

Comic Book Takeover: The Ubiquitous Influence of the Medium in Hollywood

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In response to the spread of comic book culture, the popular press has offered both justifications and accusations of blame. While many comic book fans recognize the medium's recent ubiquity as a vindication of its inherent worth, critics see the surge in superhero content as evidence of American infantilism. With neither perspective proving satisfactory, my hope here is to explore a more nuanced explanation for this media phenomenon, which is only intensifying (since this question was posted, the networks have announced that their fall schedules will include no less than five new comic-book based series to join those already on offer). My research is in the industrial history of comic books, so that is where I will focus. In the process, I also hope to establish a historical context for our discussion.

Over the last eighty years, three industrial factors have played a large role in the spread of transmedia comic book adaptations: copyrightability, licensability, and demographics. The first two are deeply intertwined, with the strength of the medium's IP claims supporting aggressive licensing. Comic books' copyrightability stems largely from its pictorial nature, providing the form with a concreteness more easily defended in objective legal comparisons. That characters are legible as a single mental image also helps them comply with copyright's preference for flatter, consistent, and memorable characters who can be easily removed from their original context. Additionally, the tendency of superhero stories to produce recognizable costumes, logos, names, and phrases means that many comic book characters are easy to trademark too.

These qualities were tested in court early and often and thus greatly shaped the development of the form, particularly under publishers interested in pursuing broad licensing campaigns that depended on strong copyrights and trademarks. Most famously, Superman—who was vigorously protected in court—was appearing in a newspaper strip and a radio show within a year of his debut, and starred in animated cartoons and a live-action television series not long after. He wasn't alone; the forties and fifties saw film serials starring a variety of comic book characters, including Captain Marvel and Sheena of the Jungle. Comic book licensing was so effective that by the sixties, a company that began as Superman Inc. had morphed into the Licensing Corporation of America (LCA); representing 35 major properties, the company was earning \$100 million annually, and caught the eye of rising media mogul Steve Ross. He bought LCA in 1967, along with parent company National Periodicals, and sister DC Comics. The next year, Ross bought Warner Bros and a major media conglomerate was born. With Marvel bought up that same year, comic books had become core media holdings within the country's most powerful media corporations. While synergies haven't always worked, comic books have nonetheless long been structurally positioned as available and ripe for major media exploitation. In the wake of these buyouts, comic books not surprisingly experienced a surge in adaptations; the seventies brought popular animated cartoons, prominent live-action series, and several films.

The last two decades have seen an even bigger explosion in comic-book based content. This coincided with a dramatic shift in the media industries' audience preferences, highlighting the third major factor driving comic book transmedia: demographics. For decades, television executives had aggressively pursued female viewers, who helped drive big ratings. But starting in the nineties, shifts in advertising and in infrastructure (the result of deregulation and cable growth) pushed the television industry more aggressively toward young men. Studios were also pursuing an increasingly young and male demographic—favoring the ancillary opportunities and big opening box office numbers these audiences tended to support. Comic books meanwhile, through the development of the direct market and specialty shops, had spent the last three decades cultivating a readership composed largely of highly tech-savvy and media-literate men in their twenties and thirties. With an established history of loyal fan engagement, this audience was intensely valuable to emerging multimedia empires. The pursuit of the comic-book demographic helped to drive early experiments into comic book-based media (e.g. *Tales from the Crypt*, *X-Men*, *Blade*). And their success in attracting large, loyal, and active audiences propelled a more involved incorporation between comic-books and Hollywood.

There are of course many other factors that have contributed to comic books' widespread exploitation across media. But what I want to emphasize here is the extent to which this embrace has been structural both to the comic book medium and to convergence era Hollywood. Licensing has been shaping comic books from their very inception. And with each advance toward our current conglomerated multimedia landscape, comic books have been a part of industry thinking. Accordingly, it becomes hard to imagine either comic books without multimedia production, or multimedia production without comic books.