

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

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

To read Part I visit: [**Mark Millar: World On A String – Part One.**](#)

TIM: What dynamics of the original **Fantastic Four** (if any) have any bearing on your approach to the **Ultimate FF**?

MILLAR: We treated this as "FF the Movie" (and lo and behold a new movie script miraculously appeared a few weeks after we delivered our ideas!!). Like any adaptation, we tried to keep what would work for a mainstream audience and focus less on the stuff that belonged to the period when the book first launched. We all agreed that the space-rocket hijack really would be a mistake 40 years after the space race was interesting. Sue Storm actually had a line in Lee and Kirby's first story saying they had to beat the commies to the moon and that just wouldn't fly with an audience most of whom were born the year the Berlin Wall came down. So we spent a couple of days in Joe's apartment, tried to eliminate all the things we thought was holding up the countless rejected screenplays the movie had gone through and delivered something that a modern audience could get into as much as we enjoyed the **Fantastic Four** growing up. Bendis was desperate to get **HERBIE** in there at every opportunity. He's got such a hard-on for HERBIE for some reason. He's a very strange, little man. Very talented, but strange.

MARKISAN: In mid-November Brian Bendis appeared on **Fanboy Radio** and was asked what it was like to work with you on **Fantastic Four**. He replied, "Working with Mark Millar on **Ultimate Fantastic Four** is insane. "[Mark's] drunk a lot and he talks with a really thick Scottish accent. So I tend to listen to him go on and on and he usually passes out mid-phone call and then I just hang up and I type up what I was gonna do anyhow. And I'll send it to him and then he goes, 'Aw yeah that's what I meant!' And that's how it's been going so far." Would you consider this an accurate portrayal of your working relationship?

MILLAR: That's actually CHILLINGLY what our relationship is like. Bendis is the hardest working man in comics and really put so much work into this series. Writing the plots is honestly just 30% of the final story and all the hard work really goes into the scripting. He's a lovely man and should get most of the credit for adding meat to my bones. That said, I'm still happy to take half the money.

I think the thing I love about Bendis is that hanging out with him is like an ongoing episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. He's just a cuddlier version of Larry David with less hair. I saw a great episode a few weeks back where Larry rents a limo and treats his wife to a really big night on the town, but he's sitting there in a restaurant and unable to enjoy his meal because he feels like he's abusing the limo driver for paying him to wait for them in the car. That's just such a beautiful moment that could have been written for Bendis himself. Bri's the most sensitive guy I've ever met in the sense that he's always worrying about everybody else in the room. It's why he's so good at character. He can put himself into other people's heads very, very easily. It's his mutant ability.

TIM: How odd is it to be launching a new Ultimate series without Bill Jemas at the helm?

MILLAR: It's actually really weird. Like doing a Bond movie without Cubby Broccoli. If Joe provided the ovum for New Marvel then Bill certainly pumped in the semen and fertilized the egg. There are some new faces on the business end now providing completely different semen which, of course, will



produce a completely different... Actually, could we just change the subject for a minute?

TIM: Er.. in terms of the **Ultimates** themselves, with more than 12 issues under your belt, do you wish you'd done any of the pacing differently? As a consumer, I had wished the Hank and Jan domestic abuse storyline had not been used as a cliffhanger from one issue to another.

MILLAR: Really? Those were our most eagerly anticipated issues and, quite cruelly, happened to coincide with a complete realignment of Hitchy's personal life which led to some pretty big delays. We said from the start that we really wanted to re-imagine violence in this comic and, quite intentionally, the first 13 issues has about three fights. Instead of the usual two-fights-and-an-interesting-villain formula most 22-page comics follow, we've kept the action/violence sparse and tried to make each fight mean something. Fights hardly ever happen in real life and, when they do, people talk about them for ages.



A superhero hitting his wife interests me more than Superman hitting the Parasite. Captain America chasing this wife-beating superfuck to Chicago and kicking his ass gets me more excited than seeing the traditional misunderstanding where two superheroes beat the shit out of each other for an issue, realize their mistake and decide to team-up against the bad guy. Bryan and I have tried to turn a lot of conventions on their heads with this book and this extends to the cliffhangers. I couldn't WAIT to see Cap kick Hank's ass and I was writing the fucking thing.

TIM: But did you have a twinge of concern when you decided to use Hank's attack on Jan as the cliffhanger? I understand Cap gave Hank his comeuppance in the end, but nonetheless the initial cliffhanger was, on a certain level, using domestic abuse as a marketing tool.

MILLAR: Not at all. I honestly see everything as valid for storytelling and this had more dramatic impact for me so it wasn't a choice. Those early 90s comics where women spent three pages having their clothes torn off in alleys before Spidey, Spawn, Batman or the Punisher

appeared and saved them from a horde of mo-hawked rapists seemed exploitative, but I don't think this was at all. Besides, is domestic violence any worse than street-violence? They're both just violence, but culturally we seem to have these things labeled as acceptable or unacceptable in print for some reason.

Note: Markisan loved the domestic abuse plot. He cheered when Cap kicked the living piss out of that giant meatball.

TIM: Now that there is a new publisher at Marvel, does there seem to be a new creative sensibility at the House of Ideas, or has it remained constant, given the consistent presence of EIC Joe Quesada?

MILLAR: It feels quite different to me because I had a lot of direct contact with Bill. I used to call him up or email him most days, using him as a sounding board. Oddly, quite a lot of people had daily contact with Bill and you sort of forgot he was the President of the place sometimes. I've known Joe for several years and have a really good working relationship with him. Most freelancers would tell you that the perfect relationship is one where the company leaves you the hell alone and that's pretty much the deal I have at Marvel. Joe's a very straight guy and you can just talk to him like one of your pals. If something's pissing you off you can just call him up and say so. He's got great empathy with the creators because he IS a creator so it's a lot like DC used to be under Giordano, I'm told. It's very much a case of keeping the talent happy and everyone just working to produce good comic books.

TIM: Given the strong creative rapport that you and Bill Jemas had, any chance you'll work with him again?

MILLAR: Absolutely. I love Bill and keep in contact with him quite regularly. He was brilliant to work with and just told it like it was. Not everybody appreciates that.

JASON: Given the spectacular collapse of the Epic project, do you feel any regret for supporting it initially, and thereby encouraging many, many fans/writers to go through an agonizing submissions process that would be ultimately futile?

MILLAR: No, that's crazy. How could anyone know it was going to bomb? It had been 20 years since a company (DC) opened its doors and requested submissions and this seemed very positive to me. It just wasn't well-handled, but they had the best of intentions. Marvel weren't wickedly looking to waste people's time and fuck them over just so they could laugh one year later when it all went down the tubes. Marvel doesn't spend money on Christmas cards and yet they shelled out cash for two full-time editors to review these submissions so I'm really convinced they meant the best. It was weird how many people were desperate for it to fail because it really was the first time in a generation the companies actively went looking and its failure means it'll be a long time before anybody tries this again. Which is a shame; I love seeing new people coming in. Imagine music or cinema with the same people year after year.

TIM: Did it surprise you when the **Trouble TPB** was cancelled? Or did you expect it, given the fall of Epic?

MILLAR: Are you kidding? It bombed. Sales on the first ish were actually really good (about 55K) which was nice for a romance comic, but it completely missed the mark. The art was nice though and I quite liked the ending. It seemed like a good laugh when pitched to me in a bar last December.

JASON: Why was the **Trouble TPB** *really* cancelled? Simply low pre-orders? Or a need to clear decks after the closure of Epic?

MILLAR I didn't even ask, but low-orders seems a logical explanation. Marvel love money. They need money because they're accountable to shareholders. If this would have made any money at all it would have been out there so I expect low orders is the reason. There's no conspiracy. It's not an anti- Jemas thing. If that was the case they wouldn't be expanding the Ultimate line gradually over the next year.



TIM: Typically comic book companies have never figured out the best way to capitalize on a successful movie release. Marvel seems poised to do so this time around, with a new Marvel Knights **Spider-Man** series by you and the Dodsons on art. Is your target audience, to a certain extent, the untapped non-**Spider-Man** reader? Do you even write with a target audience in mind?

MILLAR: I wrote **Superman Adventures** for 18 months when I was a DC wage-slave and the target demographic is very important on a book like this because even a six-year-old must be able to read and understand your work (a brilliant exercise I think all new writers should have a bash at). Likewise, writing **Swamp Thing** for Vertigo had me aiming directly at the hearts and wallets of the slightly cynical, late teen/early 20s horror audience. The same kind of restrictions apply in the sense that you can't deviate too widely from an established brief or you'll lose your target audience. The work from 2000-2003 was definitely aimed at the movie-going public. Some people didn't get this or why it consistently sold insanely well, but the truth was that everybody I was loaning the comics I loved for years just didn't understand them. People not understanding a fucking word was as critical to our demise as a medium a few years ago as the number of shitty comics we had out there and I include myself in both camps. The idea behind the Ultimate line was to do books that a 12-year-old could enjoy as much as an 18-year-old. This was the 'kewl' period, but now seems about as 'kewl' as poor, old Michael Bay. The buzzword, as far as I'm concerned, in 2004/05 is neurotic. Neurotic with a big budget of course, which is why I think **Spider-Man** taps into the zeitgeist so brilliantly right now. I'm very, very happy to be writing him at this precise moment in time.

TIM: What added advantage/unique element does your **Spidey** book gain by being edited by Axel Alonso, and how important is an editor to the success/failure of a book when collaborating with you?

MILLAR: Axel's the 21st Century Archie Goodwin. He's the writer's editor and he's got a great eye for telling the cream from the shit. He's also very, very good at figuring out what title will play to the strengths of an individual creative team and then either rolling up his sleeves and helping or standing back and letting the magic happen. I didn't know what to make of him at Vertigo because a few good books could be a coincidence, but as I've gotten to know him better at Marvel and watched him steer **Amazing Spider-Man, The Hulk** and so on to literally double the sales they were doing when he took over and I was suitably impressed. He just absolutely knows what he's doing.

He, Ralph Macchio and Jenny Lee will be, I think, the three pivotal players under Joe over the next two years. Ralph's a genius. He edited Miller's **Daredevil**, Waid's **Captain America** and just about anything else you ever liked up there. He knows story like no editor I've ever met.

Jenny, I think, will be to Marvel what Karen was to DC back in the early 80s. I'm working with her on a project at the moment and the stuff she's got lined up is phenomenal. That and she could kick your ass. ALL your asses. She runs a martial arts school in her spare time and, despite only being 3'1", can take down entire gangs of the Kingpin's henchmen. I love the fact that everybody up there is so scared of her.

MARKISAN: Is this project you're doing with Jenny a book in the regular Marvel Universe? Earlier you mentioned you have two other Marvel projects in the works..

MILLAR: I've got two big books planned at Marvel beyond the ones you know about. One of these is a big, big project with lots of characters and the other is a solo character project I'm planning at some point with John Romita Junior once schedules permit. The Italian is as fast as he's talented so hopefully we'll be able to announce this very soon. I love Johnny to bits. He and Hitch are the best two artists Marvel has. Far more important than any of the writers, as much as it pains me to say it. To have them both in my harem makes me go to bed every night with a four-inch erection.

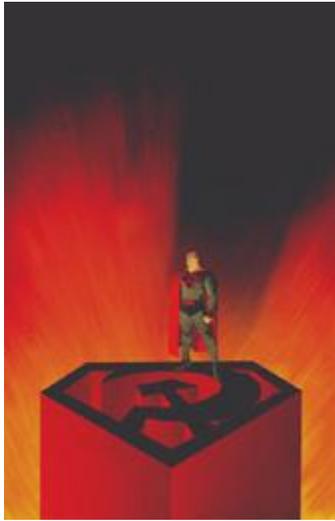
MARKISAN: Hold the ejaculation, did you say you're working with John Romita Jr.? What project is that?

MILLAR: I can't say, but Blade might be a factor in one of the two books I have coming up. That's all I'm saying. I finally have a chance to use all the Blade ideas I've been saving up since the age of 10 when I talked my pal's Dad into painting Blade on the side of an ice-cream truck. Have I ever told you this? Back when I was a kid, ice-cream trucks always had things like Tom and Jerry illegally painted on the side to entice kids to come over and buy lotsa shit. Superman Ices (which I'm sure DC never heard about) used to stop outside my house ever day for two years and my pal's Dad used to paint the kind of awkward pictures on the side. After Superman started to seem a little old hat, he asked me what kids liked now and I told him BLADE was where it was it. This was 1981 or something. Only me, my brother and Marv Wolfman loved Blade, but I lied and told this guy it was huge and so he copied a picture from Tomb of Dracula and had Blade screaming AND NOW YOU MUST DIE on the side of this truck. The funny thing is he thought the stake and the blood was a little too violent and so he replaced it with a snow-cone. It was the funniest fucking moment of my life and was painted back to Superman the following year. Anyway, that's how far me and Blade go back.

JASON: Coming from a moral/ethical position, isn't using Blade in a project slightly problematic in terms of creators' rights, given the character's complex legal history?

MILLAR: I honestly hadn't thought of that, certainly no more than working on **Spider-Man** or **X-Men** while Stan Lee was in dispute with them or **Captain America** while the Joe Simon suit was going on. I'll speak to Marv and ask his blessing before I take this any further. I really like Marv so there's no way I'd do this if it'd piss him off. Congrats, Jason; you might justa killed this project, baby!

TIM: Some advance press on your **Spider-Man** series suggests that you plan to take a more mature approach toward the character. If so, why have you chosen this approach and is this contrary to the nature of the character?



MILLAR: Not a chance. I remember people wailing prior to **Superman Red Son** that **The Authority** guy was just going to have Superman as a drunk, cussing rapist, and although that would have been worth picking up, it's just not true to the character. **Red Son** was essentially my love letter to Superman and the DC I wanted to work for before I broke into the business. **Red Son** treated Superman completely reverentially. Spider-Man will be treated exactly the same way. I'd never forgive myself if I fucked up a character as perfect as Spidey and so when I say mature I won't mean an All-Anal Spidey Adventure. I mean looking at the characters and subject-matter in a slightly skewed, more realistic way. I'm keeping the actual content of this book completely secret because I'm so fucking fed up with knowing every detail of every comic to the point where I don't even need to read them. My template, in terms of mature approach, is Alan Moore's DC work. This will be intense and dramatic and hopefully intelligent, but still something a 12-year-old could get something out of.

TIM: What is it about the Dodsons' style that makes them the perfect fit for your **Spider-Man** series?

MILLAR: They're just great artists. It's as simple as that. Somebody asked me how I always get the great artists and the answer is simple: Never Fuck Outside The Club. The way I see it, The Club is an amorphous VIP room containing 10 great artists. This changes from year to year, but there's only ever 10 white-hot artists at any given time and, no, this isn't the Wizard Top 10 List. Artists are a funny lot and they all like to keep an eye on what their peers/rivals are up to. Thus, if Bryan Hitch, for example, is working with a particular writer and they see this book getting a lot of attention they all start drifting over and trying to catch your eye. If you ONLY fuck within The Club you'll always have the best artists, believe me. I'm working with Hitchy, JG Jones, JRJR, The Dodsons and some of the biggest artists in the world right now. I'd honestly rather sweep the streets than fuck outside The Club because the second they see you working with someone else they all scatter and you're soiled goods. I love artists and I can really give them good stuff to draw. I appreciate that the art is 70-80 percent of what sells a comic and they know they're going to have a good time with me. Honestly, there's nothing more depressing than a bad artist, so having the best guys in the world on my books really makes the job very pleasant. It's like having an A-list actor, director and cinematographer bringing your script to life. Bryan Hitch is a perfect example of this on **Ultimates**. Having Bryan on-board is like having a \$150 million budget. He's a genius. I don't know how he's managed to maintain this quality and ramp up production to monthly status on volume two, but the bugger seems to be doing it and people are going to go apeshit having this in their paws every month. Hitch-clones beware: The Bitch Is Back.

TIM: When writing **Spider-Man**, do you write him in terms of the icon that he is, or are you able to get past the iconic trappings and get into the character's head, much as Straczynski has done on **Amazing Spider-Man**?

MILLAR: At the risk of sounding insane, I just try to channel the character. Sometimes this works and sometimes it doesn't, but you absolutely know when it's working because the material just flies out of you. Stephen King has this theory that writers are more like mediums than creators and I think this is true. He also uses the metaphor of us as archeologists dusting away at a story until the whole thing is revealed. Anyone who writes will know what I'm talking about when I say this and that's what I try to do when writing **Spider-Man**. Peter Parker has never told anyone what his favorite soft drink is, but when you sit down and think about it you kind of know instinctively that he'd like Dr. Pepper.

Visually, I always think of Ditko's interpretation of the character; lonely, neurotic, guilt-ridden and sweet-natured. I think he's the best character Marvel has and I'm in love with the fact that even babies are attracted to the big eyes on that mask.

MARKISAN: On more than one occasion, you've expressed a desire to work on **Superman** with your **Ultimates** partner Bryan Hitch. But you say that's a few years down the road. I get the sense that

you really have the time frame mapped out - Marvel for two years, back to Millarworld for six months or so and then the jump to DC to take on the Big Blue Boy Scout. Are you really a brilliant career tactician or have I had one too many pints? Also, having already written some **Superman** comics, how would your approach to the character be different now? Do you think that approach will change after a few years working on **FF**, **Spidey** and the Millarworld books?

MILLAR: The approach changes all the time. The books I'm writing now are nothing like the books I was writing 18 months ago. Nothing like them at all. By the time I do **Superman** (and this would be some years down the line because I'm very happy at Marvel) the ideas will be completely different. That said, I've been putting notes together for some time on Superman and a variety of other characters. I tend to think pretty far ahead and have a skeleton plan of what I want to do right up until I retire.

MARKISAN: You've often said that you don't want to stay on a book for too long. You want to leave while you are on top. Two years (or 24 issues) seems to be your black line. Is this "hit 'em fast, hit 'em hard" method something you plan on sticking to for the rest of your career, or would you consider a longer stint on one title?

MILLAR: I hate flab, both in real life and in comics. Flabby issues or flabby arcs are just depressing, and as a consumer, always piss me off. I read these interviews where people say they know nothing happened in their eight issue arc, but relax; it's all going to be explained in the next 14-issue arc. I feel like I've just been pick-pocketed. Almost without exception, the best comics are finite because the team knows they only have a certain amount of space. **Dark Knight**, **Watchmen**, **[Batman:] Year One**, **Kid Eternity**, Warren and Bryan's **Authority**, **The Enigma** and so on are all my favorite comics. Of course, there are a few exceptions to this rule. Books like Moore's **Swamp Thing**, Morrison's **Animal Man** and **Doom Patrol**, Miller's **Daredevil** and a few others, but for the most part people seem to start with a one-year burst of enthusiasm and then the book becomes a job and a deadline bind, the good stories merely punctuating long-winded and sometimes boring runs. I like what DC is doing by making everything a six-issue or a 12-issue arc. It keeps it all fresh and shaking up the creative teams has me interested as a reader.



MARKISAN: Many industry pros post at your website, Millarworld.biz, and the fans have really made it a hub for comics information. And now you've started *Mostly Wanted*, an online magazine of sorts. Did you ever think your website would become such a comic geek Mecca? What plans do you have for the site in the future?

MILLAR: There's no plan for the web-page beyond what Jen [Hook], Mike [Tegler] and everyone have planned. They're the brains behind the whole operation, me just being a Andy Warhol kind of figure who comes in every day and signs his name along the bottom while others do the work. In terms of a Mecca for comic people, our philosophy was very simple; we wanted a forum where pros and readers alike could mix, have fun and say what they liked, but hosted by the most steel-eyed, jack-booted mods imaginable who will kick the living shit out of you if you step out of line. It's a perfect environment in this sense for all kinds of discussion. We want brains, not assholes.

JASON: Do you feel that you have done enough for the neophyte creators that you've been mentoring? Has this project been a success? How would you measure that success?

MILLAR: It's not a project or a job or anything. This wasn't like JMS taking on Fiona Avery as a protégé or anything like that. I just told three people whose work I liked the look of that I'd always be available by phone or by email for advice. Not script-advice or editing or whatever. That's a paid-job. I just mean advice, intros and so on and that's what I've done. They're all very good and they'll all make it, but the genuine test of a successful freelancer is their persistence with the companies and how they handle rejection. I knew guys who were great, but spent literally 10 years bitching about two proposals that got knocked back. Genuine potential pros are the ones who keep hammering until

they make sale after sale.

JASON: Speaking of advice.. My mother-in-law feels a continual and vocal need to reiterate that the weather in Scotland is a lot better than people assume. In fact she won't shut up about Scotland. What can I do to keep her quiet? Why would someone leave a country to live elsewhere and then feel the need to tell everyone the country they left is much better than the one they are in now?



MILLAR: Scotland has a higher murder rate than New York, the worst stats for heart disease and cancer in Europe and the average life expectancy for a guy is almost a decade less than people growing up in the South of England. The economy is fucked and it rains all the time. Where has your mother-in-law moved to that seems so much worse than here? Iraq? That said, it's where family and friends are and this little wet rock provides us with an accent that melts the hearts of women everywhere so I love it to bits. I'd never leave here. The USA is my second-favorite country in the world and I'm out there every six weeks or so, but this is home and it's mine.

MARKISAN: You've told SBC this will be your only online interview in 2004 because you want to concentrate on writing comics. What prompted this decision? What kind of promotion will you be doing for your books instead?

MILLAR: Like everyone else, I log on every day and see people promoting their work. This is essential, of course, because you have more time and inclination to promote your work than a company has and it's a major part in our success. However, my 2004 projects have been mostly established and I think it might be nice to just do this one interview and then no other online interviews until Jan 2005. Not because I don't love the net or anything (I'm as addicted as everyone and enjoy reading these things) but because I've kind of told you all you need to know about my work for the rest of the year and the comics should just speak for themselves until my next wave of Marvel titles around a year from now. This is my one and only online interview of 04, but I'll still speak to the mainstream press and so on because they've basically never heard all my jokes before.

MARKISAN: Well then, here's the last online interview question until 2005.. When you are old and gray; when you're fixed to a rocking chair on a porch sipping Jameson in your Depends while you oogle young girls, what do you want your comics legacy to be? What do you want the next generation of fans to say about Old Man Millar?

MILLAR: He was a sex-machine. Fuck the writing. He was a sex-machine.

To catch up on Mark Millar's work check out these trade paperbacks:



Absolute Authority Vol. 2
Hardcover
304 pages



Ultimate X-Men Vol. 1
The Tomorrow People

