

Serialize This: The Universification of Film Franchises has Backed Hollywood into a Corner

By Danny Katz

It is a fascinating time in Hollywood history and no film franchise better encapsulates the self-induced tumult and uncertainty of the modern era than James Bond. Twenty-five films in (plus a couple of [flex-options](#)), a once nimble series of spy movies reportedly [can't figure out](#) where to take its adventuring MI6 agent next. For a franchise that has, on average, managed to introduce a new Bond roughly three years following an actor's departure from the titular role, 007 has seemingly waded into the dangerous waters of audience attachment. But how did we get here?

Interestingly enough, this phenomenon started—of all places—in the MCU. Yes, the first Iron Man film actually came out two years after Daniel Craig's 007 debut in *Casino Royale*. And yes, *Royale* ended with (spoiler for a 20-year old movie ahead) a sad-boy Bond, revenge firmly on his mind. And OK, yes, I concede, *Quantum of Solace* picks up right after *Casino Royale*, with said sad-boy on a quest for said revenge. But that's typical sequel stuff and it was hardly the first time 007 set out to avenge a slain lover. Not to mention, any internet-sleuth/film junky can tell you, *Quantum's* whole production was [marred by that year's writers' strike](#). Craig even alluded to taking a pass at the script himself. So, a reasonable person might concede that *Quantum's* serialized structure was less a grand strategy than a byproduct of necessity.

The ship was righted—and then some—with 2012's *Skyfall*. Considered by many to be the greatest Bond film of all time, *Skyfall* broke new ground by exploring depths of 007's character that had, through 22 movies, not yet been excavated. But it also told a largely stand-alone tale, connecting to Bonds of Franchise Past more thematically than through direct reference to the prior two installments.

By the time Daniel Craig and director Sam Mendes were lured back to the series for *SPECTRE* with [Brink's Truck-sized offers](#), the Marvel Cinematic Universe was in full swing. 2008's *Iron Man* had ended with a post credits scene that introduced Sam Jackson's Nick Fury and hinted at more elaborate crossovers to come. The secret sauce there was two-fold: a movie that stood on its own merit as a wildly entertaining popcorn flick, and the aforementioned *hinting*. *Iron Man* was an Iron Man movie. It didn't have to [backdoor pilot a Black Widow introduction](#), or attempt to fast track a super friends movie by [force feeding audiences a crossover not yet earned](#).

Iron Man 2 aside, this was a recipe the MCU stuck to through its first batch of films as it built the beams that would prop up an extended cinematic universe. Phase I culminated in a well-earned team up event that would forever alter the landscape of Hollywood. *The Avengers*—that film, the final of Phase I—released in theatres the same year as *Skyfall*, and the Broccolis certainly seem to take notice.

It wasn't just that *The Avengers* raked in an ungodly \$1.5 Billion at the box office (*Skyfall* did after all become the first Bond film to surpass the ten figure mark globally), it was that the architects at Disney/Marvel seemingly cooked up a recipe to make every single side-story and B movie seem like appointment viewing. *God forbid you miss a reference to Antman 2 the next time you sit down to watch the Avengers team up. Excited for next year's Spider-Man film? Don't even think about missing his cameo in the upcoming Dr. Strange sequel.*

The Bond series' over-serialization began in earnest with 2015's *SPECTRE*. If you're spoiler averse, into 007, have read this far *and* still haven't seen the *Skyfall* follow-up, I'm so damn sorry but Blofeld was revealed to be James Bond's adopted brother. His character also explained to Bond that through his terrorist organization, SPECTRE, he was controlling Le Chiffre, Dominic Greene, and Raoul Silva--the three villains from *Casino Royale*, *Quantum of Solace* and *Skyfall*. Aside from being so obviously convoluted and flatly unnecessary, this retcon also weakens the prior three entries in retrospect. Javier Bardem's Raoul Silva had a near-perfect character arc. His obsession with Craig's Bond came from a place of mutual mommy issues and an earned resentment toward MI6, his former employer. Turning him, after the fact, into a pawn of a far less developed antagonist isn't just bad storytelling, it's lazy and desperate.

2021's *No Time to Die*, the final entry in the Craig-era Bond series, shook the franchise up like a game of Boggle. The film opens with 007 visiting the grave of Vesper Lynd. If you were sitting in the theater opening weekend, wondering *who exactly the fuck Vesper Lynd* was, you were not alone. [By hammering home the point that Bond was still haunted by the betrayal and subsequent death of his Casino Royale counterpart](#), the stewards of the franchise had done something completely new with our favorite martini-slugging, MI6 sex hound; they had directly connected *No Time to Die* to a plotline developed five films prior.

There were plenty more firsts for the series in *No Time*--the implication that Bond may have sired a child, him (ONCE AGAIN: SPOILER FOR A FIVE-YEAR OLD MOVIE) fucking dying at the end, etc.--it was also the longest film starring 007 ever, with a runtime coming in at two hours and forty three minutes. All of this *may* have impacted the box office, the total international haul coming in at well under the franchise highs of *Skyfall* and *SPECTRE*, but that likely had, at the very least, just as much to do with the reality of releasing movies into a post-pandemic world.

This series of 'firsts' for a franchise now twenty five films in has led to rumors of another major first. The Amazon acquisition of MGM and the [subsequent incredibly high profile buyout of Barbara Broccoli's and Michael G. Wilson's creative control](#) followed murmurs that the next 007 story might be a period piece. For the record, franchise firsts aren't necessarily a bad thing. In many cases they're quite welcomed. Hollywood should be mixing things up instead of constantly force feeding audiences more of the same. A period piece Bond flick could be seriously cool. But the setting and time period of a movie should come from a place of storytelling, not box office desperation.

The highs of the billion-dollar Daniel Craig era of 007 were great for both the studio and the fandom. But in a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately Hollywood, that won't mean much if viewers are slow to connect with the next incarnation of the beloved MI6 agent--if the studio can even get the next installment off the ground. This lesson is an important one for Amazon MGM to keep in mind moving forward, especially considering that the most obvious way for the e-commerce giant to capitalize on this hefty Hollywood investment is to turn the faucet up on the Bond formula. A franchise used to trickling out movie releases slowly but consistently, will likely make its first foray into scripted television, producing streaming series to accompany a faster drum beat of film releases.

Meanwhile, a look over at the current state of the MCU serves as a nice reminder of just how far off the tracks these franchise trains can run. The lead-up to *Avengers: Endgame* was largely electric. Not everything worked, but the misses felt like minor speed bumps, not full on derailments. *Endgame* was a genuine cultural event, grossing almost \$2.8 billion dollars worldwide and tying a bow on an unprecedented run of 21 interconnected movies. The releases since have been a series of diminishing returns. That's not just in 'vibes' either--the box office and

critical sentiment for these post-Endgame MCU flicks has dropped consistently, starting with *Spider-Man: No Way Home* and culminating with the head scratcher of a Captain America sequel, *Brave New World*.

Marvel and Bond are hardly the only franchises to suffer from this sort of high-on-your-own-supply, everything-must-connect, if-you're-not-retconning-yourself-into-oblivion-are-you-even-making-movies-anymore universification. *Fast & Furious* has toyed with timelines, resurrected dead characters, [and gone to space](#). *Indiana Jones* had a son, lost a son, got de-aged and then went back in time. *Star Wars* can't launch a successful TV series without shoehorning a certain green lightsaber-wielding Jedi into the proceedings and don't even get me started on *The Rise of Skywalker*.

There is an argument to be made that the Bond franchise is fascinating precisely for the way the series has mapped onto Hollywood history so unselfconsciously. Perhaps that's the reason that even the worst 007 installments bring something interesting to the table. They are all, at the very least, a product of their moment—reflecting the tastes, anxieties, and industry trends of the era in which they were made. In that regard, the universification of the Craig films makes perfect sense. It also begs the question, what does the next era of 007 look like?