This week comic book icons Iron Man, Captain America and Thor will re-assemble in movie theatres for Avengers: Age of Ultron. The A$250 million sequel to 2012’s record-breaking Marvel’s The Avengers will mark a 15-year dominance of mainstream movies by comic book adaptations.

Yet, this release is but a momentary pit-stop in the relentless march of the supermen. Next summer Marvel rival DC Comics and its corporate partner Warner Bros. will combine the publisher’s most iconic heroes in Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice (2016).

The team-up will be the first in a series of ten DC Comics-based films, with the planned blockbusters ranging from the familiar (Wonder Woman) to the obscure (The Dirty Dozen-like Suicide Squad, starring Will Smith). Not to be outdone, Marvel has announced its own five-year plan, including Black Panther, Doctor Strange, and a host of Avengers sequels.

The full Marvel release calendar can be seen here.

Yet, the excitement and chest-thumping of this comic book hero arms race raises the question: will anyone still be watching when Warner Bros.’ Cyborg shuffles into cinemas in 2020?

It’s hard to remember a time when cinematic skies were not darkened by superheroes, but in the late 1990s comic books were box-office Kryptonite following the DayGlo excess of Joel Schumacher’s Batman & Robin. But with little fanfare and less expectation Marvel mutants X-Men grossed US$300 million on a modest US$75 million budget in the summer of 2000.

When Spider-Man amplified that success with a record-breaking opening weekend in 2002, long-gestating adaptations such as Daredevil, Hulk and Fantastic Four were spurred into production.

Of course, there had been feature-length adaptations of comics in the past. Superman and Batman had both been the subject of blockbuster movies, but these isolated hits failed to develop a sustainable trend. Yet the dawn of the millennium was ripe for comic book movies.

By the time of X-Men’s release digital technologies had arrived at the point where audiences not only believed a man could fly but they could actually see him soar.

Furthermore, the now dominant media conglomerates were hungry for content that could be extended across their subsidiaries in industries such as movies, videogames, television and publishing.

With their cross-generational appeal, merchandisable costumes, and franchise-ready quests for justice, superheroes came to the rescue of conglomerates such as Time Warner, which owned DC Comics, and The Walt Disney Company, which would acquire Marvel in 2009.

Beyond the industry, superheroes were also welcomed at the multiplex, particularly in North America where they dispelled their “boys only” reputation by equally attracting the four sectors commentators use to analyse attendance (male, female, over 25, and under 25).

Heroes on the comic book page were never more popular than when they were turning over Axis tanks or
soaking Hitler on the jaw. This four-colour rebuttal to a real-world threat saw many linking the more recent success of cinema’s heroes to the escape they offered American audiences rocked by 9/11.

By 2008 the exponential growth of the comic-book adaptation trend reached a plateau. The films produced during this more mature phase tended to rework the simplistic conventions of the genre. Tony Stark (Iron Man) was a narcissistic playboy who gleefully revealed his secret identity, while Christopher Nolan’s Dark Knight agonised over the ramifications of his actions.

Marvel Studios

Other genres had followed a similar trajectory: after the black-and-white morality of classical Westerns, that genre entered a revisionist stage in the 1950s with films such as The Searchers (1956). This fertile period was followed by a sharp decline littered with parodies, such as Blazing Saddles (1974), from which the Western never fully recovered.

There were hints moving into the comic book movie’s second decade that a similar decline was imminent. Watchmen (2009), Kick Ass (2010), and Super (2010) all skewered the superhero by reimagining spandex-afficionados as misguided fanboys and sadistic vigilantes. But, like their relentless heroes, the studios adopted a number of strategies to keep audience fatigue at bay.

After the last three Marvel movies were headlined by white guys named “Chris” (Evans/ Captain America, Hemsworth/ Thor: The Dark World and Pratt/Guardians of the Galaxy), the studios heeded calls for greater diversity, with a slate of films featuring superwomen and multicultural icons including Wonder Woman, Black Panther and Aquaman.

Filmmakers also sought to widen the boundaries of the genre with last year’s hit Guardians of the Galaxy owing more to Star Wars than Superman.

One of the most visible strategies to combat audience attrition is cross-pollinating heroes (i.e. brands). Audiences have seen this tactic before in movies such as Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man (1943).


Film Frame ©Marvel 2015

The Avengers was not a desperation move, but rather a pre-emptive strike that reaped huge returns. The strategy was replicated last year for X-Men: Days of Future Past, and, as the subtitle for Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice suggests, a film version of DC Comics Avengers-like Justice League is planned for 2017.

Constantly upping the ante isn’t cheap and, with so many studios competing for audiences, budgets are rising faster than a speeding bullet.

Universal Studios

Yet, as studios move towards transmedia paradigms they can afford to take the financial hit. While films might still be the most visible example of a franchise, they are not the only one. With videogames such as Batman: Arkham Asylum (2009) scoring bigger opening weekends than most movies and merchandise outstripping the profits of blockbusters, conglomerates, which spread their content across a variety of media, can afford to treat films as loss leaders.

Today comics, the birthplace of the superhero, are a rarefied pastime. But, much like Superman escaping his crippled home of Krypton, superheroes have gone on to prosper in a variety of other media. While the most familiar form is movies, as the recent success of Netflix’s TV series Daredevil demonstrates, these durable characters can move from one medium to the next in a single bound.

We can expect superheroes to continue looming large in popular culture, as these media conglomerates are not simply in the movie, television or videogame business; they are in the superhero business, and right now business is booming.
Liam Burke is the author of *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*.

*Avengers: Age of Ultron* is released in Australia on April 23.