

**SCOTT PILGRIM
RETURNS**

— BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW HIM.
THE SHOWRUNNERS BEHIND
NETFLIX'S NEW ANIME
SERIES TALK EVIL EXES,
FANDOM WORRIES, AND
THEIR ALL-STAR CAST

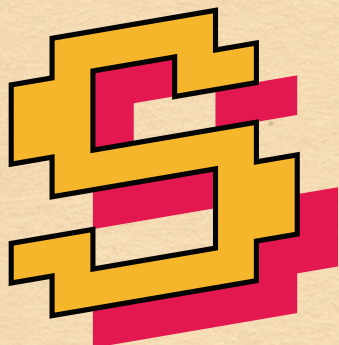
WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD

GAME

SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF

OW!

SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF



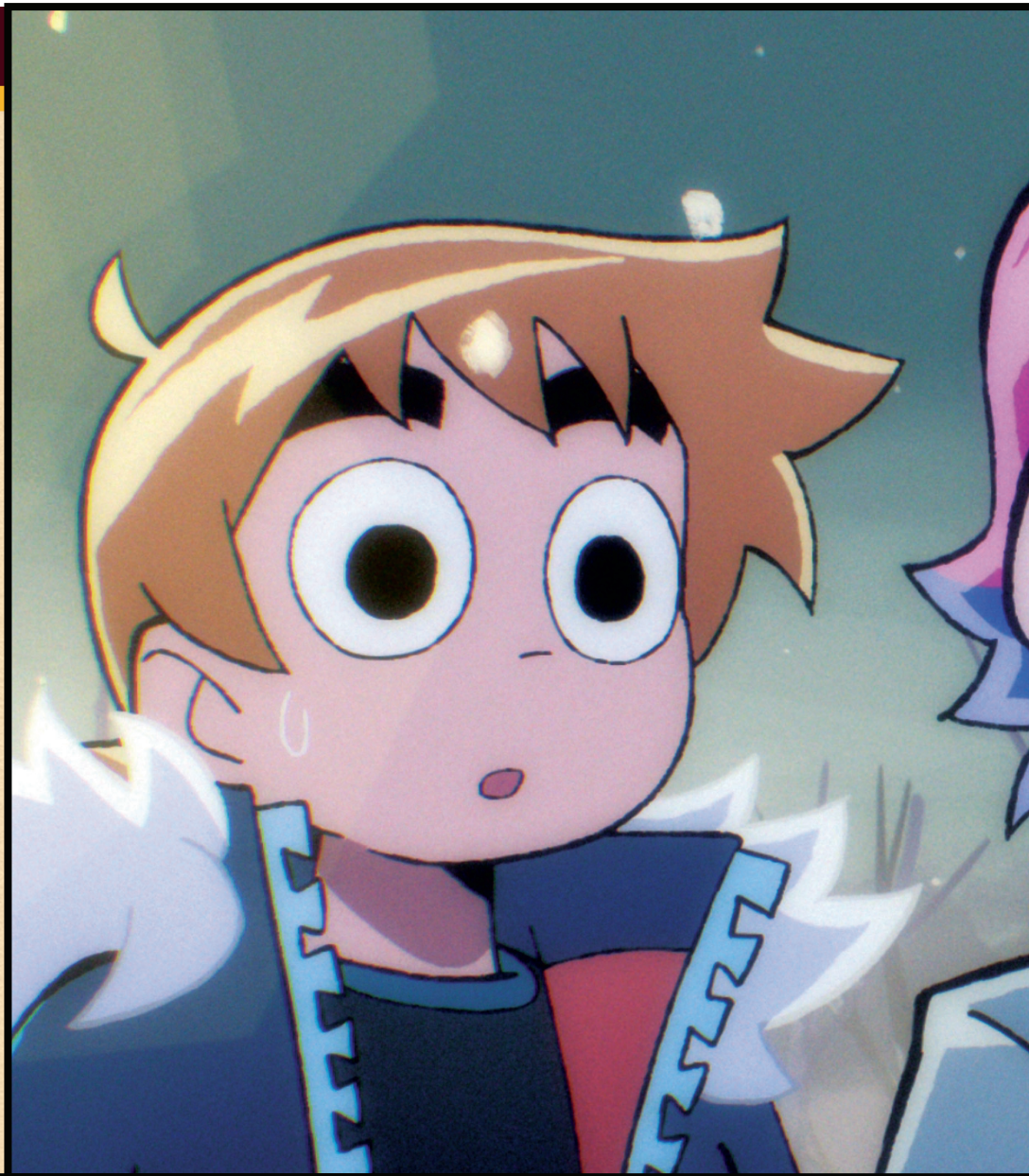
SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF STARTS inside a dream. The eponymous dorky 23-year-old's sleep has been intruded by a mysterious woman with colourful hair skating through subspace. He wakes up next to his cooler roommate Wallace Wells, who wants Scott to move out or find a job. Scott instead goes to band practice, where his girlfriend, Knives Chau, watches him play bass in awe.

Later, at a party, he meets Ramona Flowers, the skater girl from his dreams, and the next day orders DVDs from Netflix because Ramona's a delivery person for them. The two go on a date, sparks fly, and Ramona goes to watch Scott's band Sex Bob-Omb play a concert; the whole thing's ruined when one of Ramona's seven evil ex-boyfriends, Matthew Patel, crashes the gig.

So far, as expected. The first episode of Netflix's new anime adaptation of Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novels sticks faithfully to the source material (apart from the added inclusion of Netflix DVDs). But then, something happens at the end of the series' opener – something that no one familiar with the novels or Edgar Wright's cult classic film or the videogames will expect.

While *SFX* has been barred from going into specifics about what this climactic, surprising moment entails, we can say that this single event upends the series in a shocking, viscerally exciting way. This isn't *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* any more.

For co-showrunner BenDavid Grabinski, who previously wrote episodes of the *Are You Afraid Of The Dark?* revival and directed *Happily*, remixing the core Scott Pilgrim story was "99% of the appeal" of working on the project. "Having people not know that we were doing something mostly new, and then just really embracing that while trying to stay within the same voice and tone of the other Scott stuff, that was the whole fun," he says.



The enigmatically named Sex Bob-Omb.



Mary Elizabeth Winstead voices Ramona.

Indeed, the opening episode is something of a Trojan horse, luring in long-time fans and then completely upending things. It's a startling creative choice, compounded by the fact that *Scott Pilgrim's* creator, O'Malley, serves as the other showrunner. In essence, the author is deconstructing and rebuilding his own story – and if it hadn't been for this approach, it's unlikely another *Scott Pilgrim* adventure would have ever taken off.



It was all going so well for Scott, and then...



Scott's got a thing for Ramona Flowers.

SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF



SCOTT PILGRIM GETS ANIMATED

WORKING WITH SCIENCE SARU

The Japanese studio Science Saru – best known for its distinctive method of meshing hand-drawn and digital animation styles – animated the series. “We tried to stay out of what they were doing because everything they were doing was brilliant,” says Grabinski. “We didn’t have to guide them towards anything. In terms of the aesthetic, it was just a bullseye from day one.”

“For instance, Gideon [leader of the League of Ramona’s Evil Exes], his lair in the first episode is not something from the books or the movie. We wrote two sentences on a page of what we thought it was. I remember sitting in a conference room when some of the team were visiting from Japan. They presented their designs for Gideon’s lair, and I immediately knew that our job was not to tell them what’s cool. Ever! It’s so much better to get out of their way. There’s such a cinematic look to it.”

“They’re the best in the world,” O’Malley adds. “Their character designer and the animation director, these Japanese guys who have been doing this for a long time, I can’t overstate how respectful they were of my work without me ever asking them to be.”

“They were tearing apart the books, different versions of the books, they were going through my Instagram, finding my more recent art and analysing how I draw.”

“It was very humbling because they’re way more talented than I’ll ever be. Given that the scripts get pretty wild, they still were very faithful to the books in a way that I think will make the fans super-excited.”

“One day, late 2018, early 2019, Netflix approached me saying, ‘Would you like to revisit *Scott Pilgrim* in anime form?’ They said the amazing animation studio Science Saru might be interested,” O’Malley tells *SFX*. “I was like, ‘Hell no!’”

O’Malley had no interest in rereading the story, which he first wrote 19 years ago, for the umpteenth time. A few months later, however, that all changed. He was out eating with Grabinski – the two being friends and fans of each other’s work – when O’Malley mentioned that someone had once again brought up the idea of making a *Scott Pilgrim* anime. That got Grabinski thinking, and he quickly started reeling off ideas that had O’Malley rolling around the restaurant in hysterics.

“Almost everything I mentioned over that dinner is in the show,” Grabinski says. “There are a lot of twists and turns, and most of them came together extremely quickly, just in that conversation. That was not a meeting with the goal of doing a show, but Bryan went back to Netflix and said, ‘Hey, I know what the show wants to be, and I know who I want to do it with.’ And now, years later, we have a show.”

“That dinner will become legend among certain fans,” O’Malley adds with a smile.

There are two scenes Grabinski pitched that proved to be core linchpins for the series – one of which is the end of the opening episode, while the other comes in episode four (again, no spoilers here).

To really make the moments work, though, the medium in which the story was being told had to be right, and anime seemed the best way of reintroducing the *Scott Pilgrim* universe to the world. After originally being suggested by Netflix, Science Saru – the Japanese studio best known in the West for animating episodes of *Adventure Time* and *Star Wars: Visions* – quickly came aboard.

“I had done my best work on the book, and we did our best on the film and the videogame, and they’re all unique, and they all tell the story in their own way, and we wanted to be able to do that with the anime,” O’Malley says.

“With all the years of hindsight that we have and the culture that has accrued around *Scott Pilgrim*, which didn’t exist back then, we found ways to make the series silly and fun and meta without being too meta and without breaking *Scott Pilgrim*. We wanted to see how far we could stretch it.”

Stretch the *Scott Pilgrim* story the showrunners certainly do. There are self- →

SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF

SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF AGAIN?

THE SHOWRUNNERS ON WHETHER A SECOND SEASON IS ON THE CARDS

Scott takes on Matthew Patel (Satya Bhabha).

With the series going off-piste from the worn *Scott* slopes, there's a question of whether this new version of the story will continue into a second season. "We have not thought about anything past this," Grabinski says. "This season is a story that has an end. But I love this world, the cast and the characters. If Bryan and I sat down one day and started brainstorming and thinking of other stories to tell, and the cast wanted to do it, then great, but I put 10,000% of my brain into this season and I think it has a great ending."

O'Malley, the man behind the entire *Scott Pilgrim* universe, concurs. "I didn't want this to end in the middle - I hate it when that happens in a show or a movie. We wrote something that comes to a full stop. I really look at it like a beautiful piece of jewellery that we all got to work on together, and we're just trying to make it great."

referential moments aplenty, including knowing nods for those people who grew up loving *Scott* and *Ramona*, yet the series shines most brightly when going in deep - deeper than any other version of the story - on its side characters. Wallace Wells, Knives Chau and *Ramona's* seven evil exes all get extended screen time. Better yet, they're all voiced by the actors who previously portrayed them in the zippy 2010 film adaptation (Wright also serves as an executive producer on the series).

FRIENDS REUNITED

Looking back, the film's cast is a *Who's Who* of actors who would come to dominate pop culture - Michael Cera, Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Kieran Culkin, Anna Kendrick, Brie Larson, Aubrey Plaza, Chris Evans, Jason Schwartzman - and having them return for the series (alongside a handful of well-known guest voice actors) gave O'Malley the confidence to play with the lore even more.

"We knew what having the cast back would mean for the audience that grew up with them," he says. "It refocused our priorities. We really

wanted to use that cast to the fullest. It was BenDavid's brainwave to find a new way that we could combine characters in completely different ways that we've never seen before, and that was so fruitful and so much fun."

"I love the movie and I've seen the movie a billion times," adds Grabinski. "But if you're going to tell this story in one movie, it's going to end up being mostly from Scott's perspective. The thing I was most excited about with this series was treating it as an ensemble, or finding ways to spend more time with characters in ways you don't expect. We had opportunities to really look at the story and the journey that we're putting everybody on from different perspectives."

You would think that convincing the A-listers to take part would be a difficult task - after all, not many casting agents have Captain America (Evans), Captain Marvel (Larson) and *Star Trek: Picard's* Borg Queen (Alison Pill) on speed-dial. Not only that, but Grabinski and O'Malley made it even harder on themselves by deciding that they needed everyone back, or no one at all: "It didn't make sense to mix and match," Grabinski says.



SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF

CAPTAIN JACKASS

CHRIS EVANS RETURNS AS THE VOICE OF LUCAS LEE, RAMONA'S MOVIE-STAR EX. EVANS HAS SAID THAT SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD WAS ONE OF HIS FAVOURITE FILMS TO WORK ON

"Oh no, boys, please don't fight over me..."

Knives Chau, Julie Powers and Ramona have a goss.

"There were some characters that would have been really hard to recast, and that one, there's such a specific voice that he brought to the role," says Grabinski. "I had so much fun writing him. I truly can't imagine anyone else doing that part except for him. He just has such a great take on the character. And he was so prepared. He knew everything, like it was down to a science. The guy can do two takes of a line that are perfect, just immediately. It was really exciting to have someone come to a character that much later and to have a bunch of stuff that's new, not from the movie. It felt like we had a time machine from that movie set to the recording booth."

“ We didn't know if the cast would say yes, and then they did. And that's it. It was just insane ”

Luckily, none of the actors batted an eyelid when the offer came – and, unfortunately for SFX, hoping for a fun story about O'Malley chasing a post-*Succession* fame Culkin around Hollywood with a job offer, there were zero difficulties getting everyone to sign on. "I wish there was a big adventure to gathering the cast," Grabinski says. "The story is very simple: we didn't know if everyone would say yes, and then they did. And that's it. It was just insane."

When the actors stepped into the vocal booth, something akin to magic happened. The showrunners say that each individual took the task very seriously when they needed to, and less seriously when they didn't. In other words, they understood the assignment and delivered performances far beyond

expectations. "It felt like a passion project across the board," Grabinski says. O'Malley concurs: "I feel like they've lived with those characters for so long, even if they hadn't thought of them or been in that headspace. It was really fun to bring them back to life that way."

As well as the returning cast, the series borrows from *Scott Pilgrim's* past in other ways, too. Anamanaguchi – the chiptune band who soundtracked the videogame – created new music for the series. In fact, the whole thing feels like an amalgamation of everything that came before.

"We're building on top of the work everybody else did, [but] my goal was that the series had to be emotional," says Grabinski. "It's super-funny and exciting, but if it didn't have emotions, and if there wasn't some joy and sadness, and if you didn't kind of go on a journey with these characters, then it would just be flippant, and I don't think either of us wanted to do that."

Of course, with the series' story being such a drastic change from the beloved source material, there is a chance some fans may be annoyed or disappointed.

O'Malley knows very well how much pressure comes from having a rabid fanbase – but doing another retelling of the same story was simply not an option for him.

"I knew when we started that I could not put myself through years of trying to perfect my old work, and I knew I had to do something that resonated with me now, all these years later, with all these different experiences.

"Hopefully no one will burn my house down! But, ultimately I just had to do it my own way. I hope that the fans love it, because I wrote it for them. Like, I fucking love them, and I want them to be happy."

Grabinski counts himself among the fandom. "There's not a single thing in our show that doesn't come from a place of love for the world, the characters, the tone and everything about it. It does a lot of stuff people aren't expecting, and maybe not what they think they want from the show, but my hope and expectation is that people will watch it and be stoked." ●

Scott Pilgrim Takes Off is on Netflix from 17 November.

