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Endgame Scenario

CHRISTOPHER MARKUS & STEPHEN MCFEELY



WRITTEN BY **PETER HANSON**

PORTRAITS BY **TOM KELLER**

TO INFINITY &

World domination isn't just a common motivation for villains in movies from Marvel Studios—it's what the company has achieved in the last decade. As if making 23 interconnected features wasn't sufficiently impressive, Marvel has a stunning box-office record, capped by *Avengers: Infinity War*, which has earned more than \$2 billion worldwide since its April 2018 release. Together with its second half, *Avengers: Endgame*, which debuts on April 26, *Infinity War* concludes a storytelling cycle that began with Iron Man's first live-action appearance in 2008.

Christopher Markus (left) and Stephen McFeely (right) are key players in Marvel's success, writing all three Captain America movies as well as *Infinity War* and *Endgame* (all based

on various Marvel Comics). Yet they're also looking toward a future beyond Marvel, serving as co-presidents of story for AGBO, a new studio founded in early 2018 by *Infinity War/Endgame* directors Anthony and Joe Russo. After a decade with Marvel, Markus and McFeely are excited about exploring riskier material.

"It's scary because we don't have this big fat IP behind us where it's always sunny and the wind's always at your back," notes McFeely during a recent conversation at AGBO's offices in downtown Los Angeles. "We're currently looking at some 'ripped from the headlines' stuff that may be pretty satisfying—smaller movies, perhaps more controversial and complicated movies."



BEYOND

To be determined is whether the AGBO slate will include Markus/McFeely originals. If the writers have learned one thing about today's blockbuster-driven climate, it's that stories issuing directly from writers' imaginations face uphill battles. "It's much easier to lose confidence in your own idea than it is to go, 'We have this book and we can all agree on it—it's a solid object,'" Markus observes. "Outside validation helps ideas live. If you invented *Infinity War*, I'd laugh you out of the room. If you came in and went, 'This big purple guy has got six magic stones that...' Just shut up. But the fact that it has existed for 30 years in another medium makes you go, 'Ok, let's try it.'"

Purists may fret about the implications of Markus' remarks, singing the familiar refrain about tentpoles homogenizing the

marketplace, but it's hard to argue with results. The writing team's Marvel movies have generated well over \$4 billion in worldwide ticket sales, with more to come from *Endgame*.

Producing those results requires a dynamic creative process. "Chris is a restrictor plate in a lot of ways," McFeely says. "In auto racing, cars can only go so fast. Chris will only let us go so fast, because he's very thoughtful. He doesn't need something done, he needs it done right. Sometimes I just need it done. I'll spit out ideas and say, 'This one's pretty great—we should run down that road.' He'll stop us and go, 'It's only half-great for X, Y, and Z reasons.' We don't go down as many blind alleys as I would by myself."

Markus describes the other half of the equation. "I have a

serious lack of drive,” he says without a trace of irony, “and a serious inability to complete tasks. Were there not someone pushing me, I’d skid into a ditch.”

Determining who contributes which story elements is trickier than identifying how their personalities mesh. “By the time a script is done,” Markus says, “there are only a few lines I remember specifically typing, because it’s been passed back and forth. I took the ‘and’ out of his sentence, and secretly that was the genius move.” McFeely laughs but also nods, giving a sense the two have grown accustomed to bolstering each other’s strengths and surmounting each other’s weaknesses.

In a word: teamwork. Not a bad fit for the guys who wrote *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, each of which has over two dozen major characters.

GROWING UP BRADY

Markus grew up in Buffalo, New York, then spent a few years working various jobs after graduating from Rutgers (“I was a waiter, I was a hotel clerk, I was unhappy”) before enrolling in a fiction program at UC Davis. That’s where he met McFeely, a Bay Area native who spent the years after his graduation from Notre Dame teaching English at his former high school. Both say getting MA degrees was a firewall against the potential regret of never pursuing writing careers.

For Markus, who says he was raised in a community without much support for burgeoning artists, becoming a writer was the unlikely result of time spent in front of the small screen. “I watched a lot of TV in the ’70s, which was pretty repetitive and formulaic,” he recalls. “Eventually you go, ‘I know how stories work.’” He also took inspiration from literature.

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“In Fitzgerald, the characters are all fucked up and there isn’t a hero among them. That’s kind of what I’m looking for in these Marvel movies—to find the weaknesses.”

McFeely, who grew up in a climate that was friendlier to creativity, also reacted to TV shows, books, and movies—especially such sci-fi touchstones as *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980, screenplay by Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan, story by George Lucas) and *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982, screenplay by Jack B. Sowards, story by Harve Bennett and Sowards). “When writing,” he says, “I’m mimicking, in many ways, movies that touched me when I was 12.”

He also vividly recalls an experience from eighth grade: “My mom is really creative, and she wrote a story on my lunch bags, sort of a medieval fairy tale that involved all the kids in the class. I would get to school, and they’d want to know what was going on in the lunch-bag saga. I’ve been thinking lately,

‘Where did my love of serial story come from?’ I think it’s that.”

Although they enrolled at UC Davis with designs on becoming novelists, once they became friends the pair anguished over the economic realities of that career path. One evening, while hanging out in Markus’ apartment, inspiration came from an improbable source: *Baywatch* (created by Michael Berk & Douglas Schwartz and Gregory J. Bonann). “We would watch it like anybody else does, just to giggle at it,” McFeely says. “Then we saw all the names in the credits.” Adds Markus: “It was like, ‘Somebody got paid to write that? There’s, like, 20 lines of dialogue and a slow-motion montage!’” Around the same time, McFeely’s uncle gave him a book on screenwriting that cited WGA minimums. “I showed it to Chris and went,



Christopher Markus

Written by Peter Hanson

WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE?

Inside the game-changing final moments of *Infinity War*.

In addition to concluding a story thread that began with supervillain Thanos' first appearance in *The Avengers* (2012), the much-discussed ending of *Avengers: Infinity War* begins a significant reordering of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As in the original *Infinity War* comic, Thanos gathers "Infinity Stones" that grant him godlike powers, so with a snap of his fingers, he erases half the beings from the world. Among the casualties are Peter Parker/Spider-Man (Tom Holland), T'Challa/Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman), and most of the Guardians of the Galaxy.

What happens next will be revealed when *Avengers: Endgame* opens on April 26. Meanwhile, screenwriters Christopher Markus & Steven McFeely describe how they crafted The Sequence That Launched A Thousand Memes—many of which feature Holland poignantly saying "I don't feel so good" before evaporating.

"We had the luxury of being in a conference room, putting two movies on the wall, and charting out a two-movie story," McFeely explains. "The story we wanted to tell in *Endgame* is with a certain group of characters accomplishing a certain goal, and that dictated who was going to make it to that movie."

Eliminating beloved heroes was always part of the plan. "We were going to take out franchise-leading characters, for sure, because otherwise it would feel like bullshit," McFeely continues. "We really tried to own the ending."

Although many fans expected to lose some (or all) of the original six movie Avengers—Tony Stark/Iron Man, Steve Rogers/Captain America, etc.—Markus is glad that path wasn't taken. "This many movies in, part of the joy of watching those characters is seeing how much Tony and Steve can take," he says. "I wouldn't want to vanish them and not see their reaction. Those are the guys I've been following for ten years. I want to see them go through this. That said, there are a lot of beloved people who vanish. You don't want a red-shirt feeling, where we only got rid of people who are not essential to franchise development. You want to feel like you got punched in the stomach."

McFeely says that utilizing viewers' knowledge of character relationships helped layer emotion into the climax. "I lean on the reactions of the characters in the moment," he offers. "As

an audience member, my tears don't necessarily well because a character dies. Tears well because the character next to them is watching that character die. I blubber because other people are blubbering. I know what it means for Tony to lose Peter."

Tony, who mentored Peter in two previous movies, holds the younger hero in his arms as Peter fades away. "We saw dailies of Holland," McFeely says. "I got choked up watching him do that live. So we knew we had that little piece of gold in the bank. The idea that you can just say 'I don't feel so good' to somebody, and many Americans will think of a very specific thing now—that's a testament to the Marvel Universe, and it's kind of a pat on the back for us."

To some degree, it's surprising that fans reacted as powerfully as they did to the vanishing sequence, seeing as how death is rarely permanent in superhero stories. McFeely says he and Markus had to push out of their minds the thought that some audience members might resist the vanishing sequence by thinking that Marvel's not really going to kill, say, Black Panther, whose first solo movie just made a billion dollars. "We can't make decisions based on how much we think an audience member follows the business of Hollywood," McFeely says. "Some part of the audience does that. The eight-year-old who was sitting behind me doesn't."

"It's the way fiction works," Markus adds. "There would only be one James Bond movie if people went, 'Oh, he won't die, the stakes aren't real.' You enjoy the movie within the parameters that are given to you during those two hours in the black box. The measure of the film is how well it keeps you inside the box."

To that end, the writers endeavored to make the ending of *Infinity War* feel complete, rather than just a setup for a sequel. "I don't call it a cliffhanger," McFeely asserts, "because it's a story that is done. The bad guy won. Had we done this [snaps fingers] and cut to black, that's a cliffhanger. But snap, people disappear, bad guy sits on his porch and smiles, having won—that's a tragedy."

Markus and McFeely promise something fresh when *Endgame* arrives. "It's a completely different kind of movie that will give you closure on the preceding film," Markus pledges, "but you're not going to stop being emotional."





I THOUGHT IT HAD BEEN BLOWN TO BITS... ITS ROBOTIC HEAD ON DISPLAY IN SOME RED SKULL TROPHY CASE.

GET OFF THESE STREETS!

RUN!



BUT IF THIS REALLY IS THE SAME THING I'VE FOUGHT BEFORE... THERE'S A MAN'S CONSCIOUSNESS BURIED INSIDE THAT SHELL.

OH, THAT'S RIGHT, MRS... SAVE A LITTLE PEOPLE...



PROFESSOR LYLE DEKKER... AN OLD NAZI SCIENTIST AND SPY.

HE BUILT THIS... THIS MOCKERY.

BECAUSE MAD SCIENTISTS NEVER KNOW THEY'RE MAD.

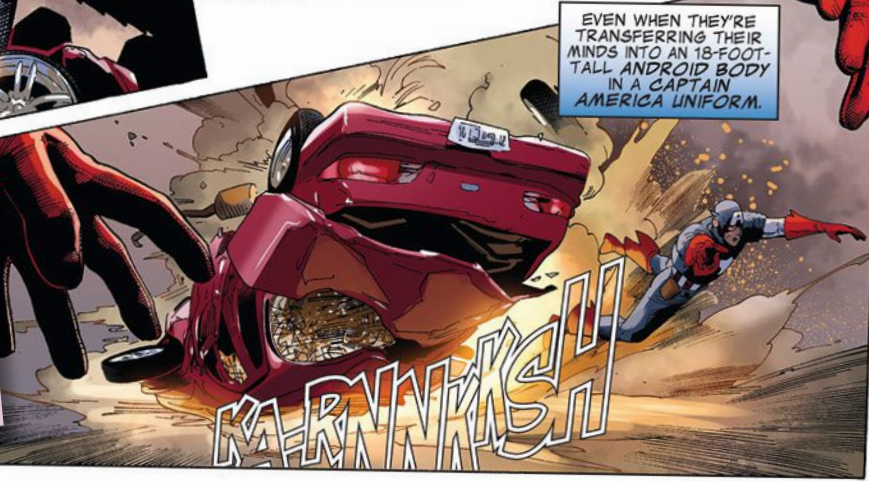


YES-- YOU'RE THE HERO!
IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU!



CAPTAIN AMERICA

STAN LEE, GENE COLAN & JOHN ROMITA



EVEN WHEN THEY'RE TRANSFERRING THEIR MINDS INTO AN 18-FOOT-TALL ANDROID BODY IN A CAPTAIN AMERICA UNIFORM.

KRRNNKSS!!

“That’s much more than you get paid for your first novel!”

On a deeper level, the epiphany addressed a concern Markus had about high art. “When writing fiction, I didn’t think you could use story conventions, because those are cheesy,” he says. “I’d be left with a story about a guy who’s in a room, and by the end of the story he’s on the other side of the room. Nothing fucking happened. But there were all those plot mechanics in my head that I ingested in the ’70s watching *The Brady Bunch* [created by Sherwood Schwartz]. They’re very basic plot mechanics that you don’t have to use in a cheesy fashion, that aren’t necessarily un-artful. I have nothing against incredibly oblique storytelling—I like it. But I also love when all the gears mesh together,

Stephen McFeely notes a connection between the *Narnia* scripts, the media he absorbed as a youth, and the duo’s Marvel work. “*Star Wars* was my serialized storytelling. I followed those characters over three movies. In many ways, that’s what we’re doing now.”



and I think it’s harder to make the gears mesh together than to make an obscure tone poem.”

McFeely echoes the sentiment. “Going to grad school, I thought my tastes needed to be elevated, so in the first year I’m reading a lot of Richard Ford and [Frederick] Exley and guys like that. It felt fake. Things that appealed to me were a little more jazzy. I still struggle with it, and I don’t want people to think I’m some sort of base clod, but as Chris said, I really value the craftsmanship in, say, *Seven* [1995, written by Andrew Kevin Walker]. You get to the end and you realize they’ve taken you on a journey that was a little pulpy and a little naughty and a little scary, but there were brains behind the whole thing. We’ve been chasing that kind of reaction in a bunch of our movies, to varying degrees of success.”

FRANCHISE MANAGEMENT

After deciding to pursue screenwriting, the duo penned their first script together at UC



Davis—a learning experience, nothing more. Next came the black comedy *You Kill Me*. The script got them representation and a gig writing a never-produced screenplay for actor-producer Bill Pullman. That project helped them get a job adapting Roger Lewis' book *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* into the 2004 telefilm of the same name, for which they won an Emmy and a Writers Guild Award, among other prizes. Markus and McFeely were then co-writers on three *Chronicles of Narnia* movies for Walden Media, adapting C.S. Lewis' beloved book series. During the *Narnia* years, *You Kill Me* reached the screen as a 2007 feature starring Ben Kingsley.

While their work on the *Narnia* franchise might seem like ideal preparation for Marvel, Markus and McFeely note important differences. For one, reconfiguring Lewis' allegorical narratives into blockbusters necessitated a betrayal of the source material. "There was a corporate drive [on Walden's part] to shut their eyes and hope they had a *Lord of the Rings*, which *Narnia* is not," Markus explains. "As the movies went on, we felt an increasing discomfort in trying to shoehorn something that was kind of amorphous into a three-act structure with a battle at the end."

Still, the *Narnia* job let them explore a special aspect of serialized storytelling—checking in with characters at different times in their lives. "I just love thinking about those four kids at the beginning of *Prince Caspian*," Markus says, referring to the series' second installment (written by Andrew Adamson & Markus & McFeely). "I loved the idea that they had been kings and queens for 30 years, came back, turned into school kids again. What was that like?"

McFeely notes a connection between the *Narnia* scripts, the media he absorbed as a youth, and the duo's Marvel work. "*Star Wars* was my serialized storytelling," he says. "I followed those characters over three movies. In many ways, that's what we're doing now."

Markus continues: "When Chris Evans [who plays Steve Rogers/Captain America] is standing there with a beard and he's all fucked up and he's facing off against Thanos [the *Infinity War* villain played by Josh Brolin], a certain portion of the audience remembers the 90-pound kid from six movies ago, and goes, 'Holy shit, that kid had a long journey, and it might end right here.' You don't write that. It's just there. That pleases me to no end—now there's a deep past to these people."

As for the deep past of how Markus and McFeely got into the Marvel business, it started during the 2007–2008 writers' strike. Around the time Marvel was prepping Iron Man's film debut, Markus and McFeely were playing with the idea of



pitching a period superhero movie, thus returning the genre to its original historical context of the World War II era. By wild coincidence, the writers heard that Marvel planned to introduce Captain America, whose first adventure was published in 1941, by way of a period piece. They chased the job for a year. Eventually, after Marvel completed script work with other writers (none of which was shown to Markus and McFeely), the duo got the job in late 2008.

Working on Cap movies led to rewriting Marvel's second Thor installment, which was released a few months after *Pain & Gain*, a Michael Bay action/comedy that Markus and McFeely adapted from articles by Pete Collins. The team also created the 2015–2016 TV series *Marvel's Agent Carter*, centered around Cap's 1940s love interest, Peggy Carter (played by Hayley Atwell).

ROMANCING THE STONES

Thanos' first screen appearance was a tag scene in *The Avengers* (2012, screenplay by Joss Whedon, story by Zak Penn and Whedon). Since then, various Marvel movies have involved "Infinity Stones," cosmic artifacts that Thanos assembles into a complete set, thereby achieving untold power. This explains why the two-part *Avengers* saga has such a huge cast—the epic story has life-or-death consequences for everyone in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). For Markus and McFeely, breaking this sprawling narrative into manageable chunks required imagination and organization.

The pair was hired to write the two-parter while *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) was filming, and their work continued through picture lock on *Endgame*—all told, nearly four years of writing. They estimate that each of their *Avengers* mov-



Stephen McFeely

ies required seven full drafts, but before scripting came playtime. Markus and McFeely made index cards for every living character in the MCU and lined a wall—“It was a big wall,” Markus says—with cards as they considered story possibilities. Eventually Marvel provided a set of magnetized trading cards, so Markus and McFeely shuffled those cards around their board as they considered team-up options.

Referring to Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige, McFeely explains the process. “Kevin didn’t lay out these two movies and say, ‘Here’s what they are.’ We went to him and said, ‘Our gut is that you don’t want 25 people in a room every time, so you’re gonna want to split these teams up. You’ve got six McGuffins. Let’s do the math.’”

“It was effectively wide open,” Markus continues. “Basically we made a menu, and they were like, ‘Well, you can’t do that one if you do that one, but you might be able to do this one if you do that one.’ We generated a lot of theoreticals, some of which made it all the way to the final.”

Despite the obligation to render massive action sequences, the project gave the writers ample opportunities for character work. “Thanos was a new color to play with,” McFeely explains. “How do you give him, for want of a better term, a humanity? That was a delightful challenge.”

Challenge seems too small a word—not only is Thanos a huge purple alien, but his goal is to annihilate half the universe’s population in order to address galactic overcrowding. Moreover, comic book scribe Jim Starlin, who wrote most of Thanos’ early adventures, imbued the character with a wild fe-

tish: Thanos kills in order to please Death, whom Starlin personified as a sexy skeleton. (It was the ’70s, man.) “We wanted people to be on board for his journey,” Markus says. “To take that to this semi-metaphorical world where he’s in love with a skeleton seemed to undermine him in a way he didn’t deserve. It works great in the comics, but we needed him to be as human as we could get. We wanted people to love him as much as they hate what he does.”

“The best part about the relationship with Death,” McFeely suggests, “is that it’s about love: ‘I’m not just a crazy maniacal guy, I have needs.’ So we tried to take that idea [and] structure a story wherein his love for his daughter is tested. We took this romantic love for Death, transferred it, made it familial, and thought, ‘Maybe that could make him a well-rounded character.’”

GROUP DYNAMICS

Although Thanos is an extreme example, writing MCU characters requires more nuance than superhero-cinema skeptics might imagine. “Strangely, even though we write him a lot, Steve [Captain America] is not that easy because he’s taciturn, he’s laconic, he doesn’t wear his heart on his sleeve,” McFeely says. “He doesn’t have a ton of turns. His arcs are flat. What tends to happen is the world changes around him, in this old-school Gary Cooper type of way. It took us a while to start dirtying him up. He was much more noble in previous movies.”

Tony Stark/Iron Man, played by Robert Downey Jr., is an-



other matter. “Tony is a lot of fun to write,” Markus says, before adding with a laugh: “It’s not always productive. He’s so discursive and unfocused sometimes that you can do whatever you want.” In fact, circumstances occasionally compelled the writers to rework Tony scenes during production.

“We’ll restructure for Downey,” McFeely explains. “We don’t usually do that for anyone else. He’ll show up on the day and say, ‘I have thoughts,’ and then we’ll sort of frantically type the thoughts up in a coherent way that blends with what we started with, and hopefully we stay on the tracks.”

McFeely cites a moment from *Civil War*. In the story, Steve and Tony are at odds, so Tony brings a peace offering—the pens that FDR used to sign the “lend-lease” agreement allowing the US to aid Great Britain against Germany before the US formally entered World War II. “That scene is pretty much exactly as written,” McFeely says, “except for the opening three lines, the last two lines, and the prop in the middle, which is all Robert. It plays like gangbusters. That’s because he needed something to hook into.”

“Some Marvel movies are more serious, some are more ridiculous, some are more kid-oriented. Within the franchise, every movie is different. Despite what some people might think, it’s not a sequel factory. Inevitably, when you feel the gears grinding in the same way, somebody’s gonna notice and go, ‘No, no, no, that’s not what we want—other people have done that before.’ A great amount of effort has been put into keeping the movies fresh.” —Christopher Markus

The interplay with Downey speaks to the delicate matter of ensuring that Marvel movies remain tonally consistent. Beyond suggestions from actors, ideas emanate from FX teams, from Marvel’s concept-art department, and even from stunt coordinators, who are given license to shoot extra material during battle scenes, just in case. All of this serves Feige’s method, the writers say, of keeping the creative process fluid until the last possible moment.

“It’s collaborative,” Markus explains. “It’s a method of storytelling that is more writer-intensive than anywhere we’ve ever worked—the

writer is valued and consulted throughout the process.”

“While it seems that Marvel is this huge thing,” McFeely adds, “it really is a small shop. The focus of creative people at Marvel is laser-sharp.”

“Some Marvel movies are more serious, some are more ridiculous, some are more kid-oriented,” Markus continues. “Within the franchise, every movie is different. Despite what some people might think, it’s not a sequel factory. Inevitably, when you feel the gears grinding in the same way, somebody’s





gonna notice and go, ‘No, no, no, that’s not what we want—other people have done that before.’ A great amount of effort has been put into keeping the movies fresh.”

MAKE MINE MARVEL

One tool Marvel uses for continual revitalization is the steady introduction of new characters. While outsiders might consider this method crass—a matter of shoving teasers for upcoming projects into unrelated stories—Markus and McFeely say that’s not accurate. Consider the first screen appearance of T’Challa/Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman) in *Civil War*. “We didn’t need a superhero—we needed a foreign dignitary,” Markus says. “Well, Marvel has a foreign dignitary who’s also a superhero. How about that? That wasn’t an edict. That was us going, ‘Hey, we could use somebody.’”

Other factors influenced the same film’s use of Peter Parker/Spider-Man (Tom Holland), since Marvel was in the midst of a protracted negotiation with Sony, which controls the rights to the character. “Kevin was doing a lot of work behind the scenes to create a relationship,” McFeely notes, “so off and on, he would come in and go, ‘It looks good,’ ‘It looks bad,’ ‘Maybe we’re gonna get it.’ We created a structure that was loose enough to have a recruitment section.”

Markus adds that Marvel didn’t ask the writers to include an origin sequence for Spider-Man. “Luckily, we didn’t have to cut away to a kid on a field trip who gets bitten by a spider,” he says. “You’re servicing your universe, but you’re not twisting your main story just to get there.”

That said, stuffing epics with extra superheroes has consequences: *Civil War* runs 147 minutes, *Infinity War* 149. The writers say the more-is-more approach originates with Marvel’s main man. “That’s one of Feige’s big strengths,” McFeely says.

“He’ll eat his lunch now and decide what he makes for dinner later. You only look at Movie 25 after Movie 24, and you go, ‘Oh, hey, what can we do now?’”

Unsurprisingly, both writers bristle when naysayers dismiss superhero cinema—the old ‘they’re all dumb spandex movies’ line. To any such critic, Markus offers this challenge: “I’d like to see the proof that you’ve seen the movies, and I defy you to tell me they’re dumb.”

“*Black Panther* [2018, written by Ryan Coogler & Joe Robert Cole] has made over a billion dollars not because it’s a dumb spandex movie,” McFeely says, “but because it’s got one of the most thoughtful, complicated villains that you’re ever going to see. And not to toot our own horn, but *Winter Soldier* [2014’s *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*] is a tight Swiss watch of a thriller. Marvel’s made some excellent movies that just happen to have superheroes in them.”

“Genre is just a delivery system,” Markus opines. “It’s just a way to frame up a story so you can tell it. So if you’re gonna reject something because of the genre that it’s in, then I don’t know what you’re gonna end up watching. A genre-less movie? So it’s just *My Dinner with Andre* every time? Take movies one at a time, watch them, and tell me if they’re good.”

That said, does *Avengers: Endgame* mark the end of the duo’s long run with Marvel, especially given their new commitments at AGBO? Probably not. “I feel like I’m graduating from college,” Markus says. “I’d like to go to grad school, but I don’t want to go to grad school right away.”

“I need to travel Europe for a year,” McFeely adds, embellishing the metaphor.

“I need to see what real life is like,” Markus concludes.

In other words: TO BE CONTINUED. 📺