

The Devil and Todd McFarlane

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BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE

Here's a vision of hell, as drawn by Todd McFarlane in the 10th issue of *Spawn*, the best-selling comic book in the country:

A row of black-hooded men, hands lashed behind them, stands trembling with fear. Flames curl around their feet. Beneath their hoods, the men are weeping. Before them is a long cage. Desperate hands flail between the bars. They belong to classic superheroes: Batman, The Thing, The Incredible Hulk, Wonder Woman, The Flash and a dozen others, reaching for help.

"It's up to you, Spawn," says Superman, rising from a bench in his cell. "It is now or never."

McFarlane's superhero, who is outside the cage, musters his strength and strikes. There is a violent explosion, but when the smoke clears, the cage stands, unscarred. A demon wearing a dress of dollar bills cackles in the background. "You failed, buddy boy!"

Spawn protests. "But I have to save them!"

"You can't," says a pig named Cerebus.

"Who . . . who are they?" Spawn stammers.

"Superheroes. Like you."

Spawn gestures to the sobbing, hooded forms. "And . . . these men?"

"Their creators. The ones who sold them."

Spawn's creator is Todd McFarlane, a self-avowed "arrogant psycho" who made himself a millionaire by refusing to take his place in line. Five years ago, McFarlane led a cabal of Marvel Entertainment's hottest young artists and writers in a mutiny that revolutionized the treatment of creative minds in the comic-book industry. Since then, he has parlayed his most famous character, *Spawn*, into a multimedia entertainment dynasty, which he oversees from a studio atop the garage of his Ahwatukee manor on the edge of the South Mountain Preserve.

At 36, McFarlane has the number-one comic book in the country, his own phenomenally successful toy company, a hit animation series on HBO and, most recently, *Spawn: The Movie*, a \$50 million special-effects dazzler from New Line Cinema. While weaving this cross-promotional web, McFarlane defended the aesthetic honor of his creation to the death of many business deals. In the

process, he became an icon for the creative guy who beats the greed heads at their own game, selling his ideas without selling them out.

When McFarlane started shopping *Spawn* to TV and Hollywood—both of which have a long, inglorious history of buying off creators and watering down their characters for mass consumption—he laid one deal-breaker condition on every bargaining table: total control of marketing and merchandising.

"I knew I had to get that, because it would remove any incentive on their part to let trinkets drive the content," he says. "Look what happened to the Batman movies. The second one was really dark, and McDonald's said they didn't want any more Batman toys in their Happy Meals. So what happened to Batman number three and four? Pussy! They made them pussy, so they could put images of Batman on toothbrushes and pajamas and little fuckin' glow-in-the-dark stickers. If they would hand it over to me, I could make a Batman movie that would rock. But it wouldn't make a lot in ancillary rights."

Two years ago, in talks about an animated series, CBS asked McFarlane to lighten up his content for a network audience. He spiked the deal. HBO called a year later, and he had just one question: "I went in there and said, right off the bat, 'Can I use the word "fuck"?' " He could. HBO granted McFarlane total creative and marketing control of the \$6 million project. The first of six half-hour episodes of *Spawn: The Animated Series* appeared May 16. Broadcast at 12:30 a.m., EDT, it drew 6.5 million viewers. Another six episodes are now in production.

Same story when McFarlane licensed *Spawn* to Sony for a video game. He got final approval of the game's design. *Spawn: The Eternal* is scheduled for release in mid-August. According to Sony, presales already exceed 700,000 units.

The deal McFarlane negotiated for the *Spawn* movie, however, is unprecedented. He got to pick the director, screenwriter and special-effects team, and instead of being paid a flat sum for his concept, he's on a stair-step percentage plan that kicks in at \$30 million gross. If the \$50 million movie bombs, McFarlane gets nothing. If it breaks even, he gets a little. But if it makes a ton, so does he. McFarlane walked away from deals with several major studios until he found one, New Line Cinema, that would meet his terms.

"The last 500,000 million comic-book guys who came to Hollywood just bent over and took it," says McFarlane. "That's what the big studios want you to do. They want to take your idea, and give you some money and send you on your way, and they expect you to be happy with that deal, because you get to ride in a limo and go to a premiere and act like a big shot and say you made a movie deal. Well, *Spawn*'s my baby, and I wasn't about to sell my baby on the black market for someone else to raise." Furthermore, "There will be no *Spawn* coloring books. No fucking *Spawn* the movie

toothpaste, okay? Let's keep some integrity for the content. Let's maintain some dignity here. That's what I'm saying."

Spawn is the story of Al Simmons, a black CIA assassin who loves killing almost as much as he loves his beautiful wife, Wanda. When Simmons is betrayed by his superiors and burned alive, his soul goes to hell, where the devil, Malebolgia, offers him a deal: Simmons gets to see his wife again if he accepts an officer's commission in hell's army. Malebolgia demands a split-second decision, and Simmons signs in blood. Of course, there's a catch. Simmons comes back to life as a ghoul with charred skin and fragmented memories, who can only gaze upon his beloved wife from afar. On the upside, he's got superpowers and a badass costume. So while he waits to lead a battle host of demons against the forces of heaven on Judgment Day, the Hellspawn (Spawn for short) seeks revenge on those who wronged him.

There are similarities between McFarlane and his most prodigious brain child. He, too, has a taste for payback, and, not coincidentally, a beautiful wife named Wanda. And, like Simmons, he leads a double life. One side of Todd McFarlane is an artist, devoted husband and doting father. The other is a ruthless businessman with the instincts of a pit fighter.

Here's McFarlane on negotiating: "See, you play poor, dumb creative boy around them, so they feel good about making the deal you want. They don't feel like they got swindled, they're like, 'Such a nice little kid, just let him have the pony.' So going into a deal, I think, 'Okay, what do I need to make this work for me? I need a carrot.' So I go into the room, and I go, 'You're right, you got it right, you know best, I'm dumb, you're smart, how's your wife?—by the way, can I have a carrot? Thank you—so how was your weekend? Did you see that show last night? Yeah, yeah, I'll sign there. Okay, see ya.' And I walk out and"—Pop! McFarlane snaps his fingers—"I've got my carrot. I don't care how their weekend was. I don't even know their wife's name. But I got my carrot, which is all that matters. And that's business."

There's more:

"I'm a creative guy, bottom line. But I can sit in some fancy room with some Wall Street guy, and we can talk spreadsheets and we can talk investment capital and we can talk importing, exporting, manufacturing, we can talk stock options, mergers, financing, whatever. You want to talk business? I'll bore you to tears. Do I like to talk business? Fuck, no. So I try to keep that hat off as much as possible. But I'm a lot smarter about that game than I like to let on. I didn't get this far without knowing how to move in the jungle."



Spawn is a chunk of comics history, and an important one. Spawn is a Boston Tea Party, a loud, rude act of defiance against a bad, broke system built on abusing its finest. Spawn is a bold gamble that paid off and made comic books a better field for anyone with talent and a fresh idea.

—*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* writer Frank Miller, 1995

Ungodly howls from the Wookiee-imitation contest punctuate the excited crowd chatter at the 28th annual San Diego Comic Con International, the largest comic-book gathering in the world. This year, the four-day conference drew more than 40,000 people to the San Diego Convention Center in mid-July. Spawn's presence is ubiquitous inside the 250,000-square-foot exhibit hall. The Sony Playstation booth, just north of the Batmobile, had the Spawn video game running on seven free-play monitors. HBO's booth featured excerpts from the animated series. The Spawn-movie action figures are fresh off the boat and everywhere. Todd McFarlane Productions had a booth. So did Todd McFarlane Toys, Spawn the movie and Spawn the comic book.

It's the first day of the Comic Con, and John "Dak" Morton, who had the distinction of playing Luke Skywalker's co-pilot in *The Empire Strikes Back*, is signing autographs in a second-floor meeting room. Two celebrity appearances from the Spawn franchise are far more popular. On the west end of the convention hall, several hundred fans of all ages stand in line clutching various arrays of Spawn merchandise. They are waiting to meet Todd McFarlane, who signs autographs at a table, sitting next to his 5-year-old daughter Cyan, who is coloring.

Several hundred yards away, another long line snakes along the graffiti-sprayed, fake concrete wall of "Spawn Alley," a walk-through tunnel containing props and scale models from the *Spawn* movie set, action-figure displays and a disarmingly realistic statue of The Violator, a demon in the film.

Near the alley's entrance is a man wearing a baseball cap and a Spawn hockey jersey, signing autographs. His name is Al Simmons, and he's more than happy to pull out his driver's license to prove it. Simmons—the real one, not the assassin—is a friend of McFarlane's from back in the day. In 1982, they both played baseball for a Seattle Mariners farm team based in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada. McFarlane was a center fielder. Simmons, second base. "We were the two fastest guys on the team," Simmons said while mowing through a plate of pasta salad after signing autographs—"Al Simmons, AKA Spawn, '97"—for five hours straight. "But I was always just one step faster."

Neither man made the big leagues, and after he stopped playing ball, Simmons went to work "for the government—as a CIA assassin! I'll kill ya! Pow! Naw, actually I was in transportation. But I always told the guys at the plant, 'One day I'm going to go do something, and you guys are going to freak.' And that's just what happened. The day I left, I told them, 'See you later, dudes. I'm gonna go be a superhero!'"

Here's the deal: After *Spawn* went supernova, McFarlane hired the real Al Simmons to play the imaginary Al Simmons—and, in costume, *Spawn*—at comic-book conferences and in-store appearances. "See, Todd is not an accessible, easily approachable guy," says Simmons. "He's really inward directed, whereas me? I'm the promotional king. I do the store appearances, I go out

shaking the hands, kissing the babies. In the last two years, I logged 100,000 miles on a Ford truck, pulling the Spawnmobile around the country. I love my job. I love all the people. It's good to be Spawn."

Within the comic-book culture, Simmons has become a celebrity in his own right. Several fans at the Comic Con asked why he didn't play Spawn in the movie. Simmons says he was supposed to have had a cameo role in the same scene where McFarlane plays a bum who hands Spawn a gun during a fight with The Violator.

The shooting schedule got moved around, however, and the scene was filmed while Simmons was in Boston for an in-store appearance. McFarlane offered to fly him out, Simmons says, "but I decided the job I had to do was more important.

"I don't really regret that decision, but when the sequel comes out? I'm going to make sure I'm in there. It doesn't have to be a speaking role. Just let my face be on that screen. I think I deserve that."

Simmons says he wasn't really into comics before he got the Spawn gig, and, though he stayed in touch with McFarlane sporadically, had no idea his friend was becoming a star. "Then one day, he called me when he was still at Marvel, and I was like, 'Hey, Todd, how you doing?' and he said, 'Well, I just got back from Singapore.' And I go, 'Singapore? What the hell were you doing there?' And he says, 'Signing comic books,' and I thought, 'Hmmm. This comic-book thing might be a little bigger than I thought.'"

McFarlane started working for Marvel in 1984, shortly after he graduated from Eastern Washington University with a fine-arts degree. Like most artists, he started out doing odd support jobs on titles already underway. Superior work on a 16-issue run of *The Incredible Hulk* starting in April 1987 led to a coveted job doing the inside art and covers for Marvel's flagship title *Amazing Spider Man*.

Spider Man's intricate costume has long been the bane of comic artists, but McFarlane ran with it, playing to his strength as a superb detailer. He also gave Spider Man larger, more sinister eyes, drew his body in spidery, contortionist positions, and draped the pages with sheets of the superhero's webbing, which McFarlane drew in 3-D whirlwinds rather than the usual, more expedient flat grid pattern artists had used for decades. His work boosted *Amazing Spider Man* from the ninth best-selling title in the country to number one. In his first issue, McFarlane co-created a new villain, Venom, with writer David Michelinie. Venom quickly became Marvel's most popular supervillain, and the company gave the character his own title, which McFarlane had nothing to do with. He thought Venom should become "creepier, even more ruthless," but Marvel's bosses turned the character into "sort of a good guy."

"It was pussy," says McFarlane. He protested, and Marvel gave him a spin-off title of his own, called simply *Spider Man*. By this time, McFarlane was a big name. When the first issue of *Spider Man* came out in September of 1990, it sold a record 2.5 million copies. McFarlane continued to write and draw *Spider Man* until August 1991. During that time, with his own series to draw and write, McFarlane created not one new character. "What stopped me? Simple. The atmosphere was not conducive. I knew they would just rape and pillage my idea."

Since the 1930s, many of the brightest creative minds in comics have had their work creatively and financially strip-mined by publishers who, under standard-practice work-for-hire contracts, owned everything the artists put on paper.

"The creators of childhood myths like Superman, Spiderman, Captain America and all the rest were, to say the least, treated abominably by publishers who reaped millions from their work," contemporary comics legend Frank Miller wrote in his 1995 introduction to a *Spawn* anthology.

"Many of these creators died in poverty. Virtually all were denied proper credit, any compensation beyond slave-wage page rates, even the possession of the physical artwork they drew with their own hands."

Late in 1990, McFarlane started rousing the rabble. He and several other top Marvel creators, including his close friend Rob Liefeld, Jim Lee, Jim Valentino and Erik Larsen, started talking about breaking off to form their own company, one where creators enjoyed full ownership of their work. They represented a new breed of comic artists—college-educated, business-savvy and rebellious. Valentino and Larsen got their start in underground comics, and were increasingly uncomfortable with Marvel's corporate structure. And a few years before, Liefeld and Lee had created *X-Force*, a spin-off series of Marvel's popular title *The X-Men*. The title's sales had skyrocketed, and Marvel had recently sold licenses to toy companies and tee-shirt manufacturers without Liefeld and Lee's consent or compensation. Lee, who has an MBA, knew he'd just gotten screwed.

"Everyone's thinking was moving in the same direction," says Valentino. "I'd come from independent comics. Eric had come from there. Jim wanted to move. Rob wanted to move. And we all knew each other, and we all started talking about it. It was like a gestalt, almost. It had to happen."

A Marvel executive whacked the final straw across McFarlane's back on August 6, 1991, three days before his daughter Cyan was born. That morning, McFarlane had turned in his final page proofs for the next issue of *Spider Man*. That afternoon, he received a telephone call. There was a problem.

"I had Spidey fighting this villain named the Juggernaut, who, as you might expect, was sort of this big, immovable force. But he has slits for eyes, and Spidey took this piece of shrapnel and shoved it right in his eye, and they were like, 'You can't do this; redraw it in silhouette and lose all the blood.'

And I thought that was silly—oh, what, you can poke out somebody's eye, but you just can't poke it out good. You gotta poke it out in some boring way." McFarlane was pissed. He redrew the panel, but it was the last work he ever did for Marvel. "In my head, I quit that day," he says.

Officially, he didn't resign until five months later. When Cyan was born, McFarlane went on a prearranged leave of absence. During his time off, he and the other Marvel artists quietly solidified their business plan, inked a deal with a California publishing company to print their titles, and came up with a name: Image Comics. "We built a co-op, basically," says Valentino. "Every artist has an autonomous studio. There is a no-interference policy, and a no-shared-money policy. The publications do not benefit the company, they benefit the individual artist. Each individual owner of Image is an entity unto himself."

In late January 1992, McFarlane, Lee and Liefeld scheduled a meeting with Marvel Entertainment president Terry Stewart and flew to New York City to drop their bomb (McFarlane and his family lived in Portland, Oregon, at the time; they moved to the Valley in August 1995). "In summary, the conversation went like this," says McFarlane. "We're all quitting. There's nothing you can give us or otherwise do to stop us from quitting. We're not here to ask you for anything, we're not here to negotiate. We're here to quit and tell you why. We're quitting because we don't feel like we get the respect we deserve. We're quitting because when you have editorial conferences about how to sell more copies of *X-Men* and *Spider Man*, you never bother to actually invite the *X-Men* and *Spider Man* artists and writers. And we're quitting because guys like you have been screwing over guys like us for way too long, and now you're going to get yours."

After leaving the Marvel building, McFarlane says, the group went across town to meet with the chief executives at DC Comics. "We'd called to set up a meeting and told them we all wanted to talk about Batman or something," McFarlane says. By the time the party arrived, word of their walkout had already reached the DC offices. "They were pretty excited when we got there," McFarlane says. "But we sat them down and gave them the same spiel: 'We just quit Marvel. We're not going to work for you, either. Here's why.' We told them the same thing we told the Marvel guys—'You should think about the fact that if everyone stopped drawing and writing books, none of you guys has a job tomorrow. You can't market air, assholes.'"

The cumulative work of the artists who left Marvel accounted for 40 percent of the company's total sales in 1991. The departure of the "Image Seven" was first widely publicized a week later in the business magazine *Barron's*. Terry Stewart was quoted trying to downplay the importance of the exodus. "The importance of the creative people is still secondary to the importance of the comic-book characters," he said. Investors disagreed. The day after the *Barron's* article ran, Marvel's stock took an \$11 hit, and the company lost \$137.6 million in market value overnight.

Image, meanwhile, was getting ready to rock 'n' roll. The company's timing was perfect. The trading-card market had just crashed, and the comic-book market was suddenly flooded with speculative buyers, who boosted a comic-book renaissance that was already under way. In 1989, comic books generated \$175 million in sales. In 1991, the figure doubled to \$350 million. In 1993, it was \$850 million. The market was largely single-issue driven in the early '90s, and gambling investors commonly purchased hot titles by the case like stocks, hoping they would quickly appreciate in value.

Image published its first title—Rob Liefeld's *Youngbloods*, about a group of ultrahip, bio-enhanced superheroes with press agents and wardrobe consultants—in March of 1992, and it sold 900,000 copies. Todd McFarlane followed up two months later with the first issue of *Spawn*, which nearly doubled that figure. It sold 1.7 million copies, shattering the previous sales record for independent comics. For the first time, the best-selling comic in America was totally controlled and owned by the artist who made it up.

And, for the first time, Marvel and DC had serious competition. "Suddenly, there was a big three in comic publishing, instead of the usual big two," says John Jackson Miller, the editor of *Comics Retailer* and an associate editor at *Comic Buyer's Guide*. "The influx of new buyers, combined with computer inking technology, which made the startup cost to compete with Marvel and DC much lower than 10 years ago, allowed Image to come out of nowhere and suddenly grab a 15 percent market share, which certainly threw a scare into Marvel and DC."

After Image scored two quick hits, the company started head-hunting promising artists at both DC and Marvel, and McFarlane made a quickly notorious crack at a comic-distributors conference that "Marvel is now a training ground for future Image artists." Finally, DC and Marvel started to react. Creators got substantial pay raises. Those who came up with new characters were offered royalties, involved in marketing decisions, and cut into licensing deals. In some cases, the deals were retroactive, rewarding artists who had recently created popular characters. In 1995, DC published its first creator-owned comic title, *Sovereign Seven*.

"Generally speaking, publishers are treating their creators radically better since Image arrived on the scene," says Miller. "Creators are getting deals that would have been pure fantasy 10 years ago. Are there still creators laboring under work for hire? Yes. But far fewer."

Five years after it was first published, *Spawn* is distributed in 36 countries, printed in 16 languages, and has sold more than 90 million copies worldwide. Last year, *Spawn* issues captured 31 of 65 spots on comic-distribution giant Diamond Distribution's annual "Top Comics 1-65" list, including four of the Top 10. Al Simmons/*Spawn* is the first black superhero with his own title to achieve such popularity. Domestic sales for *Spawn* grossed \$4.4 million last year, international sales another \$1.8 million.

On the flip side, Marvel never recovered from its black day on the stock market. The comic industry went into a recession in 1993, and Marvel and DC, who expanded their lines dramatically during the boom, took it on the chin. Terry Stewart resigned as Marvel's president in 1995. The company declared bankruptcy last year after a disastrous attempt to revamp its distribution system, and spent the next 16 months as a Ping-Pong ball in a buyout match between corporate raiders Ron Perlman and Carl Icahn (last month, a court decision awarded control of the company to Icahn).

"If I had taken over Marvel in 1992, if they had said, 'Todd, we love you, don't quit, here—take over the company,' and I decided to drive the company into bankruptcy to get my revenge, I couldn't have done it any faster than they did themselves," says McFarlane.

"What does this tell us about big-business guys? Those big-business guys aren't so brilliant. They just think they're better than the average guy, and what's worse, the public thinks they are, too. That's chicken shit. Too many people cower before big business, when the only thing that prevents anyone from equaling what they do is two things: cash, and ambition. Well, I'm far too ambitious for my own liking, and I have cash. You got those two things, you can do anything in this friggin' world."



Are you sure you know the difference between good and evil? Are you confident you could distinguish the forces of light from the forces of darkness? I'm Todd McFarlane, creator of Spawn. And to me, there's nothing out there in life that's all black or all white. Good always has a germ of evil inside it, and evil just a touch of good. Take Spawn. An assassin in life, hell's own soldier in death—not exactly Boy Scout material. But if you consider he made his choices for love, for the love of country, and the love of his wife, well, you begin to see he's a little like you and me. Just another poor schmo, walking on razor's edge, all hell pushing one way, and heaven pushing the other, and him stuck in the middle, trying not to get cut.

— Todd McFarlane, introducing the second episode of *Spawn: The Animated Series*; May 23, 1997

Last month, McFarlane Toys released a wildly hyped line of action figures depicting the members of the rock group KISS. The band's bassist, Gene Simmons, recently said that Todd McFarlane is the only person he's met with an ego bigger than his own. McFarlane launched his own toy company in January of 1994, shortly after he broke off negotiations with toy giants Mattel and Hasbro when both scoffed at his insistence upon final design approval of a Spawn action-figure line. Nine months later, McFarlane Toys shipped the first line of Spawn action figures to retailers nationwide. They were better articulated and detailed than any other action figure on the market.

McFarlane has produced seven additional lines of Spawn figures since then, and Tower Records in Tempe has a sign on its door warning that the store is sold out of KISS figures, including back orders through August. McFarlane Toys grossed \$23 million last year.

"Hey, I didn't start a toy company to become a toy mogul," McFarlane says. "I started a toy company because those sons of bitches sat there and told me I couldn't make a toy unless I kowtowed to them. So I was like, 'Fine, I'll make my own fucking toys. And what's more, my toys will be cooler than your toys. And I'll do it just to show you that you're not as smart as you think you are.'"

The animated series didn't force the same kind of showdown. McFarlane found a company, HBO, willing to commit its money to his vision. Typically, comic books lose their edge when they make the jump to TV animation—witness Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, et al. McFarlane wanted to take Spawn in the opposite direction, and HBO let him. If anything, the animated Spawn series is more hard-core than his comic book. Its dark themes, rough language, nudity and graphic violence are much closer in style to Japanese manga animation than Saturday-morning cartoons. The episodes aired earlier this year were perforated with highly stylized gunfights à la John Woo, and in one scene a cyborg assassin ripped the arm off a homeless man and used it to write a challenge to Spawn in blood on a brick wall.

Some critics were aghast. "I can't imagine why anyone would want to subject themselves to such a relentlessly grim, gruesome, dehumanizing experience," opined *Dallas Morning News* TV critic Ed Bark. "Mr. McFarlane makes Stephen King look like one of the three Rice Krispies characters." Bark also declared the success of McFarlane's toy company, comic book and the upcoming Spawn movie "all signs that the apocalypse is upon us."

Whatever, says McFarlane. "I got a number-one movie coming out where the hero is a guy who comes back from hell. There's a lot of tight asses out there who probably won't like that much, either. I don't worry about public opinion. I just do what I do, and that's worked for me so far."

McFarlane's credo has been, if you won't let me do it my way with your money, I'll do it my way with mine. Hence, Image Comics and McFarlane Toys. He had the capital for those startups, and probably could have produced his own video game or animated series if he saw the need. In May of 1996, *Forbes* magazine estimated his net worth at \$35 million. McFarlane said later it guessed a little low, and he's clocked some bank since then. "I got a few bucks in my pocket," he says.

But not enough to make a movie. Not to do it right. Not without risking everything he owns. McFarlane needed Hollywood to make a Hollywood movie—not the best bargaining position for an idealist going into a town where ideals typically rank somewhere below the bottom line. He says he was prepared to come up empty. "When I went in there, my attitude was like, 'Let's see, I'm 35

years old, and I've got a family who adores me that I love very much, and a nice house and toy company and a number-one comic book, and I've never had a Spawn movie, and I'm still a happy man.'"

But, after several major studios rejected his conditions—including Columbia, who was "90 percent there before it fell apart"—McFarlane shook hands over the table with New Line Cinema. He got his marketing and merchandising control, he got his point shares, and he got to hand-pick the director, writer and special-effects team. They watched his back on the set, McFarlane says. When New Line wanted to change Spawn's "very organic, Alien-esque" costume to look more like the Spawn toys, they gave him a red alert, and, with their help, he talked the studio out of the idea.

But to get all that, McFarlane had to make just one little change. It was a matter of pigmentation. Two principal characters who are black in Spawn the comic book, Spawn the action-figure line and *Spawn: The Animated Series* are played by white actors in Spawn the movie.

In the second comic-book issue of Spawn, the superhero tries to use his magic powers to temporarily regenerate his charred skin. In a flash, he turns into a white guy. "No," Spawn cries. "This can't be. I'm a black man!" Apparently, all it took for two of McFarlane's characters to undergo a similar transformation on the big screen was a Hollywood studio's insistence.

New Line president Michael De Luca says he doesn't remember any discussion about there being too many black characters. "I think we just wanted more casting options," he says.

McFarlane tells a different story. "If I'd stuck by my guns and it were perceived as a 'black movie,' they [New Line] would have only given us \$20 million," he wrote in a recent issue of Spawn. "The movie deserved more."

Diehard Spawn fans were outraged. Especially the black ones. "I recognize that you being a white man, you may not totally understand my anger with your decision," a fan from Delaware wrote McFarlane in a recent "Spawning Ground" letters section, where the casting change has been a topic of debate between McFarlane and his readers for several months. "But I challenge you to give a valid, concrete reason that doesn't center around you selling out to please the executives who funded the project."

McFarlane tried: "Given that we had to make some concessions, the up side is that we've got a \$47 million movie that's promoting the lead as a man of color. I feel that it's far more advantageous to have a better movie with a bigger budget that will get more attention and stars a black man as a hero instead of a \$20 million movie with four black actors that will come and go and disappear."

Ironically, one of the characters that got whitewashed is Terry Fitzgerald. Played by D.B. Sweeney in the film, Fitzgerald is the best friend who marries Simmons' wife after Simmons is dead, adding to

Spawn's anguish. Simmons' wife in the movie is played by Theresa Randle, who is black. "So, basically, they created an interracial couple," says the real-life Al Simmons. "You tell me where the logic is. But that's Hollywood. When I first heard they thought there were too many blacks in the movie, I was like, 'What do you mean there are too many blacks? Is that what you tell Spike Lee—"Uh, Spike, I'm sorry, you're going to have to get some more white guys in there.'" But that's just the way Hollywood is, dude. They thought there were too many brothers. But they're okay with a white man kissing a black woman onscreen. Far as I'm concerned, it just made the movie more cutting-edge."

McFarlane wouldn't talk about the color changes in a recent interview, except to say this: "I didn't create Spawn as a black superhero. I created him as a cool superhero who happens to be black. His race isn't the key to his character, just like it isn't the key to any of the other characters in the comic. But if you have to look at the situation in racial terms, look at it this way: I got the big movie made, and created a role that can now be played in two or three sequels by a black actor. So it was more of a victory to me to have a big movie with a big budget with the lead being a black man than to have a little movie with more black characters that the studio wouldn't promote, and that would never get a sequel. But, again, I truly don't think the color of the actors is that big a deal. It's what the characters stand for that's important."

McFarlane has also used that argument in the letters pages, and at least one Spawn reader didn't buy it.

"That's like saying making a movie with a purple Incredible Hulk or a movie about Jaws where the main character is a squid is not a major issue," wrote 25-year-old Jason Williams. "Altering race for the movie to avoid it being labeled as a 'black movie' just shows who you are catering to. Don't you see how this is selling out?"

By that argument, McFarlane shares one last trait with the character that made him rich. When the stakes got high enough, and a voice started whispering in his ear, he listened.

If every man truly has his price, Todd McFarlane's was around \$50 million.