

Batman redefined: Comics expert says success of Dark Knight trilogy tied to character examinations, loyalty to storyline

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(Phys.org) -- The July 20 release of "The Dark Knight Rises" marks the end of arguably the most successful series of Batman films ever. Directed by Christopher Nolan, the latest Batman franchise has smashed box office records with each of its first two films.

Since [Batman](#)'s debut in 1939, writers, artists and movie executives alike have redefined the character countless times. The success of Nolan's trilogy, the latest interpretation of the enduring story of a millionaire who dons a bat suit at night to fight crimes in the fictional Gotham City, has several origins, according to a Kansas State University comic book expert.

Joe Sutliff Sanders, assistant professor of English, says many people credit Tim Burton's Batman revamp in the late 1980s and early 1990s with returning the caped crusader to his dark roots. While the Batman comics of the 1980s did take a darker turn in both themes and plot, comics between 1939 and 1980 had a wide range of tones. The 1960s-era television show starring Adam West was developed after reading Batman comics, according to Sanders.

"Look at these garish costumes and these ridiculous sound effects that are there on the page," Sanders said. "It was inherently campy."

But later viewers responded favorably to the darker interpretations of

Batman. Though that has likely aided Nolan's franchise, Sanders believes the films have been successful for more old-fashioned reasons.

"They've done a better job of [paying attention](#) to characters," he said. "That sounds like such a 1950s' thing to say about a story. But I really think that's what it comes down to."

In Nolan's first film, "Batman Begins," the story revolves around the personal struggles of Bruce Wayne, who later becomes Batman. The film helps establish who Wayne is through his [life experiences](#) and develops his motivations.

"The first film shows tremendous courage and dedication to character in that you don't even see the costume until halfway through the movie," Sanders said. "That characterization was lost in Joel Schumacher's Batman."

Schumacher directed the two Batman films between Burton and Nolan's franchises.

Characterization in Nolan's trilogy has presented many advantages in storytelling. Gotham City has developed into a character without a face but deserving of sympathy, according to Sanders. Minor characters and even characters quickly killed off have received similar character development, setting up powerful scenes that have thwarted viewers' expectations.

Despite the distinctive nature of Nolan's trilogy, there are still many comparisons that can be made to Batman graphic novels and comics of the past. Much of the plot of the second film in Nolan's trilogy, "The Dark Knight," is based off of "The Killing Joke," a 1988 graphic novel written by Alan Moore. Moore's graphic novel features the Joker attempting to prove that one bad day can turn the best person to evil.

Additional darker themes developed by the 1980s' comics revamp of Batman are evident throughout the trilogy as well. Frank Miller's "The Dark Knight Returns," a four-issue comic book series, was also widely influential in the development of Nolan's trilogy, according to Sanders.

There is at least one notable omission in Nolan's trilogy -- Batman's faithful sidekick, Robin. Originally introduced in the 1940s to soften Batman's extreme image, Robin helped boost sales for the already successful comics even more. Not including Robin was an interesting decision for Nolan to make, according to Sanders.

"There is no whisper of Robin in the first two films," Sanders said. "When they introduced Robin in the comics, they sold a lot more copies. It's interesting that they've completely bypassed something that has made them money in the past."

Batman's popularity has endured throughout the varying interpretations of the caped crusader. Sanders has his own theory as to why Batman remains popular today.

"Batman is flexible enough to do what different people of different generations want of him," Sanders said. "That is why he has remained popular while characters like Captain Marvel, who was actually more popular than Superman at one point, are not popular at all now. Captain Marvel was not flexible enough to speak to different generations.

"Batman is popular because he changes."

Provided by Kansas State University

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