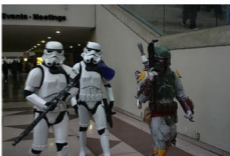


NEW YORK COMIC CON

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An Exploration of New York Comic Con 2009

//WORDS + PICTURES! BRIAN P. RUBIN

"I can already tell that some of these guys have committed the first cardinal sin of Comic Con," remarks my friend Collin as we first enter the convention center. "They forgot to wear deodorant."

Indeed—the guy in the Wolverine costume to my right is definitely ripe.

Thus begins my quest to understand the New York Comic Convention.

The first thing I'm struck with, aside from the odor, is the mass of bodies piled into the Jacob K. Javits Center in Manhattan. It's Saturday, the second day of the three-day event, which runs from February 6 to 8. I'm descending into this thing at its height. The aisles crisscrossing the convention are so utterly choked with flesh that, at times, I have to stave off panic-attacks.

Above me, brightly-colored banners beckon con-goers, jockeying for attention from the crowd. Speakers boom with voices of videogame and movie hucksters, blaring over the din generated by the masses who've turned out to celebrate their love ... love for comics, toys, genre-television, anime, and dressing up like Jedi. And that doesn't even scratch the surface of Comic Con.

When I was a senior in high school, I unexpectedly won a small scholarship of about \$300. I remember being surprised at the award—I think the purpose of the funding was to go toward the next year's college textbook purchases. Of course, that next weekend, I promptly blew every last cent of the scholarship on comic books at a convention in Madison Square Garden.

With that con, and others like it, you knew what you were getting. Still held in ballrooms of Holiday Inns across the nation, comic conventions have often resembled indoor flea markets, but the vendors hawking their wares all sell comics, bootleg videos, and whatever else your geeky heart might fancy. As you walked, you might bump into some stormtroopers. Around some corner would be an aisle for half-remembered celebrities from genre-television's past (guys like the Incredible Hulk himself, Lou Ferrigno) who found themselves elbow-to-elbow with the genre celebrities we'll half-remember tomorrow (I'm looking at you, Hayden Panettiere, your adorable cheerleader). Eventually you'd find Artists' Alley, where the comic pros set up tables to meet fans and sign comics, armed with a pen for sketches and a bottle of Purell, to ward off fan-infection.

These cons are rarely glamorous, a little on the dank and dirty side, but they made sense to me. I went to find deep discounts on comics, get books signed by artists I dug, and to just spend some time searching through long boxes with my friends.

But the New York Comic Con, now in its fourth iteration, is a different beast altogether. Yes, it has peddlers, comic pros, and B-list celebrities, but there's the added polish of big-budget media corporations competing for the eyes and ears of all who dare to walk through the doors.

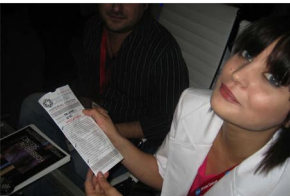
Their presence changes things. No longer is this the kind of convention I remember from my youth. Almost as ubiquitous as the fans dressed like their favorite characters are members of the media reporting on the event. It's clear that the focus of the "comic convention" has shifted—to what, exactly, I'm just not sure. I am determined to wrap my head around it.

I push my way through the throng, looking for direction. While I wander, I blunder my way into the DC Comics booth, bumping into Dan Jurgens, a longtime comics vet who's done classic work as both a writer and artist in the industry, including unforgettable runs on Captain America and Superman (he created Doomsday, after all). These days he's writing and penciling Booster Gold, and he's nice enough to answer my question about how this con differs from the cons I remember in days gone by.

"It's much more a pop-culture thing, so many more toys, so many more movies, TV ... these are more like pop-culture cons than comic cons," he says in his Fargo-esque, Minnesota-accent. But what's interesting is that he doesn't point out this difference in a disparaging way. He's into it.

"Whereas before it might've been people looking to buy back issues, now I think there's more of a feeling where people are coming in wanting to feel





a part of something, and to feel a sense of energy about all this stuff that's going on around us right now."

Energy is right—everywhere I look, there's another flashing video screen or people in brightly colored costumes. Oh, the costumes ... they're everywhere. This year, the Heath Ledger Joker takes the top spot in terms of fan representation, followed closely by *Watchmen's* Rorschach.

"The costumes are obviously intriguing," says Martin Pierce, with gaming publisher Wizards of the Coast. I met Martin during my trip to Chicago's Magic: The Gathering Championship last summer, and I caught up with him again at the con to talk freaky cosplayers.

"I've seen my fair share of really creative ones, and some mildly scary ones. I saw a gentleman with a pair of tighty-whities on the outside," he says.

Then Martin gets philosophical.

"I just want to know—did he take the subway here like that, or did he change when he got here? Same with the people who are painted in full-body paint. They can't be painting themselves here; they must've painted themselves at home. And so, whose cab were they riding in? What subway were they on?"

Martin is wise.

But his presence at the con with Wizards of the Coast proves Dan Jurgens's point ... with no relation to comics, here they are, swarmed with geeks like the other booths, all clamoring for D&D and Magic cards. I decide to press on.

Eventually I find myself at the booth promoting a new Cinemax show called *Forbidden Science*. Not having rich-man's cable, I've never seen the show, but apparently it's a science-fiction show about cloning, with sexy-undertones. Sexy clones are great ... but they're not comics.

I grill the show's creator and star—Doug Brode and Noelle DuBois, respectively—about why they're here, and what they're getting out of the experience. Doug links his enthusiasm as a comic geek with his status as sci-fi writer, saying this pop-culture con mixes everything together in the best ways—inspiring future talents.

"Science fiction and comics and horror films ... they connect very well. The kids today who read comic books will be science-fiction fans tomorrow. I guarantee you there's a kid walking around here that will literally have his own series or his own movie in ten or fifteen years."

As for Noelle, she's never been to a con like this, but she's a self-proclaimed Trekkie and sci-fi buff. She practically jumps from her chair recounting a run-in with some stormtroopers who gave her a ticket for "attempting to use the Jedi mind trick on a trooper," "carrying a concealed lightsaber without a permit," and "unauthorized use of the force."

"Apparently I'm in big trouble," she laughs.

At Dark Horse's booth, I meet Milk and Cheese creator Evan Dorkin, who's promoting his new comic with Jill Thompson, *Beasts of Burden*, where animals get mixed up in supernatural adventures. He explains the convention in stark terms.

"What's this thing about? It's about money," he says while he sketches his infamous dairy-duo for fans, who laugh at his honest sentiment. "I'm being facetious, but I wouldn't be doing this if no one was making money."

"This show is not done for the love of comics. What makes up for that is that a lot of people seem to have a good time here. It draws a lot of children, a lot of people are here having fun. It's a very modern show about very modern work. It's very geared towards what's happening right now, it's very multi-media—"

Evan's cut off by a booming, amplified voice nearby.

"See? I'm not interested in a show with idiots screaming and yelling into their cameras to put it on the internet so other idiots screaming and yelling at their cameras can go see who's the best at yelling and screaming on the internet.

"I like comics, maybe I'm stupid that way," he says. Evan says out loud what I think as I wander the convention floor, I'm lost amid marketing pitches and multi-media blitzes and flashing lights and frightening sounds. And, of course, those guys in costumes.

Finally, I decide to go hardcore: someone bold—or deluded—enough to spend his weekend dressed up like a fictional character. If anyone would really know the secret of this con and its appeal, it'll be one of them.

Singling one out's tough, I'm nervous—do I call them by their character's name? Is it rude to ask what their secret identity is? What if I laugh accidentally? Or not so accidentally?

Eventually, while browsing one of the retail booths, I find myself exploring at the same comic rack as Captain America ... so I strike up a conversation.

As it turns out, Cap's pretty nice—and he's not crazy. He's dressed as the new version of Captain America—with former sidekick Bucky Barnes under the cowl—in honor of his father, whose favorite character was the 1940s hero.

"This is my first time going to a con without my father since he passed away, so you know, I'm wearing this not only for me, but I'm wearing it in memory of him, and in celebration of him," he says, revealing his real identity as David Santiago, from Manhattan. He's spent over \$500 on his costume and shield, each component handmade (except for the belt). He's very zen about the expense of his experience, as well as the capitalistic nature of the convention.

"It all balances out. They get money, we get our entertainment at the same time; it keeps going in a circle. It all balances out. Money's made to be lost, and it's made to be gained back. That's the whole cycle of it."

I say goodbye to Cap and I'm glad that I talked to him. I also come to realize that while this convention may not really be for me, there seem to be plenty of people who get so swept up in the spirit of it all that they can spend tons of cash on feeding the pop-culture machine ... not only becoming a part of it, but reveling in every moment. For them it is about the love of comics; it's just that the love of comics has taken on a whole lot more in the years since that con where I wasted all my scholarship money on funnybooks.

As for me, my feet are tired. My eyes are sore. I take one last look at the madness of New York Comic Con, and I walk out the door to the Javits Center, smelling Manhattan air that, for the first time ever, smells a lot cleaner than the air I've been breathing.

