



A Lean, Green, and Mean Guide to the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles



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The newest addition to the TMNT franchise, **Seth Rogen's *Mutant Mayhem***, releases this summer, the newest film **in a long line of adaptations**, remakes, reboots, and new storylines. Our favorite crime-fighting, pizza-loving ninja reptiles are back, making this the perfect time to look back at many of the most iconic versions of the turtles. For those who are just now becoming interested in the TMNT, this is your beginner's guide! Settle in, grab a slice, and get ready to learn all about the TMNT highlights throughout the years.

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The Birth of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles



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The TMNT follows the journey of four young brothers (Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Donatello) who have been mutated (via the definitely-very-scientific mutagen ooze) from baby turtles to turtle-human hybrids and live in the sewers of New York learning ninjutsu from their rat sensei/adopted dad, Splinter.

Before this origin story was penned, the birth of the teenage mutant ninja turtles starts with two goofballs, **Kevin Eastman** and **Peter Laird**, trying to make each other laugh. What **started off as a joke** was actually the inception of a franchise spanning over 30 years and counting. Eastman and Laird published the first TMNT comic in 1984 as a parody of the dark and edgy superhero stories of the day. The original comics included plenty of violence and cursing, which had to be lessened for future, children-focused iterations.

'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' (1987)



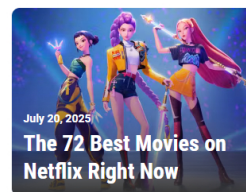
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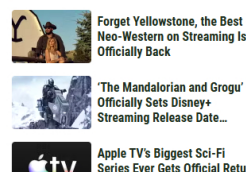
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The turtle brothers first appeared on-screen in 1987. Beginning with a five-part miniseries, the TMNT's first TV series quickly established the turtles as beloved characters as they battle against soon-to-be iconic villains, and the turtles' allies, Splinter, vigilante Casey Jones, and Channel 6 reporter April O'Neil, rounded out the cast nicely.

While Eastman and Laird weren't too happy with the liberties taken with their original comic's storyline, many of the changes were better suited to a children's cartoon. Instead of every turtle wearing the same red bandana, the 1987 series gave each turtle their own color.

Coming Out of Their Shells (1990)

What could be more unique than teenage mutant ninja turtles? The answer: **teenage mutant ninja turtles as a rock band in a touring musical**. Believe it or not, this actually happened. It was even sponsored by Pizza Hut and played 40 shows across the US and even overseas in 1992.

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Live-Action Trilogy (1990)



Image via New Line Cinema

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1990 saw **the turtles' very first live-action film**. Following success and enthusiasm at the box office and among audiences, two sequels followed: ***Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: Secret of the Ooze*** (1991) and ***Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III*** (1993). Unfortunately, the final two didn't perform as well, but the trilogy itself is a classic.

Portraying giant turtle mutants presents a challenge in terms of visual effects, especially during the '90s. The live-action movies featured an impressive collection of costumes using "puppetechnics": a combination of suit and puppetry. The actors within the turtle costumes could perform all the stunts and movements they needed to do (and being actual martial artists, having costumes that allow freedom of movement is a must), while the facial expressions were controlled by puppeteers offscreen.

'Ninja Turtles: The Next Mutation' (1997)



Image via Fox



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Though a lesser-known series, *Ninja Turtles: The Next Mutation* was the first (and only) live-action TMNT TV series. It only ran one season before cancellation, but this installment in the long, colorful history of the TMNT isn't without interesting detail. For one, the brothers got to team-up with the Power Rangers in a crossover. This was also the franchise's first introduction of Venus de Milo (performed by both **Nicole Parker** and **Leslie Sponberg** and voiced by **Lalainia Lindbjerg**), a fifth female turtle who helps the brothers on their adventures.

'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' (2003)



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Following the sale of the TMNT to Nickelodeon in 2000, three years later saw the release of the turtles' new animated series. This one spanned seven seasons and introduced yet more changes to pre-existing character lore, as well as brand-new villains and allies. The tone of the show was dark again, but not so adult-oriented that children wouldn't enjoy it. Action-heavy and tense in some instances, the 2003 series remains many fans' favorite.

In 2009, a tie-in TV movie, *Turtles Forever*, was added to the canon, in which the 2003 turtles are visited by their counterparts from 1987, giving the audience a taste of the multiverse.

'TMNT' (2007)



The very first computer animated teenage mutant ninja turtles film was released in 2007, shortening the title even more to *TMNT*. This film portrays an especially tense relationship between Leonardo (**James Arnold**

Taylor) and Raphael (**Nolan North**) as they struggle to fit into their places on the team. Other notable VA performances include **Chris Evans** as Casey Jones and the late, great **Mako Iwamatsu** (well-known for his performance as Iroh on *Avatar: The Last Airbender*) as Splinter.

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The plot takes place after defeating the Shredder and sees the turtles take on new villains in the form of ancient generals and thirteen otherworldly monsters. Leo has returned after a long solo journey during which Mikey (**Mikey Kelley**) and Donnie (**Mitchell Whitfield**) have gotten day jobs and Raph spends his nights as the vigilante Nightwatcher. For the TMNT's first foray into computer animation, it holds up fairly well.

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Are Rebooted by IDW (2011)

In the realm of comics, the turtle brothers made a glorious return in 2011 when IDW Publishing released a new series. The issues (now amounting to more than a hundred installments) took the darker tones of the turtles' past iterations and ran with it, creating plot lines full of suspense and inviting some of the edginess and violence back into the storylines.

'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' (2012)



Image via Nickelodeon

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Up until this point, the TMNT on TV had mostly been 2D animated; in 2012, the TMNT returned as computer-animated ninja for the first time. This TV series spanned five seasons and portrayed the turtles as more childlike. The story begins with their first emergence to the surface above the sewers and continues their training while fighting bad guys on a weekly basis.

Though the series is targeted toward a younger age demographic, it has plenty of dark and emotional moments as well. The CGI can take some time to get used to when audiences are coming directly from the 1987 and 2003 series, but the 2007 film is a good precursor.

The Michael Bay 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' (2014)



Image via Paramount Pictures

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The turtles took to the big screen once again in 2014 for the first of two live-action movies produced by Michael Bay. This time, the origins of the turtles has been significantly altered (though, not as altered as they could have been; luckily, an outcry from fans helped narrowly avoid the turtles portrayed as aliens). April O'Neill (Megan Fox) kept four baby turtles and a rat as pets in her father's lab and considered them lost for good following an "accidental" fire—until April comes across four gigantic (and kind of terrifying) CGI turtles during an unauthorized reporting investigation into the Foot Clan.

The turtles return to their affinity for violence but still retain a sense of silliness (random beatboxing during an elevator ride to their next fight is perfectly in character with the fine line between tense and fun that the TMNT so often walk). The sequel, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows*, focuses more on the turtles' desire to be accepted by society and introduces Casey Jones (Stephen Amell) as a wannabe detective and hockey enthusiast.

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'Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' (2018)



More of a prequel than anything else, *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* chronicles the four brothers' journey from immature goofballs to skilled heroes. Though not well-received at the time, the show has gained a fierce cult following after its cancellation during the shortened Season 2 and subsequent movie finale in 2022.

The most childish adaptation yet, *Rise* made numerous significant changes to the source material. Team dynamics have shifted so that Raph (Omar Benson Miller), not Leo (Ben Schwartz), is the leader at first. The most beneficial change is that of Donnie (Josh Brener), who, after years of being the team's token "smart guy," finally breaks out of the archetype by adding a bit of chaotic mad scientist insanity to the character. The biggest changes are that of Splinter (Eric Bauza), who is now a lazy father figure in his pre-sensei times.

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Despite its radical changes (and in some ways, because of them), *Rise* managed to become its own thing, using its freedom as a prequel to lean heavily into comedy. In addition, Flying Bark Productions creates dazzling animation, both for fight scenes and for comedic ones.

IDW Strikes Again with 'The Last Ronin' (2020)

While the TMNT have numerous appearances and iterations in the comic world (it would take more than one article to highlight them all), there are a few stories that deserve a spotlight, and IDW's five-issue comic miniseries, *The Last Ronin*, is at the top of the list. Still mourning the deaths of his three brothers, Michelangelo hunts for their killer, hoping for the revenge he seeks. Though this comic is a relatively quick read (only having five issues compared, for example, to IDW's 100+ run starting back in 2011), it hits plenty of emotional beats and, needless to say, is plenty dark.

THE LAST RONIN (2020)

Mutant Mayhem (2023)



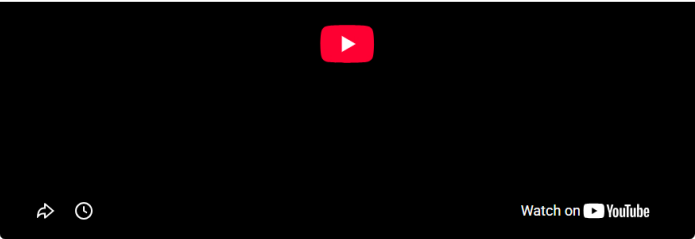
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Though Seth Rogen’s *Mutant Mayhem* has yet to hit theaters, the TMNT’s long history, as well as their unique combination of silliness and seriousness, gives a solid foundation from which to build new stories. From the trailer, *Mutant Mayhem* seems to take inspiration from 2018’s *Rise*, aging down the turtles in behavior and **even hiring actual teenagers to voice them**. In terms of animation, the influence of *Into the Spider-Verse* is clear even years later, and the use of 2.5D animation is perfect for the franchise’s comic origins.

As we wait for the newest versions of our favorite pizza-devouring ninja heroes to hit the big screen once again, one thing is for certain: the history of these silly but lovable turtles is rich and full of interesting stories that are too many to count. We didn’t even talk about **the Batman crossover!** But no matter which version of the TMNT you watch, you will always have a good time.

In the meantime, [read up on everything we know so far about Seth Rogen’s *Mutant Mayhem*](#).

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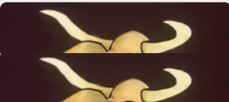
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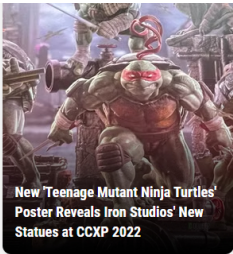
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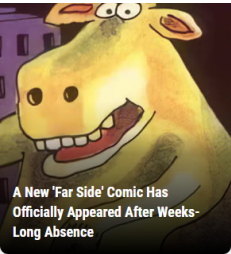




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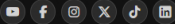
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