



Paramount's *Captain America: The First Avenger*

# SUPERHEROES!

It's capes and masks at 10 paces as heroes dominate the box office, lounge and Q4

A hiccup managed to blight the 2011 instalment of San Diego's famous Comic Con last month - evidently the world's largest annual fan (read fanboy) convention went ahead without sufficient superhero film promotions to satisfy the geeky, and presumably single, hordes of teens and middle aged men in attendance. This oversight disappointed many.

Some commentators went so far as to label the event 'light on tights', or 'tent pole in spandex action'.

Meanwhile back in Australia.... superhero films are so thick on the ground that you can't visit a shopping mall multiplex, retailer or rental store without bumping into one.

The discrepancy is large enough to beg the question: what gives?

Well, San Diego's reaction was perhaps as symptomatic of fan expectations at a time when hero movies have been released in record

numbers as it was a genuine disappointment. Locally however, there are several factors at work according to experts.

"I think it's just timing - I don't think it's just been one particular thing," says comic book authority and unashamed pop culture fan Mitchell Davies, co-owner of Melbourne's All Star Comics.

The short answer though, appears to be that the phenomenon is built on what's historically been some particularly sound economic ground.

Since Superman arrived in Action Hero comics number one in the late 1930s, hero films have been big business. Across the 85 genre movies released theatrically to date, the US box office alone has recorded a whopping \$8.3 billion dollars in takings. Worldwide, the number is roughly double that amount.

Throw in billions of dollars more in action figure, t-shirt and comic book sales, and you're

talking Bill Gates money (in a single year the North American comic book market is worth some \$450 - \$550 million in sales - and it's been generating similar heat since the 1960s).

But do impressive box office and comic book figures translate into a surefire hit for the



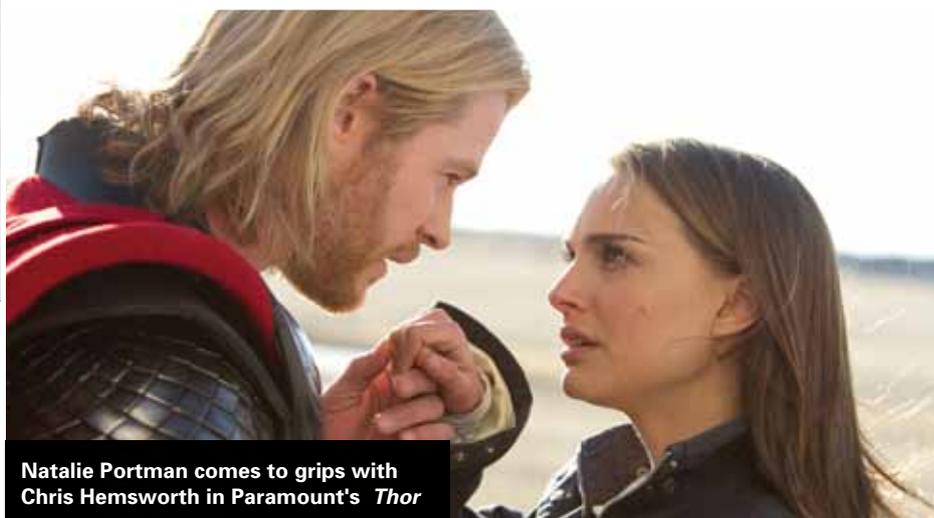
Mitchell Davies, All Star Comics, Melbourne



Fox's upcoming *X-Men: First Class*



*Iron Man 2* laid the groundwork for 2012's highly anticipated release *The Avengers*



Natalie Portman comes to grips with Chris Hemsworth in Paramount's *Thor*

hero genre on DVD and Blu-ray? Not exactly, according to Paramount Home Entertainment Marketing Director Richard Clarkson. It's bums on seats that ultimately hold more sway.

"They're (box office figures) never 100% accurate," says Clarkson. "They're certainly a guide, (but) it's more about admissions for us because box office can be deceptive, especially in the 3D world."

Two or three years ago the average ticket price was ten or eleven dollars, and today it's eighteen or nineteen. So having the same box office doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get the same (number of) people buying your product."

Australia has seen no less than five big budget superhero movies in cinemas this year.

Early indicators are that 2011's crop of films will all do well – January's *Green Hornet* from Sony grossed \$227 million in cinemas. Paramount's April release *Thor* has \$444 million and counting, while Fox's June contribution *X-Men: First Class* has \$344 with more time in cinemas to come. Expectations for Paramount's *Captain America: The First Avenger*, which debuted last month are similar.

This trend looks set to continue in 2012, with new installments from the Batman, Spider-Man and Ghost Rider franchises, along with the highly anticipated Avengers and Shazam debuts, and Spider-Man spin off *Venom*.

According to pop culture expert Dr. Lauren Rosewarne, Lecturer at Melbourne University's School of Social and Political Sciences, there are several other factors behind the current glut of superhero movies.

"There's the older audience of viewers who may have been fans of the original incarnation of the story (original comic or an earlier version of the film), and children like them because they are exciting and adventurous," says Rosewarne.

"Caped and masked heroes (also) tap into a popular interest with secret identities

**"By pulling on a mask suddenly an entire identity changes; something we each strive for in our own lives in much smaller ways through dress, glasses and haircuts."**

- Dr. Lauren Rosewarne, Lecturer at Melbourne University's School of Social and Political Sciences,

and double lives," Rosewarne says. "We're captivated by the idea that there's something fascinating and intriguing under the mask. There's also appeal in the idea that just by pulling on a mask an entire identity changes; something we each strive for in our own lives in much smaller ways through dress, glasses and haircuts."

Many hero titles also tap into traditional teens demographics by ensuring a photogenic lead is attached to the film, something that helps them reach an even broader fan base.

Yet Davies maintains that the rise of hero movies owes as much to a latent comic book audience and chance as it does to anything else. He points to the natural story arcs of Paramount's *Iron Man*, *Thor* and *Captain America* in particular as lending themselves to a grouping of titles.

"Marvel (and Paramount), I think that their films have been building towards *The Avengers*

film coming out late next year apparently. The *Iron Man* film hinted four years ago that this may happen – *Iron Man 2*, *Thor* (both *Thor* and *Iron Man 2* had teasers after the end credits) and *Captain America* are all leading up to the actual payoff in *The Avengers* where you get to see all those characters interact together in one film. That'll apparently be out late next year."

With so many titles appearing at once, are studios in danger of tempering the public's appetite for them?

Not so, according to Paramount's Marketing Director Richard Clarkson.

"No I don't think so (that it will be flooded), I think there's a market for all of those titles," says Clarkson. "There's certainly a plethora out there, obviously some people won't buy them all at once, but they'll certainly pick their faves - I think that having choice is good. It's a genre that works very well."

Despite the almost unwavering performance of superhero titles in cinemas, buyers from rental chains remain wary of over-committing to them – opting instead to make a careful assessment of each title before committing their stores to buy anything on mass.

"(Ultimately) it would completely depend on the superhero," says Mandy Howroyd – Rental/Retail Buyer from The Network Group.

"Look at the theatrical and DVD rental/retail results of titles such as *Daredevil* and *Elektra*, which were both one-off superhero action films, compared to the much larger success of franchises such as *Spider-Man*, *Superman*, *Iron Man* and *X-Men*," Howroyd says.

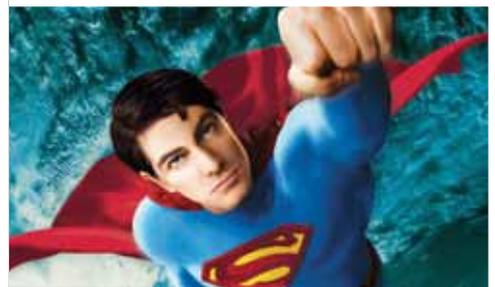
While it can be difficult to pick which film will translate well from cinema to disc, it can be equally difficult for distributors to reach their target audience in a crowded marketplace.

"The hero titles are good in that they are the better converting titles, but unfortunately trying to reach males between the ages of 16 and 34 is one of the hardest demographics to reach," says Clarkson.





The Dark Knight



Warner's 2006 release *Superman Returns* drew on more than 70 years of comic book history

"It's about being smart when you try to reach them, making sure all your elements are working well, and understanding where they are. Obviously TV's one of the biggest avenues, but you get a lot of wastage with that. It's more understanding where those people are at the time of year – trying to market to guys when there's footy finals on is very different to marketing to them in November/December because it's summer and they're out and about.

This difficulty of reaching a media mobile target audience is analogous in some respects to another reason why hero movies are currently doing so well.

Rosewarne and other experts say, caped and masked heroes tap into our fascination with changing identities to live more exciting lives.

"There's also the obvious vicarious appeal of these heroes: they get to do dangerous/exciting/heroic things that we never could or would."

On a deeper level, many comic book characters also reflect directly the socio political climates of the era in which they were created.

"A lot of the early comic books reflect wartime efforts for example, and you're also looking at characters who were seen as a beacon of hope during darker periods," says Davies.

"Despite the fact that they were a luxury item in the 1940s they still sold well, because they're something that people can lose themselves in: that idea that there's someone out there looking out for you."

But Hollywood has also been smitten by superhero comic book plots, which are tailor made for action blockbuster films, says Davies.

"In the 80s you had your stand alone action hero like Bruce Willis or

**"There's no point in having the 8th best drama for the month – that credo can extend across any genre."**

- Mandy Howroyd, Rental/Retail Buyer, The Network Group

Arnie – but it seems now they've been replaced by someone in spandex. In some ways it's just swapping one for the other."

The difference of course is that instead of just getting a bankable star, comic book backed hero movies also draw on a pre-existing fan base, and in many cases a multi decade history of story telling potential.

"When the Hollywood machine comes around to developing new stories, it's kind of a no brainer to draw on all these properties," Davies maintains.



Warner's Green Lantern

Still, the Network group's Howroyd is skeptical about the likelihood that every hero movie released over the coming 12-18 month is going to be a top shelf exercise in drama – opting instead to take a cautious approach to a genre market experiencing a glut of titles.

"We carefully look at the genre spread each month and make sure the weeks are balanced with a spread of different genres. Imagine if we bought nothing but horror in October or only rom-coms in February? There'd be no male foot traffic in February and no female traffic in October!"

Howroyd also believes that the right genre mix needs to cater to every movie lover, and if there is a week that is top-heavy with a particular genre it should be balanced out with the weeks prior.

"There's no point in having the 8th best drama for the month – that credo can extend across any genre," Howroyd says.

Clarkson agrees that simply because a film is a hero title, you can't automatically add number to sales expectations. But he believes that the box office remains accurate 'within a tolerant variable' as a sales indicator for disc.

"It (sales) also varies by box office and time of year. Releasing something at Q4 does make a difference compared to June for example," he says (with the likes of *Captain America* and the heavy hitting *Thor* still to arrive on disc this year, Paramount hopes to capitalize in this area).

"We do a lot of comping analysis when we try to work out what our numbers are. Irrespective of the box office take, action titles in general always convert better than most (on disc). We keep quite a data base of all of our competitor titles, and certainly those action and action hero titles are of the better converting genre."

With other distributors locally expressing similar bullish predictions, it's probably a safe bet that were San Diego to tire of its Comic Con before next year's date, an Australian edition would avoid the same complaints voiced by fans in 2011 – at least as far as Home Entertainment is concerned. ■

