

Movies

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Drawn to the big screen

Comic-book craze is sweeping Hollywood, but just how long can a good thing last?

SAN DIEGO — It happens now faster than a speeding bullet.

No sooner than the ink has dried on the pages of a new graphic novel — crime thriller, slam-bang superhero adventure or space opera — than the film rights are snapped up in the hopes of launching pop culture's next multi-media cash cow.

Most recently, director Len Wiseman (*Underworld*, *Live Free or Die Hard*) wandered into a Los Angeles comic shop and, after being intrigued by a copy of Radical Publishing's sci-fi opus *Shrapnel*, obtained the rights himself.

It never used to be like this. Spider-Man was middle-aged before he became a movie star. So was Superman by the time Christopher Reeve donned the blue tights. Ditto Batman, Iron Man and the Hulk.

But no more. These days, producers pounce before a single issue has been published.

Consider *Kick-Ass*, a blood-splattered satire that was under way as a movie — with creators Mark Millar (*Wanted*) and John Romita Jr. on board as producers — even before the book's first story arc was finished.

Last month at Comic-Con, when director Matthew



KEVIN WILLIAMSON
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Vaughn (*Layer Cake*) unveiled footage from the film about a teenager who battles crime and meets with painfully hilarious consequences, fanboys responded so enthusiastically that multiple studios mulled distributing it. And this past week, Lionsgate snared the rights for a 2010 release.

Of course, everything is cyclical in Hollywood, leaving some to question if the comic-book movie craze could soon burn itself out. Decades ago, two other genres so dominated the industry they eventually went extinct: The western and the musical.

Kevin Feige recognizes the potential danger of overexposure. As the production president of Marvel Studios, he's in charge of translating the publisher's stable of costumed icons — Thor, Captain America and Iron Man among them — to the big screen.

"The two examples you just used lasted 30, 40 years. We're maybe 10 years into this now," he tells Sun Media.

"From our side, it is about expanding the envelope of what a comic-book movie is. I think *Dark Knight* did that, I think *Iron Man* did that, I think *Thor* will do that. So yes, they all came from comic books, but they don't all fit that cookie-cutter stamp of whatever a comic-book movie is ... There's a lot more to it than just, 'Uh-oh, there's trouble, I'm running into a phone booth.' I think that's how you keep it from getting stale over time."

The origins of the current boom can be traced to 2000 when — to the astonishment of industry observers — Bryan Singer's *X-Men* grossed \$150 million. Two years later, Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* webbed up more than \$400 million, followed by *X-2: X-Men United* in 2003, which earned \$215 million. And after last year's *Batman* sequel *The Dark Knight* raked in \$1 billion worldwide to become the second highest-grossing movie in history after *Titanic*, Hollywood isn't about to relent.

Tobey Maguire and Raimi will be back for *Spider-Man 4* in May 2011, while Sony this week hired a screenwriter to pen scripts for *Spider-Man 5* and 6. And further *X-Men* entries include a *Wolverine* sequel, a possible Magneto prequel and a spinoff



entitled *X-Men: First Class*. DC Comics, which is owned by Warner Bros. but has lagged behind Marvel in exploiting its spandex-clad library, is ramping up its slate as well. Ryan Reynolds will star in the science-fiction-flavoured *The Green Lantern* for director Martin Campbell (*Casino Royale*) in 2011. A third *Batman* film starring



Christian Bale from director Christopher Nolan is likely no later than 2012. And other lesser-known heroes from *The Flash* to *Green Arrow* to *Wonder Woman* are also in the pipeline.

For studios who increasingly want to play it safe, the appeal is twofold. Comics come with a built-in fanbase of young



males — the average comics reader is in his 20s. Plus, the source material can serve as an extended storyboard of sorts — literally showing executives what the movie will look like. Director Zack Snyder, after all, lifted imagery directly from *300* and *Watchmen* for his highly cinematic adaptations.

It's all admittedly a little



Iron Man is just one of the legion of comic books already tapped as the subject of a major motion picture (or sequel) or in development for the big-screen treatment. Others include (bottom, from left) Kick-Ass, Captain America, Wonder Woman, Shrapnel, Thor and The Green Lantern.

And if Hollywood — which hit bottom with 1997's despised, disastrous *Batman and Robin* — is finally honouring the source material, it's because the directors themselves are fans, he adds.

"Sam Raimi loves Spider-Man. Christopher Nolan and his brother Jonathan Nolan, and David Goyer, love the Batman mythos. Jon Favreau did a knockout job on a surprising character because *Iron Man* has never been as good as that movie."

And gone are the days when only A-listers like the man of steel could leap to the big screen in a single bound. No one knows that better than Barry Levine, the president and publisher of Radical Publishing. In less than two years, the upstart has attracted such heavy-hitters as Johnny Depp, John Woo, Singer, Peter Berg and the aforementioned Wiseman to properties that range from western to Greek myth to futuristic drama. On-the-rise director Joseph Kosinski has even conceived a comic entitled *Oblivion* for Radical that he will develop into a film after he's wrapped work on *Tron: Legacy*.

Still, for all the hype, Levine stresses the book comes first. "When we approach a concept, the book has to stand on its own. But I'm not an idiot. I didn't get into this business just to make comic books. I got into this business to be a publisher and this is a four-quadrant entertainment company ... The stuff I green light seems to be cinematic. It has an adaptability to it."

Whatever the ultimate outcome is for comics-to-movie mania, Wolfman is confident the hand-drawn medium itself will endure.

"We've been around since cave paintings, which existed to tell stories," he says.

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Studio's plan a real Marvel

SAN DIEGO — Marvel's master plan for world domination would do Dr. Doom proud.

After years of licensing their characters to Hollywood studios — Spider-Man to Sony, X-Men, Daredevil, Silver Surfer and Fantastic Four to Fox — Marvel seized control of its own cinematic fortunes with 2008's *Iron Man*.

Now bolstered by that movie's \$585-million worldwide windfall, the fledgling studio is plotting to bring much of the remaining Marvel universe to multiplexes.

Next May's *Iron Man 2*, with Robert Downey Jr. and Mickey Rourke, has wrapped.

Director Kenneth Branagh is prepping the lavish fantasy *Thor*, which will star Chris Hemsworth (best known for playing Capt. Kirk's doomed father in *Star Trek*) as the hammer-wielding god of thunder. It's due out May 2011. And director Joe Johnston (*Jurassic Park 3*) will helm *The First Avenger: Captain America* for a July 2011 debut.

"The origin of Captain America (during the Second World War) is the origin of the Marvel universe," explains Kevin Feige, president of production at Marvel Studios. "It's about that time in Marvel history when the idea of the superhero began to emerge."

Who will play Captain America in the film that's been described in some circles as "*Raiders of the Lost Ark* meets *The Rocketeer* meets *Saving Private Ryan*?"

Feige says a casting announcement could come by the end of the year.

It's no small decision since in May 2012 Marvel will release *The Avengers*, a massive cross-over set to team Iron Man, Thor and Captain America alongside Samuel L. Jackson's Nick Fury, Don Cheadle's War Machine, Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow and possibly Edward Norton's Hulk. If you want a window into the scope of Marvel's ambitions,

consider this: Jackson is signed to a nine-picture deal.

And beyond *The Avengers*, there are plans to launch such lesser-known second-stringers as Antman (*Shaun of the Dead* creator

Edgar Wright has long been attached), Iron Fist, Black Panther, Vision, Nighthawk, Doctor Strange into A-list movie stardom. Worked for Tony Stark, didn't it?

But is it too much, too soon? No, says Jon Favreau, director of *Iron Man* and its sequel.

"Marvel is doing it the right way. They're not rushing it. If *Thor* turns out well and Cap turns out, well, then I think you can have a killer Avengers movie."

Favreau has long been viewed as the obvious candidate to direct *The Avengers*, but when asked about it, he is noncommittal.

"I will be involved as an executive producer and will be helping with the whole process, but to live it for two years and bring all those things together, that's going to depend on the story and where Marvel wants to go with it."

— Kevin Williamson



FEIGE
Marvel exec



surreal and "strange" to Marv Wolfman, the scribe who created *Blade* in the 1970s and has penned comics ranging from *Spider-Man* to *The New Teen Titans* for the past 30 years.

"We were doing it for ourselves and just trying to do entertaining things and not considering movies or television or



anything else," he says.

Unlike now when some comics are designed with a film deal in mind. Understandably, Wolfman is weary of putting the movie before the comic.

"The best comics are still done to be comics. People who are doing comics with the sole intention of turning them into movies or video



games or whatever, there's a sense the readers can pick up, that it's not really meant for this medium. It's really just a sales tool. And very few of them become very popular ... You have to do a good comic book. If you later sell it, that's great. But you have to think first and foremost of the comic-book medium and technique."