

arts & life

And the geek shall inherit the Earth

After years of being mocked, sci-fi and cult comic-book fan **Scott Snowden** embarked on a pilgrimage to the annual San Diego Comic-Con and discovered he has friends. Over 130,000 of them.

Sunshine once again drenches the city of San Diego as it bathes in the glow of another glorious summer's day. The streets of the old Gas Lamp District are packed with people as Comic-Con has arrived and the carnival is in full swing.

Every year the conference centre is filled to quite literally bursting point with fans and followers of everything associated with science fiction, superheroes, cult movies and comic books. Not only is it a gathering of all things geek, Comic-Con has become by far the biggest single cinematic event in terms of news and announcements. Yes, it focuses the sci-fi, cult movie and comic genres and you might think that doesn't relate to you, but what you have to remember is that you do dip into it, whether you realise it or not. *Batman*, *Spiderman*, *The X-Men*, *Superman*, *The Watchmen*, *Iron Man* and *Star Trek* all fall into this category. And everyone has watched at least one of these. Only the Academy Awards puts more movie stars in one place.

This is an environment where you can be, and probably will be, judged on how worthy you are of being there simply by the t-shirt you're wearing. Your level of knowledge, your degree of enthusiasm and ultimately your geek credibility rating are all assessed in a second by a simple glance as to what's on your t-shirt. A bog-standard *Batman* logo t-shirt for instance, is little more than a token attempt and you'd be considered an amateur. However, if you had one with the Kirby *Silver Surfer* on it, or you are in a Silver Age *Flash* t-shirt, then you will have earned kudos.

This is all of course providing you haven't gone in costume. That truly separates the men from the boys, or girls. Comic-Con isn't just for guys. Half of the colossal crowd in attendance is female, shattering once and for all the myth that this kind of thing is just for men.

The Mardi Gras mood that grips the city is further felt by the sheer number of fans around the show floor and walking the streets dressed in costume. The roads are closed off to traffic, every eatery with outdoor seating is full and live bands play on the occasional street corner. Pacman and a medley of ghosts merrily meander past me, the Ectomobile from *Ghostbusters* is parked on one side of the road and is drawing a big crowd as more and more people seem to join in the party.

Comic-Con gets bigger every year and there were some enormous events in 2010, the biggest draw probably being all the attention the new *Tron* movie was attracting. For anyone whose been living under a rock recently, this is the much-anticipated sequel to the 1982 original that promises more spectacular special effects than *Avatar* – and certainly more of a story. As it happens, the mind-blowing CGI is integral to the plot as the story takes place inside a computer mainframe, *on the other side of the screen*.

The press conference for *Tron: Legacy*, as it's called, was the first big event of my visit. I arrived early to ensure a good spot and despite it taking place first thing that morning there already seemed to a massive crowd, of thousands of people outside one of the halls. Making my way to the Hilton where the conference was to take place, I stopped to ask many of the queuing fans exactly what they were queuing for. The answer was for the *Tron* "panel", which was to take place after the press conference.

A panel is where members of the cast and often the writers and directors sit in front of thousands of people in a giant conference room taking questions, telling anecdotes and giving the fans a chance to voice their views and even bond a little with their screen heroes and favourite artists.



Comic book fans Evan Gordon and his wife Gloria sport two no nonsense-looking Judge costumes from 2000AD at Comic-Con in San Diego. The National

Comics, continued on 3 →

noted
w



The unveiling of the Man Booker Prize longlist, Notably absent from this year's list are Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, overlooked in favour of younger authors such as Emma Donoghue, pictured, and Lisa Moore. The judges will now reread the longlist, name a shortlist of six on September 7 and reveal the winner on October 12

'Where else can you have a coffee and watch Darth Vader, the Silk Spectre and the Predator walk past?'

→ Comics, continued from 1

The dedicated followers at the front of this queue told me they'd camped out over night to secure their place.

I thought myself exceptionally lucky to have not had to go through this to see the stars of *Tron: Legacy*, which include Jeff Bridges, Bruce Boxleitner, Michael Sheen and Olivia Wilde. In fact, I sat just three rows from this legendary line up of actors plus the writers and director.

Something just didn't seem right though. The press conference was formal, dry and appeared at times to be a chore for these people. I didn't know it yet, but my insight into the Comic-Con phenomenon was about to begin.

Only very select members of the press – ultimately those who are there as guests of Disney (the studio distributing the new movie) – were allowed to fast track the queue and go straight from the press conference to the panel, consequently, there were a lot of very upset reporters. And as I later learnt, the panel was where they showed the brand new trailer for the movie for the first time. This seemed odd, to withhold new material relating to the film from the press? But as I was to discover, even the world's press come second to the fans at Comic-Con.

So much is on offer over the annual four-day festival-of-sorts and regardless of what your particular tastes might be, it's guaranteed that you'll miss something as events will clash. I'd been prepared to sacrifice the *Battlestar Galactica* panel – something I'm interested in as a fan, to take in the *Tron* panel – something I needed to cover as a reporter.

Since I wasn't allowed into the latter, I raced over to where *Battlestar Galactica* was being held and managed to secure to a respectable spot. As with every single event, the room was filled to capacity and I watched in awe as a hero from my childhood, Richard Hatch – who played Captain Apollo in the original series and the charismatic Tom Zarek in the recent reimagined version – took to the stage and performed, what was basically 15 minutes of stand up comedy to the captivated crowd.

After which, other members of the cast and crew joined him and took questions from the gathered fans. They laughed, they joked, they entertained and they were clearly enjoying themselves. This was so vastly different to the stale, sterile Q&A-style press conference that I'd witnessed not long before. This was the case for every panel I saw subsequently.

Comic-Con is about the fans. The actors, writers, directors and producers enjoy being with the fans, it's fun for them and they clearly relax. Evidently having to talk to the press is still seen as work. Comic-Con is also about cast and crew reuniting after working closely together for many years. Quite often it's the case where they haven't seen each other for some time and a reunion takes place at Comic-Con and the fans get to share the experience, live.

One fan's blog surmises the panel experience for the fans at Comic-Con.

"Without question, the most benevolent moment of Comic-Con 2010 was Ryan Reynolds's reciting of the *Green Lantern*'s oath for a young boy who asked him what is was like to say, 'In brightest day, in blackest night...' Reynolds fixed his gaze, got into bedtime-story voice, and recited said oath directly to the child. Cut back to the amazed fan, who then held up his Power Ring to Reynolds, who did the same and return, and the biggest lump since *Toy Story 3* formed in my throat. I thought about how cool it must be to be a younger person who gets this kind of access to one of their superheroes."

A trip to the autograph hall hailed a new experience: almost hundreds of little booths, with film and TV stars from the world of cult film, each with queues varying in length depending on who was signing pictures. No where else in the world would you see Dirk Benedict in a booth next to Val Kilmer in a booth next to Patrick Duffy who's next to Rick from *Magnum PI*.

Comic-Con brings the fans closer to their favourite stars. We're reminded that they are human after all and it gives thousands of dedicated followers the chance to feel connected in some way to these huge blockbuster movies. And the stars that come to show their appreciation are further respected.

Historically speaking, Comic-Con used to be much more about the actual comic books, and many of the hard-



The Exhibition Center in San Diego is filled to bursting point every July without fail with fans and followers of all things comic related. The National



Simple and imaginative costumes stand out the most. The National



Han Solo in carbonite left, and the Jones boys above. The National

core comic fraternity are upset that Hollywood has pretty much taken over. There's still plenty of comic book and artwork stands in the vast halls of the Convention Centre, but it's true that the primary focus has shifted to movies. However, it's these very same comic books that gave the movies life, so they should not be forgotten. Personally, I don't think they ever will be, as they form an integral part of the genre, but you can still find a few grumpy old comic book vendors who feel their world has been invaded.

"Do they even sell comic books at this stupid thing anymore? Hollywood has ruined Comic-Con. If I had gone this year, it would have been my 14th con. Last year was my last one," writes disgruntled fan on his blog.

However, this isn't an opinion shared by all from the pure faith. Rebecca Hicks, comic book writer and artist told me that she benefits from the overspill. "It's all about having a fun here. Where else can you have a coffee and watch Darth Vader, the Silk Spectre and the Predator walk past. People buy and read comic books because they're here when they might otherwise not have done. I think the cross-over is a good thing."

The following day I sought to take in

Comic-Con is an opportunity for people to meet, hang out and talk about common interests, shared likes and dislikes and which Dr Who is best and why

one of the really big halls, where people queue for hours to get into. The basic premise is that fans not only queue for a specific panel session, but also just to hang out and catch whatever is on. The halls are so big that people are coming and going all the time at the back without disrupting whatever is going at the front. Huge projector screens hang from the ceiling so you can see who's talking and what's going on.

At first I had no idea how impossibly long the queue was, but within a few minutes I was chatting away to everyone around me. For the first time in my whole life, I didn't have to explain the background to *Babylon 5* to anyone; I could launch into an intense discussion about the issues I have with the destruction of Vulcan and be completely understood. I was in heaven. This is what Comic-Con is about: an opportunity for people to get meet, hang out – albeit standing in a queue together – and talk about common interests, shared likes and dislikes and which Dr Who is best and why.

Over two hours later, I didn't actually care what I was queuing to see, I was among friends, kindred spirits, shuffling along in the San Diego sunshine and chatting away about all things pop

culture. As it happened I arrived in the hall just in time to hear creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, Joss Whedon, answer questions from his fans and give an insightful, inspiring and entertaining account of his work. He is, after all an artist, a very gifted and imaginative writer and director, who will soon be applying his talents to the new *Avengers* film, based on a collection of Marvel comic book superheroes.

Comic-Con continues well after the conference centre has shut. Every cinema in the Gas Lamp district and down town San Diego has some kind celebration and shows a cult movie. Every bar is full of fans and sometimes themed nights are laid on. Events are even held in big, open public spaces; new cult movie *Machete* director Robert Rodriguez and star Danny Trejo actually made tacos and margaritas for fans at a preview showing that proved very popular.

After four days of the most fun I think I've ever had, I was exhausted. And sad. I missed my new Comic-Con family. But, if they were here, they'd say, "Hey, be happy you were part of something amazing." Then they'd probably say something like, "Live long and prosper."

the news

There's almost too much going on to keep track of it all, but here are some of the highlights.

Director **Kenneth Branagh** unveiled a trailer for *Thor*, opening May 2011 with Chris Hemsworth and Natalie Portman.

Joss Whedon, the genius behind *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly* and also *Captain America* (in production) confirmed he would be writing the eagerly-awaited *Avengers*, which will bring together a whole host of Marvel superheroes into one film, including *Captain America*, *Thor*, *Iron Man* and the Hulk.

Iron Man director **Jon Favreau** introduced his new project, *Cowboys & Aliens*, to be seen next summer, starring Daniel Craig and Harrison Ford – who not only plays a bad guy, but made his very first ever Comic-Con appearance, plus Sam Rockwell and Olivia Wilde.

New Zealand-born **Karl Urban**, who played Dr McCoy in J.J. Abrams *Star Trek* reboot confirmed he will be playing Judge Dredd in a substantially darker movie adaptation than the earlier Sylvester Stallone attempt.

Zack Snyder (upcoming *Legend of the Guardian*, *Watchmen*) announced his next project will be *Xerxes*, the prequel to his *300*.