

COMIC-CON INTERNATIONAL 2009

Gettin' your geek on

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SAN DIEGO, Calif. — Break out the inhalers and Batarangs: Comic-Con has begun. Or as they say in Klin-gon: "Maj!"

Starting today, more than 120,000 fans of science fiction and fantasy are expected to descend on the San Diego Convention Center for the five-day expo that's become a beachhead for video game, TV and movie marketers.

It's a long way — even at warp speed — from the convention's origins in the 1970s as a gathering of a few hundred basement-dwelling comic-book aficionados.

For that, you can blame Hollywood. Around the time 2000's *X-Men* was flexing its box-office might, studio and network executives started to realize Comic-

Con — with its thousands of tech-savvy tastemakers — had serious pop-culture clout and could help spark blogosphere buzz in our increasingly wired age of YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Cannes may be more prestigious and Sundance cooler, but Comic-Con has the fans — ones who studios aim to woo by carting out celebrities, filmmakers, merchandising and never-before-seen footage.

Twilight phenom

Few know that as well as Montreal's Rachelle Lefevre. She arrived here last year as part of the then-unknown cast of phenom *Twilight*. But thousands of delirious, screaming girls and women — greatly diluting the male-driven mecca's typical testosterone — made everyone take notice.

"That's where it all started,"

she remembers. "Before Comic-Con no one knew who we were. Even the Comic-Con organizers were like, 'Who are you people?' And we were like, 'Uh, we're vampires.'"

So everyone is braced for a similar tsunami of squeals this afternoon when the franchise's stars — including Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart — return to promote *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*. But *Twilight* isn't the only prodigal franchise here in the hopes of repeating history.

Saturday sees *Iron Man 2*'s creators back — two years after their memorably raucous 2007 Comic-Con outing helped propel their film into the box-office stratosphere.

But arguably no movie is as eagerly awaited as James Cameron's *Avatar*, a science-fiction 3-D epic he's

been working on for 14 years. The pressure is intense — so is the secrecy, some of which will be lifted when later today Cameron lifts the veil on 20 minutes of 3-D footage in the 6,500-seat Hall-H.

Not that he's the only heavyweight trotting out 3-D spectacle. So are Robert Zemeckis (*A Christmas Carol*) and Tim Burton (*Alice in Wonderland*) — neither of whom has been to Comic-Con before.

Also attending for the first time despite impeccable geek credentials? Peter Jackson — a god in these circles after the Lord of the Rings trilogy — who is hoping fans will spread

the word about *District 9*, the alien-centric thriller he produced; it opens next month.

Presumably, he will also touch upon December's *The Lovely Bones*, his teaming with Steven Spielberg on the 3-D computer-generated *The Adventures of Tintin: Secret of the Unicorn* and, of course, the two-part prequel *The Hobbit*, which he is co-writing and producing with director Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*).

Still, even among Jedi knights, buzz is a two-edged light-sabre.

Consider comics icon Frank Miller's *The Spirit*, which bombed here last year, months before it tanked in theatres.

Yet for producers, the potential reward outweighs the risk and

films hoping to capitalize on Comic-Con include *Kick-Ass*, an adaptation of the satirical comic directed by Matthew Vaughn (*Layer Cake*) starring Nicolas Cage and *Superbad*'s McLovin, Christopher Mintz-Plasse.

Small screen-ers

From the small screen, TV series whose actors and creators are set to appear include *Family Guy*, *24*, *Smallville*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Fringe*, *The Simpsons* and *Lost*, which launched at the convention five years ago.

Hoping for *Lost*-scale success this time out are newcomers *V*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Human Target*, all three of which screened their pilots for prospective viewers last night.

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KEV-MAN'S COMIC-CON PICKS

SAN DIEGO, Calif. — From extraterrestrials and iron men to bloodsuckers and mad hatters, here are some of the stars and filmmakers beaming down to this year's Comic-Con International:

AVATAR (Dec. 18): James Cameron — who, like Peter Jackson, is nerd royalty — will chat up his first film since 1997's *Titanic*. It's about a battle for survival on an alien planet, but really, it could star Benedictine monks and fanboys would be breathless with anticipation.

IRON MAN 2 (May 2010): Robert Downey Jr. and director Jon Favreau received a hero's welcome in 2007, but they're not resting on their laurels. How can we tell? They're bringing Scarlett Johansson.

THE TWILIGHT SAGA: NEW MOON (Nov. 20): Sure to be packed with shrieking soccer moms and schoolgirls, if you're at this panel, you're probably not a guy. And if you are, you poor bastard.

ALICE IN WONDERLAND (March 2010): Johnny Depp turns up as the Mad Hatter in Tim Burton's characteristically macabre retelling of the children's classic.

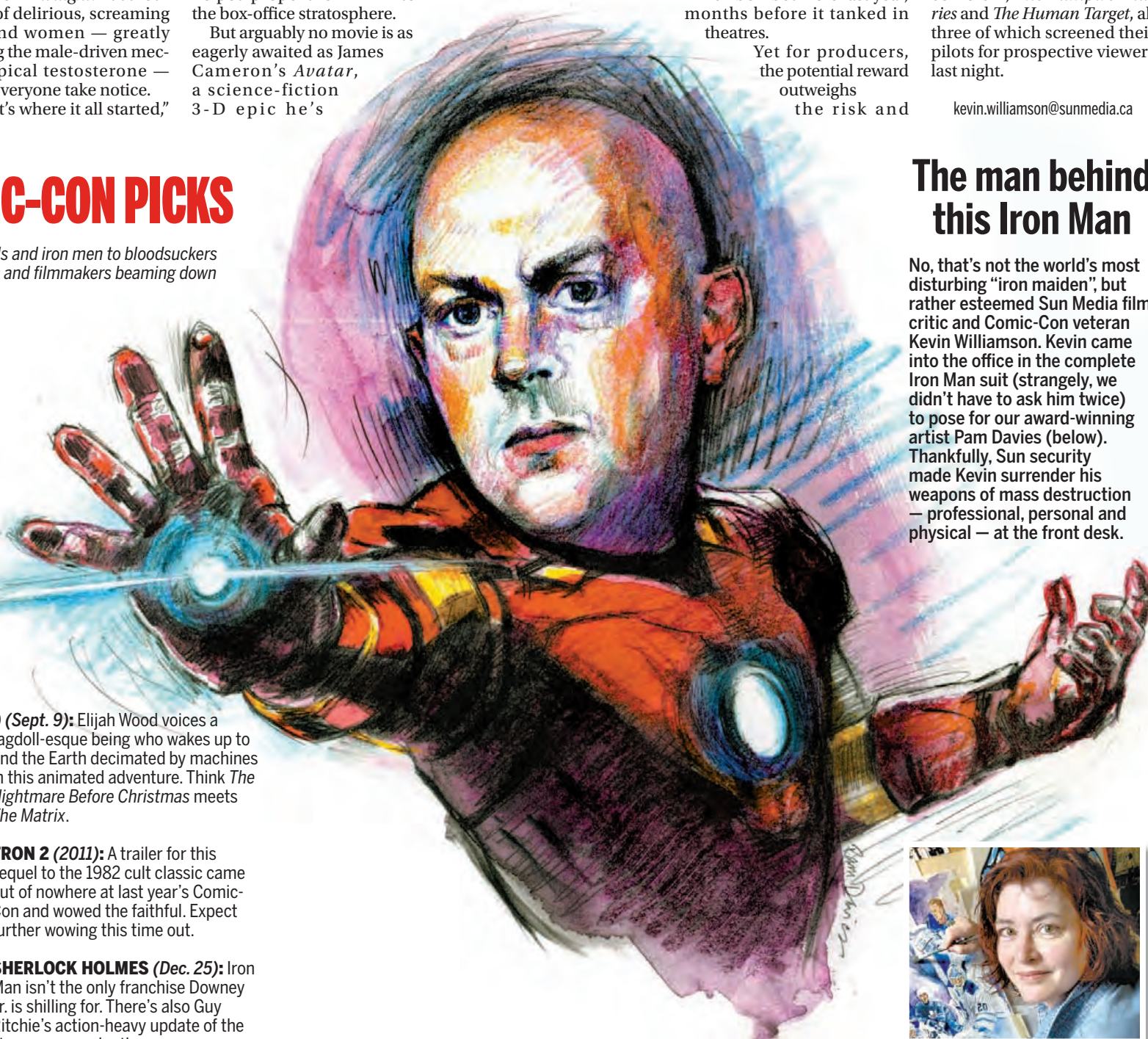
2012 (Nov. 13): Which way would you like the world to end? If this apocalyptic extravaganza isn't to your liking, there's always Denzel Washington's *Book of Eli*.

ZOMBIELAND (Oct. 9): Woody Harrelson stars in this black comedy as a cowboy who finds his calling: waging war on the undead.

9 (Sept. 9): Elijah Wood voices a ragdoll-esque being who wakes up to find the Earth decimated by machines in this animated adventure. Think *The Nightmare Before Christmas* meets *The Matrix*.

TRON 2 (2011): A trailer for this sequel to the 1982 cult classic came out of nowhere at last year's Comic-Con and wowed the faithful. Expect further wowing this time out.

SHERLOCK HOLMES (Dec. 25): Iron Man isn't the only franchise Downey Jr. is shilling for. There's also Guy Ritchie's action-heavy update of the literary super-sleuth.



The man behind this Iron Man

No, that's not the world's most disturbing "iron maiden", but rather esteemed Sun Media film critic and Comic-Con veteran Kevin Williamson. Kevin came into the office in the complete Iron Man suit (strangely, we didn't have to ask him twice) to pose for our award-winning artist Pam Davies (below). Thankfully, Sun security made Kevin surrender his weapons of mass destruction — professional, personal and physical — at the front desk.

