

# Franchise films dominated the box office in 2021

Article

**The news:** After 2020 saw movie theaters enduring delays, cancellations, and shutdowns, the first half of 2021 showed promise. The arrival of vaccines, followed by a low case count in the early summer, teased a return to normalcy that was quickly disrupted by the emergence of new variants, trouble at the foreign box office, and viewer habits changed by the pandemic.

So how did the box office fare in 2021, and what does that mean for the year ahead?

**Franchises are the new blockbusters:** Franchise films were the big winners at the box office in 2021, consistently drawing viewers to theaters despite the ongoing pandemic.

- **Marvel Cinematic Universe** films **Black Widow** and **Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings** marked a successful return to the MCU, with strong opening weekends of **\$80 million** and **\$75.5 million**, respectively, though their box office performances were hampered by a number of issues.
- **Black Widow's** debut may have been undercut by a dual streaming-theatrical release. But less than two months later, at the peak of a delta variant surge, **Shang-Chi** shattered opening weekend box office estimates of \$50 million, showing that the cultural power of MCU films hadn't dwindled.
- The franchise films **Fast & Furious 9** and **No Time To Die** both suffered several pandemic-related delays, but they still managed to rank in the top 10 highest-grossing films of the year at the domestic box office, alongside all four Marvel offerings. The only non-sequel or franchise film in the top 10 was **Free Guy**, per BoxOfficeMojo.

Franchise films far outperformed films by famed, established directors. **Ridley Scott's The Last Duel** crashed at the box office, and **Steven Spielberg's** musical, **West Side Story**, also failed to drive enough viewers to theaters to break even.

**The changing business model:** Though franchise films firmly established their claim this year, troubles that plagued the MCU show how the blockbuster model is changing.

- **Black Widow's** streaming debut netted an additional \$60 million for **Disney**, but it was marred with scandal after star **Scarlett Johansson** sued the company, claiming that her contract stipulated a traditional theatrical release. Shortly after the release of **Shang-Chi**, **Disney** announced it would release the remainder of its 2021 lineup exclusively in theaters.
- Making matters worse, **Shang-Chi** star **Simu Liu** and **Eternals** director **Chloe Zhao** criticized the Chinese government, which then blocked the release of all four of the MCU's 2021 films in the country—which **Disney** has increasingly relied upon to boost box office numbers.

**Spider-Man breaks the rule:** Prospects for **Spider-Man: No Way Home**, **Disney's** final MCU film of the year in partnership with **Sony**, looked grim going into the holiday season after the omicron variant emerged and China issued another rejection. But the film managed to defy expectations, grossing over **\$1 billion** in the worldwide box office.

- After an uneven year in which the box office failed to reach pre-pandemic heights, Spider-Man's performance at home—where it has grossed over **\$500 million**—and abroad shows that blockbuster studios have a path back to lucrative box office results. But they will need to rely less on China and navigate the changing tastes of viewers who prefer to watch new films at home.