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Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence

by Derek Johnson

Abstract: Between 2005 and 2009, Marvel Studios' independent film production diverted creative and economic power from major studios once licensed to use its comic book properties. Marvel negotiated and legitimated this changed relationship through self-reflexive trade stories that positioned comic book managers as inevitably integral to a reimagined film production culture.

Few companies proved as central to the production of big-budget cinema over the past decade as Marvel Studios. Partnering with established Hollywood firms willing to finance production and distribution, Marvel brought sixteen films based on its comic book characters to the screen between 1998 and 2007, including the *Spider-Man* trilogy (Sony-Columbia; Sam Raimi, 2002–2007), the *X-Men* trilogy (20th Century Fox; Bryan Singer, 2000, 2003; Brett Ratner, 2006), the *Blade* trilogy (New Line; Stephen Norrington, 1998; Guillermo del Toro, 2002; David S. Goyer, 2004), and smaller pictures like *The Punisher* (Artisan/Lionsgate; Jonathan Hensleigh, 2004). Of these offerings, five remained among the one hundred highest domestic grossing films of all time as of 2011. Following the decline of comic book publishing in the late 1990s and Marvel's subsequent bankruptcy, the royalties Hollywood paid for use of Marvel's properties provided an alternative revenue stream to support the company's tentative rebirth. By 2005, these successes encouraged a stabilized Marvel to finance production on its own and recapture creative control and box-office profit from its studio partners. With *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008)—the first of these self-financed pictures—Marvel launched a unique model for cinema production in the age of convergence: an independent company with expertise in a different media industry drove blockbuster film content. Following this success, even video-game publishers sought the expertise of former Marvel executives like Avi Arad to develop original titles like *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog, 2007) and *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007).[1] So valuable to

1 Matt Helgeson, "Hollywood and Video Games," *Game Informer* 199 (2009): 27.

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industries outside of comic books did Marvel's imprint and content strategies become that in December 2009, Disney bought the company for $4 billion.[2] Though no longer independent, Marvel's box-office success from this initial production slate continued with *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011), and, of course, *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012).

Marvel's sustained licensing program in video games and other markets, even during its brief cinematic independence, spoke to the continued centrality of film in converged media economies. In overseeing the production of licensed video games based on Marvel characters, Marvel Studios executive Justin Lambros explained that following the logic of comics was less central to licensed production than ensuring conformity to emerging film styles and strategies. "The film creatively leads," Lambros explained in reference to the *Iron Man* game (Sega, 2008). "We take the lead from where the film is going, then take stuff from the comics for the game and filter it through the film."[3] Lambros proposed a creative hierarchy in which Marvel's filmmaking operations trumped anything developing in other markets—largely as a result of the cinema's ability to command larger audiences and build greater exposure for Marvel's characters. For all its success in reframing blockbuster film as a market for comic book properties, Marvel Studios remained a contradiction—a reminder of the continued significance of cinema even as convergence meant redefining the film industry around external content, companies, and creators.

Thus, the brief independence of Marvel Studios presents a compelling opportunity to examine how cinema has been produced in an age of media convergence, as well as how converged production has been conceived and imagined as "cinema" within the culture industries. This reproduction of comics as cinema bears a textual dimension, as a brief summary of Marvel's house style and narrative continuity shows. However, to intervene at the level of industry organization, discourse, and production culture, this study also examines how converged production is made meaningful as cinema by cultural and critical practices within media institutions. Cultures of cinema production have been reimagined as much as, if not more than, the texts under construction. With Marvel's independence having delimited studio control over blockbuster film content in favor of economic strategies, creative practices, and labor hierarchies that serve its own interests across media industries, this self-production initiative constituted a significant economic reorganization of Hollywood modes of production, to be explored in detail. Moreover, for such reorganization to make sense to established Hollywood production cultures, the industrial shifts implied by Marvel's independence had to be managed on a self-reflexive, discursive level. Through specific trade narratives that constructed Marvel's cinematic independence as commonsense—even as "destiny"—Marvel reimagined the production cultures tied to Hollywood film to accommodate its proposed economic reorganization. As a comic book firm driving a significant share of Hollywood tent-pole production, Marvel Studios needed not only to bring the textualities and creative hierarchies of cinema in line with its external

2 Paul Bond, "Spidey, Meet Mickey," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 1, 2009, 1.

3 Justin Lambros, interview with the author, January 15, 2008.

needs but also to inscribe and give viable meaning to that convergence within existing cinematic production cultures. The case of Marvel Studios forces us, in sum, to consider what the convergence of comics and film has meant for industrial identities and production contexts—as well as to consider how the discursive figure of the comic book fan might play a role in making Marvel meaningful within Hollywood.

Convergence, Independence, and Imagination. This research advances a growing body of work concerning convergence, creativity, and labor in contemporary Hollywood. While Henry Jenkins has explored the creative and economic strategies by which a company like Marvel might seek to work across media, Chuck Tryon has specifically engaged with the transformation of cinema in this age of convergence, arguing that digital technology reworks the social practices by which film is produced and consumed.[4] Although Tryon focuses on the technological aspects of digital convergence through which "traditional business models and traditional models of watching come under question," further analysis might yet explore how the economic and cultural dimensions of convergence drive further adaptation of traditional film practices. Marvel Studios suggests an "old media" adaptation specific not to new media technologies but to new creative and economic relationships between film and comics. Convergence is not a uniquely digital or technological phenomenon but a reworking of media new and old, and thus the cinema of convergence must be understood in terms of collisions with extracinematic sectors of all types.

Though not explicitly framed in convergence terms, one of the most detailed analyses of such collisions can be found in Kristin Thompson's examination of the *Lord of the Rings* films (Peter Jackson, 2001–2003). Thompson explains how filmmakers collaborated with production partners working across DVD, gaming, and merchandise markets, yet she also emphasizes the autonomy of New Line Cinema and Peter Jackson's New Zealand–based WingNut Films from parent-distributor Warner Bros. to conceptualize franchise filmmaking in terms of an independent production mode.[5] The legibility of such independence raises intriguing questions about how producers' autonomy from Hollywood may have been narrativized and may have given meaning to all the distributors and licensors accustomed to doing business the Hollywood way. How could outsiders be understood as a desirable part of the existing Hollywood system? Why did such widening of cinematic practice in an age of convergence make sense to established creative and economic interests? How did companies like WingNut and Marvel approach Hollywood culture from a position on the margins, yet increasingly occupy the center in an industrially meaningful way?

To answer such questions, we can turn to John Caldwell's recent conceptualization of media production as a symbolic, collective expression with semiotic meaning in its own right. Film practitioners do not just produce meaningful texts, Caldwell argues:

4 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 105–106; Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 4.

5 Kristin Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise:* The Lord of the Rings *and Modern Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

in their creative practice, they also articulate meaning to the work of producing film. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Caldwell considers the artifacts circulated among production communities as "deep texts" that offer insight into what specific labors and practices mean within those communities. As Caldwell writes, "the worlds of film/video workers are organized and rationalized around an extensive set of secondary symbolic texts, trade stories, pedagogical rituals, and technologies. All of these rituals and artifacts serve to manage and inflect the social relations and labor activities, even as they [have] enabled each craft and association to collectively imagine itself as a community."[6] In other words, stories that film producers tell about their labor play a direct role in reproducing conditions in which that labor occurs, thus making those conditions imaginable within and as a production community. The deep texts of trade stories, therefore, offer a unique tool for examining how convergence is made culturally operable within the film industry, and specifically how independent firms like Marvel Studios might be imagined as a part of Hollywood production communities, despite their external status and expertise. Moreover, Marvel's assimilation into the film industry presents an opportunity to complicate claims about imagined production communities in Hollywood, thereby illuminating how such communities have to be reimagined as media institutions and practices converge.

To explore these shifts in industrial imagination, this study combines analysis of Marvel's film narratives and production strategies with examination of the self-reflexive trade stories that Marvel executives have deployed to legitimate their incursion into Hollywood production communities. J. D. Connor has previously examined Marvel's reflexivity, conceiving its "discourses of independence" as a way of rationalizing the increased control of global media corporations over the practices and processes of art and creativity.[7] Although Connor's critique of Marvel's "indie" status reveals the discursive constructedness of independence, I take a different approach here in analyzing discourses that supported Marvel's material attempts to redraw its position within the creative hierarchies of Hollywood and upset the economic status quo regarding the production of its superhero films. Although "independence" should be recognized as a construct, firms from outside of the Hollywood establishment (independents, for lack of a better term) negotiate that construct in material circumstances to navigate status and outwardly affirm membership in a network of production communities. My argument about Marvel's trade stories, therefore, is not precisely a causal one that identifies the discourses that informed Marvel's internal decision making in its bid for independence. Instead, it is an argument about rebranding, self-presentation, and self-reflexive legitimization, and about how Marvel attempted to support, shore up, and give industrial meaning to a strategic course of action already engaged. Drawing on a sample of more than five hundred articles published between 2002 and 2009, primarily in trade publications like *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*, this analysis traces how Marvel Studios narrativized itself and imagined its ability to

6 John Caldwell, *Production Cultures: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 341.

7 J. D. Connor, "Why No One Want Make Hulk 2? Independence, Rebooting, and Industrial Reflexivity" (conference paper, Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Los Angeles, March 18, 2010).

serve established Hollywood production communities in spite of its outsider status and even its bid for material independence. Interviews conducted in 2008 with personnel involved in Marvel's video-game productions supplement these trade stories, providing insight into how the company figured digital media into its translation of comic book characters into film.

Previous work has detailed the 1998–2004 period in which Marvel embraced licensing to emerge from bankruptcy.[8] Furthermore, the purchase of Marvel by Disney in late 2009 brought an effective end to Marvel's pursuit of financial independence from Hollywood, leaving much open to question (particularly as Disney reshuffles Marvel's existing film and television development plans). This study, then, focuses on the 2005–2009 moment in which Marvel implemented plans to self-finance its films and relegated its former production partners at the major studios to distribution duty. Marvel Studios' relatively brief moment of independence offers a distinct social formation for the analysis of converged cinema, evidencing not only new textualities and filmmaking practices but also unique strategies for ascribing meaning to the participation of a comic book company in film production cultures. More broadly, then, the following case study also brings into relief how economic and creative independence (however brief) might be culturally negotiated and legitimated in an era of industrial convergence.

A Modern Marvel Movie Model? At the end of the 2008 *Iron Man* film, Marvel Studios made a bold declaration about how its comics characters would be used in cinema henceforth. In a post-credits cameo, Samuel L. Jackson appears in eye patch and trench coat as Colonel Nick Fury, director of S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division), asking Robert Downey Jr.'s Tony Stark to consider himself part of a larger superhero ecology. "You think you're the only superhero in the world?" Fury asks. "Mr. Stark, you've become part of a bigger universe. You just don't know it yet. . . . I'm here to talk to you about the Avenger Initiative" (Figure 1). Titillating comic book fans, Fury invoked Marvel's long-running *Avengers* series, launched in 1963 to team up already-popular



Figure 1. Samuel L. Jackson reappears as Nick Fury in *Iron Man 2* to recruit Robert Downey Jr.'s Iron Man into the Avengers initiative and to remind audiences of the crossover *Avengers* film in development (Marvel Studios, 2010).

8 Derek Johnson, "Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up? Marvel's Mutation from Monthlies to Movies," in *Film and Comic Books*, ed. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 285–300.



Figure 2. The first issue of *The Avengers* featured Thor, Hulk, Iron Man, Ant-Man, and the Wasp together in the same ongoing comic title (Marvel Comics, 1963).

heroes like Iron Man, Thor, Hulk, and Captain America (Figure 2). Mention of *Avengers* in a Marvel film similarly promised to unite its cinematic heroes under the same shared narrative banner.

True to that promise, Marvel announced after the *Iron Man* opening its intention to organize long-term film development around an *Avengers* film. As publicized in the *Hollywood Reporter*, *USA Today*, and its own news reports on Marvel.com, the company planned *Iron Man 2* and *Thor* for May and July 2010, respectively, followed by *Captain America: The First Avenger* in May 2011, all culminating in the release of *The Avengers* two months later (a plan later revised to hold *Thor* and *Captain America* until 2011 and *Avengers* until 2012).[9] *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008), released a month after *Iron Man*, also became implicated in this strategy thanks to another story-capping cameo by Robert Downey Jr., in which Tony Stark states that he's "putting a team together" before the film cuts to black. With each film in this production sequence, Marvel continued its tease. *Iron Man 2* featured the return of Nick Fury, a discussion of Tony Stark's suitability as an Avengers team member, and an epilogue in which S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Phil Coulson finds Thor's hammer in the New Mexico desert (with the anticipation generated by this latter scene dependent on character and narrative rather than Jackson's or Downey's star power). Thus, in isolated moments across discrete films, Marvel established narrative interrelationships and limited serial progression across installments. By contrast, Marvel's earlier film releases made no attempt to draw links between heroes like the X-Men, Spider-Man, Hulk, and the Punisher (a discontinuity that allowed stars like Rebecca Romijn to play different roles in multiple Marvel films). Promising that its releases would work in unison as the "Marvel Cinematic Universe," Marvel presented individual films as mere episodes in a larger, cohesive work (Figure 3).[10]



Figure 3. In *Thor*, character actor Clark Gregg returns as agent Phil Coulson to provide a link to his appearances in the *Iron Man* films (Marvel Studios, 2011).

9 Paul Bond and Borys Kit, "Marvel's Machine in Gear," *Hollywood Reporter*, May 6, 2008, 9; Scott Bowles, "Marvel Plans Four Brand-New Films," *USA Today*, May 6, 2008; "Marvel Movies Assemble!" Marvel.com, May 5, 2008, http://marvel.com/news/moviestories.3493.marvel_movies_assemble~excl~.

10 "Marvel Decade: Kevin Feige," Marvel.com, December 30, 2009, http://marvel.com/news/moviestories.10812.marvel_decade~colon~_kevin_feige.

As part of this presentation, Marvel emphasized the uniqueness of its crossover strategy. "We're trying something that's never been done before, a new idea of the same character appearing in multiple franchises," Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige claimed in 2009.[11] Yet, while these textual strategies certainly drew from Marvel comic book traditions, they were novel neither to film culture nor to Marvel's previous forays into filmed entertainment. Animated television series such as *Marvel Superheroes* (syndicated, 1966), *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* (NBC, 1981–1983), *X-Men* (Fox, 1992–1997), and *Spider-Man* (Fox, 1994–1998) had leveraged interactions among different characters in a shared Marvel Universe to multiply audience appeals. Classical Hollywood cinema, too, has long relied on installment narratives, not only in cheap serials but also in studio films like *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935), as well as *Four Daughters* (Michael Curtiz, 1938) and *Daughters Courageous* (Michael Curtiz, 1939).[12] Moreover, David Bordwell identifies in contemporary Hollywood cinema a tradition of "network narratives" in which characters' story lines "intersect again and again, especially if the duration and locale of the action are well circumscribed."[13] So while framed as groundbreaking, Marvel's cinematic intertextuality did not threaten textual traditions in the cinema so much as leverage existing compatibility with comic book storytelling.

This is not to imply that Marvel's new narrative initiative was insignificant: in emphasizing connectivity between its films, Marvel relied on the aesthetics of "incompleteness" that Chuck Tryon attributes to convergence cinema.[14] Dangling scenes and quick character teases in Marvel's films foster not just narrative expansion but also an audience participation that extends the commercial viability of the films into new media markets beyond theatrical distribution. Tryon suggests that the digital form of DVD in particular "has helped to reconceptualize film narrative in ways that tie together the fictional world of a film with the economic goals of a studio."[15] In other words, film narratives are crafted to make repeated consumption on DVD (or via digital download) more compulsory. The narrative links constituting the Marvel Cinematic Universe thus encourage careful, repeated, often frame-by-frame viewing. Although these moments of interconnectivity constitute only a handful of scenes in otherwise self-contained films, when subjected to close visual scrutiny, those scenes offer excisable seriality. For example, producers used digital compositing to insert Captain America's shield into the background of Tony Stark's lab in the first *Iron Man* film; while Stark would more explicitly interact with the shield as a prop in the sequel, this first, subtler insertion would be most readily noticeable by fans with their fingers

11 Borys Kit, "The Avenger," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 21, 2009, 12.

12 Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

13 David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 98–99.

14 Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema*, 19.

15 Ibid., 30.

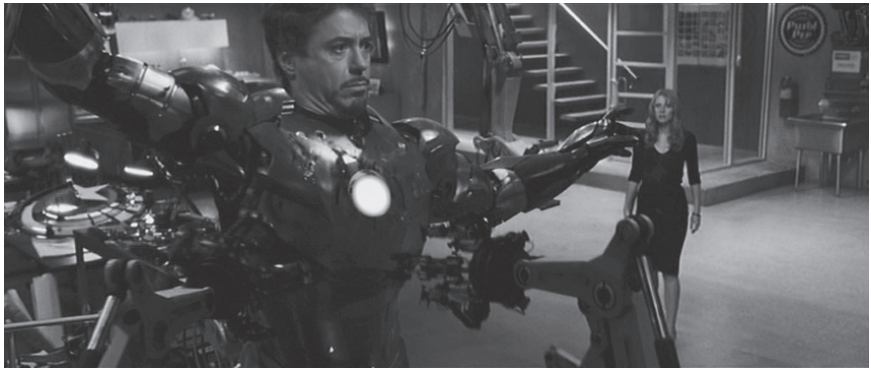


Figure 4. Added digitally in postproduction, Captain America's shield is subtly embedded into the background of *Iron Man* (Marvel Studios, 2008).

on the pause button (Figure 4). Furthermore, DVD releases used bonus materials to strengthen these serial links between films. When watching an "alternate opening" sequence frame by frame on DVD, *Incredible Hulk* viewers spied the frozen figure of Captain America buried in the ice, visible for only a fraction of a second during an Arctic avalanche. The shared Marvel Cinematic Universe thus drew significantly on digital production and consumption practices.

Further, as "semiotic cluster bombs," these films pointed audiences to additional content offerings across converging media platforms.[16] Tie-in video games meant to extend the films' story lines circulated alongside direct-to-DVD animated productions like *Planet Hulk* (Lionsgate, 2010) and television series like *Iron Man Armored Adventures* (Nicktoons, 2009–) that introduced alternative interpretations of the characters. Prepping younger audiences for the eventual release of *Avengers* years later, parallel television productions like *The Super Hero Squad Show* (Cartoon Network, 2009–2011) put softer versions of the Iron Man, Hulk, Thor, and Captain America characters into shared narrative relationships. According to Eric Rollman, president of Marvel Studios' animation division, the goal of these productions was "to create synergy with the brand by having a continual awareness of different interpretations of the characters in the marketplace."[17] Through industrial convergence, in other words, Marvel developed a unified narrative brand for itself and for *Avengers* at the same time that it sought a diversity of approaches to mobilizing the characters that made up that brand. So while Marvel's textual strategies were not historically unique, they did extend explicitly from contemporaneous patterns and practices of convergence whereby the firm sought to organize the production and consumption of its comics content across media platforms. Moreover, Marvel's textual strategies proved unique in another significant way: while Hollywood has generally acquired rights to material on a property-by-property basis, that economic mechanism has made studios poorly suited to manage

16 Caldwell, *Production Cultures*, 307.

17 Bill Keveney, "Marvel Superheroes Power Up for Nicktoons," *USA Today*, March 18, 2008.

entire story universes that comprise multiple properties. By examining how Marvel reorganized Hollywood economics in an age of convergence, the major industrial shifts underwriting these crossover narrative strategies become more evident.

From Licensed Convergence to Self-Produced Convergence. Looking beyond narrative interrelations and character networking, the real significance of Marvel's new initiative might alternatively be located in who had creative control and agency over that production. Although Marvel arguably only leveraged narrative traditions that it shared with Hollywood, it also aimed to restructure industrial hierarchies of labor and creativity that produced such textuality, pushing for an expansion of the creative and economic roles a comic book company might play in existing film production institutions. By transforming in 2005 from a licensor that sold studios the right to create and profit from comic book characters to a production entity that maintained control and adopted the risks of film development itself, Marvel Studios carved a space within Hollywood for an external firm with noncinematic expertise. Understanding Marvel's transition to independence, therefore, illustrates one way in which the film industry has been reorganized in the wake of convergence.

Marvel films released between 2000 and 2007 all extended from prior licensing agreements made with Hollywood studios like Twentieth Century Fox, Sony, and Universal. In exchange for a license fee (and typically a small percentage of box-office revenues), those studios gained creative and economic control over production, marketing, and sublicensing. For the studios, this model afforded a significant degree of development and production flexibility in a post-Fordist economy. As Bernard Miège explains, minor, independent firms play a crucial role even in the consolidated media of modern capitalism, absorbing the risks of developing content on behalf of the majors.[18] Licensing their properties to Hollywood majors, independent suppliers like Marvel serve as development farms that enable film capital to invest only in those properties with proven market viability. Make no mistake: this role did benefit Marvel. For a comics publisher emerging from bankruptcy without the wherewithal to support capital investment in filmed entertainment, licensing multiplied revenue streams and provided mass-market cross-promotional visibility at no production cost. Although studios earned the bigger profits, license fees and royalties bolstered Marvel's revenues in a time of need. From $19 million in 2000, licensing revenues increased tenfold by 2003 thanks to films like *X-Men*, *Spider-Man*, and *X2*. By 2004, 83 percent of Marvel's total revenues (inclusive of publishing) came from this kind of out-licensing.[19] Marvel became the fourth-largest licensor in the culture industries worldwide by 2008, with $5.78 billion in sales of licensed product.[20] While Marvel's position as licensor also meant sharing revenues with licensed production partners in film, television, toys, and video games, this economic model enabled Marvel to recover from its previous financial insolvency.

18 Bernard Miège, *The Capitalization of Cultural Production* (Bagnolet, France: International General, 1989), 44.

19 "New Focus: Swinging into Action," *Managing Intellectual Property*, September 2004, 1.

20 Josephine Collins, "Hero Worship," *License! Global*, July 2009, 26.

Despite these advantages, licensed production left Marvel executives unsatisfied for several reasons. Although CEO Avi Arad would serve in advisory executive producer roles that afforded influence over studio decisions, Marvel still struggled to maintain creative power over the direction of its comic book films. While creative disagreements shape any collaborative production, this licensing model also gave studios full control over development schedules—and thus control over how often Marvel could expect license royalties. Marvel could not put any of its properties into film development without willing partners in Hollywood with equal vision for and confidence in licensed premises; even *Spider-Man*, for example, sat in development hell for years before seeing production and theatrical release.[21] Reliance on studio partnerships meant that motion picture profits, though significant, remained fiscally unpredictable. In 2005, for example, Marvel collected only $39.6 million in first-quarter licensing revenue, whereas 2006 saw $98.9 million thanks to increased *Spider-Man* revenues of $56.9 million.[22] Marvel could generate the predictable returns favored by corporate accounting and investors only if it could promise something like a *Spider-Man* film every year—a mean feat considering that the power to green-light rested with multiple Hollywood production partners disinclined to coordinate releases given their competition with one another.

Because Marvel depended on the mainstream visibility of these films to drive toys, video games, and other licensed markets, the health of those revenue streams required consistent, predictable film development. Furthermore, while one successful film could generate significant royalties for Marvel, licensing analysts insisted that film hits did not necessarily guarantee the success of related toys and video games, giving Marvel increased motivation to ensure that film development progressed in service of these other crucial licensed markets.[23] So while Marvel had reinvented itself as a multimedia character licensor, many investors doubted its ability to control the licensed markets on which it depended.[24] Presciently, IMS Capital Value Fund analyst Carl Marker told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2002, "Marvel needs to be sold to a larger entertainment company, like Disney or AOL Time Warner, with the leverage to make better films and promote the library of characters."[25] In this configuration, Marvel could manage multimedia content production in-house, absorb costs across a wider revenue base, and gain the power to make better licensing deals. Even as licensed film production revived Marvel, the long-term viability of the strategy remained in question, with absorption into the Hollywood mainstream presented as the most viable alternative.

21 Tom Russo, "Monster Ink," *Entertainment Weekly*, May 10, 2002, 38; Tom Russo, "Swing Time," *Entertainment Weekly*, April 26, 2002, 38. License agreements also impeded Marvel's ability to make new, independent use of its own content library. When Marvel adapted its comic book *Mutant X* into television production, for example, Twentieth Century Fox sued, arguing that the series violated its *X-Men* license. See Scott Brown and Brian Hiatt, "Insider-Man," *Entertainment Weekly*, July 12, 2002, 28.

22 Paul Bond, "Marvel Senses Spider-Man Success in Q1," *Hollywood Reporter*, May 9, 2007, 10.

23 Lauren Kellachan, "Hot Licenses," *Home Textiles Today*, May–June 2000, 36.

24 Paul Bond, "Reduced Sales in Spidey's Web," *Hollywood Reporter*, August 8, 2006, 13; David Landis, "Where Cash Is King," *Kiplinger's Personal Finance*, December 2004, 54–57; Melanie Warner, "How a Meek Comic Book Company Became a Hollywood Superpower," *New York Times*, July 19, 2004.

25 Dwight Oestricher, "Marvel: Powerhouse Potential?" *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2002.

In 2005, Marvel took steps to resolve this dilemma, but in contrast to these recommendations, it sought the means to replace licensing with a mode of independent, self-financed production that could support its interests across media. While independent film firms like New Line Cinema offered a significant historical precedent—producing genre franchises like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Steve Barron, 1990) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) to support their wider catalog of prestige pictures—Marvel Studios adapted this independent strategy to the economics of convergence.[26] Marvel first needed to secure a financing mechanism to replace licensing revenues and production investments previously covered by Hollywood studios. As part of a wider interest in the film industry on the part of banks, hedge funds, and private equity, firms like Relativity Media had begun arranging financing for independent production with agencies outside of the Hollywood establishment.[27] With Relativity's support, Marvel executive David Maisel secured a revolving credit line of $525 million from Merrill Lynch to support its film endeavors. The deal provided budgets of between $50 million and $165 million per film, the profits from which could be reinvested, allowing Marvel to project the production of ten films over eight years with this funding. Merrill Lynch guaranteed Marvel an evaluation period of four films, after which the proven viability of the investment would keep the credit line open. The Ambac insurance company promised to cover the interest payments owed to Marvel's creditor should those first self-financed movies bomb, but in exchange it would seize the film rights to twelve of Marvel's characters.[28]

Though independent, the reformed Marvel Studios still needed studio contracts for film marketing and distribution services. With those distribution fees estimated at only 10 percent of the box-office gross, however, the Merrill Lynch deal enabled Marvel to retain the bulk of the profits, determine its own release schedules, and make further toy and video-game licensing deals without sharing revenue or authority with the studios.[29] From *Iron Man*, the first production under this financing mechanism, Marvel Studios profited more than from its previous sixteen films combined.[30] As distributor, Paramount was estimated to have received only $50 million of the $600 million worldwide box-office revenues for *Iron Man*, inverting the economic relationship between Marvel and the studios under previous licensing agreements (when Marvel was estimated to have received about 2 percent of the box-office revenues).[31] Moreover, Marvel executives reasoned that as the company's release slate grew—with the coordinated *Avengers* narrative offering a road map for ongoing production—such profits would become more regular and predictable.

26 Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 74–90.

27 Jill Goldsmith, "H'w'd Open-Book Policy," *Variety*, January 20, 2006, 44; Gregg Goldstein, "Relativity Invests in Capital Idea," *Variety*, January 8, 2008, 38.

28 Devin Leonard, "Calling All Superheroes," *Fortune*, May 2007, 104.

29 Ibid.

30 Lauren Schuker, "Marvel Looks to Break Through," *Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2008.

31 Gregg Kilday, "Par and Potent Pals Power B.O.," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 24, 2008, 12.

Marvel's newfound independence had significant implications for the organization of creative labor within established film production communities. Marvel tapped existing cinematic talent pools, hiring experienced Hollywood directors like Jon Favreau, Louis Leterrier, and Kenneth Branagh to oversee production. In a twist on existing Hollywood labor practices, however, the production of limited seriality across installments required multiple directors to work side by side (in contrast to *Lord of the Rings*, for which three films had been produced simultaneously under the aegis of one director). Just as convergence enabled the blurring of boundaries between production and consumption (as well as production and postproduction), so, too, did lines dissolve between discrete film productions and the work worlds of directing. In describing the Tony Stark cameo in *Incredible Hulk*, director Louis Leterrier explained in his DVD commentary, "For me, that's where the *Hulk* movie stops. It's here. And then the next scene is another movie altogether. . . . That's the first scene of *The Avengers*." Leterrier imagined his work as director as spanning two separate films (even if he was only contracted for one). Marvel's long-term production plans also required new negotiations over talent contracts. With characters like Black Widow positioned to appear across multiple films in the buildup to *Avengers*, Marvel sought to sign an extensive, "unique" deal with actor Scarlett Johansson (Figure 5).[32] Yet the difficulties of acquiring commitments from A-list talent for cameo roles (for which Marvel wished to pay accordingly) led to much doubt as to whether Samuel L. Jackson would agree to reprise his initial role.[33] Similar conflicts contributed to the recasting of Iron Man sidekick James Rhodes when a lasting agreement could not be reached with Terrence Howard.[34] In eventually signing stars like Jackson to nine film deals, Marvel had to negotiate the gap between its ongoing production model and existing talent compensation practices defined by discrete film projects.



Figure 5. In *Iron Man 2*, Scarlett Johansson joins Samuel L. Jackson and Robert Downey Jr. in the diner scene, crowding in more star power but also raising new uncertainties about signing stars to multiple-picture deals (Marvel Studios, 2010).

This creative resistance to participation in Marvel's direct, ongoing management of its filmmaking operations also stemmed from directorial preference for the perceived individual expression of discrete film projects. In the DVD special features for *Incredible Hulk*, director Louis Leterrier explains that he was initially hesitant to work with a creative universe established by someone else. Only as a rebooted, reimagining

32 Matthew Belloni, "Power of Attorneys," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 28, 2008, 14.

33 Michael Fleming, "Samuel Jackson Joins 'Iron' Cast," *Variety.com*, February 25, 2009, http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118000573.html?categoryid=1236&cs=1.

34 Matthew Scott, "Samuel Jackson's Marvel Deal Adds Sting to Terrence Howard's Pay Revolt," *Black Voices*, March 4, 2009, http://www.bvonmoney.com/2009/03/04/samuel-jacksons-marvel-deal-adds-sting-to-terrence-howards-pay/.

of the character—and not "Hulk 2"—did Leterrier claim to have acquiesced. Desire to participate in a sustained, shared Marvel project, therefore, remained questionable for Hollywood talent—a sensibility that could create obstacles for Marvel, notwithstanding its newly enhanced agency. To effect the coordinated production it had in mind despite creative tensions and idiosyncrasies, Marvel Studios tasked a group of creators with advising film directors and other key personnel across film, electronic media, and publishing. In 2008, the Marvel Creative Committee included Kevin Fiege (Marvel Studios' president of production), Dan Buckley (chief operating officer for Marvel publishing), Alan Fine (chief marketing officer), Sid Ganis (president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences), Craig Kyle (a comics writer who had also overseen animated series like the WB's 2000–2003 *X-Men Evolution*), and Joe Quesada (Marvel Comics editor in chief), and by 2009 it would also include Brian Michael Bendis (lead writer on Marvel Comics' current *Avengers* titles). With film and television producers, comic book talent, and marketers all pooling their expertise, this committee sought to impose creative coordination across film productions, thus ensuring that each served the needs of all the markets under Marvel's brand umbrella, despite any resistance within existing Hollywood production cultures.

Marvel Studios also sought creative coordination in sectors in which it continued to license production and distributional authority to other firms. Executive Justin Lambros managed the licensed production of video games, for example, serving as liaison with developers and guiding them in accordance with Marvel's long-term strategies. However, just as Marvel forged development deals with multiple studios, it had previously assigned individual properties to a multiplicity of competing licensees. Prior to 2007, for example, Activision held the rights to *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*, and Vivendi-Universal held the license to *Hulk*. For the developers of *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* (Activision, 2006), a team-up game based on the shared *Avengers* premise, this posed a challenge.[35] With this network of competing licensing agreements blocking a more singular creative agenda, Marvel complemented its centralized reorganization of film production by awarding a single master license to Sega for all game software related to the *Iron Man*, *Captain America*, and *Hulk* movies. Although Marvel could not directly control production of video games and other licensed merchandise at the same time that it financed its own film operations, it similarly consolidated its licenses, as one executive told trade magazine *KidScreen*, to "bring further continuity to the [licensing] program for the next three to five years."[36]

In cinema, too, Marvel consolidated its partnerships when required. Marvel's long-term distribution deal with Paramount to release the *Avengers*-related films provided marketing continuity in support of its narrative continuity. As Marvel chairman and CEO David Maisel noted upon signing the master distribution deal, "It's nice to have one partner to market all those films because we are emphasizing the films individually but also how they all come from the Marvel universe and sometimes characters

35 Licensed producer Dan Vondrak explained, "We thought we'd be able to put Hulk in, but Vivendi owned the rights to *The Hulk*, and we weren't able to put him in the first release until the license expired." Vondrak, interview with the author, January 31, 2008.

36 Gary Rusak, "New IPs Look to Hit the Jackpot in Vegas," *KidScreen*, June 2009, 14.

pop over from one movie to another. . . . We want them to feel like you're watching a story that's evolving over time in addition to separate films."[37] Marvel recognized that its film content could not be sufficiently cross-promotional if marketing efforts clashed between competing distributors. Previously, studios with claims to different Marvel licenses had remained reluctant at a production level to risk promoting the competition by embracing character crossovers.[38] At the level of distribution, where studio revenues from Marvel films would become more limited, little suggested that studios would become any more cooperative in spirit.

Thus, even with an independent Marvel reliant on partnerships in film distribution and licensed media markets, the significance of its strategies as a rearticulation and reorganization of Hollywood production cultures bears reflection. For the major studios, Marvel had once represented a source of contractual labor generating blockbuster properties for their appropriation. The licenses sold by Marvel had effectively given away the comic book company's position of creative authority and industrial authority over talent and labor. Yet in the wake of Marvel's independence, the institutional relationships between converged Hollywood and comic book industries became significantly altered. As marketer-distributors, Hollywood studios became contractual labor serving Marvel, as did stars, directors, and other creative talent signed by the upstart. In declaring independence and facilitating production practices coordinated over time and across industries, Marvel redrew around itself the creative and economic practices of Hollywood tent-pole production. Furthermore, in corralling its characters under a single banner and making Paramount sole film distributor, Marvel effectively cut most studios out of the long-term comic book film market (insofar as the only real competitor to Marvel Comics remained Time Warner subsidiary DC Comics, limiting studios like Sony and Twentieth Century Fox to continued exploitation of grandfathered licenses). As an outsider independent, Marvel depended on the distributional and marketing support of the Hollywood majors, yet it reorganized production in a manner that upset established hierarchies.

This complex shift therefore reflected two significant tensions within Hollywood. First, in an age of convergence, who could cross borders and work across media, and in what ways? And, who could control the creative and industrial collisions of comics and film? As this analysis of industrial practice suggests, Marvel responded to this tension by redrawing institutional and labor relations to put itself in the position of convergence quarterback. A second, still-unexplored tension centers on the willingness of Hollywood institutions to let this happen. How was this change presented as reasonable to Marvel's studio and licensed partners? Given Marvel's continued dependence on its partners, why did Hollywood not resist this change in creative and economic authority? On a cultural level, how did Marvel render its economic independence meaningful and acceptable to the established production communities it reworked in the process? While these questions certainly have economic answers based in calculations

37 Jay Fernandez, "Ongoing Story Line: Marvel-Par Alliance," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 30, 2008, 12.

38 Shawn Adler, "Spider-Man Meets the Hulk," *MTV Movies Blog*, June 12, 2008, http://moviesblog.mtv.com/2008/06/12/spider-man-meets-the-hulk-the-cross-over-that-almost-was-but-wasnt/.

of risk and reward, they can also be answered by turning to the production culture of trade stories.

Trade Narratives, Legitimization, and Destiny. While Marvel's narrative strategies were compatible with Hollywood's storytelling traditions, its institutional strategies in pursuit of industrial convergence proved less so, requiring another set of narratives—stories about Marvel itself—to manage the contradiction and give commonsense meaning to Marvel's objectives. In the trade narratives that "sold" Marvel's independence to other production communities, at least five recurring strategies emerged to reimagine Hollywood and the place of Marvel Studios within it. These self-reflexive trade narratives smoothed over the institutional transitions and contradictions of convergence by: legitimizing the managerial control of converged production by film industry outsiders, offering reassurances to the established Hollywood order, articulating industrial expertise to fans' knowledge, emphasizing meaningful communal bonds with contracted labor, and inscribing institutional reorganization in the language of destiny and inevitability. Together, these discourses produced a series of meanings about and potential identifications with Marvel's institutional reorganization within the production communities of Hollywood. Though not unified, and often targeting different audiences and constituencies within the media industries through their slippages and contradictions, these narratives formed an interlocking discursive formation that worked to make meaningful Marvel's emerging relations to existing industrial identities and communities.

To understand the impact of these self-reflexive utterances, it is important to recognize them not as meaningless hot air spewing forth from the executive suite but rather as discursive acts rich with semiotic utility that had a significant impact on how Marvel could be imagined within the culture industries. Circulated in publications like the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Variety*, and the *Hollywood Reporter*, the comments made by Marvel producers and executives carried a great deal of weight in setting the agenda for industrial and popular conversations about the company. With the press reproducing one another's stories, statements made in one publication echoed in another. The trade and financial press especially served as primary sites at which stockholders, potential investors, and would-be production partners became familiar with Marvel's strategies. Similarly, fan websites and entertainment news sites such as ComingSoon.Net reviewed the trades and reproduced such stories as news for popular consumption. Simply put, as a part of the "industry lore" theorized by Timothy Havens and others, the self-reflexive statements in these press stories were one of the primary cultural gateways through which investors, potential partners, and consumers alike would have begun to articulate, reproduce, and negotiate meanings about Marvel and their practices in relation to that company.[39] Certainly, some of this discourse may have been merely intended as public relations spin rather than as any kind of accurate

39 Timothy Havens, "Universal Childhood: The Global Trade in Children's Television and Changing Ideals of Childhood," *Global Media Journal* 6, no. 10 (Spring 2007), http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/gmj/sp07/gmj-sp07-havens.htm.

reflection of Marvel's rationales or motives—yet even such puffery held the potential to inform the meanings and values articulated to Marvel in the production communities receiving that talk.

In this regard, it may also be productive to conceptualize these discourses as media "paratexts" in the sense suggested by Jonathan Gray: frames or filters one passes through to access and make sense of a text itself.[40] Although paratextuality is most often considered in relation to how popular media audiences receive meaning, trade stories ask us to consider how production personnel are themselves audiences of a kind for whom deep texts, as paratexts, offer branded meaning and identity to the media firms in relation to which they labor. In this sense, the text on which paratexts operate would be the Marvel brand, not Marvel films. Through self-reflexive discourses such as these, institutions, structures, and practices acquire meaning in industrial contexts and spaces. Marvel's self-reflexive production of industry lore held paratextual power to manage and inflect the imaginative orientation of those within Hollywood who encountered and made sense of the company as a brand. As the hype that Gray identifies with paratextuality, these promotional utterances were rarely, if ever, devoid of meaning; instead, they were crucial, meaning-laden moments in which Marvel institutionally inserted itself into the imaginative space of Hollywood production cultures.

Keeping the significance of corporate hype in mind, many of Marvel's trade narratives aimed to legitimate its centralized control over the production of film from a position outside that industry, challenging the commonsense notion that a specifically cinematic managerial expertise might be requisite. As chairman and CEO David Maisel told the *Hollywood Reporter* upon the release of *Iron Man* in May 2008, "We are in the *Iron Man* business . . . so whether it is a major motion picture or a video game, we have somewhat of an obligation to our fans and the consumer to stay involved with the creative process."[41] Maisel recast the production of comic book films and video games not in terms of specific media platforms, but instead in terms of the iconic characters Marvel had on offer, emphasizing a special relationship with its consumers. In the days leading up to the film's public reception, this talk reassured trade readers that Marvel's expertise in service of fans would generate market returns. Because the *Iron Man* business transcended medium-specific institutional boundaries, the decades-long expertise in pleasing fans of that character suggested that Marvel was the most viable manager of that enterprise. In framing *Iron Man* as a business to be managed as much as a creative endeavor, however, Maisel's statements also reworked commonsense claims about moral rights and creative authority to cast corporate managers in a more sympathetic and valuable light. In this slippage, creative talent in film and other industries became a problem to be managed, and thus Marvel claimed a moral obligation to keep corporate watch over that creative process. The promise of imminent success Marvel made to the trade press in 2008, therefore, hinged on making

40 Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 2–3. Comparisons could also be drawn to the discursive process explored by Lynn Spigel whereby accumulations of print advertisements worked in aggregate to render postwar television within "domestic" space. See Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

41 David Ward, "Sega Plays Marvel Video Game," *Hollywood Reporter*, May 2, 2008, 12.

meaningful its expertise as a force of corporate management and control as much as its creative acumen.

Indeed, Marvel executives promoted their corporate control and managerial expertise in direct opposition to creative processes in the film industry to which it attributed any and all past critical or commercial failures. Shortly after the Merrill Lynch deal had closed in 2005, leaving Marvel to sign new promotional and licensing partners under its new production model, executive Avi Arad insisted in 2006: "We've had one bad movie, *Elektra* [Twentieth Century Fox; Rob Bowman, 2005], and it was bad because we did not have creative control. That won't happen again."[42] Marvel's ability to manage the creative enterprise of filmmaking was framed as a necessity for commercial and critical success rather than as meddling by an outside executive office without filmmaking expertise. Arad expanded on that claim that same year by celebrating Marvel's management as an intervention into traditional studio practice. "This time we'll make it the Marvel way," he promised. "Once you license something to a studio, you have to watch them like a hawk. These are our children, not theirs."[43] With the business of managing characters couched in terms of parental responsibility, these self-reflexive discourses offered Marvel as the best father-manager for the job of convergence cinema. Although these claims drew on commonsense understandings of licensing as a culturally illegitimate and inauthentic mode of production, they did not simply defer to the authority of creators. Removed from the discursive field of parental rights were both original *Iron Man* comics writers and artists Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Larry Lieber, and Don Heck, as well as film industry talent who might claim moral ownership or creative authority over their work. Executives like Maisel and Arad firmly recast parental rights as a function of corporate management as much as creativity, positioning and rebranding Marvel as the corporate entity best suited to the job of overseeing converged film production.

These management discourses were ultimately reproduced by industry analysts like Borys Kit in their assessment of competing Warner Bros. and DC Comics properties. "Here is the problem," Kit wrote in the *Hollywood Reporter*. "Warners [*sic*] lets its filmmakers dictate what happens in its superhero movies . . . the filmmakers and executives take it upon themselves to make wholesale changes to DC's mythology. . . . Warners [*sic*] needs to take stock: Give DC a bigger voice in its movies, streamline the projects under fewer execs, and realize that it can get more mileage with a unified universe than by parceling out its heroes one by one."[44] Kit directly invoked Marvel models of textuality and talent relations in his critique, reinforcing the premise that comic book films should be conservatively managed by outside comic book companies rather than by filmmakers and studio executives. Moreover, Kit reaffirmed the value of centralized authority over the wide-reaching narratives of convergence: "Today, Marvel's film fibers are held together mostly by one man, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige."[45] By

42 Susanna Hamner, "Is Marvel Ready for Its Close Up?" *Business 2.0*, June 2006, 112.

43 Paul Bond, "Arad Jumps Marvel Ship for New Film," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 1, 2006, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1002611209.

44 Borys Kit, "Marvel's Universal Approach Makes It a World Apart from DC," *Hollywood Reporter*, May 13, 2008, 13.

45 Ibid.

narrowing authorial agency to single companies like Marvel and single managers like Feige, analysts like Kit agreed that Hollywood should defer to the centralized, external management of comic book publishers. This trade narrative thus rationalized the creative and economic restructuring pursued by Marvel, casting the effective convergence of film and comics in terms of the company's own centralized corporate management.

Although Marvel's financial independence may have allowed it to criticize studios in efforts to convince other potential partners to work under its managerial aegis, the continued need for distributional, licensing, and promotional collaboration meant that the company could not reposition itself entirely outside of existing production cultures. A parallel trade narrative therefore offered reassurances about Marvel's managerial incursion into the established Hollywood order, seeking both to soothe the studios and to court new partners by downplaying the threat of change. Despite Marvel's inverted economic relationships with studio distributors, executives framed the new arrangement as a culture of continued collaboration. To develop a cooperative marketing coalition for the gradual lead-up to *The Avengers*, Marvel Studios' worldwide marketing president, Geoffrey Ammer, promised in 2008 that he would "work with Marvel's studio distribution partners in guiding pre- and post-release marketing initiatives."[46] Ammer assured studios that he would offer a direct, continued liaison to the production process. Similarly, executives like Kevin Feige reassured actors and other Hollywood talent who found themselves potential employees of a former comic book company, not a storied film studio. "There's a sense of trust there," Feige insisted. "We bring a sense of quality where they are not going to be just playing two-dimensional characters."[47] Feige's self-reflexive discourse directly countered notions that acting would descend to the shallow depth often presumed of comic book characterization.

Similarly, Marvel reassured its licensed production partners that its increased authority would not privilege comic book–specific strategies and practices. As manager of Marvel's licensed video-game productions, Justin Lambros distanced himself and his goals from comic book storytelling, inversely critiquing designers who wanted Marvel games to fit too squarely within the traditions and continuities of Marvel Comics. "The most difficult part is small universe syndrome," he explained. "Every time you turn around, it's another experience from the comics. . . . You have to steer licensees away from that."[48] In articulating such guidelines and steering licensees to creative allegiance instead with the production of Marvel's films, executives like Lambros cast Marvel as a company that understood the economic and storytelling value of film over comic books. Film and the Hollywood way of doing things would continue to be just as central to converged cultural production under Marvel as it had been under the studios. So, executives asserted their managerial expertise over creative processes across comics, film, and games, but they also submissively downplayed that shift in self-reflexive discourse, engaging in a careful balancing act of making the Marvel Studios brand a meaningful point of identification for existing production communities while also upsetting the relations between them.

46 Ibid.

47 Kit, "The Avenger," 12.

48 Lambros, interview.

An undercurrent of both of these complementary trade stories, of course, was the negotiation of Marvel's relationship to comic book fans. While the managerial narrative emphasized the ability of the corporation to serve the comics fan, the narrative of reassurance pivoted toward an embrace of film cultures and a distancing from comics. A third self-reflexive discourse, therefore, worked to smooth over the contradictions between these two positions, characterizing Marvel's external expertise in managing comic book culture as a boon to the specific needs of the film industry by playing up affinities between key managers and a consumer base of purported value. Marvel executives like Avi Arad and Kevin Feige claimed a unique, insider perspective into the tastes of a "fanboy" audience of adult and adolescent males targeted by Hollywood blockbusters. Feige, for example, claimed insight into fanboy skepticism: "He's enthusiastic at the mere prospect of something he loves being brought to the screen. . . . But he's cynical until he sees the goods. He's been burned the past 20 years with movies that aren't faithful to the source material."[49] By self-identifying with this fanboy position in his self-reflexive pronouncements, Feige not only called into question the studios' ability to handle the material but also built up his own authority to handle the material. These self-reflections fed the descriptions offered by Borys Kit in the *Hollywood Reporter*: "Kevin Feige's love of comic books goes back to childhood. Now, as the man who produces all of Marvel's movies, Feige is attempting to do what only a kid might dream up: create multiple movie franchises that tie in to one cohesive universe."[50]

The same lore surrounded executives like Avi Arad and David Maisel. Arad was described by the *New York Times* as having the appearance of "a kid in a comic book store. In fact, the Marvel Studios headquarters might have been decorated by the owner of the comics store in 'The Simpsons': atop the file cabinets, bookcases and every other flat surface stand dizzying arrays of action figures."[51] When David Maisel used his success in negotiating the Merrill Lynch loan to push out Arad as chairman and CEO, concern about his business acumen outweighing his creative talent met with similarly affirmative discourses about his fanboy credibility. After quizzing Maisel on Marvel trivia, *Fortune* concluded, "With the verve of a true comics geek, he got the gist of it right. Maybe Maisel is the right guy for this job after all."[52] Later stories in the business press reproduced this narrative, confirming Maisel's identity in his youth as "a voracious reader of Marvel comics, with a soft spot for Iron Man."[53] By sharing such self-promotional anecdotes with reporters, executives established a sense of boyish solidarity with the comics fans interested in Hollywood's adaptations. Notably, few, if any, of these trade narratives featured Marvel's female executives, branding Marvel's managerial acumen as a particularly masculine expertise. Furthermore, these stories distinguished that fan solidarity from even traditional filmmaker identities. As *Incredible*

49 Scott Bowles, "The Search for Fanboy," *USA Today*, July 25, 2007.

50 Kit, "The Avenger," 12.

51 Robert Levine, "Does Whatever a Spider (and a CEO) Can," *New York Times*, June 27, 2004.

52 Leonard, "Calling All Superheroes," 104.

53 Matthew Garrahan, "From a Comic Fan to a Marvel Movie Maker," *Financial Times*, May 1, 2008, 26.

Hulk director Louis Leterrier told *USA Today* in his critique of esteemed director Ang Lee's previous *Hulk* film, "I loved [Lee's *Hulk*] as a filmmaker. There was great art in it. But as a nerd, I absolutely didn't like it. It was slow."[54]

While we might initially read this narrative as an attempt to sell the emerging creative and economic authority of Marvel to fan audiences, a more careful analysis reveals the fan not as a constituency to be pleased but as a discursive prop deployed in Marvel's attempts to generate meanings for its brand within the industry. While best-selling comic books sell perhaps fifty thousand issues, blockbuster films need to sell tens of millions of tickets to turn a profit, meaning that Marvel fans could constitute only a small part of the potential audience for Marvel films and could not be Hollywood's sole target market. What Marvel did in nevertheless emphasizing its proximity to the fan audience was to elide the fact that comic book readers were not the sole audience for comic book films. In discursively overselling comics fandom beyond its economic scale, Marvel inflated its own value and ability to bring a key competency to Hollywood film production. Marvel executives emphasized their fanboy credibility and deployed the token figure of the fan in moments when industry attention was already particularly attuned to comics fandom and to accessing that small market (in the summer months surrounding San Diego Comic-Con International, for example). Marvel's respect for comics readers in performing fanboy identity, therefore, came as much from the discursive value it offered the company in carving out a niche identity within film production cultures as it did from any concern that failing to serve fans would result in poor box-office performance.

While the fan identity that Marvel managers claimed for themselves reinforced promotion of their managerial expertise, it also insisted upon the compatibility of that management with the diverse production cultures brought into relationship by industrial convergence. In another narrative self-reflexively deployed by Marvel, slippage between manager and fan positions outside the film industry allowed Marvel to offer itself as an alternative site of identification and meaningful communal bonding for contracted labor in film, television, and video-game production. With actors and licensees signing deals with Marvel instead of Hollywood studios, executives presented the fan-managerial Marvel brand as a cultural space in which contracted labor could feel affection, affinity, and belonging. In that process, Marvel worked to reimagine film, television, and gaming production communities with itself as a cultural touchstone and point of identification at the center.

Amid the publicized difficulties surrounding the contracts for actors like Samuel L. Jackson and Terrence Howard, for example, Kevin Feige appealed directly to actors by stating, "I hope with our track record that people can see us as a place that makes product that a lot of people will see, and that at the same time, there's a comfort factor that we will not hang them out to dry."[55] Similarly, in describing his conception of production-based licensing in the gaming market, Justin Lambros explained that he aimed "to manage and work with the guys and provide input. I want to set up something where they feel ownership. . . . [T]he more ownership they feel the harder they

54 Scott Bowles, "Re-Hulk'd," *USA Today*, June 6, 2008.

55 Kit, "The Avenger," 12.

work and more cool ideas come out of it. . . .There's lots of room for creative freedom as long as you stick to who the characters are."[56] President of consumer products Simon Philips made similar claims in 2009, placing particular weight on the value of the coordinated *Avengers* project in his pitch to potential merchandising licensees. "Each property now works for the benefit of each other," he explained. "Licensees and retailers appreciate this because it gives them an interconnectivity and, at the moment, the ability to build a program into 2012. . . . With the links that we are making, retailers and licensees can really get behind the franchise and invest in it."[57] In this discursive slippage, economic investment in the *Avengers* franchise also suggested cultural participation in an interconnected community of production granted identity and meaning through Marvel's unique strategies and styles. Just as Marvel highlighted its ability to serve fans who felt a sense of belonging and ownership vis-à-vis its comics characters, it narrativized itself as a locus of community within the industry to which contracted laborers could also belong.

Video-game licensees thus reproduced many of these discourses, citing a cultural allegiance to Marvel as a community and directly invoking fan credibility as a virtue in managing the labor of convergence. As Sega's Rob Lightner explained, "Marvel understands how extremely important these titles are, so they . . . really gave us access to the film talent and paid attention to how the games were developing."[58] Marvel was narrativized as a collaborator in media convergence that welcomed its partners into a wider community of production and provided access to privileged fields of film production. Similarly, Dan Vondrak of Raven Software presented the fanboy credibility of Marvel Studios as a means of managing the gulf between creative producers like himself and executives at game publishers like Activision: "Marvel is interested on both sides—they are true geeks. Marvel's good at having a business side to interact with Activision, and a more geek side to interact with us."[59] Marvel's self-professed geekiness rendered the company meaningful not just as an idealized manager of contractual creative labor but also as a stronger point of identification for creative laborers in the video-game industry beyond the publishers for whom they more directly worked. Whether a genuinely felt allegiance was in play, or simply a reproduction of the promotional discourses Marvel preferred, the relationship between Marvel and its contracted labor became meaningful in industry lore: Marvel had created a sense of community and belonging to a fan-managerial regime that superseded existing corporate affinities within individual media industries, such as gaming.

A final trade story crafted by Marvel executives highlights the way in which the company's financial reorganization of converged film, comics, and game production was legitimated by the meanings, affinities, and identities articulated to the company within industry lore. To legitimate their increased authority over Hollywood production communities, Marvel executives often relied on a concerted, self-reflexive appeal to "destiny" that suggested that their foray into film production was inevitably

56 Lambros, interview.

57 Collins, "Hero Worship," 26.

58 Ward, "Sega Plays Marvel," 12.

59 Lambros, interview.

predisposed to success, drawing on narrative tropes central to Marvel's core brand identities. Shortly after the Merrill Lynch deal closed, Lehman Brothers analyst Anthony DiClemente described the financial arrangement as one that would enable Marvel to "control its own destiny."[60] Whether consciously appropriating this language or not, Marvel Studios' president Michael Helfant used this same language in 2006 to justify the continuing self-financing strategy: "If we wanted to control our own destiny, we'd have to make our own movies."[61] The following year, as the push to gain support in Hollywood and other media industries continued, David Maisel began using this calculated theme in his recurring conversations with the business press. "Yes, we're making our own films and we control our destiny," he explained to *Fortune* in 2007. "It's not like we have to wait for somebody down the street to green-light something."[62] The following year, he told the *Financial Times*, "We used to be hostage to other studios. . . . But we've taken control of our own destiny. We're getting the same producer fee that we would have got if we had been licensing the property, in addition to 100 percent of the upside."[63] In this narrative, repeated again for the *Wall Street Journal* in 2008, Hollywood studios stood in the way of Marvel's self-determined and inarguable destiny to control its film economies.[64] Although this perhaps irked Hollywood executives who had formerly managed Marvel films, in combination with the assurances of Marvel's other trade stories, this discourse worked to legitimate Marvel's singular corporate destiny and control throughout a variety of production communities. In pitching the Marvel model to potential licensees, for example, Simon Philips emphasized, "The Marvel business is now both the IP rights holder and the content creator. We are in control of our future, and that's a real opportunity for innovative product creation, too."[65] Imagined this way, control over its destiny would provide dividends not just to Marvel but also to the company's production partners. So hegemonically figured, destiny helped Marvel's reorganization of comic book film production appear difficult to contest in both its certainty and its beneficence.

Moreover, in casting Hollywood as the villain and Marvel as the hero in the mythological terms of destiny that often structure comic book narratives—where heroes are "meant" to discover amazing powers and fulfill grand, even cosmic purposes—these trade stories reinforced Marvel's core comics expertise as a rationale for its growing "superpower" in a converged film industry. This narrative of destiny made the entrepreneurial and managerial acumen of Marvel legible within the industry not as calculated corporate oversight but as a meaningful and affective condition that could be believed and invested in on a cultural level. While this certainly appealed to Marvel's existing fan base, that same sense of meaningful identity gave it potential to foster feelings of engagement, belonging, and endorsement within media industry lore. Keith Jopling of *Billboard*, for example, saw Marvel's self-determination in film as a model

60 Nat Ives, "Marvel Settles with a Spider-Man Creator," *New York Times*, April 29, 2005.

61 Kathleen Kingbury, "Marvel Unmasked," *Time*, August 7, 2006, A1.

62 Leonard, "Calling All Superheroes," 104.

63 Garrahan, "From a Comic Fan," 26.

64 Lauren Schuker, "Studios' Latest Stunt: Less Risk, Less Reward," *Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2008.

65 Collins, "Hero Worship," 26.

other beleaguered industries like music publishing might wisely adopt. "Now Marvel controls its own destiny, which looked hopelessly out of control only a decade ago," Jopling wrote in 2009. "Perhaps the [music] labels should look to it as an example."[66] Such replication of trade stories suggests the degree to which Marvel's reorganization of Hollywood blockbuster economies became meaningful and desirable in industry lore, despite the company's potential to upset established economic patterns and creative relations.

It is unlikely that this destiny narrative alone had the direct effect of making Marvel's self-financed film production meaningful and acceptable to Hollywood partners. In concert with several other self-reflexive discourses deployed by Marvel executives, however, it represents part of a coordinated attempt to legitimate culturally the economic changes effected by Marvel in the name of film, comics, and games convergence. Through this and other self-reflexive narratives, Marvel presented its outsider independence as a viable model for reorganizing and making sense of converged film production. The discourse of destiny helped Marvel to hype its textual and economic reorganizations to potential partners with established interests in the status quo across Hollywood and a variety of other industries. Ultimately, then, these 2005–2009 trade stories represented an attempt to rebrand Marvel not only for the public but also for industry insiders. Through these self-reflexive mythologies, Marvel worked to make itself industrially meaningful as something other than a comic book company and other than a licensor, as it had more recently come to be understood. The characters deployed in those stories—manager, filmmaker, fanboy, collaborator, predestined hero—built on core brand identities Marvel had long possessed but now leveraged anew to take advantage of media markets opened by the rise of economic convergence and the decline of Fordist models of cultural production. This rebranding strategy narrativized Marvel as a worthy partner while also framing the company as ideally suited to forging new cultures of production in a complex and changing industrial context.

Conclusion. As this analysis has shown, Marvel Studios' bid for creative and economic independence in the film industry between 2005 and 2009 facilitated a specific form of convergence between cinema and comic books both compatible with and insurgent to the existing production cultures of Hollywood and other related industries. Although Marvel's embrace of installment narratives meshed with some Hollywood traditions, the corporate hierarchies and relations of labor with which Marvel pursued that content diverted institutional power away from the majors to an external position in another media industry. The trade stories that Marvel executives told about themselves and their company—managed narratives about their expertise in managing narratives—thus made its specific model of industrial convergence comprehensible and meaningful to the production communities an independent Marvel sought both to interact with and to reorganize. Marvel's task was not just to reimagine its comic book characters as protagonists in a shared movie universe but also to reimagine the hierarchies and relationships of Hollywood as a shared cultural formation that could and should include a comic book company. Marvel had to give cultural meaning to

66 Keith Jopling, "Opinion: Great Power, Great Responsibility," *Billboard*, June 13, 2009, 4.

the cinematic agency that it pursued. The trade iconography of the Marvel Studios logo—emphasized by the sequence of quickly cut comic book panels that began each of its films—had to connote more than comic books. It had to convey the expertise, labor identities, and sense of belonging that might sell Marvel's direct management of film production to potential collaborators. Marvel's cinematic universe was both an on-screen space and a space of cultural labor through which Marvel inserted itself into the production and lore of Hollywood.

Since early 2010, Marvel's position within Hollywood hierarchies has shifted once more, with its acquisition by Disney bringing an end to its brief moment of independent production. The Disney deal refigures the meanings and relationships in which Marvel engages as a company, changing how it will be modulated in trade stories and imagined within production communities. Marvel's ability to claim immunity from the meddling of studio executives may be reframed, for example, with even Marvel cheerleader Borys Kit afraid of Disney "undermining the cohesive universe Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige has been evolving."[67] The sense of single companies and single managers like Feige standing advantageously outside the Hollywood fray appears increasingly in doubt. Moreover, with Disney initially agreeing to honor but ultimately seeking to buy out Marvel's distribution deals with Paramount for the *Avengers*-related production slate for $115 million, this new corporate entity will continue to find itself managing the muddied industrial identities already and contradictorily invested in the Marvel brand.[68] Giving new meaning to Marvel's productions as Disney products may become a significant narrative endeavor for Marvel and its marketers. How can they aptly respond to the move to set the Los Angeles premiere of *Iron Man 2* at the El Capitan movie palace, a theater owned by Disney that only shows "Disney" films?[69] As the *Wall Street Journal* predicts, "unraveling" Marvel's meaningful ties to other institutions throughout Hollywood "is going to be a long-term project for Disney."[70] While this new era for Marvel should be examined in greater detail, Marvel's continued need to make sense of itself and its strategies within Hollywood lore suggests that the work and institutions of cinema are just as culturally meaningful as cinematic artifacts themselves—with convergence creating new vectors along which to make that meaning. ✻

67 Borys Kit, "Character Development Is Key," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 1, 2009, 6.

68 Pamela McClintock, "More for Marvel Rights," *Variety.com*, October 18, 2010, http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118025864?refCatId=13.

69 "Paramount 'Iron Man 2' to Premiere at Disney Theater," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 7, 2010, http://heatvision.hollywoodreporter.com/2010/04/iron-man-2-to-premiere-at-el-capitan-theatre.html.

70 Ethan Smith and Lauren Schuker, "Disney Nabs Marvel Heroes," *Wall Street Journal*, September 1, 2009.