

The Transmedia Universe of Spider-Man

Spider-Man was created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko over 45 years ago. He first appeared in a comic in August 1962. At the time of his creation, Spider-Man was designed to appeal to a teenage audience who could relate to the character. His debut was as a troubled teenager who suffered from many of the same issues as his teenage audience such as: self-obsession with rejection, inadequacy, and loneliness (Wikipedia.org). The Spider-Man series, as with most fan objects, has been successful because the fans have been able to identify with the character. Another reason why the Spider-Man franchise has been popular for almost 50 years is because it has been able to reach a wide audience through different forms of media. Each new incarnation of the character has been created to appeal to a new audience while simultaneously trying to appease its longstanding fans. While not every addition to the franchise has been able to achieve both goals, the fact that Spider-Man continues to attract new fans indicates that audiences can still identify with the character's constant struggle between his two different identities, Peter Parker and Spider-Man.

Spider-Man's first animated appearance was in a Saturday morning cartoon that originally aired in 1967 and ran until 1970. The series produced 52 episodes over its three season run and added to Spider-Man lore with its well-known theme song. The theme of the series, which started with "Spider-Man, Spider-Man, does whatever a spider can," has become almost inseparable from the character himself. The song has been used in all three Spider-Man movies and was also parodied in *The Simpsons Movie* which, was

released the same summer as *Spider-Man 3* (Wikipedia.org). The series focused less on Spider-Man's alter ego Peter Parker's internal struggles and more on the super human villains that Spider-Man faced. The decision not to include the Peter Parker stories was due to both the intended audience and the time restrictions. The series was aimed at a younger audience than the comics were, and therefore, they would not have been as able to identify with Parker's teenage struggles. The younger audience was also why the episodes were usually broken down into two 15 minute episodes rather than one 30 minute episode. The producers believed that two shorter episodes would be easier for children to follow (Wikipedia.org).

While there were other cartoon series in the meantime, no other series had as much success as the original 1967 series until 1994. The 1994 series, titled simply *Spider-Man* as was its 1967 predecessor, is the longest running Spider-Man cartoon to date. The series is composed of 65 episodes that spanned five seasons. This series was notable because it focused on multiple episode story arcs, some of which spanned the entire season, such as in seasons two and three (IMDb.com). This incarnation of Spider-Man focused a lot of attention on Peter Parker's struggles. Throughout the series, Parker had multiple romantic interests and eventually a marriage to Mary Jane Watson. Despite the focus on complex story lines and Parker's individual struggles, there still existed noticeable, audience-directed differences between this version of Spider-Man and the one portrayed in the comics. Being a cartoon aimed at children, Spider-Man faced many restrictions with regards to violence. Spider-Man was not allowed to land punches in this series. Also, realistic guns were not allowed to be portrayed. Instead, futuristic-looking guns were used that fired lasers rather than bullets. Other restrictions included the

inability to use the words 'death' or 'kill', instead villains threatened to 'destroy' Spider-Man. Blood was not allowed to be depicted nor was the word allowed to be spoken, and the word 'plasma' was used instead (Wikipedia.org). In spite of these regulations, this series was able to attract the younger audience it was intended for while keeping older audiences interested. The complex story lines, most of which were taken directly from the comics, along with the inclusion of Parker's struggles allowed this series to appeal to teenage audiences as well as the current fans of Spider-Man. This mass appeal allowed this series to become perhaps the definitive Spider-Man cartoon.

The installment of the Spider-Man franchise that was directed towards the largest audience was the Spider-Man movies. The 2002 release of *Spider-Man* marked the first time that the character was portrayed in an official, Marvel licensed film. All three movies were box office successes and the first and third installment set the record for opening weekend box office sales of \$114.8 million and \$151.1 million respectively (IMDb.com). The first two films received seemingly unanimous commercial praise while the response to the third installment was more mixed. The most glaring difference between the comic book and film versions of Spider-Man, one that was a problem at the time of the release of the first film among some fans, was that the movie version had organic web shooters. Spider-Man comic book purists were outraged because up until recently in the comics, Peter Parker had used mechanical web shooters that he designed while in his Spider-Man costume. This was very much an audience-directed change. The director of the three movies, Sam Raimi, stated that Parker inventing the mechanical web shooters would distance himself too far from the average person. Similar to the concept of the inception of Spider-Man, Raimi wanted a character with whom it would be

easier to identify (Wikipedia.org). Another reason, and a slightly more cynical one, is that the movie is aimed at attracting a mainstream audience rather than die hard fans because it is assumed they will go and see the movie no matter what. With the movies, as opposed to the cartoons, it is more important to please casual fans. The cartoons, by their nature, are not aimed at a large audience while the movies are attempting to please all viewers and not just fans, and judging by the over \$1.1 billion domestically and almost \$2.5 billion world-wide box office figures can attest to the fact that the movies were successful in this respect (IMDb.com). Recently, even the comic book version of Spider-Man adopted the organic webbing, presumably based upon the overall favorable reaction to the movie portrayal (Wikipedia.org).

The hardest Spider-Man incarnations to classify are the video-game portrayals. Due to technological limitations in terms of graphics, early Spider-Man video games were unable to really portray anything but the super hero side of the character. The earliest video games were “beat ‘em up” games in which the character literally beat up a bunch of street thugs until you beat up enough, and then you were able to fight super villain thugs. Some games, such as *Spider-Man: The Animated Series*, used the concept that Spider-Man has limited webbing, invoking the principle that his webbing is mechanical based and therefore his web cartridges are not unlimited. Others, such as *Spider-Man and Venom: Maximum Carnage* allow you to use unlimited webbing, although there is no mention as to whether or not it is organic. Most of the early video games had limited story lines; however, some games such as the aforementioned *Maximum Carnage* and *Spider-Man and Venom: Separation Anxiety* borrowed heavily from actual plots from the comic book. More recent games have improved upon both

graphics and storyline. Rather than in the “beat ‘em up” games, the more recent games allow the character to roam throughout the environment, allowing for a more “realistic” portrayal of Spider-Man and his villains powers.

Whenever a character is being reproduced in varying mediums, slight changes are going to have to be made in order to compensate for the differences in each type of media. It appears obvious that taking a comic book super hero that usually operates in panels and moving him to a movie screen is going to require some adaptations. The most advantageous aspect of portraying a character in different mediums is that the character will be able to reach new people and hopefully create a never-ending influx of new fans. The Spider-Man series continues to do this through the creation of new games and television shows. Marvel has even tried to attract new fans to the character through a revamp of his story in its Ultimate series. The series, which debuted in 2000, is a retelling of Spider-Man’s story taking place in today’s world. Keeping true to the main storylines, the Ultimate series updates certain aspects such as using genetic engineering rather than radiation for explanations of character origins. With ever evolving character adaptation, it is conceivable to imagine that the Spider-Man series will still be going as strong in its next 50 years as it was in its first 50 years.

Works Cited

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