuously on the rise, it is relevant to analyse how these mass-produced highly popular stories relate to basic narratological principles.

First, the thesis will provide a solid theoretical framework regarding transmedia storytelling and the storyworld, before delving deeper in the storyworld of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, in order for the reader to get a decent understanding of the films' overarching narrative themes and structures. In this thesis, we will explore the storyworld (as conceptualized by Ryan) of the MCU through an analysis of two of its key components as a transmedia franchise: we will first look at the notion of transfictionality in the MCU, showcasing how the storyworld constantly changes along with new MCU releases. We will focus on the crossover as a special sort of storyworld expansion, and will then look at some characteristics of several stories' ontologies in light of this expanded shared universe. Secondly, we will look at the transmedia component of the MCU, looking at how the franchise's narrative is spread across different media. The importance of each medium for the overall understanding of the franchise will be shortly reviewed, and we will further explain how the notion of the canon impacts the MCU's storyworld. Finally, the MCU's narrative integration of the multiverse will be closely inspected; the franchise contains multiple alternative universes and even integrates other cinematic universes into its own narrative. Through this analysis, we hope to reach a conclusion on how the storyworld(s) of the MCU are constructed. Because the MCU is still ongoing at the time of writing, it is impossible to deliver an analysis of its narrative structure in its final form –yet, the MCU's broad and multifaceted scope and storytelling is able to give us valuable insights in the ways a multimedial entertainment franchise is narratively constructed.

2. Theoretical framework

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is an entertainment franchise that is built up in a transmedial way; its narrative content is spread across several media. Henry Jenkins first introduced the concept of ‘transmedia storytelling’, which “unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 95-96). As for the MCU, its narrative is first shaped through its narrative feature films, and later expanded with television series, comic books, video games, theme park attractions, etc. (Baroni et al. 375-376). A transmedia aspect does not immediately qualify as transmedia storytelling, however; Jenkins adds that ideally, every medium should present a unique addition to the storyworld and contribute to a connected universe in order to provide a unified experience (Jenkins, *Transmedia Storytelling* 101; Baroni et al. 377). A mere adaptation of a story – most commonly, from (comic) book to film – can therefore be classified as a transmedial practice, but cannot be considered transmedia storytelling, as the two media are recounting the same story, and there is therefore no unique information added to the universe. Due to the rise of different forms of media, these transmedial narrative structures “keep sprouting up and suggest that transmedia storytelling is the most important narrative mode of our time” (Ryan, *Transmedia Storytelling* 1).

Importantly, Ryan defines transmedia storytelling as a hybrid of two major aspects: adaptation and transfictionality (Baroni et al. 378). Transfictionality, first coined by Richard Saint-Gelais, is defined as “the sharing of elements, mostly characters, but also imaginary locations, events, and entire fictional worlds, by two or more works of fiction” (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 70). By combining this with the concept of adaptation, these elements are not only shared by works of fiction, they are also shared across media. In transmedia storytelling, there has to be some sort of fictional link connecting two stories in order for them to be a part of the same narrative universe. Ryan names several operations, among which modification, which reinterprets a story by changing its ending, for example, and transposition, which places a story in an entirely different setting, like a modern reimagining of a Shakespeare play (the 1996 film *Romeo + Juliet* imagines the famous lovers in the contemporary United States for example (Luhmann)) (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 71).

However, the most famous way of linking stories is by expanding on them. Ryan notes that this is the only “acceptable” operation in the case of transmedia franchises “because it is the only one that respects the integrity of the storyworld (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 71). Further research will prove that although some MCU projects (concerning the so-called multiverse) may seem as if they are cases of modification, they are still technically forms of expansion. This expansion can take various forms, of which the sequel is the most common. A sequel continues the story of a previous work by adding new storylines and, often, characters and locations. In contrast to adaptations or remakes, film sequelization does not “prioritize the repetition of an original” (Jess-Cooke and Verevis 5), but wants to build upon an earlier instalment. A sequel is “invested with notions of ‘better-ness’ and retrospectivity” (3), which points not only to a strong link with the previous film, but also to an urge of narrative expansion. A prequel on the other hand reveals what happened *before* the original story takes place.

A spin-off story is a story focussing on a character that was previously a supporting character in the original story (e.g. the 2018 film *Solo: A Star Wars Story* is both a prequel and a spin-off; it centres around the character Han Solo who was a supporting character in the original *Star Wars* films, and the story takes place before the events of the 1977 original, focusing on Solo's younger years (Howard)). These kinds of expansions can be very extensive, as will be shown in this thesis.

It is obvious that the Marvel Cinematic Universe has all the characteristics of a transmedia franchise. Now, one has to find a paradigm in which we can map the narrative construction of the MCU which focuses on the narrative space and ontology of a story rather than the specific characters and actions that occur in it. Instead of a more formal approach that focuses on characters or elemental story constituents, we prefer a narratological view that describes the totality of a story (its characters and actions as well as its setting, broad spatial context and natural laws) in one term – and Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of the storyworld seems to fit that bill. Her concept does away from the so-called narrative pause that exists in text when things are merely described instead of happening, because every descriptive textual element contributes to the storyworld. The narratologist provides the term storyworld of a definition: storyworlds are “totalities that encompass space, time, and individual existents that undergo transformations as the result of events” (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 63). Only addressing the reader or hidden meanings about the narrative conveyed by an extradiegetic narrator do not belong to the storyworld, as an extradiegetic narrator finds himself outside the narrative. What an extradiegetic narrator says about the narrative space or plot does belong to the storyworld however.

A storyworld implies narrativity, and must therefore include some sort of space and time continuum and some sort of character undergoing an experience (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 64). Ryan's concept of the storyworld is especially useful when looking at big transmedia entertainment franchises, as their narratives are formed across many media and they can often be placed in genres of fantasy or science fiction, in which worldbuilding is an important element. Because of this worldbuilding aspect, the audience imagines everything that is left unsaid or unspecified to mentally picture the entire storyworld based on what they see, read or imply (Baroni et al. 376) – the storyworld is therefore never definitive.

The storyworld stands, because it represents all that exists in a narrative, in some distance to our real world, or actual world, which makes it easier to recognize its fictional aspects (as they differ from the actual world we live in). This also means that the storyworld does not necessarily refer to a spatial or geographical 'world' as we know it (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 64-65). The Marvel Cinematic Universe features many different planets – or 'worlds' – and planes of being, yet these all belong to the same storyworld, as they are all part of the same narrative universe of the MCU's 'Sacred Timeline' (see 4.3.1). When a character capable of interplanetary travel goes from one planet to the other, that voyage is still part of the narrative and therefore part of the storyworld. In order to talk about separate storyworlds, one needs to distinguish more than one ontology, i.e. a set of rules that needs to be obeyed by the entire storyworld – or tell a different, unrelated story altogether (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 64-65).

Based on a storyworld's ontology, we can analyse how far the storyworld finds itself from our actual world, in which the audience lives. The further away, the more imagination is needed for the audience to mentally construct the storyworld (see 4.1.1). However, it does not matter how far away the storyworld is from the actual world as long as its ontology is logically possible. In our actual world, the idea of superheroes saving the world and the existence of magical artefacts is ridiculous, yet the ontology of the storyworld of the Marvel Cinematic Universe allows this sort of superhuman ability and magic. Only when something is true and false at the same time in one storyworld, for example, is there a possibility of a broken ontology. When an ontology is broken however, this can often cause for interesting plot developments (see 4.3.3, which will see ontologies converging in the same narrative). Stories that may at first appear as illogical in the context of the storyworld can also be explained later on through the introduction of new characters or concepts, because a fictional storyworld is by rule incomplete and always open to extension of some sort. Information that is missing is perceived by the audience as information that is not yet known instead of as an ontological gap (74-75).

In the case of a substantial multimedia franchise such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, one may refer to its storyworld as a shared universe. The shared universe constitutes one storyworld, yet is represented by a set of different works (and often different mediums) that is created by multiple writers or creators. In such a shared universe, a story can stand on its own but it can also fit into a network of stories, characters and places (Żaglewski 591). A shared universe therefore contains a set of stories which are all linked through certain events, characters or places. Two stories can, for example, be set in different places and a different time and have virtually nothing to do with each other, but if the same character, object or setting appears in some capacity in both stories, they belong to the same storyworld and the same shared universe. The links between stories are of essential value: "it is supposed to refer to a number of textual objects that remain in mutual cooperation in developing a mental image of a given storyworld and its characters" (Żaglewski 591).

This means that in a shared universe, the storyworld can be seen as referring to two separate entities; on the one hand, each individual story has its own storyworld. A self-contained story should be easily understandable for an audience unfamiliar with the overarching universe, yet on the other hand, all stories that are narratively connected belong to the same overarching storyworld (see 4.1.1). A story's place within a network of related stories can cause a loss of a sense of urgency or unicity however. As William Duffy puts it when talking about the serial nature of comic books, the "serial narrative structure always allows future events to be imagined which mitigate the results of a previous event" (qtd. in Backman 202). Therefore, a reader or viewer of a work set in a shared universe is by rule certain that the events of that particular work can be built upon, adapted or even undone. "Serialization pulls the alternate direction toward continual and perpetual action" (Backman 2014). This leads Żaglewski to conclude that texts within a shared universe "can cooperate with each other [...] through the never-ending procedure of following and undermining the representation of a given character or storyarc in this structure" (591). By being a part of a shared universe, a story is therefore unsure whether or not its ramifications will last.

In most cases throughout this thesis, the universe of a story constitutes the same entity as the storyworld of a story, but our analysis will show that this idea will become somewhat problematic. In order to clarify which works are being spoken about, I make the distinction between a franchise and a subfranchise, in which a subfranchise essentially acts as a ‘franchise within a franchise’. For example, the *Iron Man* films are part of the (overarching) franchise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which at the time of writing contains thirty-seven feature films – yet, the trilogy of films (*Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2* and *Iron Man 3*) also forms its own smaller franchise with its own characters and audience expectations – to some extent even its own ontology, which seems very different from the ontology of, for example, the subfranchise that contains the *Thor* films.

3. Introduction to the Marvel Cinematic Universe

To gain a proper understanding of how storyworlds arise and how they interact with each other, one needs a solid understanding of the concept of the ‘cinematic universe’, as first put on the map by the company Marvel Studios, which has spent years developing a series of interconnected films based on the superhero characters from their eponymous comic books. According to Tomasz Żaglewski, “Marvel surely dominated the superhero genre [...] by setting the overall course of superhero narratives as a distinct set of stories, in that they developed ‘typical’, dedicated concepts: crossover, retcon/reboot and finally the framework of a superheroes’ shared universe/multiverse” (589-590). Indeed, the stories put forward by the company can nearly all be characterized by narrative strategies intent upon broadening the existing storyworld and integrating its narratives into a larger universe – or even multiverse, as will be explained further in this chapter. The films produced by Marvel Studios are no different in this aspect and the firm capitalizes on this idea of interconnectedness by marketing their films as integral to one universe and therefore all worth paying a visit. In order to correctly interpret the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (from here on referred to as MCU), one needs to rely on “analysis of the ways in which these films manage their wider textual network” (Taylor 130).

The MCU is in no ways a pioneer of serialized cinematic fiction, which has existed for many decades, but it *is* the first successful case of a modern-day large-scale cinematic universe with interconnected stories. Early cinema saw ‘*Universal monsters*’ such as Dracula, Frankenstein’s Monster and Wolf Man appear in each other’s films in the 1930s and 1940s (Conti), but this seems more of a one-time phenomenon than a deliberate attempt to create a narrative universe. Other efforts for a modern-day cinematic universe have definitely been made; the DC Extended Universe started its own network of superhero movies in 2013 with the final instalment being released in 2023, and film studios have attempted several times to embed other intellectual properties, or IPs, into a larger narrative and shared universe. Notable examples are the film *Godzilla* (2014), which has grown into a ‘*Monsterverse*’ including films centred around the gigantic ape King Kong and crossovers between the two (“*Monsterverse*”), and the film series *Star Wars*, which has, since the release of its original trilogy (1977-1983), been expanded with a ‘prequel trilogy’ and a ‘sequel trilogy’, two spin-off films (subtitled *A Star Wars Story*) and a large number of both animated and live-action television series, with more on the way (“*Star Wars*”). However, the DC Extended Universe has seen mixed success, the *Monsterverse* is relatively limited in narrative scope and the *Star Wars* universe is primarily centred around one main storyline (the ‘*Skywalker Saga*’), and therefore none of these film franchises display such a diversified and expanding view of the concept of a narrative universe as the MCU does.

The MCU knew its start in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man*. From the very beginning, Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige intended the movie to be the first part of an interconnected narrative universe (Beall). From that point on, the studio started releasing several individual films based on popular heroes from their comic books, which were only faintly connected to each other (infra), leading up to the release of *The Avengers* (2012), a crossover film that integrates these characters from individual films into one narrative. After this team-up, the studio continued their individual franchises

with new instalments and released films based on entirely new characters to the cinematic universe, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Ant-Man* (2015) and *Doctor Strange* (2016). Superheroes that debuted as supporting characters in another superhero's film also got their own solo instalments; *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018) are in a way direct spin-offs of 2016's *Captain America: Civil War*, which brought these characters into the MCU.

Many loosely connected storylines converged in the two-part narrative of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). All main characters from the earlier MCU films – and many supporting ones – make an appearance in what popular media has referred to as “the most ambitious crossover event in history” (Stolworthy). The films see the Avengers unite to fight the almighty alien Thanos, who seeks to collect all six ‘infinity stones’ in order to wipe out half of the universe. These so-called ‘infinity stones’ have been cleverly planted into earlier films without clearly specifying their purpose or function, and the artefacts therefore serve as a practical way to connect several plotlines. The space stone had an important role in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and *The Avengers* (2012), for example, Natalie Portman's Jane Foster is under the spell of the reality stone in *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), the villain Ronan sought the power stone in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), and *Doctor Strange* (2016) sees the titular sorcerer come into contact with the time stone. This is why Marvel Studios refers to each of their films up until this point of culmination as the ‘*Infinity Saga*’ (“Marvel Cinematic Universe”).

After this team-up event, the company did not slow down on creating new projects, releasing multiple films and television series exclusive to the streaming platform Disney+, which they refer to as the (still ongoing at the time of writing) ‘*Multiverse Saga*’. Interesting about this new chapter in Marvel's shared universe is the concept of the Multiverse, which allows writers and filmmakers to introduce alternate universes that exist next to the ‘main universe’. The Marvel universe, which was already massive in scope and contained many intergalactic locations and a large set of characters, is therefore pulled open to include countless other universes that start interacting with each other, making it impossible for the audience to reach an exhaustive comprehension of the limits of the Multiverse. Because the different universes start interacting with each other in several works (e.g. a character travelling from one universe to another or a character meeting his counterpart or ‘self’ from an alternate world), the distinction between the fictional universes falls flat. The narrative worlds are then extrinsically linked. In other words, the Marvel Cinematic Universe is one universe consisting of many interacting and ‘smaller’ universes.

Marvel Studios has created an environment in which there is seemingly unlimited space for expanding the storyworld. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is extremely far-reaching, yet one does need to respect the ontological boundaries of several independent storyworlds that are displayed through the releases of new MCU projects within subfranchises. At the time of writing, Marvel Studios has multiple projects lined up on its release slate (“Marvel Cinematic Universe”), so it is impossible to predict if and where these boundaries will finally set. However, the MCU's evolution from a single superhero story set in Los Angeles to a massive multiverse featuring countless characters and spanning an undeterminable temporal and physical space raises some

poignant questions about the (changing) characteristics of its storyworld(s). Besides, the MCU's scope, diversity and popularity lends itself to analyses about the communication between several universes – and therefore storyworlds – and the impact that they can have on each other. Its unicity as a cinematic and narrative universe makes the Marvel Cinematic Universe a perfect testing case for research about storyworlds.

4. Analysis

In order to further understand the way in which Marvel Studios – and, by extension, large multimedial entertainment franchises – builds up its storyworld and engages in large-scale worldbuilding, we will analyse several narratological properties from multiple MCU projects, all concerned with different aspects of storyworld expansion. As Marie-Laure Ryan notes, transmedial franchises are characterised by transfictionality across different media (Baroni et al. 377-378). We will first take a look at the notion of transfictionality in the MCU by analysing the initial development of the universe, starting with Marvel Studios' first release, *Iron Man* (Favreau) in 2008. With every subsequent release, new plotlines, places and characters cause the audience to have to readjust its view of the MCU storyworld. We study the way in which the Marvel Cinematic Universe attempts to keep their ontology consistent with the constant introduction of new story elements.

Secondly, we will focus on the transmedial aspect of the universe by taking a look at the many kinds of media through which the Marvel Cinematic Universe spreads its narrative content. We will consider narrative content that is closely related to overarching storylines of the MCU as well as content that may problematize its inclusion into the same storyworld due to contradictory story elements. To clarify the latter's inclusion in the MCU, we refer to the concept of the canon. We will also look at the phenomenon of fan fiction stories, which are based on official MCU story elements yet are not official contributions to the storyworld.

Next, we will take a look at a particularly interesting and lesser known mechanism of storyworld expansion, generally preserved for narrative universes in the science fiction genre: the multiverse. In a way, the integration of the multiverse means the convergence of or communication between two separate storyworlds (or universes), so that the two storyworlds are integrated into one overarching storyworld. The Marvel Cinematic Universe therefore becomes some sort of vessel containing several storyworlds, yet can also be seen as one storyworld. Besides, other cinematic universes are, through this practice, retroactively added into the MCU.

For every example, the relevant plot points of the story will be given in order to gain a more complete understanding of how the narrative universe expands and changes. Finally, we hope to be able to map the ways in which the MCU constructs its storyworld and universe(s).

4.1 Expanding the storyworld

4.1.1 Rethinking the existing: constant storyworld adjustments

It is impossible to construct a shared universe of stories and characters without an element of transfictionality – the stories in a universe need to be somehow linked with each other (Baroni et al. 378). As previously discussed, there are several ways to contribute to this notion of transfictionality, of which expansion is the most common and obvious example. The MCU is completely made up of projects which expand on the already existing storyworld by way of sequels, but later on also spin-offs, prequels and

crossovers. However, this means that whenever a new film – or television series, etc. – gets released, the audience knows its conception of the storyworld needs to be adapted on the basis of the most recent release. With every new project, the audience is rethinking what they already know about the storyworld, by adding information, adjusting their assumptions or expectations and coming to terms with new revelations or plotlines “as a world-building effort” (Jeffries 293). This practice becomes generally less intensive as the storyworld is already expanded a great deal – because the audience has already adjusted their views many times and is familiar with the basic foundations of the fictional universe – but when developing a shared universe through many loosely connected and mostly independent stories, every film contributes to the universe with a seemingly distinctive storyworld. It is then up to the audience to align that storyworld with the storyworld they already know from previous instalments in the franchise.

I previously analysed the expansion of storyworlds in the first phase of the MCU (containing the first six feature films and three direct-to-video short films (“Marvel Cinematic Universe: Phase One”)) in a research paper for the course Verhaaltheorie: “*Avengers...Assemble! An analysis of expanding storyworlds in the first phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*”. In this paper, I developed the case of the very first film of the MCU, *Iron Man* (Favreau):

“*Iron Man* tells the story of billionaire Tony Stark, the immensely rich CEO of Stark Industries, a company he inherited from his father and which specializes in weapons manufacturing. At the start of the film, he travels to Afghanistan to demonstrate a new sort of missile. There, however, he is targeted by a terrorist group and is gravely injured by a missile from his own company, before being kidnapped. He is forced to live in a cave, where doctor Yinsen, who is also held captive, saves his life by placing an electromagnet in Stark’s chest, which should prevent the missile shards from reaching his heart. Stark is then forced to build a powerful missile for the terrorists in order to regain his freedom, but he and Yinsen secretly build an electric generator to power the electromagnet, and a heavily armoured suit in order to escape. Tony Stark later spends much time on trying to perfect the suit, eventually becoming a superhero who uses the highly technological armour to do good (*Iron Man*)” (De Bruyn 3).

When one has no knowledge of the source material of the film (and of the already existing superheroes or plotlines in the Marvel Comics, for example), one can conclude the following in terms of the film’s storyworld:

“[it] is clearly similar to reality. The audience recognizes most events as plausible, provided that the technology in the Marvel universe is somewhat more advanced.[...] Planet Earth is [...] *Iron Man*’s playing field. His flying super-suit can take him anywhere in the world, but that also means there is no reason to presume the existence of any other place beyond the places that exist in real life. [...] The willing suspension of disbelief the audience needs to go along with is therefore [...] extremely small, making *Iron Man* – and its storyworld – fairly realistic” (De Bruyn 4).

Because this film was at the point of its release the only product of the MCU, the storyworld was defined fully by *Iron Man*. This initial representation of the storyworld holds up fairly well with the following films on the MCU roster, namely *The Incredible Hulk*

(Leterrier) and *Iron Man 2* (Favreau), which both rely on a very advanced stage of scientific discovery, yet do not show a discrepancy with the established storyworld.

However, the release of *Thor* (Branagh) in 2011 demands a massive rethinking of the MCU's storyworld and its properties:

“Thor does not live on planet Earth (which we previously described as being the entire storyworld of *Iron Man*), yet on a different planet called Asgard, also a remnant of Norse mythology. Asgard is home to many Norse gods and their people, and therefore also subject to an entirely different set of ontological rules than that of Earth. Gods, mystical and mythological creatures and spiritual concepts [...] are omnipresent in the world of *Thor*, and this world is therefore vastly different from the world of *Iron Man*. However, Thor gets banished to Earth by his father Odin, and by this replacement, he crosses the boundary between what could, up until this point, be considered as two different storyworlds. [...] [T]he original ontology (as depicted in *Iron Man*) adapts to the widening storyworld and therefore changes its ontology to include the innovations made by *Thor*. With other words, the human characters in the Marvel universe adapt to the storyworld at the same time as the audience. [...] [T]he audience [agrees] to reorient [its] ontological view to include the characteristics of the grown storyworld” (De Bruyn 4-5).

Throughout the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the perception of the storyworld is constantly altered by the addition of new characters, places, plotlines,... With the release of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston), the fifth film in the MCU, for example, the audience comes to terms with people with superhuman strength or skull-like faces and a magical object being present on Earth as soon as the 1940s, as the film is mainly set during the events of the Second World War. Up until this point, planet Earth could be imagined as being closely connected to the actual world the audience lives in. The film *Thor*, however, introduces many mythological and magical elements which all originate from a realm different than the “merely human” Earth. This perception changes again with *Captain America*. Where one could initially argue that each character has its own franchise with its own storyworld, i.e. separate settings, characters and plotlines, and that the storyworld of *Iron Man*, which has no cosmic or mythological features, is therefore different than the storyworld of *Thor*, this argument does not hold when one takes into account the multiple small connections between the separate storyworlds. For example, the character of Phil Coulson, an agent of the fictional secret organization S.H.I.E.L.D, introduces himself in *Iron Man* and also appears in *Iron Man 2*, but the *Iron Man* character also turns up to investigate Thor's hammer in the film *Thor*, suggesting the two stories do in fact take place in the same storyworld (“Phil Coulson”).

The MCU films are therefore linked with each other from the very beginning, forcing its audience to continually adjust their view on the storyworld. However, the stories can still function independently from one another. The fact that a supporting character from one film appears in another film, does not necessarily mean that this has serious implications for the way in which the storyworld is conceived or perceived by the audience. For example, if a viewer decides to (re)watch *Iron Man* (2008) after watching *Thor* (2011), he has acquired knowledge of the latter's introduction of mythological and

cosmic elements in the MCU. However, his viewing experience of *Iron Man* is not necessarily dictated by the ontological set of rules posited in *Thor*. By the time the character of Phil Coulson shows up in the film, the script has already established itself as a science fiction script to a very low degree; the technology created in *Iron Man* is not always equally realistic, but all other aspects of the story seem to relate to the actual world as the audience knows it. There is therefore no reason to suspect the arrival of a certain Norse God from outer space. *Iron Man* movies will not feature rainbow bridges, and a story in a *Thor* film will not rely on complicated modern technology to resolve its conflict. “While the film franchises involving Iron Man, Thor, Captain America [...] are closely interlinked, they can also be understood as distinct entities” (Beatty 321). Each “sub-franchise” still has its own set of unspoken rules and expectations.

The more projects get released by Marvel Studios, the more characters and settings enter the shared universe, causing a constant redefinition of the already existing storyworld. Throughout the years, many already established comic book heroes got introduced in the MCU. A character such as Spider-Man appears for the first time as he is recruited by Tony Stark, Iron Man – who will continue to serve as his mentor in future instalments – in the team-up film *Captain America: Civil War* (A. Russo and J. Russo) before he is introduced as a leading character in a standalone film. Stark uses his own technology to create a suit for Spider-Man and he appears as a supporting character in the web-slinger’s first solo instalment, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts), together with other *Iron Man* alumni Gwyneth Paltrow and Jon Favreau as Pepper Potts and Happy Hogan respectively. This proves that the storyworld of *Spider-Man* is the same as the storyworld of *Iron Man*; there are no distinctive rules or peculiarities separating the two stories. In a way, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) could even be seen as a spin-off film of the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008-2013). The audience is therefore relieved of recalibrating the MCU’s storyworld, as the characters and settings they encounter are already rooted in the storyworld established in previous films.

However, when new characters are introduced in their standalone projects, the filmmakers need to rely on clever narrative techniques in order to convey the sense of a shared storyworld and uphold the sense of transfictionality coursing through the Marvel Cinematic Universe. An obvious example of linking two stories (and therefore storyworlds) is the integration of a character or setting from one story into another. In 2015’s *Ant-Man* (Reed) for example, the focus lies on the thief Scott Lang, a character that had not been introduced previously in another franchise instalment. Lang’s story is largely independent, yet features a small subplot in which he has to break into the Avengers compound in order to steal a device that will help him with a heist. The existence of the Avengers headquarters in *Ant-Man* proves that the film is set in the same universe as *The Avengers* (Whedon), and consequently all other MCU films, linked by overlapping characters, locations and plotlines. At the headquarters, he briefly fights Sam Wilson, a supporting character in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (A. Russo and J. Russo), further driving home the connection between the films. Moreover, Lang’s mentor Hank Pym has ties to the larger MCU as well; an opening scene set in 1989 shows

his character arguing about his technology with John Slattery's Howard Stark (Tony Stark's father who appeared in a video in *Iron Man 2*) and Hayley Atwell's Peggy Carter, a key character in the *Captain America* films. These appearances are all relatively short, and their exclusion would not (greatly) impact the main story of the film, so it makes sense to assume their primary function is to promote the interconnectivity of the different stories. We can refer to these appearances as cameos, which Wikipedia defines as "brief guest appearance[s] of a well-known person or character" ("Cameo appearance"). "Marvel Studios have focused on the use of cameo appearances by the characters across the franchises" to further focus on the interconnectedness of seemingly very different stories and characters (Beaty 323).

Another clever way to emphasize the interconnectivity of the different 'subfranchises' of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the use of post-credits scenes. A post-credits scene is a short clip that plays after the end credits of a film have stopped rolling (or, in case of a 'mid-credits scene', while the credits are rolling), and is usually included to "reward the audience for having the patience to watch the credits sequence" ("Post-credits scene"). The Marvel Cinematic Universe is known for its inclusion of post-credits scenes, with them being present with almost every new film. A post-credits scene can be a short joke (like an enlarged ant playing the drums at the end of *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (Reed) for example), yet can also be used as a teaser for a future MCU release. The latter function is especially interesting if we consider the connection between different films; for example, a post-credits scene included in *Iron Man 2* shows agent Phil Coulson arriving in a New Mexico desert, where Thor's signature enchanted hammer has been discovered, a direct reference to the next film on Marvel's release roster. By referencing the character of Thor at the end of an *Iron Man* film, it is made clear that the two films take place in the same universe, even if their storyworlds may differ drastically.

Moreover, the introduction of the Guardians of the Galaxy marks a significant expansion of the MCU's narrative scope, as their story initially unfolds in almost total isolation from the already established stories of the franchise. The film presents a team of misfit anti-heroes who travel between different planets in order to save the entire 'galaxy', that appears for the first time in their solo adventure, without any ties to formerly introduced characters or settings. The story of the Guardians is therefore completely independent from the other stories, even more so than other 'standalone stories', as the latter often feature characters or settings that are featured in various sub-franchises. The only sign that *The Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn) is part of the MCU is a mid-credits scene featured at the end of *Thor: The Dark World* (Taylor). In the scene, Thor's friends visit the Collector, a character that also has a supporting role in *The Guardians of the Galaxy*. The Collector's inclusion across the two projects establishes the only real link between the storyworld of the Guardians and that of the entire MCU, proving that the Guardians are also part of the same shared universe.

However, well-read Marvel fans may spot an even bigger, overarching connection between the stories; in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, the Collector first identifies the orb that

the Guardians brought to him as a so-called Infinity Stone, one of six extremely powerful cosmic objects with magic powers. Fans that are familiar with the Stones and their eventual function may note that other Infinity Stones have already appeared throughout the MCU (the Space Stone or Tesseract is of vital importance in *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *The Avengers*, and the Reality Stone is an essential plot device in *Thor: The Dark World*), and realize what casual moviegoers cannot possibly deduct: that the appearance of several Infinity Stones throughout the movies implies that the MCU is working towards adapting the famous Marvel comic book series *The Infinity Gauntlet*. The big storyline brings together many Marvel superheroes trying to defeat a common enemy set on wiping out half of the universe, and the Guardians' connection to one of the Stones therefore implies their importance when the storyline will eventually come to fruition. It is important to note that such a connection is, at the point of release, only based on speculation and that only the best informed Marvel fans will be able to catch the subtle reference to what will come. This is also the reason that the tradition of including post-credits scenes is important not only to create a link between stories but also as "a ritual enacted by fans, who interpret the scene for the uninitiated", which is why such sequences "rely on a degree of specialized knowledge when it comes to interpreting them" (Bryan 154).

In other words, the movies of the Marvel Cinematic Universe are connected on several levels; for casual audience members, there are clear yet limited signs of interconnectivity, whereas seasoned fans can rely on post-credits scenes and their comic book expertise to uncover an overarching storyline before it is actually shown on the silver screen. The *Infinity Gauntlet* series would indeed bring together many characters from many sub-franchises in the films *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* (A. Russo and J. Russo). These more experienced fans may therefore have a broader and clearer understanding of the MCU's storyworld.

Next, movies within the Marvel Cinematic Universe are also linked to each other through "linked repercussions" (Beaty 323). Big events from one movie can have a lasting impact on the story or the characters of a different movie. For example, the opening scene of *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts) takes place just days after the Battle for New York, the climactic and destructing event of *The Avengers*, in which parts of the city were destroyed by an alien invasion, and shows Adrian Toomes and his salvage crew begin to clean up the city before being relieved of their duties by the government-controlled Department of Damage Control. Furious about losing his business, Toomes and his crew decide to keep some of the alien equipment found on site and use it to manufacture weapons, eventually leading to Toomes creating his Vulture suit and becoming the main villain of the *Spider-Man* movie.

In particular, the events of the big team-up films *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* (A. Russo and J. Russo) have had an enormous impact on the characters and stories that follow the films. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, the Avengers and allies notably fail to stop the pursuits of the Mad Titan Thanos who is set on obliterating

half of all life in the universe by collecting all Infinity Stones in a gauntlet and then snapping his fingers. As a result, the population of all life in the galaxy is cut in half, with people starting to spontaneously disintegrate, including many of the characters of the MCU themselves; heroes such as Spider-Man, most of the Guardians of the Galaxy, Falcon and Black Panther all cease to exist as they are turned to dust. This event is felt all over the galaxy and thus affects the entire storyworld of the MCU. In *Avengers: Endgame*, the remaining Avengers (among whom the original six team members from the 2012 movie) manage to bring back those who were lost by making use of time travel in order to collect all six Infinity Stones. However, *Endgame* takes place five years after *Infinity War*, which means that even though the obliteration of half the population is undone, the storyworld was still marked by five years of the ‘snap’s’ ramifications. The return of characters after five years of absence also has great effects on many storylines and characters’ motivations.

The big storyline of the *Avengers* films influences pretty much all the stories that follow; in *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (Watts), the first release after *Avengers: Endgame*, Peter Parker/Spider-Man and his friends have to deal with the fact that some kids who were five years younger than them are now in their class; whereas Peter and his friends were affected by the snap, other kids were not and aged five years in the time that Peter got disintegrated. Videos shot by schoolmates of Peter show how students in the middle of a marching band practice suddenly disappear due to the snap, and show them reappearing in the same spot, in the middle of a basketball game five years later. Secondly, Peter grapples with the death of his mentor Tony Stark/Iron Man, who gave his life bringing back half of the universe; his grief is an important theme throughout the film. Similarly, the plot of the MCU’s first limited series, *WandaVision* (Schaeffer) revolves around Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch not being able to cope with her boyfriend Vision’s death in *Avengers: Infinity War*, and her using her powers to create a new contained reality in which he is still alive. Another limited series, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (Spellman), focuses on Sam Wilson’s struggle to take over the mantle of Captain America from his friend Steve Rogers, who decided to travel to the past in *Avengers: Endgame* and stay there in order to live his life with the woman he loves. Besides, the limited series shows Wilson dealing with a terrorist grouping called the Flag Smashers, who believed life was better during the five years when half the universe ceased to exist. Similarly, an episode of the series *Hawkeye* (Iglu) features a flashback scene showing Black Widow Yelena Belova’s disappearance due to the Snap and her reappearance five years later, and another standalone film, *Eternals* (Zhao), which features only new characters and is barely connected to other MCU properties, still references the event; Salma Hayek’s Eternal Ajak mentions that “[f]ive years ago, Thanos erased half of the population of the universe” (Zhao). A commitment to a large, all-affecting storyline such as that of *Infinity War* and *Endgame* is clearly beneficial for establishing an interconnectivity within the same shared universe. We will analyse this concept of overarching and encompassing storylines when talking about the crossover (see 4.1.2).

Finally, small references in ‘blink-and-you-miss-it’ moments also establish a link between different MCU projects. These tiny and quick references are also called ‘easter eggs’ and are hidden messages from the creators that can be spotted by fans (“Easter egg (media)”). They are not nearly as effective as character appearances, post-credits scenes or linked repercussions across movies, but they do connect movies in subtle ways; these subtle references are, like some post-credits scenes, meant for fans who are paying attention and are trying to discern the big picture of the MCU’s storyworld. For example, when the Avengers are researching an arms dealer and precious metals in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon), they stumble upon the country Wakanda as the resource of the strongest metal on Earth, the fictional vibranium. Wakanda is the home country of King T’Challa/Black Panther, an African superhero who would appear the following year in *Captain America: Civil War* (A. Russo and J. Russo) and would get his own solo instalment with *Black Panther* (Coogler) in 2018. Wakanda would also serve as a primary location in the climax of *Avengers: Infinity War*. By just referring to the country, fans can speculate about the inclusion of the country and the Black Panther in future releases. Similarly, during the climax of *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi), Thor’s brother Loki comes across a replica of the Infinity Gauntlet in the vaults of Asgard’s palace, referring directly to the Infinity Stones storyline. A mid-credits scene of *Thor: Ragnarok* ties in directly with the beginning of *Avengers: Infinity War*.

The creators of the Marvel Cinematic Universe have clearly put a lot of work in establishing an interconnectivity between every single MCU release, highlighting the fact that each character and storyline is set within the same shared universe and therefore share one storyworld, even if their solo instalments may at first sight suggest otherwise. We will next look at what can be described as the pinnacle of interconnectivity, bringing together many subfranchises, its characters and stories into one shared narrative, further driving home the idea that all MCU releases are part of one and the same narrative and storyworld: the crossover.

4.1.2 The crossover

As mentioned earlier, the fact that every MCU project is somehow connected to another work and is therefore part of a large, shared storyworld does not mean that the individual stories cannot be understood as independent properties (Beaty 321). There are numerous cases that evidence different degrees of interconnectivity (supra), yet the many subfranchises in the MCU (such as *Iron Man*, *Thor*, *Captain America*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*,...) all take place within their own storyworlds. These storyworlds to a certain extent imply an independent ontology. The stories are therefore evidently linked, yet do not share a common narrative or purpose. There is no overarching storyline or narratological setting suggesting that the many individual superheroes are affected by the same plot elements or that they operate with shared objectives or motivations – or at least, not until the crossover gets introduced.

The (relative) independence of the many subfranchises completely disappears with the release of *Marvel's The Avengers* (Whedon) in 2012. In the United Kingdom, the project is released under the name *Marvel Avengers Assemble*, immediately highlighting what makes the film special; the assembling or teaming up of different superheroes (and therefore, of different stories). The team-up film is quite unique in modern-day cinema, as it combines characters from the five previous MCU films into one story. This is known as a crossover, "an operation that allows characters imported from different narratives to coexist within the same storyworld" (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 71). However, Ryan refers to the crossover as a transfictional operation that differs from the operation of expansion; in Ryan's definition of a crossover, characters of different storyworlds meet each other in one narrative, and this causes it to be an example of storyworld configuration (71). In the crossover of the MCU however, these characters already exist within the same storyworld, just not yet in the same subfranchise. The protagonists from the various films join forces to defeat Thor's brother Loki, who, with the help of a magic cube called the Tesseract (which was already central to the story of *Captain America*), teleports an army of evil aliens into New York City. Iron Man, Hulk, Thor and Captain America had all led their own 'standalone' films before teaming up in *The Avengers* with the characters Black Widow and Hawkeye (who made their debut as supporting characters in *Iron Man 2* and *Thor* respectively). The expectations one could have when watching a film based on one central character must now be dispensed with, as the main characters all carry an important role in the team-up film. The audience can no longer assume a certain specific ontology or storyworld, because *The Avengers* merges all storyworlds together.

This also means that several aspects that were previously unique to, or at least characteristic of a standalone film now converge; the highly advanced technology and focus on armours and weaponry from *Iron Man*, the superhuman strength of the Hulk and Captain America, the cosmic power of the Tesseract from *Captain America*, and the mythology of Norse gods and integration of outer space and cosmic elements from *Thor* all feature heavily in the crossover movie, along with the merely human abilities of highly-trained hand-to-hand combat and archery displayed by Black Widow and Hawkeye. With the release of a crossover film like *The Avengers*, the storyworld integrates every single film into one larger narrative, in which both the advanced technology typical of the science fiction genre and the magic and mythology that tap more into the genre of fantasy play an important role, proving that the stories can most definitely coexist. In an *Iron Man* movie, the integration of gods and aliens would seem ridiculous, as they are science fiction films whose settings are closely related to the actual world the audience inhabits. In *The Avengers* however, Iron Man and his technologically advanced and weaponized suit of armour go toe to toe against Thor's mythical, flying and lightning-guiding hammer. When the characters of different subfranchises merge, so do the ontologies of their respective standalone stories.

The Avengers therefore brings together several individual heroes who have previously been defined within their individual storyworlds, and lets these characters

operate in an overarching storyworld, highlighting the fact that the MCU constitutes a shared universe in which varying storyworlds are still dependent on what happens in other storyworlds. One could argue that a character such as Iron Man is both part of his own storyworld (in solo *Iron Man* instalments) and of an overarching *Avengers* storyworld (when he is part of a crossover narrative). This overarching storyworld is always present, yet is of lesser importance in a solo film. “Marvel Studios has crafted a modular system in which parts of the whole can be emphasized and deemphasized as circumstances warrant” (Beaty 322), which allows the audience to view *Iron Man* both as an individual story and as a part of the larger, shared universe constituted in *The Avengers*.

A crossover therefore differs from a solo instalment not only because its story is larger in scope and ramifications, but also because its main characters grapple with other issues and have to deal with a storyworld that is much larger and different from what they are used to in solo films. The Avengers are almost all disconnected from their usual storyworlds, as the movie takes place in different locations and does not feature – with a few exceptions – any supporting characters from the previous solo movies, a deliberate choice by director Joss Whedon, who wanted to remove the characters from their known environment in order to establish a team that bands together to defeat a much larger, common threat (Donnelly).

We can assert that the inclusion of crossovers in a (cinematic) shared universe contributes to an evolution from a collective of individual storyworlds, that exist next to each other and are interconnected, to one large, overarching storyworld. A crossover such as *The Avengers* is the most obvious way of presenting every release as a part of a whole. Stories that have little links to others can be integrated in a crossover, showing the audience that each story is indeed connected – and, more importantly, that each story (and each character) contributes to the story of the larger whole. Characters from every subfranchise can turn out to be essential parts of the overlapping story that is told throughout instalments and culminates in a crossover, which also means that every new story that is being released becomes mandatory viewing, as one can only guess the extent to which a certain story or character will be of essence in the overarching crossover narrative.

For example, the films *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* (A. Russo and J. Russo) tell the story that (up until the time of writing, at least) incorporates the most extensive selection of characters from the Marvel Cinematic Universe and that has a very large scope in comparison to all other previous MCU releases. The audience had already been made familiar with the Avengers as a team in two earlier releases; *The Avengers* focuses mainly on the six superheroes first introduced in the shared universe, whereas *Avengers: Age of Ultron* broadens the team by introducing new characters with superhuman strength; the twins Wanda and Pietro Maximoff, who become the Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver respectively, alongside the humanoid sentient robot Vision are all new introductions into the narrative. The film also integrates several supporting characters from subfranchises: the superhero James Rhodes/War Machine is one of Tony

Stark's best friends and has appeared in all three *Iron Man* films, and Sam Wilson/Falcon aided Captain America in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. However, between the releases of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), many characters had been introduced that had not yet been a part of any conjoined storyline. Superheroes such as Ant-Man, Spider-Man and Black Panther had previously had supporting roles in *Captain America: Civil War*, connecting their solo films to a larger narrative – yet they had not appeared in an Avengers film yet. Title characters such as the Guardians of the Galaxy and *Doctor Strange* (Derrickson) had been introduced in their solo instalments and had little to no ties with other MCU characters. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, all these characters joined the Avengers in their quest to stop the Mad Titan Thanos from acquiring the Infinity Stones.

As mentioned previously, the Infinity Stones had been circulating for quite some time in the MCU before their importance in the big crossover films became clear. The Stones serve as the “one driving force that unifies all the robot-alien-hero fighting” (Miller) – in other words, their being scattered across the MCU projects is the central link between all the stories of the MCU up until the point of *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Endgame*. They serve as a good excuse to integrate the storyworlds of the Guardians of the Galaxy and *Doctor Strange* into the larger overarching storyworld of the MCU; *The Guardians of the Galaxy* shows the titular heroes coming into contact with the so-called Power Stone and the villain Thanos who wants to retrieve it, and in *Doctor Strange*, Stephen Strange wields the Time Stone after discovering it in a sorcerer's compound. Marvel Studios' biggest crossover to date has been set up in different subfranchises – and thus, different narratives that also have their independent storyworlds. The inclusion of dozens of both main and supporting characters from all MCU subfranchises in *Avengers: Endgame* emphasizes the scope of the storyworld inhabited by the characters. The crossover films serve as a climactic ending of a story that has already been set up and hinted at in early MCU movies.

Because every subfranchise – and their storyworlds – are all part of the same shared universe and come together in films such as *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Endgame*, this also means that the different ontologies implied in the individual movies all coexist. Because the MCU tells many differing stories tapping into many different sources, we have to analyse what problems might result from the conjoining of the several individual ontologies for the ontology of the overarching universe's storyworld.

4.1.3 Repercussions of converging ontologies

Because of the different natures of some of the stories in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, their converging into one single storyworld also means that several of their ontologies converge. Because a storyworld can only be considered a storyworld as long as all of its stories comply to the rules of one single ontology (Ryan, *From Possible Worlds to Storyworlds* 68), we analyse the impact of the converging of to some extent self-contained storyworlds on a new, overarching storyworld as presented in a crossover, and

look at how the franchise deals with hypothetical contradictions. In order to do so, we analyse some specific aspects of the MCU's storyworld; its conception of the planet Earth and its geopolitical classifications, the use of magic and the existence and nature of an afterlife.

4.1.3.1 Storyworld Earth

As mentioned in 4.1.1, *Iron Man* (Favreau) – the very first film of the Marvel Cinematic Universe – presents a storyworld that is very realistic to the actual world the audience lives in. There is no reason to suspect that Iron Man's planet Earth is any different than our actual world; the main difference between the two being the advanced technology of the superhero outing, yet even if Tony Stark's heart operation and his armoured flying super-suit do not exist in the actual world, it is not hard to imagine them existing in today's world, and they certainly do not have to influence the audience's perspective of the spatial storyworld of *Iron Man* as the planet they themselves inhabit. The distance between our actual world and the storyworld is therefore very small. However, this changes with the releases of other MCU stories, mainly *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon) and the *Black Panther* films (Coogler). In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the film's climax is set in the capital of a country called Sokovia, situated somewhere in Central-Eastern Europe. The country, which is the birthplace of twins Wanda and Pietro Maximoff, is fully fictional and only exists in the MCU. Secondly, the *Black Panther* films (and a substantial part of *Avengers: Infinity War*) take place in Wakanda, a technologically advanced nation that is hidden from the rest of the world by a sort of cloaking device, shielding their resources. At the end of *Black Panther*, the nation's King T'Challa decides to open up Wakanda to the rest of the world and starts engaging in global politics. To the audience, it is clear that the storyworld they previously thought of as virtually equal to their own world is largely different from the planet they live on. However, as *Iron Man* does not detail the world's nations or national politics, it is highly plausible that the nations of Sokovia and Wakanda also existed in the first MCU film – they just were not relevant to that story. In this way, the storyworlds of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Black Panther* can be perfectly integrated into the overarching MCU storyworld, and there are no conflicts between these films' ontologies.

Similarly, as also mentioned in 4.1.1, the introduction of characters, settings and elements from outer space and several cosmic realms and planets also does not posit a problem for the comprehensive storyworld of the MCU. Although the earlier, earth-bound stories of the MCU seemingly leave no room for outer space elements, this does not mean that these do not exist out of the story yet in the same storyworld. Thor's appearance in the MCU "necessitates a reconceptualization of the shared storyworld's physical laws that are inclusive of magic" (Jeffries 293). In this sense, the audience and the MCU characters that inhabit the Earth have a similar experience in trying to grasp the presence of otherworldly characters. A merely human character such as scientist Jane Foster "plays an important role as the audience surrogate, [...] attempting to understand their magic in terms of her own scientific knowledge" (Jeffries 293). After the events of *The Avengers* (Whedon) for example, the human beings that live in the MCU's version of planet Earth must come to terms with the existence of aliens in their 'storyworld', and the audience does the same.

In other words, the integration of new stories broadens the storyworld of the MCU in a way that the storyworlds of the subfranchises do not contradict each other. These new narrative elements have technically always been part of the larger universe, they just have not been mentioned yet for lack of relevance. The storyworld of the MCU is therefore only changed *as the audience knows it*. Concurrently with the events of *Iron Man*, the characters of *Thor* also exist – they are simply of no narrative value to the events of that particular film, and therefore not included in its representation of the storyworld. When new locations, inexplicable events or otherworldly characters appear in the MCU, the other characters’ perception of their own storyworld changes – and so does the audience’s. If they were to retroactively interpret the MCU’s stories in order to gain a broader understanding of the entire universe, they would recognize the broad storyworld as a given; the distinctive subfranchises however present only the part of this broad universe that is relevant to their respective narratives. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe the audience keeps on learning new things about the universe they perceive. For them, the ontology of planet Earth, *Iron Man*’s storyworld, changes, but the new ontology they face does not contradict the old one – rather, it broadens it.

4.1.3.2 Magic and the supernatural in the MCU

In the ever-expanding storyworld of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there are multiple instances of magic that differ wholly from one another. We first need to specify what we talk about when talking about magic in the MCU. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “the use of means (such as charms or spells) believed to have supernatural power over natural forces” or “magic rites or incantations” (“magic,” def. 1). For the sake of this argument, we do away with the supernatural element of the definition; for example, Steve Rogers’ strength which allows him to be Captain America is definitely superhuman and therefore supernatural to some extent, yet his strength is explained in-universe through him being subject of a scientific experiment in which he is injected by a so-called ‘super soldier serum’. Similarly, the Hulk’s existence is definitely paired with a supernatural power, yet his transformation to a green rage-monster is a consequence of being exposed to gamma radiation by U.S. general Ross, who wants to invigorate the ‘super soldier’ program. Because their supernatural abilities have ‘scientific’ origins – at least in the MCU’s storyworld – they cannot be considered magic as such; they are explained in the terms of the storyworld and therefore do not conflict with any ontology. Rather, we will consider forms of magic that tap into the fantasy genre instead of the science fiction genre.

Of course, the magic powers of characters such as Thor or Loki are properties of ancient Norse mythology, and the Marvel films tap into that tradition when giving their characters powers such as flight, shapeshifting, or commanding lightning (“Thor (Marvel Cinematic Universe)”). Therefore, Norse mythology is presented as factual in the storyworld of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The hero and his home world of Asgard are presented in the MCU partly in a traditional, mythological way, but also have lots of modern elements and sometimes even feel futuristic (Máthé 201, 203). Norse mythology

therefore definitely serves as an important source of inspiration for the cinematic presentation of Thor and his surroundings and although the MCU films can hardly be compared to the 11th Century Prose Edda, its influence seems clear and Thor's powers are characteristic of Norse mythological stories.

However, there are also many human characters with supernatural abilities, even though many acquire them through (failed) scientific experiments. These are, of course, very unrealistic, yet the description of the scientific experiments are always vague enough to validate the supernatural powers and do not warrant any further explanation from any otherworldly or mythological source. However, there are also instances of magic in the more traditional sense of the word that cannot immediately be explained in the context of science fiction experiments. Scarlet Witch is an interesting character, whose powers warrant a more detailed analysis in order to grasp the different kinds of 'magic' in the MCU.

First, her initial abilities (that she gains previous to the events of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon)) are a result of experiments being run on her and her twin brother Pietro by the evil Baron von Strucker, who has come into possession of Loki's scepter, which holds the Mind Stone, one of the Infinity Stones. As previously explained in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn), the Infinity Stones are immensely powerful cosmic objects that have been around since before the creation of the universe itself and each feature a key element of existence. Experiments with the Mind Stone give Wanda many powers such as energy manipulation, telekinesis and mind reading. The MCU's witchcraft does not limit itself to what comes from an Infinity Stone, however. The MCU miniseries *WandaVision* (Schaeffer) and its immediate spinoff *Agatha All Along* (Schaeffer et al.) show that witchcraft comes in many forms and has different sources. "Wanda's witchiness has a complex and multilayered depth of palimpsests to cite. The creators of *WandaVision* [...] have [...] cited centuries of witch history" (Barnette 56). In *WandaVision*, Agatha Harkness seeks to steal Wanda's powers, as she believes they are a form of chaos magic and that Wanda is the Scarlet Witch. Agatha is a witch herself; a flashback scene in *WandaVision* sees her being relieved of her powers by a coven of witches. The scene is set in Salem in 1693, a real-life American town infamous for its 1692 witch trials, and therefore shows how the MCU also taps into real-world myths concerning witches in order to build their characters – which are, in their storyworld, actual witches, in contrast to the real-life women put on trial in Salem.

Moreover, Agatha – and later, Wanda as well – has used the information from the *Darkhold*, a book of spells of dark magic, to enhance her powers. This dark magic is different from other magic earlier displayed by Wanda. The miniseries *Agatha All Along* even shows Agatha forming a coven of witches who are all specialized in different forms of magic: protective magic, green magic, divination and potion-mastery are all different sorts of magic, or at least different branches of the same overarching magic. This magic is not acquired through scientific experiments, nor is it inherent to a cosmic entity; the

presence of witches and their powers in the MCU has therefore no logical explanation in terms of the MCU's storyworld. It is an inexplicable force acquired by some humans.

Another form of magic that heavily features in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is that of Doctor Strange and the Masters of the Mystic Arts. Strange and the other sorcerers study under the Ancient One, a centuries-old Celt woman, and learn magic from ancient books in the Sanctum's library, which enables them to open up portals, access other dimensions and warp energy to make tangible shields and weapons. The magic is labelled as Eldritch magic or sorcery by MCU fans ("Magic"). Strange's magic is very different from that of the Scarlet Witch, for example, and it shows in their respective power. In *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Raimi), the two battle each other, and it is quickly clear that Scarlet Witch takes the upper hand.

The examples do not end here; the Marvel Cinematic Universe online encyclopaedia moderated by fans lists at least ten different kinds of magic used by various characters in several subfranchises ("Magic"). The limited series *Moon Knight* (Slater) introduces divine magic for example, in which deities take control over human avatars through whom their powers are channelled, enabling the humans to shapeshift and manipulate energy.

Now, the question in need of answering is whether or not these many different sorts of magic are compatible within the same shared storyworld. Because the many subfranchises of the MCU – such as those of *Doctor Strange* or *Thor* – initially deal with one or two sorts of magic, the storyworld in which the magic occurs is equipped with an ontology corresponding to that specific iteration of magic. However, big crossover films such as *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* show how such characters all use their respective magical powers in order to defeat the common evil Thanos. The cosmic powers of Thor, the sorcery of Doctor Strange and the chaos magic of Scarlet Witch are all used on the same battlefield, among many other kinds of supernatural powers. One can assume that, in a storyworld that encompasses all of these powers with many sources, forms and manners, combining them in such a way that their intrinsic properties are all guaranteed and the one does not overpower or outdo the other is a tricky task. The films however do manage to combine the various forms of magic without harming the separate ontologies of the subfranchises they originate from exactly by limiting the magical powers to the characters of that subfranchise. For example, Doctor Strange cannot suddenly indulge in the chaos magic posited by Scarlet Witch and vice versa, nor do any of these characters have the ability to summon lightning like the Asgardian god Thor. An important condition of the shared storyworld is that the magic practiced by one particular character or set of characters can only be practiced by the character(s) endowed with this magic in the storyworld of their subfranchise. This way, the ontologies of the subfranchises are still kept separate in the overarching storyworld of the *Avengers* films. Scarlet Witch has gotten her powers from experiments with the Mind Stone, Doctor Strange got his powers from years of practicing sorcery with the Masters of the Mystic Arts, and Thor is, simply put, a god. There is no reason for them – or any other character

for that matter, whether or not supernaturally gifted – to exchange or mimic the magic of others. The characters from several subfranchises may cross over, their ontologically motivated powers do not.

Therefore, it is important that characters adhere to the lore and stories of their own subfranchises, also when participating in a crossover whose storyworld features many different kinds of magic. Several ontologies can coexist in an overarching storyworld and so can different forms of magical powers, yet these powers are restricted to the storyworld they originated in. Of course, the magic can be used ‘against’ other people that are not part of the original storyworld and it can influence events in the shared storyworld, yet the magic still has to originate with its original practitioners. In such an event when different kinds of magic are seen as compatible, it is important for narrative purposes to scale the strength of the various magical iterations so that the powers of the various superheroes are still valuable in relation to the powers of other characters. Therefore, it may prove problematic to let the different forms of supernatural strength interact; a film such as *Avengers: Endgame* solves this by giving many characters an individual moment to showcase their personal powers and abilities, even if they are featured in a large-scale battle where several heroes and villains are all fighting each other. For instance, Scarlet Witch, who is generally considered a very powerful character in the MCU, faces Thanos by herself in the climax of *Endgame*, exerting her strength on the Mad Titan before being interrupted by blasts from an overhanging spaceship. This way, the overarching storyworld can incorporate many characters and ontologies from different subfranchises without jeopardizing the compatibility of the different smaller storyworlds from solo instalments.

4.1.3.3 The MCU’s afterlife

A similar condition for the merging of storyworlds emerges when talking about the notion of afterlife in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Throughout the films, the audience comes into contact with several representations of the afterlife, which are themselves based upon real-life folk legends.

In the *Thor* films, the creators draw from Norse mythology to portray the passing of a certain character. In *Thor: Ragnarok*, Thor and his brother Loki discover their father Odin, the King of Asgard and God of the Heavens, standing by a cliff in Norway, proclaiming that his late wife is “calling” him and that he does not “have much time” (Waititi). He feels his ending is near, and after warning his sons of the coming of doomsday event Ragnarok and their evil sister, he seemingly dissolves in thin air, becoming a light and golden sparks before disappearing completely and dying. In *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Waititi), the afterlife is specified as the realm Valhalla, a sort of paradise for Asgardians to which Jane Foster, a human, is admitted, after wielding Thor’s mighty hammer as the Mighty Thor yet finally succumbing to her terminal cancer

diagnosis. Foster dies in the same way as Odin, by dissolving into thin air, yet she is human and not an Asgardian, nor a god.

In *Black Panther* (Coogler), King T'Challa takes the 'heart-shaped herb', which allows him to communicate with his ancestors in the Ancestral Plane, a spiritual realm accessed through the ritually eating of the herb. This way, T'Challa can communicate with his father, even though he got killed in a bombing at a United Nations convention in *Captain America: Civil War* (A. Russo and J. Russo). The miniseries *Moon Knight*, in which deities choose human beings as their avatars to control, protagonist Marc Spector is taken by the Egyptian goddess Taweret to the Duat, "the Egyptian perspective of the afterlife" (Slater; "Features of the Marvel Cinematic Universe"). There, he must traverse a sea of sand to make it back to the real world. The Astral Dimension accessed by Doctor Strange in many MCU projects allows the soul to reside outside the body and is also allegedly connected to the afterlife of the MCU.

Similar to its forms of magic, the Marvel Cinematic Universe harbours several kinds of afterlife, that are all based on, or at least inspired by, different kinds of religions that have existed in the actual world. Valhalla is, just like most of the storyworld of Thor, based on Norse mythology. The Ancestral Plane from *Black Panther* is inspired by African beliefs about the afterlife, and the Duat is in ancient Egyptian mythology "a realm where people go to after they die" ("Duat"). These various interpretations of an afterlife appear only in the different subfranchises of the MCU, however, and seem to be restricted for anyone who has not been an active participant of the culture to which the afterlife corresponds. For characters without connections to any kind of mythology or spiritual beings, their death means the end and no afterlife is shown. It is only for these particular cultures that are explored in subfranchises – such as *Thor*, *Black Panther* or *Moon Knight* – that an afterlife is presented as factual and accessible.

Here, too, it is important for the stories' ontologies that the forms of afterlife (e.g. Norse or Egyptian mythology and Wakandan ancestor culture) and their sources remain only characteristics of the individual storyworld. If these properties of the individual storyworlds were to merge in a crossover project, their ontologies would clash, causing the overarching storyworld to contradict itself, because one character cannot be admitted to different versions of an afterlife – or at least, this has never happened in the MCU and would be a very strange narratological development. Therefore, Tony Stark cannot get into Valhalla nor can he communicate with his ancestors' spirits or go to the Duat after his death in *Avengers: Endgame* – Iron Man is a human without connections to deities or mythologies, and his afterlife is therefore the same as that of all other people unconnected to a certain mythology. Even if the character dies in an overarching storyworld where both Thor and *Black Panther* are present, their respective forms of afterlife are for them and their individual storyworlds only. Tony Stark gets a funeral among his family, friends and coworkers, and that is the end of his story. By keeping these realms after death apart, the storyworlds of the subfranchises remain compatible and there arise no problems for the overarching storyworld of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is constantly expanding its storyworld with every new release. By linking each instalment and story to the bigger whole of the universe through shared characters or subtle links connecting stories, such as post-credits scenes or references to other locations or events, the MCU establishes an overarching storyworld. However, the many subfranchises of the universe still have their own storyworlds that operate independently from other storyworlds and that steer the expectations of the audience and the development of their stories: a divine intervention is common in a subfranchise such as *Thor*, yet unthinkable in an *Iron Man* film with a purely earthly scope. By establishing a linking element in each release however, Marvel Studios forces its audience to think about the actual scope and ontology of the overarching storyworld, which comes to fruition in so-called crossovers: stories in which characters (and locations or events) of several subfranchises merge into one narrative. Now, the individual subfranchises' storyworlds are not independent anymore, as they are all part of an overarching storyworld. Up until the point of writing, the movies *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* serve as the epitome of the crossover in the MCU, combining characters with either purely human abilities, supernatural powers or with cosmic origins. The storyworlds of these subfranchises have to be compatible in order for the overarching storyworld – and therefore, the crossover – to work. The overarching storyworld of the shared universe broadens the notion of the individual storyworlds by merging their scopes and ontologies. In order for the different ontologies to be compatible, some properties of the individual storyworlds (such as the use of particular kinds of magic or the existence of an afterlife) have to be limited to the characters of the storyworld in which they originated. This way, the crossover can merge several subfranchises together unproblematically; the audience can see the Marvel Cinematic Universe as one big shared universe and one storyworld, in which each story is connected to the bigger whole.

4.2 Constructing a storyworld across media

Besides transfictionality, which we extensively discussed in 4.1, Henry Jenkins names another key component of transmedial franchises in his blog, namely that “elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels” (Jenkins, *Transmedia Storytelling 101*). He mentions “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior [sic] of media audiences” (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture 2*). Due to the rise of the mass entertainment industry, this practice of spreading content over several different media has become very popular. Moreover, because story aspects are spread across different places in transmedial franchises, audiences are forced to fill in the gaps of what is left implicit across media to form a mental image of the story themselves. In other words, transmedial franchises force audiences to mentally construct the storyworld in which they find themselves. Building the storyworld is therefore not only the job of the creator of a work, but also of the audience themselves, as “the virtually

infinite and perpetually expanding storyworld is no longer coextensive with a single narrative” (Baroni et al. 376).

Jenkins’ idea that transmedia storytelling should provide a unified experience for the audience (Jenkins 127, Baroni et al. 377) explains the MCU’s signature trait of constantly linking their stories, and connecting them in order to lead up to a big crossover event. However, when talking about spreading out story elements over several projects to provide narrative connections leading up to a climactic crossover event, we are mainly talking about the MCU’s movie production, which started in 2008 and systematically spread out small story elements (often in the form of so-called Infinity Stones) across different movies, ultimately leading up to the double-feature crossover event *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* (A. Russo and J. Russo). However, the MCU’s narrative elements travel far beyond the movies. In the following chapter, we explore the many kinds of media through which the Marvel Cinematic Universe spreads its narrative. Next, we will analyse to what extent particular media are important in delivering this unified experience of interlinked stories by looking at the ‘canon’ of a transmedial franchise as big as the MCU.

4.2.1 Different media

The name of the transmedial franchise that is the MCU may already reveal a vital medium: the Marvel *Cinematic* Universe implies the importance of films in telling stories that contribute to the larger universe. Most examples mentioned above in the analysis of how the MCU connects its storyworlds and creates an overarching narrative are films, yet this does not mean a lack of other media through which the characters and stories of the MCU are shaped. In the following segment, a non-exhaustive list of various media will be provided, showing the far-extending reach of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

4.2.1.1 Film

The films of the MCU are by far the most lucrative elements of the franchise. Their combined box office comes in at 31.62 billion dollars. Combined with home entertainment sales of DVDs and the like, the transmedial franchise comes in at ninth place in the highest-grossing media franchises of all time (“List of highest-grossing media franchises”). Film is also the original medium of the MCU when it started in 2008. Since then, the universe has expanded with multiple other media, yet the primary focus of the MCU still seems to be making movies, with several new features (including new crossover event films *Avengers: Doomsday* and *Avengers: Secret Wars* (A. Russo and J. Russo)) already being announced for the coming years. At the time of writing, Marvel Studios has released thirty-seven films over the span of eighteen years, and nine other films have already been greenlit (“List of Marvel Cinematic Universe films”).

In the early years of the MCU, Marvel Studios often included short films as special features in the digital and Blu-Ray releases of their feature films, referring to them as ‘one-shots’. These short films are “designed to be self-contained stories that provide more backstory for characters or events introduced in the films” (“Marvel One-Shots”). This way, characters who played a supporting role in a film could be explored further, and

big events could be expanded upon, by showing their effects on arbitrary civilians. These short films are not necessary story elements however, and they can be viewed independently from the movie they are connected to. For example, the one-shot *Team Thor* (Waititi) is meant as a humorous mockumentary explaining Thor's absence from the events of *Captain America: Civil War* (A. Russo and J. Russo), which features most Avengers. However, we can raise questions about the one-shots' inclusion in the shared universe of the MCU. Most of the times, the events depicted in the one-shots have little to no connection to any feature films, yet the one-shot *Team Thor* actually seems to contradict a story that is featured in the films. In the climax of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon), Bruce Banner's alter ego the Hulk departs from planet Earth in a spaceship, and in *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi), he is discovered to have drifted off in space and to have landed on the alien planet of Sakaar, where he was forced to become a gladiator. In the meantime, he has not been able to transform back to his human form of Bruce Banner. Banner arrives back on Earth after the events of *Thor: Ragnarok* in the film *Avengers: Infinity War*. However, in the comedy one-shot *Team Thor*, which takes place during the events of *Captain America: Civil War* and therefore between the events of *Age of Ultron* and *Ragnarok*, Bruce Banner meets Thor at a café in Australia. This is impossible if one follows the feature films' narrative, as Banner is at this time living on Sakaar in his Hulk form. Therefore, the two stories clash and logically cannot both be part of the same narrative under the shared storyworld of the MCU.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe movies seem to have by far the largest impact on its storyworld, with its most defining stories, characters and events all being told through film. Other releases, such as the Marvel one-shots or short films, seem to serve as background viewing: entertaining and to some extent linked to the overarching storyworld, yet not necessary in order to grasp the most important narrative plotlines that are formed throughout the feature films. Most MCU media seems to function in a similar relation to the MCU movies, i.e. as accessory though not essential to the main plot, but there are definitely exceptions. Television programs produced by the studio have often proved their worth in shaping the shared storyworld.

4.2.1.2 Television

In order to talk about the television programs that tie in to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, a distinction has to be made. On the one hand, there are the so-called "Marvel Television series", which includes original programming on the American broadcast channel ABC and streaming service Netflix, and on the other hand, there are the "Marvel Studios series", which have aired on the streaming service Disney+ since 2021.

The first of the MCU television series started off as an immediate follow-up to the 2012 team-up film *The Avengers*. In the film, agent Phil Coulson of the espionage agency S.H.I.E.L.D. is killed by the evil Loki, yet in the pilot episode of the television series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* ("Pilot"), Coulson is shown to have survived the attack by Loki and assembles a team of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents to deal with various unusual cases and enemies in the world of superheroes, including superhuman and cosmic stories. The series is heavily influenced by the events of the MCU films; when *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* shows that S.H.I.E.L.D. has been infiltrated by spies of Hydra, a terrorist

organization that was once a division of the Nazi Party in the Second World War, the series is heavily impacted by this storyline. Over the show (particularly the first seasons), many MCU characters from the movies guest star in the television series. The films therefore heavily influence the television show, yet this does not work in the other direction. Marvel TV chief Jeph Loeb has said that he does not “want to ever do something in our show which contradicts what’s happening in the movies. [...] [The movies a]re setting the timeline for the MCU and what’s going on. Our job is to navigate within that world” (Baysinger). In other words, the MCU films dictate what is supposed to happen in the MCU storyworld, and other media such as television programs need to adapt to that.

Marvel Studios also developed television shows exclusive to the streaming service Netflix for which they adapted a different narrative strategy: the several TV series featured on the platform can be described as forming their own smaller shared storyworld. The studio released four interconnected series focused on individual “street-level” heroes in New York City before bringing them together in the crossover miniseries titled *The Defenders* (“Marvel’s Netflix television series”). Similar to the larger MCU as portrayed in the films, the series are clearly shown as interconnected through the appearance of shared characters and through referencing events from the other television shows. For example, the television series *Iron Fist* (Buck) “makes references to the events of [...] *Jessica Jones*, *Daredevil*, *Luke Cage*” (“Marvel’s Netflix television series”). Luke Cage, a character who would headline his individual series with the same name (Coker), first appeared as a supporting character in *Jessica Jones* (Rosenberg). The series have been defined as part of the MCU and also reference many of the MCU’s movies’ plots; for example, *Daredevil* (Goddard) references the events of *The Avengers* (Whedon) and also mentions the character of Carl Creel, who appeared in the ABC series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

However, the so-called Defenders deal with threats independently from the Avengers. The film *Avengers: Infinity War* aims to bring together all the MCU heroes, yet characters from the television series are not included. Even if some events from the movies are referenced to in the television series, their narratives largely remain separate. This changes after the introduction of the so-called Marvel Studios series. The characters from the Netflix series *Daredevil* appear again in the Marvel Studios series *Daredevil: Born Again* (Scardapane et al.), which aired on the streaming service Disney+ and serves as both “a revival and continuation” of the original Netflix series (“*Daredevil: Born Again*”). The character of Matt Murdock/Daredevil also appears in the MCU movie *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts) prior to this, indicating that the films and television series are from that point on more connected.

After the release of *Avengers: Endgame* (A. Russo and J. Russo), Marvel Studios’ president Kevin Feige started looking for “a platform that [would] allow him to tell stories from the MCU on the small screen” (Barfield). The streaming service Disney+, owned by the Walt Disney Company, which also owns Marvel Studios, started serving as a release platform for various MCU projects. According to Feige, the Disney+ programming would be the first time that the MCU movies would be truly interlinked with the TV shows (Barfield) – implying that this was not the case with series such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* or the Marvel series on Netflix – and even though they do reference several MCU events or characters from the films, we do see that the two media rarely exert a narrative

influence on each other. Indeed, it quickly becomes clear that the plots of MCU movies and the MCU series released on Disney+ severely impact each other.

Take for example Marvel Studios' first television series released on the platform, the limited series *WandaVision* (Schaeffer). The series is a direct continuation of the events of *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Endgame*, in which Wanda Maximoff's lover Vision is murdered by Thanos in order to gain an Infinity Stone. The series follows Wanda, who had already appeared in four MCU movies as a supporting character, as she uses her powers to create a new reality in which Vision still lives and in which the two have children. When Wanda has to give up that reality at the end of the series, this immediately influences the plot of the film *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Raimi), in which Doctor Strange has to stop Wanda, or the Scarlet Witch, as she tries to access parallel universes by any means necessary in order to find a life where Vision and her kids are alive and well. Monica Rambeau, an agent who tries to uncover Wanda's reality in the series, is recruited in a post-credits scene to do research in space, where she will be of pivotal importance in the plot of the film *The Marvels* (DaCosta). *WandaVision* would also spark several spin-offs, centred around the witch Agatha (*Agatha All Along* (Schaeffer)) and Wanda's love Vision (the upcoming series *Vision Quest*, set to release in 2026 ("Vision Quest (miniseries)")).

Marvel Studios series characters often appear in the films and vice versa: Kate Bishop and Kamala Khan, who were introduced in the television series *Hawkeye* (Iglu) and *Ms. Marvel* (Ali) respectively, appear in *The Marvels*, and the miniseries characters Joaquin Torres and John Walker from *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (Spellman) appear in the films *Captain America: Brave New World* (Onah) and *Thunderbolts** (Schreier) respectively. The film *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (Reed) features a post-credits scene that is taken out of an episode of the second season of the Disney+ series *Loki* (Farahani).

We can conclude that the Marvel Cinematic Universe takes the cinematic releases as its focus, yet the television series that are part of the MCU are always in some way or form connected to the larger (cinematic) universe. These connections started out as somewhat one-sided; the shows would reference the films, but not the other way around. In recent years however, Marvel Studios has resorted to television and streaming in order to expand its storyworld and has produced many series that contribute to a larger narrative that continues or is expanded upon in the movies. The two media uphold a reciprocal exchange of story elements, and both contribute to the MCU's larger, shared storyworld.

4.2.1.3 Theme parks

MCU characters do not only appear on the screen, however. Since the acquisition of Marvel Entertainment by the Walt Disney Company in 2009, the superheroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe have been gradually integrated into both the animation and infrastructure of the Disney theme parks (Clark; McNary; Mitchell). These MCU-inspired attractions are based in a separate portion of the park referred to as the Avengers Campus and they are not merely attractions; rather, the rides, shows and attractions all support a narrative, as "storytelling is considered a vital component of success in the

global theme park industry” (Baker). Therefore, “theme parks are considered nodes in transmedia storytelling [...] [and] are considered a form of ‘spatial transmedia’” (Baker). In an area such as Avengers campus, the visitors are surrounded by a decor featuring lots of details referring to the MCU, giving them a sense of complete immersion in the world of the Marvel heroes. Usual theme park features such as a shop or food court are remodelled to be part of the world, with a gift shop bearing the name of The Collector’s Warehouse, for example, based on the characters’ warehouse as seen in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn), among other films. The dark ride *Guardians of the Galaxy – Mission: Breakout!* sees the Guardian Rocket the Raccoon ‘recruiting’ visitors in order to help free the other Guardians from the Collector’s fortress. Many actors from the MCU films reprise their roles for scenes shown during the ride (“*Guardians of the Galaxy – Mission: Breakout!*”).

One could therefore assume that the park and its narratives are all part of the overarching MCU storyworld as founded in the films and expanded upon in the various television series. Many MCU characters are walking around Avengers Campus to interact with visitors – including Iron Man and Black Widow for example, who both died in the film *Avengers: Endgame* (A. Russo and J. Russo). However, visitors have also seen the likes of Ms. Marvel, Kate Bishop and the Eternal Phastos in the area; all characters that have been introduced in the Marvel Cinematic Universe after the events of *Endgame* – and that in many cases did not have any powers or superhero storyline before the events of the film. Moreover, the characters of Loki and Kang the Conqueror have appeared on the site as well (“Avengers Campus”), although they are known enemies of the Avengers. This means that the coexistence of several characters directly contradicts the stories of the MCU movies and television series. Two ‘stories’ are actively contradicting each other, so they cannot be part of the same storyworld. Or put differently, “[i]f you’re a person who pays intense attention to the movies, there are several conflicting details [...] that alert you this isn’t 100% in the MCU” (Lussier).

This anomaly, however, is clarified in an interesting way, as staff writer at Walt Disney Imagineering Jillian Pagan explained that “these parks take place in a different timeline within the multiverse” (Radulovic). The Wikipedia page for the Avengers Campus also reads that the three existing parks “take place in the ‘Marvel Theme Park Universe’” (“Avengers Campus”), or in other words, an alternate reality of the MCU, in which several events central to the MCU known to the audience did not occur, such as the infamous snap and its subsequent events from *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Marvel Studios’ Dave Bushore says that “you can take all the fun stuff going on across the universe from all the different lines of business [...] and link it to [...] a wholly new experience” (Lussier). Thus, to explain the narrative contradictions, Marvel Studios introduces the concept of the Multiverse; a multitude of realities that are similar, yet can alternate between each other. The concept of the Multiverse will be further explored in 4.3.

4.2.1.4 Other official media

There are still plenty of other media through which the Marvel Cinematic Universe manifests its storyworld. Below, we explore some other forms of media that draw on the MCU to tell its stories.

There are several video games that are either based on or take place in the world of the MCU. The first nine films of the franchise (from *Iron Man* to *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*) are all accompanied by their own (console or mobile) game, based on the MCU films. In these games, the film actors also generally reprise their roles for the narrative voice-overs. However, although they are based on the MCU films and released around the same time as their cinematic counterparts, the plots of the games seem to differ quite drastically from the movies' narratives. Ryan notes that “[i]n a transmedial story system, the most common relation between the various documents is expansion”, saying that a “game may invent a new character for the player to control, or it may focus on an aspect of the storyworld that remains undeveloped in earlier versions” (Ryan, *Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality* 369). However, when two works portray the same event and differ substantially to a point where they (almost) contradict each other, this branding as mere expansion is not applicable. For example, the game *Iron Man* (Hattem et al.), accompanying the 2008 movie, features the villains Blacklash, Madame Masque and the Controller, none of whom appear in the film – or any MCU film, for that matter. Several scenes, such as an attack on an Arctic military ship and the kidnapping of Iron Man's girlfriend Pepper by the company A.I.M. also never happen in the film. Main plot points from the film, such as Stark's imprisonment in Afghanistan, his creation of the Iron Man armour and his confrontation with his business partner Stane as the story's climax however are integrated in the video game. The other games follow a similar pattern, combining the film's characters and main plot points with novel elements or plotlines, presumably in order to provide the player with a better gaming experience. This means that, even though the video games are part of the MCU, they are not connected to the primary MCU storyworld; characters originally from the video games do not appear in any other MCU medium, nor do any plot points referenced in other media as they often contradict, or at least heavily complicate, the events of the overarching storyworld's narrative.

Whereas Marvel comics are generally not a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe as they often tell very different stories, there are some comics produced for the MCU specifically. These are called tie-in comic books, as they are immediately connected to the MCU films and television series. The comics are meant to provide background information on certain characters or events that will soon appear in an MCU project or serve as connecting tools to weave a narrative together, “without necessarily expanding the universe or introducing new concepts or characters” (“Marvel Cinematic Universe tie-in comics”). For example, the comic book *Fury's Big Week*, which was released only weeks before the team-up film *The Avengers* (Whedon) entered theatres, ties together the narrative that is spun throughout the first five MCU films from the perspective of S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury (Pearson and Yost). The tie-in comic *Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy Prelude* provides the reader with more background information surrounding the characters Gamora and Nebula as they grew up with their adoptive father Thanos and Rocket and Groot's history as bounty hunters (Abnett et al.). In contrast to the MCU video

games and theme parks, the tie-in comics are therefore very closely connected to the larger MCU and its movies. The comics bridge narrative gaps between projects or offer more background information on the characters you see on the screen. It is therefore safe to assume that the tie-in comics all belong to the shared storyworld of the MCU films.

Similarly, the MCU has released some short-form digital series on their social media platforms that tie in immediately with its film releases. For instance, the digital series *The Daily Bugle* is a fictional news show in which the journalist character J. Jonah Jameson of the same-titled fictional news website from the *Spider-Man* films comments on actual events in the *Spider-Man* franchise. The series, which has a comedic tone and partly premiered before the (digital) release of *Spider-Man: Far From Home* and *No Way Home* (Watts), serves as a way of reminding the audience what has happened in earlier instalments and getting them excited about the upcoming film release, and therefore fits in easily with the established broader storyworld.

Technically, one could also argue that every piece of merchandise created by Marvel Studios as promotional articles for an MCU project is part of the MCU storyworld as well. This way, a lunchbox featuring MCU characters can be a medium through which the storyworld is expanded. However, these are often merely images or static drawings, and therefore carry little narrative value, which makes their inclusion in the MCU less a question of either expanding or fitting in with the storyworld than other media. However, a lunchbox depicting both Iron Man and Ms. Marvel for example would contradict the dominant storyworld, as the two characters never could have met.

Finally, there are some cases of MCU-inspired media that do not fit in with the broad MCU storyworld at all and that are mainly used for marketing purposes. For example, the short film *The Good, The Bart, and the Loki* (Silverman) was released on Disney+ at the same time as the MCU television series *Loki* was airing. The short is a crossover of the popular long-running cartoon sitcom *The Simpsons* with the MCU, and sees the character of Loki being banished by Odin to Springfield, the fictional town of the cartoon series. The characters of Loki and Odin are drawn in the same style as *The Simpsons*' characters, and Tom Hiddleston voices Loki, reprising his role from other MCU properties. The poster of the short resembles the poster of *Avengers: Endgame*. The story does not seem to make any sense in the MCU storyworld as there is never any feature or mention of *The Simpsons* in any MCU project. The series *Loki* heavily deals with the Multiverse and parallel universes however, which would make his traveling to the *Simpsons* universe plausible, albeit strange. In an end-credits scene, a Time Variance Authority judge from the series finds Loki guilty of 'crossing universes'. Yet, in this case, it is illogical that the scene of this trial and the scene in which Odin banishes his son to this universe are also animated in the style of *The Simpsons*, as these scenes do not take place in the corresponding universe. The short's narrative has no impact on the reception of the MCU's storyworld however and should not be considered part of it.

4.2.1.5 Fan fiction

All projects listed above are works that are (partly) created by people who work for Marvel Studios or that have been commissioned by the company, and are therefore licensed as

‘being part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe’ (“Marvel Cinematic Universe”). However, anyone can expand on the MCU’s storyworld by the means of fan fiction, defined as “stories involving popular fictional characters that are written by fans and often posted on the Internet” (“fan fiction”). MCU fan fiction is based on the storyworld of the MCU, but is not affiliated with Marvel Studios or any parent company or subsidiary. Jenkins poses that this sort of “unauthorized cultural production [...] is related to many kinds of participatory cultured communities that have flourished within this networked culture” (Radošinská and Mago; Jenkins 18-21). This shows that “fans do not passively consume cultural products [...] [yet] also produce original content through which they subvert, alter, and customize this received content” (De Kosnik et al.). The creation of fan fiction seems to be incredibly popular with MCU fans; at the time of writing, the fan fiction database Archive of Our Own lists 514.407 works based on the Marvel Cinematic Universe (“Marvel Cinematic Universe - Works | Archive of Our Own”).

In most cases, fan fiction storyworlds differ drastically from the storyworld as posited by the official MCU texts. Fan fiction “[evokes] a transformed version of the canonical universe” (Van Steenhuyse 27). Fan fiction writers use the stories, settings and characters from the MCU in order to create new narratives, which sometimes expand the MCU’s stories with background stories or imagined consecutive events, but on other occasions belong to the entirely different genres of e.g. horror, romance or even pornography. A character can meet another character that they have never met before in the broader MCU, they can have another personality or sexuality, and characters from the MCU can even interact with characters from an entirely different universe and storyworld, such as Batman or Superman.

In this case, it is more difficult to justify a story that differs from the broadly accepted storyworld of the MCU as presented in the movies as taking place in an alternate reality or universe, being part of the multiverse. Even if some MCU properties such as its theme park attractions or video games (and some of its movies, see 4.3) take place in a reality that does not coincide with the storyworld that has been set up throughout almost all of its movies and television series, they are still products of Marvel Studios. These stories in their parallel universes belong to a different storyworld, yet they are officially part of the Multiverse as decided by its creative officers. Fan-made stories that explore completely different themes, genres or plots expand the storyworld of the MCU, but do so ‘unofficially’. They are not recognized as part of the storyworld nor as part of an alternate universe. Fan fiction writers are therefore also more free in their narrative development of a story, as they do not have to comply with an existing ontology or storyworld or have to base themselves on certain source materials; their narrative can be as connected or detached from the MCU as they want, as they provide unofficial expansions. Therefore, many fan fiction texts present the reader with an alternate storyworld that lies far in the periphery of the established MCU storyworld.

4.2.2 The canon

As mentioned previously, fan-produced texts or stories that engage with the Marvel Cinematic Universe are not officially recognized as part of the universe, as they are unlicensed fan stories rather than works or stories created or commissioned by Marvel

Studios itself. Therefore, fan fiction works do not belong to the ‘canon’ of the MCU. The notion of canon, which is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a body of principles, rules, standards, or norms” (“canon”, def. 4c) refers in the context of a fictional universe to “the body of work considered as having officially happened within that particular fictional world” (“Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki: Canon Policy”).

In general, every film, short film or television series released by Marvel Studios is canonical, and has therefore actually happened in the MCU. However, not every release is recognized as integral or necessary to the canon or dominant storyworld. Take for example the television series *Inhumans* (Buck) or *Cloak & Dagger* (Pokaski), both produced under the Marvel Television banner; the series have been described as taking place in the MCU and reference certain characters or events from the MCU films or other television series, such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Whedon). The Inhumans were originally meant to lead their own movie, before the project was reworked into a television series (Freeman). However, although the several series refer to MCU-acknowledged events, they themselves do not seem to exert any form of impact on other stories within the storyworld (the Inhuman species appears in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, yet this series also does not affect the MCU storyline as posited in the films). Reason for this could be the critical failure of the shows; *Inhumans* currently holds an 11% approval rating on the popular review aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes* (“Marvel’s Inhumans | Rotten Tomatoes”). *Cloak & Dagger* garnered mostly positive reviews however, yet had “slipping ratings” and was airing at a time when “Disney [...] was clearing house [...] in preparation for the [...] launch of its own streaming service, Disney+”, suggesting that “the series may not fit into [Kevin] Feige’s overall grand plan of crossing the small-screen Marvel world into the big-screen MCU” (Starner). It is likely that the characters introduced in the series were originally meant to play a bigger part in the MCU, potentially crossing over with other properties, yet this never happened, leaving the series as largely independent productions with casual links to the MCU. In crossover instalments, neither the Inhumans nor *Cloak & Dagger* appeared, and after the series cancellations in respectively 2018 and 2019, there has never been word on the characters’ return in another MCU project. Similar to *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Inhumans* and *Cloak & Dagger* are registered as canonical to the storyworld, yet they are not needed to follow the main MCU narrative, in contrast with later television shows that influence the movies (see 4.2.1.2).

For a multimedia entertainment franchise such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, defining the canon is a difficult endeavour. As the company produces lots of content, the decision as to what is canonical is often complex. Besides, the canonicity of a work implies that it must be aligned with the existing storyworld; there can therefore be no contradictions between two stories that exist in the same narrative universe and are both canonical. Take, for example, the tie-in comic *Guardians of the Galaxy Prelude* (Abnett et al.): as mentioned in 4.2.1.4, the comic ties in immediately with the 2014 release of *Guardians of the Galaxy* and provides the reader with background information about its characters, including Nebula’s upbringing by her adoptive father Thanos. In the comic book, Nebula cuts off her own arm. However, in the film’s sequel *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (Gunn), Nebula mentions that Thanos pulled her arm out of her body. The two narratives contradict each other, yet are both considered canon, due to the

difference being a minor narrative detail that can be quite easily be ignored by the reader/viewer.

Similarly, the television series *WandaVision* (Schaeffer) and *Agatha All Along* (Schaeffer et al.) and the film *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Raimi) inclusion of the Darkhold retcon the television series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Runaways* (Savage and Schwartz), as the former version of the Darkhold is different from the Darkhold already established in the latter series. In *Agents* and *Runaways*, the pages of the Darkhold are blank, while in the later MCU projects, they clearly have text. Besides, the origin of the book as mentioned in the *Doctor Strange* sequel is different from the origin implied in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (“Darkhold”). However, *WandaVision* director Matt Shakman has stated that he “would imagine it’s the same book” (Deckelmeier).

Based on this analysis of the canon, I suggest a prototype based view of the storyworld of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as some projects are more linked to the MCU storyworld than others, and some projects are ‘more canonical’ than others. The very centre of the circle would then contain such MCU titles that are necessary in order to comprehend the overarching storyworld and that bring characters from different subfranchises together, such as the *Avengers* films. Projects that contradict or deviate from this main storyworld or that feature unique characters or plots that are not referenced in other stories would find themselves more in the periphery.

The notion of the canon loses some importance – or, at least, finality – through the introduction of the multiverse however. As hinted at before, a story that distinguishes itself from the dominant MCU storyworld does not necessarily have to lose its status as canon to that universe. Because the multiverse allows multiple realities, all with their own storyworlds, to coexist with each other under the banner of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, each non-canonical outing could therefore simply be categorized as belonging to a different, unexplored reality within the MCU. It is therefore important to note the announcements of Marvel Studios, its filmmakers and other creative officers as they determine the canonicity of a work. The implications of the inclusion of the multiverse in the MCU storyworld will be examined in the next chapter.

The MCU constructs its expansive storyworld across various media, emphasizing how different platforms both contribute to and complicate a shared narrative. Films remain the central and most canonically significant medium, yet other formats (such as series distributed on Disney+) also influence the overarching plot, establishing reciprocal relationships with the cinematic narratives. Some media (such as tie-in comics, short films and digital series) serve to expand or enrich the storyworld, whereas others (such as theme parks and video games) often diverge from the canon, and are therefore framed as alternate realities within the so-called multiverse. Some stories are positioned closer to the MCU’s main narrative than others. In the following chapters, we will attempt to map the narrative structure of the MCU’s storyworlds and examine how these varying levels of canonicity and multiversal logic interact.

4.3 The Multiverse

The storyworld of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is very large, as established at in the previous paragraphs. With every new release, the storyworld grows, making it endless and always open to change or expansion. However, the storyworld of the MCU, which is already unlimited, becomes ‘even more unlimited’ through the introduction of the multiverse, “a theoretical reality that includes a possibly infinite number of parallel universes” (“multiverse”). From its fourth ‘phase’ (2021 and onwards), Marvel Studios heavily incorporated the idea of the multiverse throughout its media, sparking many stories that (partly) take place in an entirely different albeit parallel reality to the reality of the MCU as it has been presented since its origin in 2008. In the following chapter, we will analyse the ways in which the multiverse is integrated in the MCU and how it impacts the overarching storyworld – which may turn out to be more expansive than previously thought.

4.3.1 The multiverse in the MCU

The first mention of the multiverse in the MCU already appears many years before it would actually become an important narrative element; in *Doctor Strange*, the Master of the Mystic Arts, or the Ancient One, shows Strange across multiple dimensions and universes, saying “this universe is only one of an infinite number [...] who are you in this vast multiverse, mister Strange?” (Derrickson). Although the film deals with various dimensions, with Strange leaving his own body in the so-called astral dimension and defeating Dormammu, an inter-dimensional entity who seeks to rule the so-called Dark Dimension, the film does not deal with the multiverse as it would later manifest in other MCU projects; as alternative realities.

It is in *Avengers: Endgame* (A. Russo and J. Russo) that the concept of these alternate realities is properly explained, again by the Ancient One. In the film, the Avengers travel back in time to retrieve the Infinity Stones before Thanos does, so that they can undo his snap in the present, bringing back half of all life in the universe. When Hulk travels back to the events of *The Avengers* in 2012 in order to get the Time Stone from the Ancient One, who was wielding it at the time, she points out a flaw in their plan; “[t]he Infinity Stones create what you experience as the flow of time. Remove one of the Stones, and that flow splits. Now, this may benefit your reality, but my new one – not so much” (A Russo and J. Russo). By taking the Infinity Stone from its timeline, a new timeline erupts which is affected by this absence of the Infinity Stone, thus creating an alternate reality, or another universe. The two universes originate from the same timeline, yet are split, creating different timelines. The timeline the Avengers find themselves in, and therefore also the main timeline of the MCU, is referred to as the Sacred Timeline.

In the MCU television series *Loki* (Waldron), this concept is further explained. Although Loki died by the hands of Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War* (A. Russo and J. Russo), the Avengers travel back in time in *Avengers: Endgame* to the point where he is defeated in order to take the Space Stone. However, an error causes Loki to gain hold of the Stone, subsequently teleporting. By taking himself and the Infinity Stone out of the

flow of events of the Sacred Timeline – as pictured by the films following 2012’s *The Avengers* – Loki has now created an alternate reality in which he managed to escape. He is however quickly apprehended by members of the Time Variance Authority, or TVA, an organization located out of time and space that is tasked with preserving the Sacred Timeline. Throughout the series *Loki* and the film *Deadpool & Wolverine* (Levy), the TVA has as its goal to wipe out different branches of the Sacred Timeline that would, if fully developed, open the gates to the multiverse and cause multiversal chaos.

This does not prevent the MCU from featuring many stories featuring alternate universes however; Marvel Studios, which divides its projects into phases, refers to the fourth, fifth and sixth phase, whose projects are released from 2021 to 2027, collectively as the Multiverse Saga. In a similar way, its first three phases, which culminated in the so-called Infinity War, were called the Infinity Saga, showcasing the importance of the Infinity Stones throughout the many narratives (“Marvel Cinematic Universe”). This implies the vital role the multiverse is playing and will continue to play in the MCU. Further, we will analyse some stories that deal with the multiverse in order to illustrate its impact on the broad MCU storyworld.

4.3.2 Parallel worlds and characters

Throughout its many releases, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has expanded its storyworld with new locations, planets, and even dimensions (Doctor Strange defeats his enemy Dormammu in the so-called Dark Dimension (Derrickson)). The MCU’s storyworld is virtually limitless, as there are always new narrative spaces to explore. However, the integration of a ‘multiversal’ narrative in new MCU releases adds to this unlimitedness; now, there is not only a possibility for expansions outside of what we have already seen, but the storyworld can also be expanded to include alternate realities of the spaces we already know. This means that a narrative setting is never exhaustively explored; the audience may have a conceptual grasp on the location of e.g. New York City in the MCU storyworld, but the travelling to alternate universes/realities can open up a New York City that differs wholly from the New York they know from previous films. In other words, there is a multitude of universes outside of the Sacred Timeline, yet still inside of the storyworld of the MCU. Consider the following example:

In *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Raimi), Strange is tasked with protecting teenager America Chavez, who has the ability to travel between universes, from Wanda Maximoff, or the Scarlet Witch. In *WandaVision* (Schaeffer), Maximoff had used her powers to create her own contained reality, in which her boyfriend Vision was still alive and the two had children. Forced to give up that reality as she was holding innocent citizens captive under her spells, the *Doctor Strange* sequel sees Maximoff trying to travel through the multiverse in order to find a universe in which she is happily living with her family. She hunts down America Chavez, who escapes to the Sacred Timeline, in which Doctor Strange helps her. The two travel to different universes, and the film shows several glimpses of alternate realities of the Marvel Cinematic Universe as we know it: the two briefly crash into a reality in which everything consists of liquid paint, an animated reality resembling comic books, a reality featuring endless canyons, a reality

inhabited by giant bees and honeycombs and a reality with futuristic, neon-lighted cities, for example. The sequence shows that the multiverse can take countless forms.

Finally, Strange and Chavez crash into a universe called Earth-838, an alternate version of the planet Earth of the general MCU of the Sacred Timeline, which is then referred to as Earth-616 – again, only one version of many. On Earth-838, the streets look different, and there are no Avengers, yet a group called the Illuminati, which includes different versions of characters already established in the MCU. Maria Rambeau, Captain Marvel’s friend in *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck) who has died of cancer after the snap in the Sacred Timeline, has taken up the mantle of Captain Marvel on Earth-838 instead of Carol Danvers. Peggy Carter, who has appeared in the *Captain America* films and *Avengers: Endgame* as Rogers’ girlfriend and the founder of S.H.I.E.L.D, dies in the Sacred Timeline as an old woman. On Earth-838, it appears that she was the one who had taken the ‘super-soldier serum’ instead of Steve, making her Captain Carter. Mister Fantastic, a superhero that does not exist in the Sacred Timeline, is also part of the Earth-838 Illuminati. He is portrayed by John Krasinski, who was a popular choice for the role after a film focusing on the Fantastic Four was revealed to be in production by Marvel Studios (James). In 2025, the film *The Fantastic Four: First Steps* (Shakman) was released as part of the MCU; it is the only MCU film that takes place fully in a different universe than the Earth-616 universe of the Sacred Timeline. In the film, Mister Fantastic is portrayed by Pedro Pascal – stipulating the difference between his version of the character and Krasinski’s Earth-838 rendition. “In the alternate timeline, familiar characters become alternate versions of themselves, essentially new characters, with new affordances and narrative potential” (Backman 206).

Whereas storyworld expansion takes place in the same universe by definition, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* shows that the storyworld can be expanded by transcending storyworld borders. The notion of the storyworld becomes quite paradoxical, as we are referring to two different interpretations of the term. First, the main universe of the MCU is that of the Sacred Timeline, or in other words, the universe of all MCU movies and series that have been produced by Marvel Studios with the exception of the recent *Fantastic Four* release. However, a film such as *Multiverse of Madness* depicts many parallel universes that do not adhere to the ontology of the storyworld as presented in the Sacred Timeline. These universes are not part of the main universe of the Sacred Timeline, yet they do belong to the MCU storyworld, as established MCU characters travel between the alternate realities and interact with the characters and settings of these other universes. Parallel universes such as the setting of *The Fantastic Four* and the many universes as explored in multiverse-related MCU projects do therefore not belong to the *primary* MCU storyworld, the storyworld of the Sacred Timeline and its ontology, yet they do belong to the *broad* MCU storyworld, or the storyworld of all the stories that are told by Marvel Studios and are somehow connected to each other.

To further illustrate this, we look at the animated MCU series *What If...?* (Bradley), which got released by Marvel Studios Animation on the streaming platform Disney+ from 2021 to 2024. The animated series “explores alternate timelines in the multiverse that show what would happen if major moments from the MCU films occurred differently” (*What If...?* (TV series)). The series is therefore not at all part of the main MCU

storyworld and cannot be placed on the Sacred Timeline, yet the episodes depict alternate universes and storyworlds that are similar to the main storyworld in that they use the same characters and major plots, yet feature key changes to this storyworld in order to explore different possibilities. The episodes all represent alternate universes that exist in the context of the multiverse but that do not belong to the main MCU storyworld. For example, the MCU film *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn) shows how Peter Quill got abducted from Earth and later became Star-Lord, leader of the Guardians of the Galaxy. An episode of *What If...?* reimagines his story with T'Challa, the prince of Wakanda and the future Black Panther, in his place under the title of "What If... T'Challa Became a Star-Lord?" Another episode explores the ramifications of the events of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon) in the scenario where Ultron defeats the Avengers (instead of the other way around in the 2015 film), and yet another episodes unleashes a zombie virus into the MCU, thus creating an alternate universe in which these creatures exist and transform the superheroes – the episode is simply called "What If... Zombies?!" "This narrative framework produces [...] a way of thinking about both the relation and difference between stories" that are told within the MCU (Backman 207).

It is important to note that the former examples of the use of the multiverse correspond to a great extent to the transmedial relation of modification as posited by Marie-Laure Ryan. Because two different stories (across media) feature the same names, objects, laws of nature and visual appearance, they are recognized as a version of the original universe – similarly as to how fan fiction presents different alternate versions of earlier stories. She does recognize however that modification "threatens the integrity of the original storyworld" (Ryan, *Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality* 369). Besides, it should be noted that in this case of modification, there is no mention of characters travelling between these alternate versions of the original universe, which necessitates a storyworld conversion. The narratives of the multiverse must therefore be categorized as modes of expanding the multiverse, instead of as the modification of one single universe.

Using the multiverse as a narrative plot device causes the storyworld of the MCU to be heavily expanded by other universes that need to be treated as distinct from the universe of the Sacred Timeline in which most MCU stories take place. The various universes are all distinct and unique, yet the fact that characters from one universe can somehow transport to another universe causes them to somehow be linked, and is proof that all of these alternate realities are still a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The MCU can therefore not be considered as one storyworld, but as a multiplicity of storyworlds that communicate with each other under the banner of one single cinematic universe. That cinematic universe is however also substantially bigger than initially thought of.

4.3.3 Merging cinematic universes

We have previously established that the storyworld of the MCU is constantly expanding with every new release, and that the inclusion of the multiverse causes the integration of coexisting alternate universes into this one *cinematic* universe. However, storylines concerning the multiverse do not always introduce entirely new alternate universes as

part of their stories; sometimes, the alternate realities that communicate with the primary storyworld are realities already established in a different cinematic universe. This way, the converging of several storyworlds is not just a converging within the same cinematic universe; it means the converging of several entertainment franchises from the actual world to create a single narrative. Below are two examples of how the MCU integrates other studios' cinematic universes within their own.

4.3.3.1 *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021)

In *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts), Peter Parker has to deal with the fact that everyone in the world is suddenly aware of his identity as Spider-Man after he has been framed for murder. Because the revelation heavily impacts his day-to-day life as well as that of his friends and aunt, he decides to ask Doctor Strange for help. Strange casts a spell that will make everyone forget that Parker is Spider-Man, yet the spell is corrupted, causing people from other universes who are aware of Spider-Man's identity to be summoned to Parker's universe. This includes two Spider-Man variants from different universes: the variant played by actor Tobey Maguire in the films *Spider-Man*, *Spider-Man 2* and *Spider-Man 3* (Raimi), and the variant portrayed by Andrew Garfield in *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (Webb) – all films that exist in the actual world. Together with the variants – and the actors who had previously played those variants – classic Spider-Man villains such as Green Goblin, Doctor Octopus and Sandman from the Raimi films and Lizard and Electro from the Webb films are also pulled into the universe of the MCU's Spider-Man as played by Tom Holland. Several characters therefore reprise the roles they have played in a different universe and a different franchise by a different studio.

In 2002, Sam Raimi directed a feature film based on the character of Spider-Man, produced by both Columbia Pictures and Marvel Enterprises, and released by Sony Pictures Releasing – many years before there was any word about a Marvel Cinematic Universe and before Disney acquired Marvel Entertainment (supra). The film sparked two sequels. The 'original' Spider-Man trilogy directed by Raimi focused solely on the character of Peter Parker/Spider-Man however, and featured only characters closely related to that character as originally conceived in the eponymous comic books. In the New York City of Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man, there is no mention of other superheroes such as the Avengers and the trilogy does not feature references to other superhero movies; the three films form a contained universe focused solely on Parker (Raimi).

In 2012, Sony released a fourth Spider-Man film, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, that served as a reboot of the character and that is not connected to Raimi's trilogy. The film, starring Andrew Garfield as the titular character, retells the story of Peter Parker's transformation into Spider-Man, yet changes key elements. Again, Webb's Spider-Man films also stand on their own; although the film was released in the same year as the MCU's crossover film *The Avengers*, the two films are not connected – Spider-Man and *Spider-Man*-related characters were owned by Sony whereas the Avengers and all MCU-related characters were owned by Disney. It was only after Sony and Disney struck a deal that the character of Spider-Man was allowed to appear in the MCU (Williams); Tom Holland appeared as the superhero in the character's MCU debut in *Captain America*:

Civil War (A. Russo and J. Russo), two years after Garfield last played him in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*.

When the two Spider-Men appear in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, they are the same variants as the characters of the Raimi and Webb films. For instance, Andrew Garfield's Peter Parker reveals his mental struggles after the death of his girlfriend Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, stating: "I couldn't save her. I'm never gonna be able to forgive myself for that. [...] At some point, I just... I stopped pulling my punches. I got rageful. I got bitter" (Watts). Similarly, the villains featured in the film also originate from the Raimi and Webb films; in particular, they were all transported to the MCU universe right before they died in their original movies – this showcases the fact that the variants arriving in the MCU are indeed the same characters as presented in the standalone *Spider-Man* films from 2002 to 2014. However, actor J.K. Simmons also appears in *No Way Home* as journalist J. Jonah Jameson after portraying the character in all three films of Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy – yet, the Jameson in *No Way Home* is not the variant of Jameson we see in the Raimi films. In a mid-credits scene for *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, Simmons first appears as the character in the MCU – narratively before Doctor Strange casts the spell that brings characters from the multiverse to the MCU universe. This means that the version of Jameson in Raimi's *Spider-Man* is different from the Jameson in *No Way Home*, whereas the Peter Parker from *Spider-Man* is the same Peter Parker that enters the MCU in the 2021 film.

A post-credits scene of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* also shows that the character of Eddie Brock/Venom has entered the MCU. *Spider-Man 3* (Raimi) featured the character as played by Topher Grace, but the Venom variant seen in the post-credits scene is played by Tom Hardy and comes from a different universe, referred to as the Sony Spider-Man Universe (SSU), a cinematic universe focused on several classic Spider-Man villains. Tom Hardy's appearance in *No Way Home* confirms the linking of yet another cinematic franchise to the MCU. This link is also established the other way around, as the SSU film *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* (Serkis) shows the character being seemingly transported to an alternate universe version of his hotel room, in which the MCU variants of Jameson and Peter Parker appear on the television. The film's sequel, *Venom: The Last Dance* (Marcel), shows Brock returning to the SSU after being transported to the MCU. Moreover, the MCU character Vulture, who served as the main antagonist in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts), is transported from the MCU to the Sony universe, as shown in a mid- and post-credits scene for the SSU film *Morbius* (Espinosa).

By integrating the characters from other cinematic *Spider-Man* franchises into *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, Marvel Studios retroactively claims their inclusion in the MCU storyworld. Because the MCU storyworld deals with the multiverse, it includes many different universes. The narrative of *No Way Home* brands both the Raimi films and the Webb films as alternate universes from that of the Sacred Timeline, in which the character is played by Holland. In other words, actors Maguire, Garfield and Holland portray the same character in different universes that are all part of the multiverse and therefore have the potential to converge with each other, as seen in *No Way Home*. Similarly, Hardy's Venom is also from a parallel universe in which Peter Parker does not exist or did not gain his powers yet. Through Doctor Strange's spell, all these universes are temporarily intertwined in a single narrative that takes place in the universe of the

Sacred Timeline – before all the variants are sent back to their original universes at the end of the film. Although the Raimi, Webb and SSU films were not produced by Marvel Studios and were never created as part of the MCU, their characters’ cross-over causes them to be part of the larger MCU storyworld. Through the concept of the multiverse, Raimi’s trilogy, Webb’s films and all SSU and MCU projects are now narratively connected. It is important to note that, even if the MCU’s storyworld comprises the multiverse, the *Spider-Man* films of Raimi and Webb and the SSU films still have their own storyworlds with their own ontologies, similar to how the universes within the MCU and its various subfranchises also warrant their own storyworlds. The storyworlds of the four *Spider-Man* franchises are only temporarily merged for the sake of the film *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. They are linked to the MCU, yet when not affected by a multiversal storyline, the film franchises present self-contained, independent storyworlds with their own ontological frameworks.

4.3.3.2 *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024)

The character Deadpool is an antihero that first appeared in the MCU in 2024’s *Deadpool & Wolverine* (Levy). However, the character previously appeared in films independent from the MCU: *Deadpool* (Miller) and *Deadpool 2* (Leitch) are both spin-offs from the *X-Men* films of 20th Century Fox. Therefore, the films take place in the cinematic *X-Men* universe (2000-2020), which tells the stories of several mutants, humans born with a special gene that gives them differing superhuman abilities. Both *Deadpool* and *Deadpool 2* feature references to other *X-Men* films, establishing their connection and their part in 20th Century Fox’ shared cinematic universe. A third *Deadpool* film was announced after the success of its predecessors, but the rights to the character shifted after Disney bought large parts of the company Fox, which previously owned all characters from the *X-Men* universe (Bond and Szalai). In 2021, a third *Deadpool* film was announced to be “part of the larger Marvel Cinematic Universe” (Sheridan). The MCU film would heavily incorporate narrative elements of the multiverse and of other cinematic universes in order to incorporate the titular character into its storyworld.

The film *Deadpool & Wolverine* shows how Deadpool from Fox’ *X-Men* universe travels to Earth-616, the universe of the Sacred Timeline – in other words, the MCU (supra) – hoping to join the MCU’s Avengers, before being turned down by Tony Stark’s former assistant, Happy Hogan. He goes back to the *X-Men* universe before being detained by the Time Variance Authority (TVA), the organization in charge of controlling the multiverse that was introduced in the television series *Loki* (Waldron). They explain that Deadpool’s universe is slowly crumbling because its anchor being, a character whose existence is vital to the universe, has died. In the case of the *X-Men* universe, the anchor being is Logan, or Wolverine, a superhero that has appeared in many *X-Men* films and spin-offs centred around himself before finally dying in *Logan* (Mangold). Deadpool then travels to many different universes to find a Wolverine variant in order to save his universe from dying and finds a variant of Wolverine that has failed his respective universe. Hugh Jackman, who portrayed Wolverine in 20th Century Fox’ *X-Men* universe, returns as a variant of the character. Eventually, Deadpool and the Wolverine variant are sent to the Void, “a wasteland at the end of time” where the TVA has sent many characters who resisted the death of their respective universes (Levy). In the Void, they

encounter several characters that have appeared in their own cinematic universes: the vampire hunter Blade, who appeared in his own trilogy distributed by New Line Cinema from 1998 to 2004; the assassin Elektra, who appeared in *Daredevil* (2003) and *Elektra* (2005), two films distributed by 20th Century Fox yet independent from the *X-Men* universe (“*Elektra* (2005 film)”); and the superhero Human Torch, a member of the eponymous superhero team in Tim Story’s films *Fantastic Four* and *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* released in 2005 and 2007 (Human Torch is played by Chris Evans, who also portrayed Captain America in the MCU). The climax of the film also features a battle with several Deadpool variants from other (unseen) universes, such as Kidpool, Cowboypool and Ladypool.

The film is therefore set in the storyworld of the larger MCU comprising multiversal narratives and integrates many pre-existing cinematic universes into this storyworld as well; films centred around Blade, Elektra and the Fantastic Four existed independently from each other, yet are now retroactively seen as mere alternate universes of the Sacred Timeline. These films are defined by their own storyworlds and are still narratively independent from the MCU, yet their characters’ inclusion in *Deadpool & Wolverine* causes the audience to (re)visit them and reinterpret them as universes that are part of the multiverse as established in the MCU. The alternate universes are therefore not necessarily newly explored – such as the universe in which Wolverine turns out to be a failure – as some of the alternate universes already existed on screen before the Sacred Timeline; *Blade* (Norrington), *X-Men* (Singer), *Daredevil* (Johnson) and *Fantastic Four* (Story) were released in 1998, 2000, 2003 and 2005 respectively – all before the release of *Iron Man* (Favreau), which started the Sacred Timeline universe in 2008 (see 4.1.1).

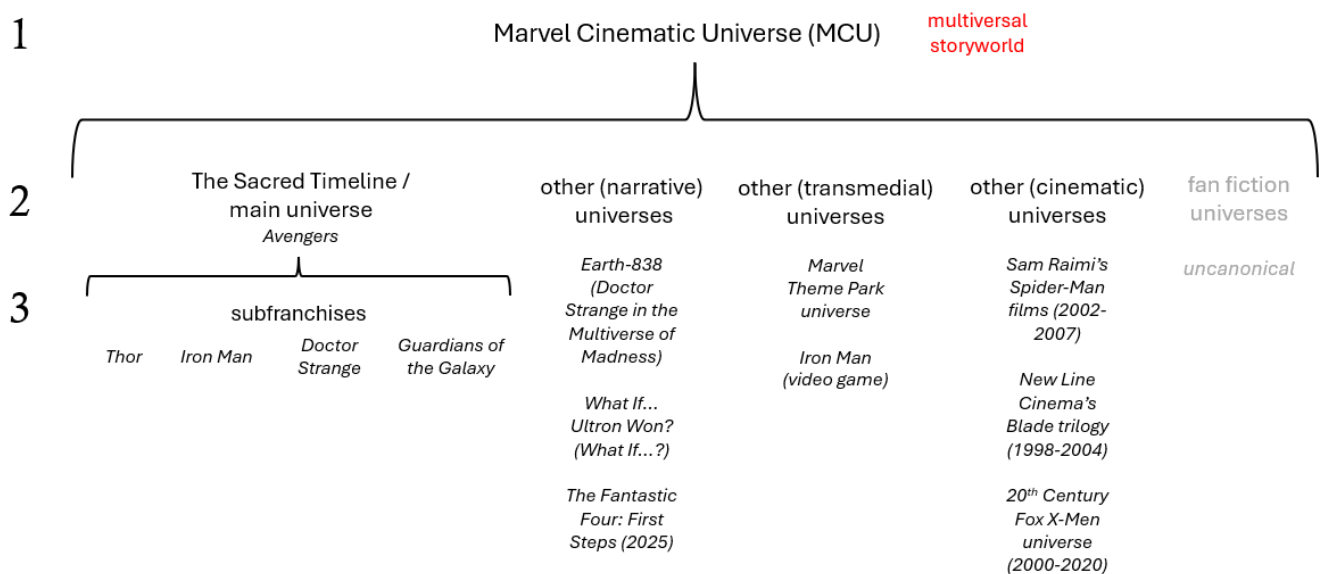
The integration of the concept of the multiverse in a transmedial franchise such as the MCU does not come without its repercussions. Based on the analysis above, we need to make a distinction between the terms ‘storyworld’ and ‘universe’. At first, the terms appear interchangeable; both refer to the total narrative environment encompassing characters, settings and events. In a multiversal framework, this equivalence becomes problematic however. Here, a universe refers to a self-contained narrative reality with its own internal characters and ontology. The storyworld, on the other hand, can be understood on two levels: it can refer to the self-contained world of a single universe, or to the overarching framework that encompasses multiple universes that are narratively connected (such as the MCU multiverse). There is a distinction between the storyworld of the MCU multiverse (which also comprises other cinematic franchises) and the many storyworlds of differing universes that technically belong to the multiverse yet are not affected by a multiversal narrative.

Take the Spider-Man variant portrayed by Tobey Maguire in Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* trilogy and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts) for example. In Sam Raimi’s trilogy, Maguire’s Spider-Man inhabits a distinct universe with its own storyworld, which lacks the Avengers or other references to the MCU. However, his inclusion in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* is the consequence of a multiversal interaction that brings Maguire’s Spider-Man into the Sacred Timeline, the main universe of the MCU, in which Tom Holland portrays the character. This multiversal narrative retroactively places Maguire’s Spider-Man within the broader MCU multiverse, linking his original storyworld to that of the MCU.

However, this does not integrate Raimi's universe into the Sacred Timeline; rather, it integrates it into the MCU's multiversal storyworld, which comprises all alternate realities as part of the multiverse and therefore features multiple coexisting universes. Therefore, Maguire's Spider-Man belongs to two storyworlds: the independent storyworld of his original universe as portrayed in his standalone films (2002-2007) and the larger storyworld of the MCU multiverse. Raimi's universe retains its autonomy and internal coherence, but is now recontextualized as part of a larger multiversal narrative. Therefore, universes remain independent ontological entities (with their own smaller storyworlds) whereas in a multiversal context, the storyworld can encompass many universes that are narratively linked. In the conclusion, we will further clarify the distinction between different kinds of universes and storyworlds.

5. Conclusion

The storyworld of the transmedial entertainment franchise that is the Marvel Cinematic Universe is gigantic. The sheer volume of projects across different types of media proves the constant expansion of the MCU storyworld. However, an analysis of the different types of storytelling of the MCU teaches us that, in a transmedial franchise such as this one, there is no one storyworld or shared universe that comprises all of the works produced under the Marvel Studios banner. Instead, the MCU should be divided into several storyworlds, depending on which narrative level one finds themselves on. Therefore, I suggest a layered view of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, through which the different narrative levels become clear and through which the narrative construction of the MCU’s storyworld(s) are best understood. Below, I have provided a schematic overview of the different levels the MCU storyworld, supported by several examples (in italics), all of which have been discussed in the analysis above. First, it should be noted that although the Marvel Cinematic Universe is made up of many characters and plotlines that are all in some way connected to each other, these projects themselves can also be categorized into subfranchises that all have their own storyworld. These subfranchises are represented on the **third** – and therefore most individual – **level** of the overview. A shared universe consists of subfranchises that lay their focus on one particular character or set of characters. For example, the subfranchise *Iron Man* contains the films *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2* and *Iron Man 3* – and this subfranchise differs substantially from a subfranchise such as *Thor*, which is made up of the films *Thor*, *Thor: The Dark World*, *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Thor: Love and Thunder*, although both of these subfranchises interact heavily in so-called crossover films. Each subfranchise has its own storyworld and its own ontology that characters in that franchise need to adhere to; the storyworld of *Thor* features cosmic and godly features, that would not fit into the storyworld of *Iron Man*, which is more grounded and takes place on planet Earth. The various film franchises are linked and often interact, yet can also “be understood as distinct entities” when they do not come into contact with each other (Beaty 321). For each subfranchise, the audience mentally constructs its storyworld in their heads,



before finally recalibrating the respective storyworlds when realizing the interconnectivity of all the films on a higher level.

Because the studio is set on creating a narrative universe in which all stories are to some degree connected to each other, each MCU subfranchise is linked to other subfranchises through various narrative tools: the inclusion of a character from one subfranchise in another; the inclusion of mid- or post-credits scenes that act as a tease for, or provide a reference to, an upcoming MCU instalment; objects that appear as a vital for the plot in various subfranchises, implicitly linking their narratives – such as the Infinity Stones in the first three phases of the MCU; linked repercussions, through which the events of one film could influence the events of another film in a different subfranchise; and subtle easter eggs or implicit references.

This linking causes the audience to view the MCU films as different narrative threads of one universe; this is represented on the **second level** of the overview. Because the films are all connected, the audience is forced to recalibrate the storyworld of the shared universe (level two) with every new release. For instance, the *Iron Man* films heavily resemble the actual world, but the release of a film such as *Captain America* – or, more drastically, *Thor* – forces the audience to rethink the storyworld of the universe as actual world-adjacent, as these films provide many more details that integrate the supernatural, the mythological and the cosmic into the universe. A storyworld such as that of *The Guardians of the Galaxy* opens up the existence of many intergalactic beings and societies and place the MCU on a great cosmic scale, and *Doctor Strange* introduces various dimensions into the shared universe. The constant rethinking of the storyworld is necessary in order to gain a proper understanding of the scale and properties of the shared universe in which all subfranchises find themselves. Finally, a shared narrative constitutes the epitome of the interconnectivity of the films in the form of a crossover. In the MCU, the *Avengers* films group different narrative threads spun in subfranchises into a shared narrative. The storyworld of the shared universe constitutes all storyworlds of its subfranchises, yet on the condition that specific storyworld features (such as godly magic) stay with the characters that have originated from that storyworld.

When analysing this shared universe, one cannot but note its transmediality; the MCU's stories are spread over many media, yet an analysis of their narratives suggests that not every medium is equally as vital in conveying the shared universe's main narrative (in its first phases, the Infinity Stones storyline). Tie-in comics and short films mainly function as linking elements or providers of background information, for example. Some MCU works seem to be less linked to other projects than others or even contradict information provided by other works. Because of this, I suggest a prototype based view of the MCU, in which projects that are essential in order to gain a proper understanding of the franchise's main narrative find themselves central. Works without pivotal information or linking elements or that contradict other projects would be placed more in the periphery. Fan fiction works are not officially released or approved by Marvel Studios and are therefore not canonical.

The fact that some Marvel Studios-produced MCU properties deviate from the officially established MCU storyline and therefore cause contradictions in the ontology of the shared storyworld is explained by the company as taking place in another universe or parallel reality from the 'main MCU stories'. This would allow the Iron Man in a

Disneyland theme park, which takes place in a different universe, to interact with characters that were introduced after his MCU death in 2019's *Avengers: Endgame*. Starting in 2021, the MCU integrated this idea of various universes or realities into its primary narrative as well. This way, different storyworlds can coexist next to each other without internally contradicting each other. Marvel Studios refers to the concept of many universes existing at the same time as the multiverse. With their films and television series, they explore the idea of alternate realities or versions of Earth as a way of telling different stories or exploring different outcomes of a plot. However, some narratives also include the travelling between several universes, thus connecting both universes as part of the multiverse. This means that these two universes, although very different, are both part of the same storyworld. In films such as *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts) or *Deadpool & Wolverine* (Levy), the main universe of the MCU (that of the so-called Sacred Timeline) interacts with other cinematic universes that were not produced by Marvel Studios. This causes these cinematic works to retroactively be included into the storyworld of the MCU. In the schematic overview, the several universes are presented next to each other on the second level, all constituting different realities. However, the capability of travelling universes and exploring different realities in one narrative causes the different universes to be grouped under the larger multiverse, which finds itself on the **first level** of the overview. The entirety of the MCU constitutes a multiversal storyworld and contains a variety of universes with independent storyworlds and ontologies. The storyworld of the MCU does therefore not adhere to one single ontology, and can contain many versions of the same character or event.

We can conclude that the notion of a storyworld can be interpreted in several ways when talking about a multimedial entertainment franchise such as the MCU. Its storyworld needs to be reconceptualized almost continually as new releases of the franchise can impact the way the storyworld is viewed. Based on what narrative level the audience operates on (that of the subfranchise, the (shared) universe or the multiverse), the storyworld takes on different properties, ontologies and a different scope. In order to enjoy each individual MCU release, the audience should only be concerned with the storyworld level the narrative finds itself on; it is useless, illogical and needlessly complex to try and grasp the story of *Iron Man* (Favreau) in the context of a multiversal storyworld. The concept of the multiverse allows for many alternations of the same character, story or setting to exist within the same storyworld, but it is important to note that the ontologies of its distinctive universes need to be respected in order for the narrative to still logically make sense. A universe is only ontologically part of a multiverse when the narrative demands it; in other cases, it should still be viewed as a self-contained entity with its own ontology.

For further research, I suggest an analysis of the storyworld(s) of other multimedial entertainment franchises in order to check whether or not they would benefit from a similar division of the storyworld into several narrative levels. It would also be valuable to research what kind of effect a multiversal storyworld has on its audience, if any. We live in a time where multimedial entertainment franchises become more and more frequent due to corporate involvement, and it appears only sensible to conduct more research on how these multimedia franchises construct their storyworld and wider narrative.

In conclusion, this thesis argues a layered and dynamic view of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's storyworld. The MCU's transmedial structure demands a layered model that distinguishes between subfranchise-specific storyworlds, an overarching shared universe, and an expansive multiverse. This thesis shows that the Marvel Cinematic Universe operates as a complex, evolving network of interrelated although mostly ontologically distinct storyworlds, and thus contributes to the general narratological understanding and mapping of the complexity of multimedia franchises.

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