Comics Move to Big Screen and Beyond

By Derek Kompare

17-22 minutes

While Hollywood has been releasing adaptations of characters and stories that originated in comic books for many years, 2014 has seen the volume of this stream increase to a torrent. Two studios dominate this space at the moment, due to their corporate relationships with the two major comics publishers. Warner Bros has long owned DC Comics, home of Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, and dozens of other popular superheroes and villains, as well as the more esoteric titles published in their mature-leaning Vertigo imprint. Meanwhile, Disney acquired Marvel Comics in 2009, and with it, Marvel Studios, who had already embarked on one of the most ambitious adaptations in media history, bringing characters like Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, The Hulk, Black Widow, and others to the big screen in a seemingly endless film saga. Both companies have also produced and distributed versions of their characters to television and direct to home video, in both animated and live-action forms. Warner Bros has many live-action TV series, including *Arrow* and *The Flash* on the CW, Batman prequel *Gotham* on Fox, and *Constantine* on NBC, and,

in development, *Supergirl* on CBS. Disney has adapted characters from its Marvel films into the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Agent Carter* on ABC, and, in 2015, will debut four interlocked superhero series on Netflix.

As many industry observers have noted, the “geek business”--of comics, SF, fantasy, horror, and video game-related properties--has been growing tremendously for at least the last decade, and has now started to dominate the large and small screens. Of the sixteen films that have grossed over $300M at the US box office since 2010, twelve of them, and four of the top five, are in these genres. On television, the geek-saturated *The Big Bang Theory* is the most-watched sitcom, the zombie-infested *The Walking Dead*, one of the most-watched dramas, and genre fare like *Arrow*, *Grimm*, *Once Upon A Time*, *Supernatural*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Doctor Who* regularly pull in sizable audiences. Moreover, genre-centric fan conventions (in San Diego, New York, and myriad similar events happening most weekends across the country) regularly pack hotels and convention centers.

It is debatable whether we’ve reached “peak geek.” Is the past few years only the leading edge of a new status quo for mass entertainment, or is the trend overhyped and due for a downturn? Regardless of any predictions about the trajectory of genre entertainment, it is important to understand how this material functions industrially, at several different scales. This is particularly the case with comics-originated adaptations, which have emerged from a distinct industry, subculture, and art form. While CGI-enhanced heroes and villains now duke it out on big

screens for millions of viewers, they originated in a colorful but generally disregarded (if not sometimes vilified) medium. The current mainstream success of these characters on film and TV comes after decades of comics existing on the subcultural margins, with its own distinct codes and practices, and sometimes these differences aren't as acknowledged as they should be.

What follows are a few things to know about the relationships of the comics industry and comics culture to the broader, mass-appeal adaptations of comics characters and stories

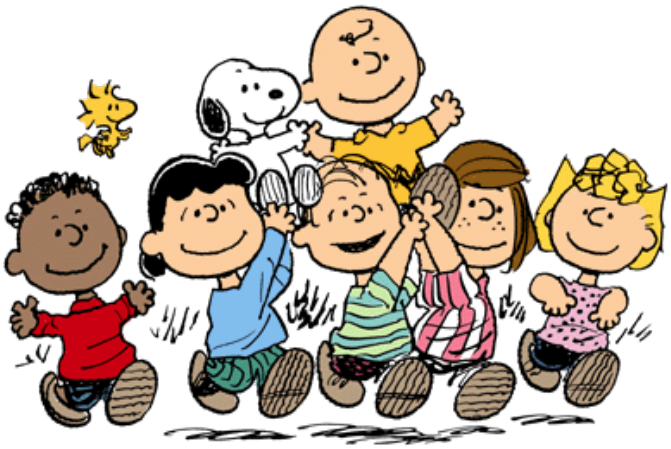
1. **Comics have always been adapted to other media platforms.**
2. **Media conglomerates systematically exploit their properties across film and TV.**
3. **Comics creators are often alienated from the adaptations of their work.**
4. **Comics fandom is increasingly diverse.**
5. **Comics aren't necessarily meant for other media forms.**
6. **A postscript from the author on the complex politics of media fandom**

1. Comics have always been adapted to other media platforms

Licensing has long been a key, but largely overlooked, component in media industries. It allows copyright owners to make deals for the commercial distribution of their properties. While the recent spate of comics-based film, TV, and other

products seems to be new, comics-based characters have been licensed for exploitation for nearly a century, first with popular comic strips like *Little Orphan Annie* and *Krazy Kat*, and then with comic book superheroes like Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and the Hulk. Characters have not only been featured in film, television, and radio narratives, but also in novels, records, games, t-shirts, lunch boxes, toys, and a vast array of household products.

These adaptations have extended the impact of characters, settings, and aesthetics into the wider world, where they function as consumer brands and cultural (and subcultural) markers. For example, Charles Schulz' comic strip *Peanuts* may have formally ended in 1999, but it has long been a licensing juggernaut, and each product--whether birthday card, sweatshirt, holiday ornament, snack cake, or animated TV special--continues to convey the strip's singular emotional and aesthetic pitch.



Such licensing deals can be more significant than the impact of a hit film or TV series, because they expand the parameters of the property into a wider, more diffuse circulation as a cultural icon. As scholars

have noted, because of decades of licensed products, Batman is a character that effectively functions as a distinct concept well beyond any particular comic book, TV episode, or blockbuster film. This movement from comics to icons is of particular interest to the major media corporations who own the two most prominent publishers, with the most lucrative characters to license.

2. Media conglomerates systematically exploit their properties across film and television

While licensing impacts the culture at a large scale, individual products still have particular functions within their product category. Film and television adaptations are arguably the most prominent versions of comics-originated content, but they still have to function within the aesthetic, cultural, and industrial expectations of their medium.

The primary appeal of comics for a film or television studio is the same for any product category: ready-made characters and settings already established with at least some consumers. In industry terms, the concept is said to have “pre-awareness.” Beyond that, however, they need to be adapted to suit the needs of the studio, and the demands of the entertainment market, at that particular moment. How are words and still images that are created in ink on paper (or, more recently, in pixels on screens) effectively represented in animation or live action?

For most comics-derived properties adapted to film or TV, this has meant constructing action-adventure narratives aimed not

so much at the relatively tiny audience of comics readers, but rather at a broad film or television audience. This has taken many different forms. Animation has been a frequent, if obvious, path, dating back to the Fleischer Superman cartoons of the 1940s, and encompassing decades of TV shows featuring DC or Marvel characters aimed primarily, though not exclusively, at children. Live action adaptations, with their heightened expectations for plausible visuals, have long presented particular challenges, but have found increased success. As Matt Yockey observes, the legendary 1966-68 *Batman* TV series might have alienated some comics fans with its campy take on costumed crimefighting, but it was a hit with a broad TV audience at a pivotal moment in the politics of popular culture. In the late 1970s, the first two *Superman* films (starring Christopher Reeve) successfully set the bar for big-screen adaptations with their epic scale, state-of-the-art special effects, and balanced emotional mix. At the same time, however, Universal Television's *The Incredible Hulk* TV series (CBS, 1978-82) met with success on a much smaller scale, and took its cues from decidedly down-to-earth episodic dramas (like *Kung Fu* and *The Fugitive*) rather than the cosmic battles generally featured in the character's Marvel Comics adventures.

More recently, starting with Fox's *X-Men* (2000), but ratcheted up considerably with Marvel Studios' *Iron Man* (2008), cinematic adaptations have functioned as global tentpole blockbusters. Disney's acquisition of Marvel in 2009 provided the financial backing and marketing heft to fuel an unfolding serial that intertwines film and television releases: the Marvel Cinematic

Universe. This ongoing epic is marked by two to three theatrical releases each year (mapped so far through 2019), with the ABC TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (and its prequel, *Agent Carter*) filling in storylines between film installments for more dedicated fans, and four further linked superhero series--*Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage*, and *Iron Fist*--debuting on Netflix in 2015. These films have thus far been massive hits at the global box office, and have proven the attraction of Marvel's bench even beyond the usual A-list characters (many of which had already been licensed away to Fox or Sony). *Guardians of the Galaxy*, featuring characters who are deep cult favorites, was even, surprisingly, the second-highest-grossing film at the North American box office in 2014 (surpassing Marvel sibling *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, the third-highest-grossing film of the year).

Meanwhile, Warner Bros has been exploiting its DC characters in a similar manner. Christopher Nolan's revision of Batman (2005-12) provided the general tone for the new DC superhero cinematic universe, which officially debuted in 2013's Superman

reboot, *Man of Steel*, and will be followed by films based on many DC characters scheduled through 2020. Concurrently, they have their own slate of live-action television shows, including *Arrow* (CW, 2012-), *The Flash* (CW, 2014-), *Gotham* (Fox, 2014-), and the forthcoming *Supergirl* (CBS, 2015-), which, unlike Marvel's TV shows, will remain narratively separate from the films. Compared to Disney/Marvel, Warner Bros seems to better appreciate the cultural and industrial difference between film and television, capitalizing on the latter's ability for weekly melodrama to draw in young adults and develop a steady fan base (*Arrow* and *The Flash*) while more slowly building up the hype for its narratively-separate cinematic universe.

3. Comics creators are often alienated from adaptations of their work

The labor of writers, pencillers, inkers, colorists, and editors is generally more known to comics fans today than ever before, but hasn't been as prominent in film and TV adaptations. Stan Lee, who co-created many of the core Marvel characters, has long been the face of Marvel to the general public (with cameo appearances in every Marvel Studios film thus far), despite the fact that he gave up writing and editing at the publisher in the 1970s. Meanwhile, the late artist Jack Kirby, who co-created many of Marvel's most famous characters with Lee, and whose distinct, dynamic art is well-known to comics fans, has only received modest recognition in licensed adaptations. Likenesses of his many creations adorn t-shirts, posters, and many other products, but since he produced them as work-for-hire, his

estate receives no royalties (although an undisclosed settlement was reached with Marvel in September 2014).

Since many of the most popular comics characters were created decades ago under similar arrangements, these acknowledgments are rare, and have been primarily granted to writers rather than artists. As comics properties have become lucrative adaptations in recent years, some creators have been able to establish more direct ownership of their creations, and a more prominent (or at least acknowledged) role in film and television adaptations. Robert Kirkman's zombie apocalypse comics series *The Walking Dead* was adapted to television (on AMC) in 2010, and has been one of television's most-watched dramas. Kirkman, as an executive producer, has written six episodes. He has also been able to leverage his increased clout in both industries to launch new titles and produce at least one additional TV series (*Outcast*). Frank Miller's name and visual style were prominently attached to the *Sin City* films, based on his comics. Marvel writers Brian Michael Bendis and Ed Brubaker have been either directly involved or acknowledged in the production of adaptations based on their Marvel characters and stories.

4. Comics fandom is increasingly diverse

The default assumption about the comics fan base (in the US, at least) is that it is young, white, male, and heterosexual. While this masculine domination has generally been the case for a few decades, and has skewed industry employment overwhelmingly in favor of straight white men, comics and comics-based products attract fans of all colors, genders, and sexualities.

Precise numbers of readership, viewership, consumption, and other forms of participation are difficult to gauge, but it is becoming apparent that this stereotype is false.

However, this gender diversity, and the responses to it, vary considerably across comics culture. While girls and women, in particular, constitute a substantial, and rising proportion of the overall “geek” market, and many conventions and comics shops have become more welcoming to girls and women, allegations of sexual harassment in those spaces (particularly towards cosplayers) continue to abound. Many publishers default to a male (and avowedly heterosexual) readership, sidelining and/or objectifying most female characters, and alienating potential readers of other gender or sexual identities. With one prominent exception (Wonder Woman), A-list characters at both major publishers are all men. Executives at one prominent cable channel (Cartoon Network) have told the writers of its superhero-based animated shows to focus on appealing to boys rather than girls, and have even cancelled series that draw “too many” female viewers.

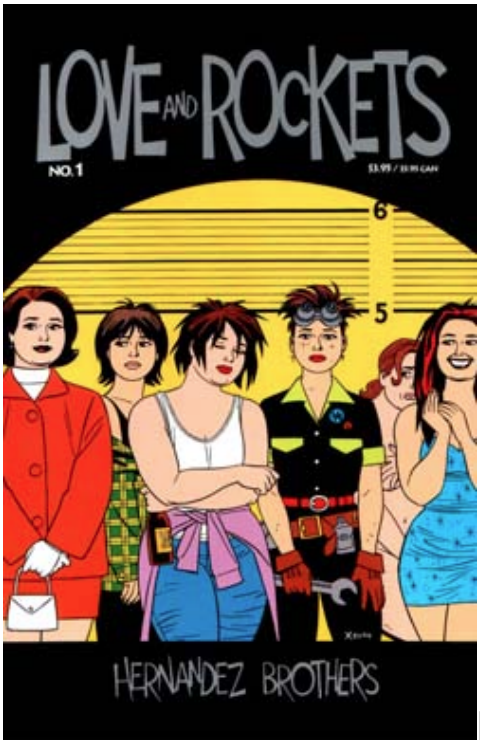
Moreover, many licensed product manufacturers also still assume an exclusively male consumer, as when *Guardians of the Galaxy* merchandise, ranging from toys to t-shirts, came on the market late last summer without featuring either of its prominent female characters, or when apparel is marketed only in men's sizes (prompting the founding of women-focused geek apparel company Her Universe).

This ignorance of diversity is an increasingly prominent issue in comics culture, and is being addressed in many different ways, including increasing the visibility of non straight-white-male characters in comics and adaptations, increasing the number of female and/or non-white writers and artists working in prominent titles, and policing sexual harassment at conventions. Comics with more diverse narratives, often outside the superhero genre, like Image's *Saga* and *Sex Criminals*, and Dark Horse's *Mind MGMT*, are finding wide and appreciative audiences. Licensees adapting comics properties should reject the old stereotypes of the comics audiences, and carefully consider this greater diversity.

5. Some popular comics defy adaptation

The influence of comics-based characters may be growing, but the unique aesthetic qualities of the medium of comics have not been generally appreciated outside the small confines of actual comics readers. The cinematic (or television, or video game) adaptation of a comic book might stand well on its own merits, but it should not be mistaken or substituted for the original "words and pictures" version.

As Pascal Lefèvre argues, the comics medium has distinct ontologies that are difficult to reproduce in other media forms, including film. The experience of time and space, to take just one example, is completely different. While the cinematic adaptation depends on a linear (though not necessarily chronological) presentation of events in motion, a single comics page typically displays multiple moments at once, with the reader generating not only narrative cohesion (i.e., constructing the story from separate instances, as with individual film shots), but all sensory detail—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches—from the relationships between graphic elements of composition, line, texture, typography, and (often) color. The most effective comics adaptations understand these differences, and either distill and highlight the features that "travel" best to other mediums (as, arguably, in Nolan's Batman films), or embrace and critique the gaps between page and screen (as seen most prominently in the 2003 adaptation of Harvey Pekar's autobiographical comic book, *American Splendor*).



Many of the most highly-regarded comics have no aspirations for big-screen adaptation. Art Spiegelman has thus far resisted attempts to license a film version of his renowned signature work, *Maus*, as has Jeff Smith with *Bone*. Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez' *Love and Rockets*, which has been running for over 30 years, aging characters and changing situations along the way, is too dense, sprawling, and "comics-y" to be contained in a film or even TV series. Similarly, many titles today, like the aforementioned *Saga*, *Sex Criminals*, and *Mind MGMT*, are designed and plotted in such a way as to be almost unthinkable off the comics page.

Comics, as a distinct medium, will clearly continue to be an essential source of material for the rest of the media industries. What "comics," as a concept that travels to different cultural forms and industries, entails, however, is a matter of debate, as these points have indicated. What is translated from the comics

page to the film or TV screen? How is the work of comics artists acknowledged and represented in different forms? Who are comics, and their adaptations, for? In approaching comics from the outside, it's important to understand its unique formal qualities, its complex histories, and its increasingly diverse fans, and how they relate to other areas in media cultures and industries.

6. A postscript from the author on the complex politics of media fandom

In the article, I talk about diversity in the comics industry and fandom as a major concern today. While this image of cosplayers might suggest objectification and contradict the points I'm making about women in fandom, in particular, I believe cosplay is primarily for the enjoyment of cosplayers, and that our assumptions (especially from outside fandom) about how and why people display their own bodies should not be our concern. I'll point you to the clear (and sometimes subtle) misogyny, and subsequent feminist critiques around "slut-shaming" and (especially) the "fake geek girl"; this essay from fan and cosplayer Emily Finke is a great place to start.