The Incredible Hulk

The Incredible Hulk was one of the MCU’s first outings preceded only by Iron Man and receives instant stat points for being one of the original pioneers of The Infinity Saga. The story centers around Bruce Banner and explores his journey into becoming The Hulk. Edward Norton played the titular character with Liv Tyler serving as his love interest, Betty Ross, and Tim Roth taking on the role of Abomination. The film in and of itself is entertaining but the fact that we never see the two latter characters again does ding the movie somewhat as well as replacing Ed Norton’s Hulk with Mark Ruffalo for the rest of the franchise. That’s nothing against Ruffalo’s Hulk whatsoever (huge fan). But when one character can be portrayed by the same actor over multiple films it’s truly something special. Overall, The Incredible Hulk is a pretty standard origin story for the most part, but we were introduced to General Thunderbolt Ross who would have a significant impact on events 7 years in the future! The art of storytelling was not wasted on the MCU and we’re just getting started.

Ant-Man

Ant-Man was an innovation in the MCU franchise for a few reasons. It was the first movie to feature CGI as a hyper realistic way to age and de-age characters. This was also the first movie to feature two versions of the same character with Scott Lang (Paul Rudd) and Hank Pym (Michael Douglas) both appearing as Ant-Man. This film explores Hank Pym’s past as a founding member of S.H.I.E.L.D. and his tense relationship with other founding members Peggy Carter and Howard Stark. Ant-Man introduced us to Hank’s daughter, Hope Van Dyne, who works closely with the film’s antagonist Darren Cross (Yellowjacket). While the fight scenes between Lang and Cross were some of the most unique I’ve ever seen, Yellowjacket as a villain leaved something to be desired. The biggest highlight of the film must be the exploration into the Quantam Realm which would have a massive impact on the overall storyline down the line.

Thor: The Dark World

The second installment in the Thor trilogy centers around the God of Thunder battling against the Dark Elves and their leader, Malekith, to secure an eternal power known as The Aether. This ancient artifact is in fact the Reality Stone - one of the six infinity stones that The Infinity Saga is centered around and is the first entry on this list to include one. Yggradsil (The World Tree) was foreshadowed in Captain America: The First Avenger and was further explored here. The alignment of Yggradsil takes place once every 5000 years or so and when this occurs, all of the 9 realms can be accessed through invisible portals that connect one world to the next. Although this cosmic event did make for an awesome plot device and set up some innovative action sequences, the choice of Malekith as the main villain hurts The Dark World’s score somewhat. In my opinion, Malekith is one of the weakest comic book movie villains of all time but the introduction of an infinity stone and interconnected storytelling gives Thor: The Dark World a boost to the 21st spot on this list.

Thor

Another entry for the Thor trilogy lands at number 20. This origin story sees Thor facing exile after being banished to Earth by his father, Odin (Anthony Hopkins), for his arrogance and lack of maturity to lead Asgard as its king. This movie establishes Thor’s brother (and fan favorite villain), Loki, into the MCU and pits the siblings against one another. Given that this movie was created in the infancy of the MCU, there were still a few kinks in the formula that would need to be worked out. However, the multiple layers of Loki and Thor’s relationship as well as the inclusion of the Space Stone in a quick post credits scene makes this installment better than its successor and has more of a lasting impression on the overarching story.

Captain Marvel

Captain Marvel is a prequel to everything in the MCU except for Captain America: The First Avenger. Being released right before Avengers Endgame but taking place in the mid-1990s already set a fantastic foundation for Captain Marvel to shine. The introduction of Carol Danvers into the franchise was generally a hit offering the MCU’s first female led superhero film and she proved to be one of the most powerful beings in the galaxy. Captain Marvel is another superhero origin story, but it also encapsulated and explained other key events including part of the journey of The Tesseract (Space Stone) and how it infused it’s power into Captain Marvel herself! The movie also shows younger versions of other characters from the MCU including Nick Fury, Agent Coulson and Ronin The Accuser as well as new characters like The Skrulls who look to have a major influence in the next phase of the MCU. There isn’t truly a villain who feels formidable against Captain Marvel in this movie which always hurts (See Thor: The Dark World) but the film does a good job of storytelling and world building that adds to the overall story.

Iron Man 2

Iron Man 2 is the first entry from the Iron Man trilogy to break onto the list. The sequel to the groundbreaking *Iron Man* sees Tony Stark team up with his sidekick War Machine (Don Cheadle) to take on Whiplash (Mickey Rourke). This movie shows a recurring theme for Iron Man’s villains where something that was done by the Stark family inevitably enrages someone to the point of retaliation. This movie provided a lot of the action and intrigue of its predecessor, but Iron Man 2 also added a new wrinkle to Tony’s story. The arc reactor in Tony’s chest that is keeping him alive is shown to cause Tony’s health to slowly deteriorate and could eventually kill him. Iron Man 2 also explores the significance of politics in the MCU – an area of great significance as we move further down the list.

Ant-Man and The Wasp

Scott Lang, Hank Pym, and Hope Van Dyne are back at it again. This time, Hope has assumed the mantle of *The Wasp* and is working with her dad to try to find their long-lost wife and mother, Janet, who was lost in the Quantam Realm many years ago. Scott was placed on house arrest following the events of Captain America: Civil War (more on that later) and is reluctant to help his mentor out of fear of being thrown back into prison and being taken away from his own daughter, Cassie. Eventually Scott is persuaded to use his personal experience of navigating the Quantam Realm to aid his colleagues in their mission but standing in their way is an adversary unlike any other villain we’ve witnessed- an invisible being who can phase-shift aptly named “Ghost”. A much more interesting foe this time around and a post credit scene that delivers a perfectly timed gut punch raises this Ant-Man outing to number 17.

Spider-Man: Homecoming

Spider-Man has officially come home! Not including his brief appearance in Captain America: Civil War, Spider-Man: Homecoming is appropriately titled as the web slinger made his way back to Marvel Studios where he rightfully belongs. I have great respect and love for the other two Spider-Man franchises starring Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield but Tom Holland’s iteration of the iconic character takes the cake for me. As it should. We finally got to see Spider-Man join the well-oiled machine that is the MCU and in this movie we see a deeper exploration of Peter Parker’s familial relationship with Tony Stark. This would play a significant role in the storyline of this film and many others within Phase 3. Vulture (Adrian Tooms) is also perfectly portrayed by Michael Keaton and creates a very compelling villain which is a must for any great superhero movie. Throw in some classic Spidey humor for good measure and you have the perfect recipe for a very solid film.

Iron Man

The man himself - The Mechanic, The Futurist, Howard Potts (getting a little ahead of myself). Robert Downey, Jr. took on the role of Tony Stark for 2008’s *Iron Man* and changed the world forever. And that’s not hyperbole, ask Nick Fury if you don’t believe me. Iron Man without a doubt is one of the most important MCU movies because it was the first and set up many tentpoles for the franchise with several callbacks and important references that we wouldn’t see come to fruition for many years to come. However, whenever you’re the first trailblazer through an unbeaten path there are going to be some hiccups along the way. Terrence Howard as James Rhodes was quickly replaced with Don Cheadle prior to Iron Man 2 and it was a welcomed change for the character. But as I mentioned with Ed Norton’s transformation into Mark Ruffalo earlier, I must dock some points for changing a character midstream. And being 11 years removed from Iron Man’s initial release it’s clear to see that some technology and effects aren’t quite as polished compared to where the MCU is today. Yet and still, the importance of this film for the MCU franchise cements it at the number 15 spot.

Black Panther

Much like Spider-Man, King T’Challa, a.k.a Black Panther, may have technically made his MCU debut in Captain America: Civil War but his first solo outing came with 2018’s *Black Panther*. Filled with symbolism and references to pop culture, real world political affairs, social climate, and comic source material, Black Panther was an astounding addition to The Infinity Saga. For the first time, we were introduced to the African nation of Wakanda and received more backstory for how the Black Panther came to be the warrior that he is today. Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) delivered an excellent performance as the main antagonist who was multilayered and complex. Black Panther doesn’t do much to further the overall plot of the main MCU story but it does nail its objective in delivering a great story about a lesser known Marvel hero.

Spider-Man: Far From Home

Spider-Man: Far From Home had some impossibly huge shoes to fill following the events of Avengers Endgame. But boy did it try. Far From Home details the aftermath of The Battle of Earth that took place in Avengers Endgame and follows Peter Parker’s journey as he tries to move on with his life as well as any 18 (or 23) year old high school student could hope. During a class trip to Europe Peter encounters an “Avengers Level Threat” and is forced into action to aid a new hero from an alternate Earth named *Mysterio*. As it turns out, things aren’t exactly as they seem and Peter finds himself fighting for his life and his sanity while trying to maintain his hidden identity and process his feelings for MJ. Sounds like quite the juggling act but Far From Home manages to pull it off masterfully and serves as a nice epilogue to The Infinity Saga.

Captain America: The First Avenger

If Iron Man is the Father of the MCU then Captain America: The First Avenger would be the grandfather. The chronological first film in The Infinity Saga takes the story back to World War II and explores the origin of Steve Rogers as he becomes “The World’s First Superhero” – Captain America. Chronicling Cap’s journey from a scrawny kid from Brooklyn to battling Red Skull in Germany was a fantastic ride to witness and the creative method that was used to bring Captain America in contact with the modern world was impeccable. We were introduced to key characters Peggy Carter and James Buchanan Barnes who would play huge roles in defining the Captain America trilogy and the Infinity Saga at large. Not to mention that this is the first movie to feature an Infinity Stone (The Space Stone) as a major plot element. Captain America: The First Avenger is an underrated movie and deserves to be recognized for the greatness that it is.

Doctor Strange

Doctor Strange was another relatively unknown Marvel property that turned into a household name seemingly overnight. Watching Dr. Stephen Strange’s transformation from arrogant surgeon to humbled novice sorcerer apprentice follows some of the expected formula of the superhero origin story but it takes a scenic detour through other dimensions to get there. And yet another Infinity Stone makes its debut with the Time Stone playing a major role in the film. Jam packed with action, humor, and world building, Doctor Strange does an excellent job of introducing another character into the fold and propels the The Infinity Saga forward.

Iron Man 3

The final entry for the Iron Man franchise lands at the number 10 spot. Iron Man 3 was one of the few MCU movies that I can honestly say grew on me over time. My initial reaction to the “plot twist” surrounding The Mandarin was one of confusion and disapproval. However, the villain that we did end up with in Aldrich Killian (Guy Pearce) was quite formidable and was yet another villain born out of scorn from the Stark family (noticing a pattern?). After watching a few more times, and in the greater context of The Infinity Saga, Iron Man 3 eventually became my favorite of the trilogy. We were taken through the psyche of a superhero unlike any other time in MCU history to that point and saw a more human Tony Stark. This character development not only served as a triumph for the Iron Man story but also set the stage for what was to come after.

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2

Speaking of lesser known Marvel properties, Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 was the follow up to the breakout hit *Guardians of the Galaxy* which followed Star-Lord, Gamora, Drax, Rocket and Groot across, well, the galaxy. In their second adventure the band of misfits faced off with an eternal being that turned out to be a living planet and is also Star-Lord’s father. I know that sounds like it makes no sense, but it totally fits when placed into the proper context. The story in and of itself is fairly good but the character development that is created from this film for the future of the MCU is why it ranks so high on this list (And I’m still waiting to see what is to come of the foreshadowed character from one of the many mid-credit scenes).

Guardians of the Galaxy

It was honestly splitting hairs to decide where to rank Guardians of the Galaxy vs. GotG2 because they’re both great movie experiences. The humor and soundtrack that was established in the first Guardians film carry over into the second (and I’m hoping will reappear in the next iteration). What really pushed Guardians 1 slightly ahead of Guardians 2, however, was the inclusion of Thanos and the explanation of the Infinity Stones and their significance for the first time. We gained plenty of backstory for The Mad Titan and his relationship with his two daughters, Nebula and Gamora, as well. Ronin The Accuser (Lee Pace) was a somewhat divisive character but I personally liked his inclusion and would like to see more of him in some capacity moving forward, most likely within the Captain Marvel franchise.

Thor: Ragnarok

The final entry for Thor comes in at number 7 with Thor: Ragnarok. Taking a page from The Guardians of the Galaxy playbook, Thor: Ragnarok really leaned into the more humorous, musical, and colorful template for an MCU movie. And it worked! The beauty of Thor: Ragnarok is that it was able to take something as brutal as the destruction of Asgard and found a way to make the film still feel relatively light and fun throughout. Watching Thor and Hulk battle in the Contest of Champions on the planet Sakaar was a nice nod to the comics and the post credit scene masterfully set up the intro scene to Avengers Infinity War leaving everyone in the theater on the edge of their seats. If we only knew what was to come…

Captain America: The Winter Soldier

Captain America: The Winter Soldier was a spy thriller filled with espionage and deception. The reappearance of a few major characters from Captain America: The First Avenger blend into the modern-day story to create a nuanced and well developed plot unlike any other in the MCU. This film is full of twists and turns with secret reveals at every corner. And this incarnation of The Winter Soldier was one of the most ruthless villains the MCU has ever witnessed. There are no infinity stones, no magic, and no mention of the Big Bad Thanos, but this film does an exceptional job of expanding the depth of Steve Rogers’ character as a man, soldier, and friend.

Avengers: Age of Ultron

The “weakest” of the Avengers movies would have to be Avengers: Age of Ultron. And I use the term *weakest* very loosely here. I was always a huge fan of this film from the first time I saw it and it only got better with time. The movie itself does a lot of things well like seamlessly introducing three new heroes -Vision, Scarlet Witch, and Quicksilver – while establishing a new villain – Ultron. The origin of Ultron (and Vision for that matter) was very well adapted for The Infinity Saga and Age of Ultron did a masterful job of foreshadowing future events that would play out and come full circle in Phase 3.

The Avengers

Much like what Iron Man did for the solo MCU hero flicks, The Avengers kicked off the inception of the crossover/team-up superhero films. I’ll never forget the feeling I had the first time I watched this movie and saw all the Avengers assembled in The Battle of New York fighting against Loki while taking turns tag teaming the Chitauri and protecting Earth from an alien invasion. It almost brings a tear to me eye just thinking about it. Needless to say this film is a major tentpole of The Infinity Saga as this was the first time we saw Thanos on screen during the post credits scene. We had no idea what was in store.

Captain America: Civil War

Captain America must have the best trilogy of any MCU hero. That’s not a knock on Iron Man or Thor and it’s technically not their fault considering Captain America’s third outing in Civil War assembled the most characters on screen up to that point. This film could have easily been titled Avengers 2.5 and nothing would have changed. But I digress. Captain America: Civil War was somewhat inevitable considering some of the events that took place during Avengers: Age of Ultron. Civil War introduced Black Panther and Spider-Man into the MCU and connected Ant-Man to the rest of the Avengers (aside from crossing paths with Falcon in *Ant-Man*). Civil War kicked off Marvel’s Phase 3 which served as the 3rd act of The Infinity Saga and it did not disappoint. Not. One. Bit.

Avengers: Infinity War

Tied for first place on our list is Avengers Infinity War. A perfect masterpiece of a film, Infinity War begins the culmination of The Infinity Saga. We finally come face to face with the man of the hour, The Mad Titan himself, Thanos. From the first scene to the last you’re hanging on to his every word. You’re filled with distress whenever he’s on screen and you can’t look away. Our splintered team of heroes fight valiantly to do what they do best but this time it simply wasn’t enough.

Avengers: Endgame

Part of the journey is the end. Truer words have never been spoken. This brings us to the end of the list: Avengers Endgame. I consider Infinity War and Endgame to be two sides of the same coin. The unified story that is told between these two works of art is so congruent that it’s nearly impossible to tell one without the other. This was the first MCU movie to journey into the future. We see our heroes struggling to deal with their own failures and shortcomings but are willing to do whatever it takes to avenge what they lost. Much like Infinity War, the opening scene grips you tight and you’re never given a break for three solid hours. The final climax is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced and I’ll wager that it’s something we’ll never see again. The perfect conclusion for some of our most beloved characters and a promising future for those who remain.