

Mark Millar: World On A String (Part One of Two)

By Markisan Naso, with Tim O'Shea and Jason Brice

Mark Millar wants to conquer the comics world and you can't do a damn thing to stop him.

In 2003 Millar planted the seeds of his takeover with what was arguably his busiest and most accomplished year in the industry. After many years spent toiling on "minor" franchises like **Superman Adventures** and **The Authority**, Millar hit his stride at Marvel Comics with the fan favorite titles, **The Ultimates** and **Ultimate X-Men**. The Scottish scribe soon capitalized on his mainstream success with an ambitious (dangerous, arrogant, crazy) decision to launch a line of creator-owned titles, spanning numerous publishers under the impossibly-titled moniker "Millarworld."

In addition to his comics work, 2003 also saw the construction of the wildly popular website/message board www.Millarword.biz. Here Millar has gathered his hordes, imbuing them with an energy that is half enthusiasm, half world-weary cynicism - just the right split for a new millennium fan group.

But as successful as 2003 was, 2004 is already threatening to eclipse the achievements of last year. With the Millarworld books set to blanket comic store shelves, a **Millarworld** magazine called *Mostly Wanted* entering it's first full year, and a new two-year contract with Marvel that promises a second round of **The Ultimates** and at least three brand new projects, Mark Millar will soon be everywhere.

Well, almost everywhere.

In order to concentrate on his reign, Millar has opted out of the internet lime-light for 12 months. This will be his last online interview until January 2005.

Consequently, SBC assembled the crackerjack team of Tim O'Shea (mild mannered), Markisan Naso (wild mannered), and Jason Brice (the one ring that shall bind them all) to take on Millar. After all, it takes a lot to tackle a man with balls bigger than **Ben Nevis**. We proudly present Mark Millar, for the final time in 2004.

TIM O'SHEA: In the advance hype for **Wanted #1**, the following ad copy was offered: "Get ready for superheroes as you've never seen them before. Forget **The Authority**. Forget **The Ultimates**." Isn't that kind of hype pissing on your own past writing too much?

MARK MILLAR: We should always piss on our pasts. It's actually very liberating and there's no harm done as long as this kind of adult activity always takes place within the privacy of our bedrooms. That said, my first 10 issues of **The Authority** and the now-completed **Ultimates Volume One** probably tie with **Superman: Red Son** as the closest I've ever come to creating a comic book I'd want future civilizations to stumble across.



However, **Wanted** raises the bar for me in terms of writing because it really takes the whole superheroes-in-the-real-world notion to a logical conclusion, in the sense that it moves on from a world quite like our own, and a world very like our own, to the actual world outside your window. The one we all move around in every day. Besides an old issue of **DC Comics Presents** I have a rather unhealthy fondness for and a 1985 issue of **Superman** starring Julie Schwartz, I think [**Wanted**] is the only series ever to have dragged superheroes kicking and screaming into this parallel reality which most of us call home. It's really, honestly

the last story I do along these lines and, in my opinion, it's the best one.

MARKISAN NASO: If **Wanted** is your last "real world" superhero story, how do you plan to approach superhero comics in the future? Is your work on **Ultimate Fantastic Four** and the upcoming **Spider-Man** series more along the lines of how you'll write superhero comics?

MILLAR: **Ultimate Fantastic Four** is quite different because it's the Ultimate universe and a certain style has been established there. Likewise, **Ultimates Volume Two** will continue the cinematic approach and, unlike the rest of my books, the storytelling will be very simple and will avoid captions and various other elements which relate almost entirely to the comic form. **Spider-Man**, which launches in the spring (and is just called **Spider-Man**), is very different. It's much more condensed and written much more in the language of comics. 2000-2003 provided the entry-level books for people. Now it's time to ramp up the IQ again in the sense that I want new readers to actually work a little harder.

A mainstream audience can go and see **Lord of the Rings** and they know they'll get more out of it if they learn a little about the continuity. Similarly, you get more out of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* if you have a classical education and can actually bring something to the work as you turn the pages. In the same way, I want to write comics again that just REJOICE in the continuity and use it as a rich, viable means of telling the story. We made comics cool over the last three years and now the audience needs to work to keep up with us a little. This would have been wrong a few years ago, but if you're coming to our party now you better dress and behave appropriately. That's my message to the mainstream.

TIM: The first issue of **Wanted** has sold out. Is that more a result of realistic print runs, or damn good advance word (and your reputation)?

MILLAR: Realistic print-run? Jesus, let me give you some numbers: I expected **Wanted** to get orders of around 30-35K. Despite the fact that an excellent book like **Y The Last Man** is considered a runaway success at 25K, and **Fables** and so on are lauded for doing somewhere around 20, I thought we might have an edge since we're doing a superhero book, and both JG [Jones] and I have had some success at Marvel and DC. However, some brilliant books in the Wildstorm line are also adult superhero books (**Sleeper** and **Wildcats**, for example) and they're struggling to keep their head above 10-15 thousand copies every month. This scared the hell out of me because these are really, really good books, but I tried to stay optimistic and hoped a little of that Ultimate magic might rub off on these unknown characters, this unknown universe, this company that isn't part of the Big Two and everything else we had stacked against us. Like I said, JG and I would have been quite happy with 30K so you can imagine our monumental bloody surprise when McLauchlin (Top Cow editor-in-chief) called us up and said our first printing was tracking somewhere between DC's **JLA** and Waid's **Fantastic Four**.

McLauchlin was delighted, but this sent me into a complete panic. This meant that, by the time you count up the advance copies sold at Wizard World Texas and add them to the numbers ordered by retailers, we're talking around 60K for a book nobody's ever really heard of. My great fear was retailers weeping at their own stupidity and feeding unsold copies of **Wanted #1** to their families for the next six months. However, I also thought **Ultimates** was going to flop and I was assuring Bendis that NOBODY was going to buy **Ultimate Fantastic Four** just a few weeks ago, so what do I know? They printed high, it sold out at Diamond inside two or three days and they're bringing out some kind of nice second printing a week or two from now. McLauchlin and Hawkins (who're very good at this sort of thing, despite McLauchlin's violent, drunken Irish rep) suggested actually making the second printing a little more interesting by keeping it at the same price, cutting all the ads and adding seven or eight pages of DVD-style bonus material. Yes, it's really just some crap they had lying around the office floor and the real choice was sticking it in the second printing or sticking it in the trash, but what the fuck? Somebody out there's bound to enjoy it.



TIM: Any idea what the final sales figures are for the first issue?

MILLAR: Estimates are that the December printing of issue one and the second printing (out the same day as issue two) should give us a total sales figure of a whopping 80K or so. Therefore, in the words of **Die-Hard 2's** officer John McClain: Yipee-kye-ay, mutha-fucka!

TIM: How hard is it juggle the logistical/business elements when having four different publishers handle your creator-owned work?

MILLAR: The tiny little details I won't even go into are very different. Since these are all published within my imprint, I've been acting as a publisher in some respect too in the sense that I've been hassling all the other creators about interviews, deadlines and all the other things you just laugh about when you see Marvel and DC editors frothing at the mouth about them. The plus-side of writing **Spider-Man**, for example, is that you get to add to something you've enjoyed since your eyes started sending messages to your brain, you get a nice steady salary, you get some guaranteed royalties and deadlines are someone else's problem. Creator-owned means contracts, legal hassles, dealing with the distributors, printers and all the things you don't even think about when you're doing work-for-hire. Also, in the short term, it's a financial nightmare. I've done **The Unfunnies** and the Image books absolutely free of charge, and I've taken big cuts in salary for **Wanted** and **Chosen** because, fuck, they're books I really wanted to do. The only way we make money is if the books make money and, thank God, that seems to be working out much better than any of us expected. So I don't have to sell my ass in Glasgow's red light district quite as much as I thought I might in 04, Bryan Hitch will be disappointed to hear.

JASON BRICE: The financial aspects aside, isn't managing all the Millarworld books and sundry projects a logistical nightmare? It may be creatively satisfying, but isn't it just extra work and energy that could be put towards better ends?



MILLAR: If you mean working with the blind, bed-bathing the infirm and so on I'd have to agree. However, in comic terms, little or nothing has been more creatively satisfying than sitting there every day and thinking up my own shit. I'd never really done this before and it's a totally different experience from working on company owned characters. I love both, but one provides a break from the other and recharges your batteries. This is something I'd absolutely recommend to any creators and the financial risks are helped a little by the potential rewards in the long-run. I shouldn't name names, but a good friend of mine makes more money from his indie book than he does from his mainstream work. Sometimes percentages mean a lot more than numbers.

TIM: In an announcement of your new creator-owned works, you said: "These titles are the kind of superhero and horror comics I've always wanted to write, but I want to own them too and also produce the kind of material that might be impossible from the big two." What kind of elements could you not pursue at the big two that you can explore in your creator owned projects?

MILLAR: Christ, where do I start? Okay, Marvel doesn't do creator-owned, DC doesn't do books with Jesus Christ in them (house rule) and absolutely nobody in their right mind would publish **The Unfunnies**. We hawked this around a few publishers who were VERY interested until they actually saw the book and then just politely said they couldn't have something like this come out with their logo on it. I don't say this to appear shocking or whatever. It's just what I wanted to write, tapping into that whole HAPPINESS vibe I've been dying to utilize since I saw my first Todd Solonz movie. I'd never have gotten away with this at DC or Marvel. None of the books would have been appropriate for the mainstream companies.

Wanted at the moment seems like something DC might do, but all the little details you'll see over the next couple of issues would have rendered this almost unprintable by a big corporation. I honestly just

couldn't trust them while some people are still working there, your work being compromised being one of the most horrific experiences you can have as a creator. Top Cow seemed like the perfect choice and the relationship is a very happy one.

TIM: With the series **Chosen**, do you hope a guy like Jerry Falwell or Donald Wildmon will hear about this series and start condemning it, so you and Dark Horse won't have to worry about promoting the work as much? Are you hoping to poke holes in the sanctity of religion with this work, or what are your creative goals on a basic level?

MILLAR: No, not at all. Quite the opposite actually. Christian-bashing is the dullest, most predictable sport known to man. The only people interested in doing it are people who were raised as Christians and want to piss off their step-dads now that they're in their teens. Christianity has become so targeted over the last forty years that I actually think it's more interesting to defend it and possibly explore what's made it such a potent force in the world for the last twenty centuries. This liberal white guilt complex that's set in motion against Christianity just falls completely flat when faced with the really simple, basic fundamentals of what Christianity is all about. Yeah, I'm a practicing Catholic (as are Hitch and Quitely, oddly enough), but that doesn't mean I'm a curly-haired automaton operated by the Vatican and agreeing with everything in the catechism. There are almost a billion Christians in the world and that's almost a billion different set of opinions. The things nobody could disagree with are the basic teachings in the Gospels and I wanted to do a series of books where I extended the storyline and wrapped everything up in a logical conclusion that was as relevant to the modern world as the New Testament was two thousand years ago. As I say in the book itself, the *Old Testament* is **Star Wars**, the *New Testament* is **Empire** and **Chosen** is **Return of the Jedi**. We even had the world's first trailer for the third testament in the form of the *Book of Revelations*. Am I a modern-day prophet or someone just trying to make a fast buck from a franchise with a solid, built-in audience? U-decide.



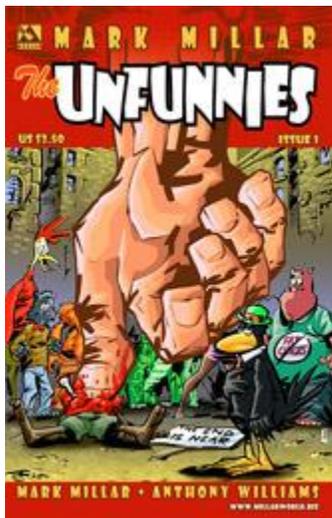
TIM: If **Chosen** is a success, do you think DC will reconsider its no "Jesus Christ policy?" How did you even find out this was their policy? Did you pitch **Chosen** to them initially?

MILLAR: The No-Christ Rule was brought in after the Rick Veitch/**Swamp Thing** episode. They're a big corporation with some very well-meaning people in it and the policy is that they don't want to offend Christians - which is actually quite nice considering we're the one fucking demographic in the world people normally feel they can take a shot at. Try slagging off the Muslims or the Hindus or any other world religion and see how fast you go to jail, gentle reader. I'm the most liberal guy in the world, but that double-standard genuinely does piss me off.

TIM: Do you think anyone has ever been successful in creating a comic that explores Christianity? Do you think there might be some push-back from people who automatically get on the offensive (not anti-religion, per se) when religion is broached - fearing some preachy pile of crap?

MILLAR: The trick is not to make it a preachy pile of crap. Listen, ALL religions start off as good ideas or nobody would sign up. I just want to take a look at what works and reintroduce it in a nice, little modern story. This isn't those crazy fundamentalist comics. This is just the kind of stuff you'd want to read. Peter Gross just called me earlier and said **Newsarama** is running eight new, lettered and colored pages just a few days before publication so check it out first and see if it gets you excited before you part with the cash.

TIM: Earlier, you said, "**The Unfunnies** (from Avatar) is just so extreme that neither of the big two publishers would be allowed to print something of this nature." Would you care to elaborate on the extreme nature of the work?



MILLAR: I think people are upset by it because I'm juxtaposing something innocent like animation-style drawing with the kind of arse-plunging storylines we watch on HBO shows like *Oz*. **The Unfunnies** isn't a comedy. It's not intended to be for the kind of person who enjoys funny animal comics. I'm just taking real-life situations and stories and making them all the more potent by blending the imagery with something quite unexpected. My wife got about six pages into it when she was reading it in the bath the other night and she just threw it at me. She said it was the most horrible thing she'd ever read in her life and she didn't want to think this sort of shit even went on in my head. I tried to explain that the crow was sucking cock for a REASON, but it actually does sound kind of creepy saying it out loud. It's a very complex plot. Probably the most ambitious thing I've ever done. It's a story about child abuse and the comic itself is an unfolding mystery we don't fully understand until the fourth issue, but it's all been very carefully considered and by issue four you'll realize why it had to be the most fucked up thing you ever spent \$3.50 on.

TIM: Now that you've had a taste of creator-owned success, any plans to expand from the four original creator-owned titles?

MILLAR: Yes, the Millarworld plan has always been scheduled in waves and the next wave is in two years time, the final wave coming two years later and tying everything together in a nice, vague way. The whole scheme comprises 21 books (9 series and 12 one-shots) and they really are all linked by very thin, almost invisible threads. The nice thing for me and the artists is that [Millarworld] creates 21 properties optional as games, movies, toys and television programs, giving us a nice, little pension for the rest of our lives if all goes to plan. The idea behind the concentrated waves, as opposed to a continuing stream of mini-series, is so I could prop up my personal work with the lucrative, big selling work-for-hire material. I've just signed a new two-year COMPLETE exclusive with Marvel that means I can't start my next wave of Millarworld titles until the end of 2005. However, **Wanted** would not have 80,000 orders had I not been the writer of **Ultimates** so I'm not kidding myself. I'm as comfortable with the big companies as I am with the little ones and I see the whole thing a little more holistically than others have done in the past.

MARKISAN: Twenty-one books? Jesus! You are planning to take over comics. Can you talk about some of the ideas you have for this tidal wave of Millar? Tease us.

MILLAR: **Wanted**, **Chosen**, **The Unfunnies** and the Image one-shots will be followed by two years of Marvel titles starting with **Ultimate Fantastic Four**, **Spider-Man** and **The Ultimates Volume 2**. Two other Marvel projects will be completed during this period and then it's back to another batch of publishers for the next wave of Millarworld titles for six months. These titles are assembling a fresh line-up of top artists even as we speak (you have to book ahead with some of these people), but the titles are a secret for now, I'm afraid. It'll be 24 months minimum before they're actually on the stands.

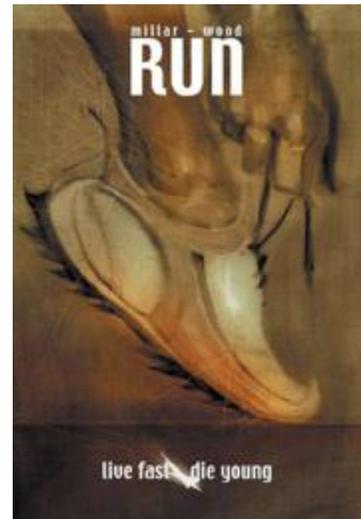
MARKISAN: The plan you detailed - to work for Marvel for two years and then go back to Millarworld in order to give your indie books a boost - is a very smart strategy. Will you continue to jump back and forth between work-for-hire and creator-owned properties after you finish the final wave of Millarworld books?

MILLAR: The thing is I've never made a secret of my love for the mainstream. I love **Superman** and **Teen Titans** and **Spider-Man** and so on just as much as I love **Powers** or Brian Wood or **Marshall Law** (the greatest indie book of all time). I just love comics in every shape and form so I'm as happy writing work-for-hire at Marvel as I am writing something horrible like **The Unfunnies**. The Ultimate books got heat because Bendis and I came from the dangerous end of the industry with **Authority**,

Jinx and so on, and this obviously fed into the creator-owned work too. I love the idea of cross-pollinating the two (often different) readerships. It's healthy creatively and healthy for the industry too.

JASON: Are the Millarworld books, in part, a reaction to the volatile world of corporate/editorially controlled comics? How frustrating is it to have a project lined up one moment and then have it disappear in a company-wide junta?

MILLAR: Fortunately, that's never really happened to me, but, yes, the line is really my way of asserting the creative beyond the corporate in the sense that the books aren't really promoted as coming from individual companies as much as under the wing of specific creators. Comics were like this when I was growing up in the 80s, but the 90s saw the corporations kicking the shit out of the creators again and the editors making us all eat a certain amount of crap. As someone who had to write more than a dozen drafts of a Phantom Stranger and a Secret Society of Super-Villains proposal over the course of a year and then hear that a certain group editor had no intention of buying it "but enjoyed fucking with writers" it's kind of nice to be in the driving seat.



TIM: Are you ever afraid that the next Ultimate series is going to be one too many, and that the concept may be close to running its course?

MILLAR: Are you kidding? Each one launches bigger than the last. **Spidey** did around 65K, **X-Men** did around 140K, **The Ultimates** did 175K and now **Fantastic Four** has ram-raided the 200K barrier. The minute they start to go down is when the bubble has burst, but the honest truth is that people seem to be getting a little more into the Ultimate stuff all the time. Since it launched in 2000, it's been the most profitable line of books in the entire industry and a consistent group of top ten sellers. I have one other Ultimate book I need to do, by the way. It'll be close to a year away, but it's the one book I've done which I think might break the 300K barrier. I started putting notes together on the plane back from New York last month.

MARKISAN: Can you reveal any further details on the "one other Ultimate book" that you need to do?

MILLAR: Ultimate Ultimate line. It completely trashes these three years of confusing continuity and restarts the whole thing over to attract a brand new audience.

MARKISAN: Interesting.. as you say, the Ultimate line keeps growing and drawing in more readers each year. But how will the line continue to remain fresh down the road? As the universe expands, obviously a whole new continuity is being developed. How will Marvel, and the writers on the Ultimate books, ensure continuity with the line and avoid problems like say, the regular Marvel universe books have generated?

MILLAR: I love this question because the answer is so simple; the Ultimate line will always be 40 years less complicated than the Marvel Universe because it's 40 years younger. It's a very important tool for reeling in new readers and, once we've got them, we can get them hooked on more refined, hardcore product. I don't just mean Marvel, of course. I know people whose first comic was **Ultimate X-Men** and now they're reading **Wanted, Global Frequency** and all that stuff, and this pleases me enormously. We're essentially drug-dealers who give you some cheap hits until you're hooked and, before you know it, you're killing people for money to buy crack.

To read Part II of Mark Millar's one and only online interview for 2004, go to: **[Mark Millar: World On A String - Part Two.](#)**