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Evolution of a Screenwriter

A genre-busting generation is multi-tasking its way to the top

By Jay A. Fernandez

To understand where screenwriting is headed, consider Justin Marks.

His first produced feature script, an adaptation of the video game "Street Fighter" will be released in February by Fox. He has assignments from three different studios to adapt existing properties, including "Masters of the Universe" and "Voltron." Then there's the two-book deal with publisher Devil's Due to create original comics, and he's also writing four video game titles, including a high-profile sequel for Electronic Arts. One of the graphic novels he's penning is derived from a video game, which will relaunch following its publication, which in turn opens up the potential for a feature adaptation — for Marks to write.

It's no wonder, then, that when asked to explain his approach, the 28-year-old sounds more like an MBA brand manager than a screenwriter.

"My interest is in building new IP that I can retain ownership of in some way and bring into the film world," he says.

Marks is not unique. A new generation of scribes is ditching the starry-eyed concept of a glamorous career writing only for the movies and embracing a more elastic, cross-platform approach. This shift has its roots in reasons economic, cultural and creative. But the result is that young (and some not-so-young) screenwriters are pursuing a far wider range of media than previous generations.

Shrinking studio slates. An industrywide obsession with pre-branded tentpoles. Fewer traditional writing assignments. These practical limitations, combined with a genuine interest in the fertile (and often lucrative) avenues represented by video games, graphic novels and the Web, have fed this trans-media methodology.

Brian K. Vaughan has co-



first generation that has grown up in a borderless pop culture world saturated with YouTube, TiVo, instant messaging, MP3s, massively multiplayer online gaming, cell phones and serious comic book movies. This platform-agnostic approach to entertainment is encoded in their creative genes.

"I don't think they're doing it as a transgressive thing," USC professor and "Savage Grace" screenwriter Howard A. Rodman says. "They're just finding writing careers that make sense given their careers as consumers of this stuff."

More pragmatically, branching out into nontraditional media simply improves your chances of sustaining a career over the long haul — an elusive feat.

"People who were once technically competent screenwriters can't necessarily do that alone,"

says Eddie Gamarra, a manager and producer at the Gotham Group.

"For financial reasons, they have to be flexible."

While video games and comic books pay less than a standard screenwriting deal, the three months a writer might spend trying to score a feature assignment could be used to write something original in another medium that is more likely to be produced.

But diversifying doesn't simply mean developing different projects. Often enough, an idea that does or doesn't work for movies can be viable in another medium.

In the old paradigm, a dead spec would either languish on a shelf somewhere or be spun into a novel or play. Now, that unsold script can be pitched as a graphic novel or video game narrative — something that will actually be made.

Marks recently turned his unsold time-travel screenplay "Sleepwalker" into a comic deal with Devil's Due — the plan being, of course, to publish the graphic novel and then go back out with the spec. The horror movie "30 Days of Night," released last year by Sony Pictures, began life as a spec written by Steve Niles, who then turned

Not long ago, writing for both film and TV was considered a crossover. Now scribes have a new set of options.

it into a short comic series (which he co-owned). Only then was it spun back into a movie.

Increasingly, alternative media not only serves as an adjunct to a film deal but also the very thing that makes the film deal happen. Vaughan, who prefers the creative control he has in his comics, broke open TV and feature opportunities with his visionary graphic novels. Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, the writers of "Superbad," wrote a Web short called "Jay and Seth vs. the Apocalypse" that Mandate Pictures recently picked up for a feature film.

Principato Young manager-producer Paul Young, who encourages his comedy clients to film pieces of their spec scripts and post them online, sees studio execs looking beyond the printed page for material to greenlight.

"They're used to watching stuff online and not expecting it to have high production value," he says.

In a youthful culture with the attention span of a squirrel, the idea of reading an entire screenplay is beginning to feel quaint. Graphic novels and video games get across a fuller picture more efficiently. "You have that much more power going into a studio and saying, 'Here's the pitch,'" writer Sheldon Turner ("The Longest Yard") says. "You don't even have to listen to me. Just flip through the comics during your next bowel movement."

Executing on a potential film idea in another medium also serves as a development tool, schooling creative talent to take on bigger tasks. "The more that we can get them directing their material and gaining that experience, the more they're going to be qualified on a larger level to direct their movies, direct their television shows and really have a hand in how it's eventually executed," Young says.

Veteran screenwriters also are

exploring new options. Whether out of strategic necessity or genuine curiosity (or both), comics in particular have attracted the likes of Kevin Williamson ("Scream"), Craig Brewer ("Black Snake Moan"), John Carpenter ("Halloween"), John Ridley ("Undercover Brother") and Joss Whedon ("Buffy the Vampire Slayer").

Developing a creative voice outside the film system also is a way to engender something that the screenwriting life is notoriously lacking: ownership over its uses in other media. While retaining control over intellectual property is well nigh impossible when dealing with the studios, those rights might stay with the writer in other artistic venues.

"They're realizing that by controlling your own IP, you can control that you're involved with it as it goes forward," Madhouse Entertainment manager-producer Adam Kolbrenner says.

And while learning the basics will never lose currency, film schools like USC, for example, are adding new-media courses to screenwriting curriculum because these days most graduates will get their start in something other than screenwriting itself.

"I don't see any of that as a compromise," Rodman says. "I see all of that as an acknowledgment that we're in the 21st century now. And unlike some of us who grew up on the holy grail of the 'theatrical motion picture,' they're much more comfortable sliding back and forth among those things."

"Michael Clayton" writer-director Tony Gilroy recalls that his options were "really dreary" when he was starting his career 20 years ago. "Boy, I wish there'd been more of a graphic novel business when I was 26," he says. "I would have been very happy with that. It looks like a cooler environment now than it did back then." **THR**

created and sold the film rights to popular comic books "Y: The Last Man" and "Ex Machina." He also writes for the ABC series "Lost" and sold an original feature idea to DreamWorks titled "Roundtable."

Michael Dougherty, who co-wrote "Superman Returns," has penned comic arcs, and he's thinking about transforming a graphic novel into an online series. He's also written and directed "Trick 'r Treat," and he's attached to direct an animated feature.

Damon Lindelof, Geoff Johns and such older peers as Mark Verheiden and Danny Bilson have worked in a variety of formats. And J. Michael Straczynski, who's written in every medium save petroglyph, bursts into the feature world in the fall with his elegant screenplay for "Changeling," directed by Clint Eastwood.

There's no one reason for this wave of multi-taskers, but to some degree they are a product of the times. The film industry is now absorbing members of the