

Why the world needs superheroes

Written by Liam Burke, Senior Media Studies Lecturer, Swinburne University of Technology

Superheroes were born in the United States in the late 1930s as a four-colour rebuttal to the misery of the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe. Today, superheroes are no longer confined to America, or even the comic book page. From Marvel movies to convention cosplay, superheroes have never enjoyed greater visibility.

Earlier this year, for instance, parts of Sydney were shut down as the Make-a-Wish Foundation and NSW police worked together to help [nine-year-old Domenic Pace](#) become Iron Boy. After rescuing a “kidnapped” reporter and facing down baddies on the steps of the Sydney Opera House, Pace was awarded a Commissioner’s Award for Gallantry before a cheering crowd.

In anticipation of the upcoming [Superhero Identities Symposium](#) in Melbourne, we interviewed 100 fans and celebrities to better understand why the world needs superheroes. We wanted to find out what these icons mean to people, as the genre reaches heights of popularity not seen since its origins on the comic book page.

“An escape” is how superhero devotee Melanie explains their popularity. The traffic control administrator, who is also president of Australia’s [longest-running Star Trek fan club](#), argued, “We’re constantly bombarded with negativity in the media. These characters may be flawed, but they’re positive people”.

As many political orthodoxies across the world seem to fall away, comic book writer Tom Taylor agrees that these characters speak to modern anxieties:

We’re getting more and more jaded by politicians, people in power, and businesses. We want to have an ideal that we can actually look up to, and I think that’s why everybody’s flocking to see all these Marvel movies about people wanting to help.

Comic book characters such as Batman and Wonder Woman have been in constant publication for more than 75 years, and they enjoy a unique cross-generational appeal. One father, who was reluctantly brought to Oz Comic-Con by his children, described how the superhero jamboree provided an unexpected hit of nostalgia: “It brought back a lot of memories from when

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I was a kid.”

For some, watching the movies isn't enough; they want to don their favourite character's costume (cosplaying). As one Doctor Strange cosplayer explained, “I work in an office. I don't get to save the day very much”, but cosplay “allows me for a day or two, even a couple of hours, to really be that hero”.

While it may seem niche, one Ghostbuster cosplayer argues, “It's no different to supporting your local football team or wearing a Hawks jersey”. While another fan who divides his attention between superheroes and footy joked, “I love both. Talk bad about DC Comics or Carlton and you're dead”

Following the success of Suicide Squad, many fans are gravitating towards the anarchic Harley Quinn (whose creator [Paul Dini](#) is a special guest of the symposium). Wonder Woman artist Nicola Scott describes the chalk-faced antihero as a “great entry point for female fans”, while one cosplayer who arrived at Supanova as “her own version of Harley” credits the character's troubled relationship with the Joker for helping her recognise the “obsessive compulsive relationships that you can get into”.

Many fans point to the police and other uniformed public servants as “real world superheroes”, yet the fantasy figures they celebrate act outside the law. Even at their most noble, superheroes are vigilantes, while no-holds-barred crime fighters like Deadpool, Green Arrow, and Harley Quinn are, by any standard definition, criminals.

When asked about this tension most fans struggled to justify the actions of their (anti)heroes, with one suggesting of maladjusted Vietnam War veteran The Punisher, “It's because he's doing it for the betterment of the world, that he still stays on the side of a hero”.

What many fans seem to celebrate is the ability of these heroes to transcend the limitations imposed on us, be it gravity, social norms, or the law. From virtual reality games like Batman: Arkham VR to convention cosplay, the industry is increasingly offering opportunities to enact this escapist fantasy.

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However, while superhero fandom may be positioned as an underground culture, two of the world's largest entertainment conglomerates, Time Warner and The Walt Disney Company, own the majority of superheroes. Thus, whether wearing a retro Batman T-shirt or cosplaying as a Guardian of the Galaxy, fans are also serving as mascots and walking billboards for larger corporate interests.

On the other hand, many of the enthusiasts we spoke to see this as a mutually beneficial relationship, parlaying their superhero interest into ambitious careers. For instance, self-described "geek musician" Meri Amber has amassed a fan following writing songs with titles like [My Superman](#) and [Work It Out Like Goku](#).

Similarly, a fan with aspirations of becoming a TV presenter began a YouTube channel, Luka Online, dedicated to cosplayers. Initially he hoped to "learn on the job, but it actually turned into the job that I was aiming for".

More altruistically, Scott Loxely of the Star Wars fan club [501st Legion](#) raised A\$100,000 for charity by [walking across Australia dressed as a Stormtrooper](#). Scott recognises how these fantasy figures can bring visibility to a cause: "everyone loves a Stormtrooper".

Despite their fantastical abilities, what many fans celebrate is the connection to their heroes' humanity. Jessica Jones' star Eka Darville described growing up in the Northern Rivers of Australia as the only black kid in his school:

When we'd play Power Rangers they were like, 'You have to be the black Power Ranger,' but I secretly wanted to be the red one [traditionally the leader]. So when I booked the role of Scott Truman, Red Ranger, I was, like, 'Yeah, vengeance is mine'.

Such diversity is necessary given the superhero's increasingly important role as escapist fantasy, cross-generational icon, and aspirational figure. One fan, heroically braving a Melbourne winter in a Little Mermaid costume, articulated the feelings of many:

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I think superheroes today are a symbol of hope, making yourself a better person and using that in your everyday life.

[The Superhero Identities Symposium](#) takes place at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) on 8-9 December, 2016.

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