

Batman: A Fan's History
Liam Burke

Fig. 4: In the 1950s, Batman stories often relied on imaginary tales and sci-fi settings including: *The Rainbow Batman*, *The Merman Batman* and *Batman, The Superman of Planet X*.



Look' Batman, which was really a return to the hero's dark detective origins. However, this revival was to be short-lived.

In the mid-1960s American network ABC was eager to attract a family audience to its lucrative 7:30pm slot. With high production values, committed leads (Adam West and Burt Ward) and A-list guest villains (Frank Gorshin, Cesar Romero, Vincent Price etc.), *Batman* the television series was a smash hit when it premiered on 12 January 1966. The series managed to engage adults and children alike by blending self-aware moments with sound effect-punctuated action sequences. Soon, West's Batman was appearing on the cover of *Life* magazine, starring in a spin-off feature film and adorning an endless array of merchandise.

Nonetheless, with its canted angles, endless puns and knowing allusions to the ridiculousness of the concept, the *Batman* series disappointed, if not outright antagonized, comic book fans, particularly as the 'New Look' Batman comics began to emulate the show in an effort to entice new readers. However, unlike earlier unfaithful adaptations, fans now had forums where they could voice their discontent. Brooker quotes a letter from *Detective Comics* #353 (October 1966) which was typical of reader criticism:

'Camp' has only been around for one or two years, and already every article on the subject predicts that the fad will vanish in a couple of months. Batman will still be around long after 'camp' is gone, unless he starts trying to be so bad he's good - and winds up so bad he's gone.

Despite initial success, the joke soon wore thin and *Batman* was cancelled after three seasons. In predicting the faddish nature of camp, the above letter seems incredibly prescient, but what strident comic book fans will often fail to recognize is that despite the innovations of Batman's 'New Look' comics, the books struggled to compete for readers with Spider-Man and the other more grounded superheroes being introduced at Marvel. Without the interest generated by the series there is a chance that Batman would not be the potent pop culture force he is today.

In his autobiography *Back to the Batcave*, Adam West describes his relationship with the series' many followers: 'Batman touched the child in viewers, and that has always made for a very special bond with the people I meet'. As the interviews in this collection attest, many of today's fans' earliest recollection of Batman is not the comics, but rather Neil Hefti's mantra-like theme song, Burt Ward's spirited puns, and Adam West's unshakable delivery. In this regard *Batman* the series was unique; it was the first time that the character had successfully ventured beyond his native medium and gathered groups of fans that had never read comics. For a brief moment in 1966 it seemed as if the entire world became Batman fans. While this 'Batmania' was over almost as soon as



Fig. 5: The success of the *Batman* television series gave rise to a spin-off feature film, as well as a *Life* magazine cover. However comic book readers were unhappy with this camp approach, which the comic creators articulated on the cover of *Batman* #183 (August 1966), wherein the caped crusader appeared more interested in watching himself on TV than fighting crime.

it begun, it would return.

The quick cancellation of *Batman* left the comics in a difficult position, with Denny O'Neil noting, 'when the camp fad was over the comic books weren't'. As writer, and later editor, O'Neil helped Batman reclaim his mantle as a dark detective. Typical of O'Neil's approach was, 'The Joker's Five Way Revenge' in *Batman* #251 (September 1973). During the 1950s, Batman's villains had been attenuated to colourful pranksters who would occasionally rob banks. O'Neil's story, with photorealistic, full-figure art by Neal Adams, returned the violent, chalk-faced gangster of the Kane-Finger era, and set a template for future interpretations, including the 1989 film.

The 1970s saw further consolidation of comic book fandom as direct distribution through newly-established comic stores meant that older readers could now buy comics without facing derision from supermarket cashiers. Consequently, the average age of readers increased and collecting became

commonplace. These bastions of comic book fandom, however, were uninviting to outsiders. Thus, the greater depth and complexity of the 1970s' comics went unacknowledged by a wider world that still associated Batman with Adam West's Technicolour pratfalls. By 1985, sales in Batman comics had reached an all-time low. Into that malaise, the landmark graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* would hit like the lightning bolt that crackled across its cover.

In the 1980s, the fan interest in creators had developed into a fully-fledged star system. One of the most popular creators was the noir-influenced writer/artist Frank Miller. Released in 1986, Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* was a genre redefining four-part limited series that extrapolated from 1980s America a bleak, near-future Gotham mired by unchecked crime and political corruption. Out of this maelstrom rose a 55-year-old Batman who believed that 'the world only makes sense when you force it to'. Written with a Clint Eastwood drawl, and drawn like a bare-knuckle boxer, this vivid reinterpretation, repackaged as a bookstore-friendly graphic novel, garnered widespread media attention and a darker knight started to supplant the caped crusader in public perceptions.

To motivate further interest, DC embarked on an initiative that took fan participation to a new level. By the 1980s, Dick Grayson (the original Robin) had matured into Nightwing, leader of the Teen Titans. To take over from the grown-up Grayson the publisher introduced streetwise orphan, Jason Todd. However, while some fans never fully embraced Grayson, there was widespread hatred of Todd. In this era of greater reader involvement, Denny O'Neil opted to let the readers decide via a phone poll whether Robin would live following a vicious beating from the Joker. By a narrow majority fans

Chapter 4

Being Batman: From Board Games to Computer Platforms

Robert Dean

- In 2009 Warner Bros. released the critically acclaimed and extremely popular computer game *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady, 2009). However, the superhero game genre pre-dates digital technology. Beginning with the 1966 board game *Batman Swoops Down*, this chapter will chart the evolution of Batman games and identify the ways in which these products have interpreted and adapted elements of the superhero's mythos. This analysis will reveal the underlying principles of interactivity and branding that have informed the development of these games, and increasingly allowed fans to become Batman.



Fig. 1 (above): Batman and flipper, *Batman Swoops Down* (Spear's Games, 1966).

Fig. 2: Board, *Batman Swoops Down* (Spear's Games, 1966).

Batman Swoops Down, released by Spear's Games in 1966, was one of the first Batman board game spin-offs, and although it may not be the 'official' game of the 1960s' television series, both were released in the same year. The box even featured drawings of the dynamic duo wearing Adam West and Burt Ward-style costumes. This early example of branded board game merchandising was essentially a combination of tiddlywinks and noughts and crosses. The colours of the pieces, the number of 'winks', and the launching of plastic projectiles towards a pot are all elements taken from a traditional tiddlywinks game. However, in a conventional game the players propel their winks into the air by pressing down on them with a larger plastic disc known as a 'squidger'. In this version the winks and squidger are replaced with a more complicated method of propulsion. Each player receives their own plastic Batman effigy that resembles a *Subbuteo* piece with its static action pose and weighted spherical base (Fig. 1). They also each receive a 'flipper.' This is a short plastic see saw device which the player uses to catapult their Batman figure into one of nine plastic 'cavities' built into the box. An incarcerated Robin is pictured in the centre of the box while the eight spaces that surround him contain comic book style drawings of Batman tackling his arch-enemies (Fig. 2). Like tiddlywinks, the player is required to fire their counter into a pot; however, in this variation there is not a single central receptacle. Instead, each time Batman 'swoops down' and lands in one of the villain's spaces they leave a 'wink' in the compartment and the first to get three-in-a-row wins.

Despite the assurance on the box that the game is suitable for players of any age, the combination of aiming and operating the flipper is tricky. With practice the player can become quite proficient at launching Batman in the direction of the board, although ensuring he lands in the intended cavity is often more a question of luck than skill. It is

Fan Appreciation no.3

Josh Hook and Kendal Coombs



Fans want to be first. They line up for hours, even days, so they can be the first to buy the ticket, read the book, get into the stadium. Such enthusiasm surrounded the release of Christopher Nolan's trilogy-closer *The Dark Knight Rises* in the summer of 2012. Fortunately for Australian Bat-fans the film was released on 19 July, one day earlier than most of the world. Factoring in the time difference, these fans were able to experience the film almost two days before their Stateside equivalents. Nonetheless, for 23-year-old artist Josh Hook and 22-year-old writer Kendal Coombs this wasn't early enough. To ensure they were amongst the first to see the blockbuster, they attended a marathon of Nolan's Batman films that culminated in a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* at Melbourne's IMAX cinema, and of course, they were dressed as Batman and Catwoman.

Liam Burke: *What was your first experience or encounter with Batman?*

Josh Hook: My dad was really big into the 1960s' Adam West *Batman*, so through that. When I was about three or four my grandma made me a costume; this cowl [pictured] is actually from the original costume. So that's pretty much where I started. I got into comic books when I was in high school. There was a comic book store near the train station so I said I'd check it out.

Kendal Coombs: My parents bought *Batman Forever* on DVD when we first got a DVD player. It's like the worst movie ever, but I always liked Batman. I never really embraced being a proper comic book nerd until I started going out with Josh. I've embraced it since. I love dressing up and going to movies.

LB: *Across the decades there have been many different interpretations of Batman. Do you have a preferred version?*

JH: I always loved the original animated series from the early 1990s with Kevin Conroy and Mark Hamill doing the voices of Batman and the Joker. In terms of the current Batman writers, Scott Snyder is doing really, really good stuff with the Batman comics at the moment. I would always have arguments with my Dad because he would never budge on Adam West being the ultimate Batman, and as much as I tried I could never get through to him. It's been forty years; it's time to move on.

KC: Not Batman so much, but I really love the villains in the 1960s TV series. I loved it when Eartha Kitt was Catwoman

LB: *Do you have a favourite Batman villain?*

JH: I always sort of loved Two-Face the most, and then the Scarecrow and