

THE GAME HAS CHANGED

The much-anticipated sequel to cult sci-fi movie *Tron* is only a few months away and yet again, the cast stole the limelight at this year's Comic-Con. Scott Snowden met the man who *is* Tron, Bruce Boxleitner



BOXLEITNER BECAME A HOUSEHOLD NAME PLAYING AGENCY OPERATIVE LEE STETSON IN THE TV SERIES SCARECROW & MRS KING

To revisit a character some 27 years later is quite amazing and it's not something we get to do very often

THE YEAR 1982 was memorable for many reasons; an Argentine Exocet missile sank HMS Sheffield as the Falklands conflict still raged in the South Atlantic, the USA Today newspaper was launched and Michael Jackson released his second solo album, Thriller. And in a tiny, community cinema in a little town on the south coast of England, a small 10-year-old boy had his imagination electrified by the most amazing thing he'd ever seen: video game warriors doing battle on the *other side* of the screen.

When this interview was being arranged over the telephone six weeks or so before Comic-Con, as the movie media was becoming increasingly obsessed with the new Tron sequel, the polite-but-plainspoken public relations lady from Disney asked who from the cast I specifically wanted to interview. Of course I already knew, but out of curiosity enquired if it was possible to talk with Jeff Bridges, the main star of the film. She laughed out loud for a moment, then just as abruptly, purged herself of all emotion and said "he's only doing Oprah darling".

In fact, I'd been counting on more or less that exact outcome. I hoped that now an extra effort might be made, guaranteeing my genuine first choice, provided the disappointment in my voice sounded sincere. Sure, it would've been mind blowing to have met the Dude, but this was all about the new Tron movie and Bruce Boxleitner is Tron.

Arguably the most overdue sequel ever, it only took Disney 26 years to realise they had a potential gold mine with Tron. The original, made back in 1982, is set in a world that exists inside a giant software corporation's computer mainframe and was way ahead of its time.

"To revisit a character 27 years later is quite amazing and it's not something we get to do very often. To see where they were going with the character of Alan Bradley and Tron himself was interesting," says Boxleitner in a tone resonating with the relish of this recent challenge.

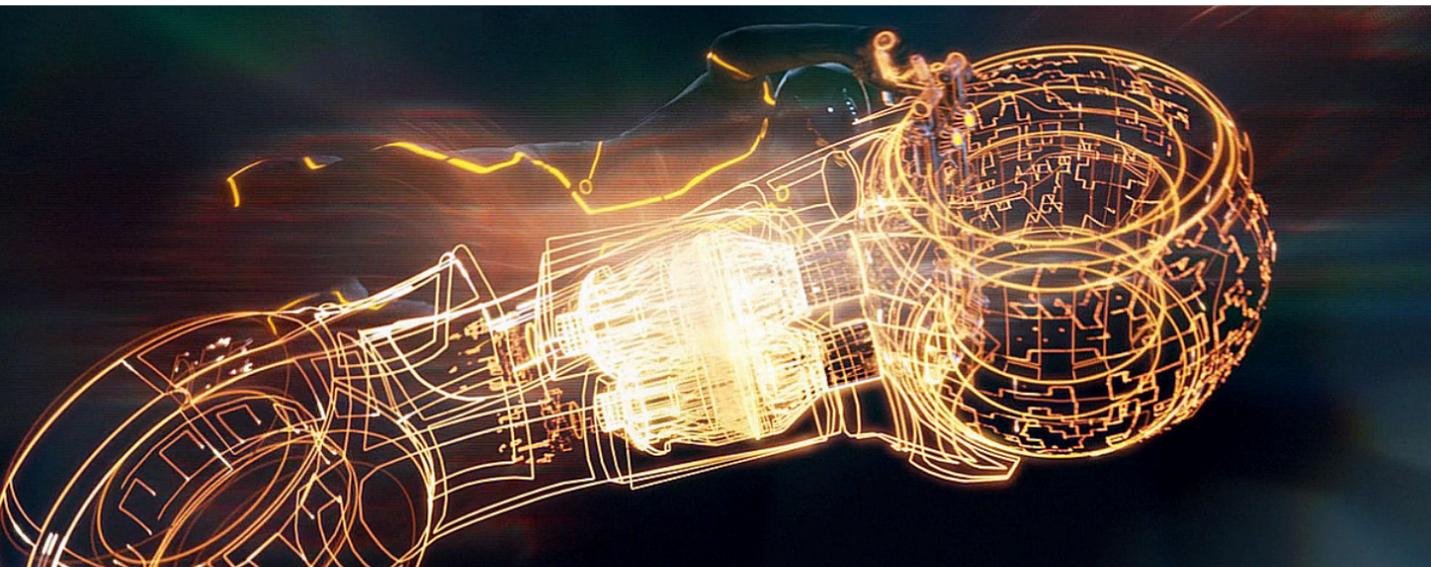
The original was in fact so far ahead of its time that it didn't do too well at the box office. It was only a few years after that it began to develop a cult following. The idea of computers having such an influence on our daily lives seemed unimaginable back then.

"The first movie had a lukewarm response critically and box-office wise because it was a great year. That season was a marvellous year. You had *The Thing*, *Poltergeist*, *ET*, and *Blade Runner*. You had some classic movies. Those are four of the best films in science fiction. So we came out in that block and it was really the kids that saw Tron.

"They understood it more compared to the adults at that time who didn't get it. The kids

BOXLEITNER RECEIVED HIS FORMAL TRAINING ON STAGE THEN, AFTER A SERIES OF AUDITIONS, FOUND HIMSELF WORKING BOTH ON TV AND IN THE THEATRE





got it and now they're adults. Technology has become intergenerational. There isn't that old generation gap, but there was back then. The adults, the establishment of Hollywood, said it was light entertainment. But it was the kids who played the arcade games."

Back at the 2008 Comic-Con, the panel for *Race to Witch Mountain* was winding down. The crowd had been kept entertained by Dwayne Johnson's jokes, but many were keen to get back outside into the San Diego sunshine. However, before anyone could exit Hall H, there was one more presentation. This had not been previously announced, so the crowd shuffled back to their seats as the lights dimmed and a two-and-a-half minute teaser trailer of sorts for a sequel to *Tron* was played.

Two video game warriors did jaw-dropping battle in a world that looked familiar except it had been transformed into something so much more than it once was. Re-imagined lightcycles raced through tunnels, repeatedly smashing into one another as each attempted to outwit his opponent. They even had air brakes.

The crowd went absolutely nuts. Within minutes, posts were appearing all over the internet – the coolest thing in the universe had just been unveiled. And since then, in a carefully orchestrated marketing exercise, Disney has managed to keep fans on the edge of their seats for a staggering three years. Each year, a new trailer has been released along with new photographs and tantalising tidbits of information about the new movie.

"That first footage that was shown three years ago was intended to test the concept, to try and gauge the audience's reaction. Could it work? Scripts had been floating around for years and Disney decided, very wisely, not to make a sequel until the time was right."

Two years later and once again at Comic-Con, a warehouse in the fashionable Gaslamp District has been completely decked-out down to the last detail to match Flynn's arcade – a pivotal location featured in both *Tron* movies. Inside, old arcade machines from the 80s stand draped in plastic covers as if time had stood still for nearly 30 years. Fans would soon be allowed in to walk around the replicated set, and through a secret door that opens in the wall – just like in the new movie – into a secret cellar and then into the glamorous End of Line nightclub.

It was here Mr Boxleitner sat, gently stirring a coffee as scores of workman put the final touches to the club interior, rearranging lights and furniture and fine-tuning the sound system before the big *Tron: Legacy* party that evening; hailed by all in-the-know as the social event to attend at this year's Comic-Con event.

"The excitement that first test film generated was way beyond anyone's expectations. But, although it showed that Disney was seriously considering this idea, it had not yet officially been given the go ahead at that time.

"Its aim was to serve two purposes; firstly to show executives at the studio what a new *Tron* movie might look like before they committed to a large-scale budget and secondly, if it didn't create sufficient buzz with the fans, the idea would be dropped. And that certainly didn't happen.

"They went crazy," he laughs. "It was fantastic. I've been living in science fiction for a while now, so I know this CGI stuff pretty well. I knew that sometimes a little piece of tape on a giant, green screen could represent almost anything. I know how that works and I've fought many battles in space that way."

Smiling over his coffee cup, Boxleitner has clearly enjoyed his time fighting said battles in space.

"But this one takes it into a whole new dimension and I think you're all going to be very thrilled by it. I am. And I'm the biggest *Tron* fan there is."

In the first movie, we learn that *Tron* is – in essence – a piece of security software written by Alan Bradley (Boxleitner) that's being held captive by the all-powerful Master Control Programme. With the help of Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges), an actual user who has been transported to the other side of the screen by the evil MCP, *Tron* manages to get the girl (Yori, played by Cindy Morgan), kill the bad guy (Sark, played by David Warner) and save the entire planet – or in this case the virtual world of Encom's mainframe.

A little known fact from the original is that Peter O'Toole was approached to play Dillinger/Sark, but after reading the script he became very interested in playing *Tron*, such was the strength of this character.

The word *Tron* itself is actually a debugging command in the BASIC programming language, meaning "TRace ON". However, writer and director Steven Lisberger swears blind that he took the name from the word 'electronic' and didn't know about the BASIC command until much later.

Set in the present day, the new movies focuses on Flynn's son, Sam (Garrett Hedlund). Haunted by the mysterious disappearance of his father some 20 years ago he has no interest in the Encom software juggernaut, despite being a majority stockholder. Alan Bradley is the board-bullied CEO of Encom and one-time father figure for young Sam.

When Sam investigates a strange message that seems to have come from his father, he finds himself pulled into a digital

alter-existence where Kevin Flynn has been trapped for the last two decades. Here Sam must do battle in a gladiatorial video game arena in order to rescue his father and set the system right again.

"I guess Alan Bradley is the storyteller. I'm the guy that bridges the past to the present and helps the audience along a little bit. There's a lot of history that needs to be told there and not everyone knows that story," Boxleitner says, sounding a little like an old, white-bearded bard.

"I kinda see myself as Alfred to Sam's Batman, and Batman needed Alfred...to remind him of who he is and where he came from and maybe when he strayed too far. He was always his conscious and Alan is the kind of guy who is a surrogate father of Sam Flynn because his friend and creative partner has disappeared over 15 years ago and both these guys, Sam and Alan, are like wounded people because of it."

"There's no closure, we don't know where he is, is he alive or dead? We don't know what's happened and both lives are altered seriously because of that. Because even though Alan is the CEO of Encom now, no one cares anymore.

This one takes it into a whole new dimension, you're going to be thrilled by it. I am and I'm the biggest *Tron* fan there is

They tolerate him in the boardroom, but he really has no say in anything anymore because Encom has turned into something that neither Flynn nor Bradley had envisioned."

His face or even his name might sound familiar to many, but Bruce Boxleitner has played some formidable roles, especially in the science fiction genre. Aside from *Tron*, he is probably best remembered for playing Capt. John Sheridan in the multi-award-winning TV series *Babylon 5* from 1994-98.

A smooth-talking, stylish, square-jawed icon of the 80s, Boxleitner became a sought-after actor following *Tron*. He appeared in advertisements for Estee Lauder's 'Lauder For Men' campaign from 1986-89 and became a household name from playing top-level 'agency' operative Lee Stetson opposite Kate Jackson in the four-year running TV series *Scarecrow & Mrs King*. He also starred as Frank Buck, big game trapper and collector



BOXLEITNER, GARRETT HEDLUND AND JEFF BRIDGES AT COMIC-CON. ASIDE FROM TRON, BOXLEITNER IS BEST REMEMBERED FOR STARRING IN THE ACCLAIMED TV SERIES BABYLON 5



of wild animals in the Indiana Jones-styled hit show *Bring 'Em Back Alive*, opposite *Tron* co-star Cindy Morgan and George Lazenby.

But much more like the matured character of John Sheridan from *Babylon 5*, his voice resonates reason and a wisdom that demands respect. At a commanding 6 feet 2 inches tall, one can only imagine what it must have been like to have been one of his three children – all boys – Sam, Lee and Michael, growing up, especially when being reprimanded for some youthful, mischievous misdemeanor.

Sam and Lee are both from his first marriage to actress Kathryn Holcomb and it was she who introduced Bruce to his present wife, Melissa Gilbert, an accomplished actress from a very early age and probably best known as little Laura Ingalls from *Little House on the Prairie*. She also portrayed Bruce's wife in *Babylon 5*, as it was about this time they were getting married, despite Bruce calling off his engagement twice before finally making it to the altar. Lastly Michael, Bruce's youngest son, and Dakota Brinkman, Melissa's son from a previous marriage make up the rest of the male-dominated Boxleitner family.

"I'm certainly not a gamer. Not really, but I have four boys, ranging from 30 to 14, so I've been aware of video games all these years. One of them even calls himself *The Son of Tron*."

Despite this testosterone-rich training ground, there's an undeniable air of modesty in his manner and an almost humble nature.

During the *Tron: Legacy* panel at Comic-Con, the spotlight was without a doubt on the main actors of the new film, Jeff Bridges and Garrett Hedlund – portraying father and son, since the primary plot revolves around this

relationship. But despite being awkwardly positioned almost at opposite ends of the conference table, it was fun to watch both Bridges and Boxleitner bounce off each other whenever questions were asked about the original movie.

"We wore spandex tights and a hockey helmet and threw Frisbees at each other," Boxleitner laughs.

"When the first movie came out, words like 'virtual world' and 'internet' were almost unknown to the general public and now, we almost live more in the internet, in the virtual world than in the real world with things like social networking and so on."

Boxleitner received his formal training on stage then relocated to Los Angeles in 1972 and quickly landed a guest spot on an episode of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. He then embarked on a series of screen tests and auditions, and found himself working both on television and in the theatre.

"I had been doing westerns for the most part and I was doing a movie for NBC called *I Married Wyatt Earp*, based on the memoirs of Josephine Marcus Earp. We were doing it out in Arizona and I got a call at my hotel saying that a script would be coming and would I take a look at it and get back to my agent as fast as possible.

"So, eventually I brought it to work one day and early one morning I was sitting on a horse, way out in the middle of the desert, in my full Wyatt Earp outfit, with the huge glued-on handlebar moustache and the whole works. I'm sitting in my saddle while they sort out the lighting and I'm reading this thing called *Tron*, by Steven Lisberger. It was

so out of this world and I was really trying to understand it...and really, I had no clue what it was about, so I said 'no'.

"They offered it to me again and this time they said we want you to come to Venice in LA and see what we're doing. So I'm nearing the end of this TV movie and come in and I meet Steven, Richard Taylor [conceptual design] and Don Kushner [producer] and then it was a whole different story.

"I saw storyboards, I saw all kinds of fantastic ideas and designs...and the biggest plus for me was that it was a feature – for Disney – and I was like, 'Wow' and then they said that Jeff Bridges had signed on and then I said, 'My God, OK, I'll do it'."

Born in Elgin, Illinois, Boxleitner has always maintained an active lifestyle and freely admits, "I like to play sports more than watch them." He's a keen horse rider having also once owned and managed a ranch.

"*Tron* was quite a physical role, especially the disc fights. Steven wanted to push me and so he'd get kinda angry with me. He said, 'come on, I wanna see what you do...I don't think you're doing enough'... I know now that he was just trying to edge me on, wind me up a little and fire me up," he laughs.

"I said 'OK, you want a fight, is that it? You want High Noon?! You wanna showdown?!' So, everyone's gone for lunch, it's just us and the camera guys on the empty studio floor," he sits up and becomes more animated, excitedly describing the scene.

"Imagine someone throwing a Frisbee right at your head, very hard and he was up on a ladder and he really threw this thing down at me. And this was one shot I think he



A STYLISH, SQUARE-JAWED ICON OF THE 80S, BOXLEITNER BECAME A SOUGHT-AFTER ACTOR FOLLOWING TRON

Tron was a very physical role, especially the disc fights. Steven wanted to push me and so he'd get kinda angry with me

reckoned he could catch me out with. But as this thing whizzed past my head, as I duck, I instinctively reach up quickly and grab hold of it – and I actually catch it.

"So I stand there looking defiantly at Steven and he yells 'cut' and breaks out into laughter and the camera guys start laughing...and I'm so very proud as it made it into the final cut of the film."

This genuinely impressive catch can be seen as *Tron* defeats the last of his four opponents in a disc game just as Flynn walks overheard and asks, "Who's that guy?" To which the other programme replies, "That's *Tron*, he fights for the users."

The money machine behind Hollywood is seldom one to let a promising opportunity pass by, once it's been realised, and even before audiences have actually even seen this sequel, they're keen to know if the legacy will continue on in *Tron 3*.

"In reality, I can't really say, there's all kinds of variables in this type of kind, with a big picture opening. If you'd asked me if I thought a sequel would be made before a year before they started making this, I'd have said 'no way' so you never know. Let's hope this one does well enough. I think they'd like to do another one."

Indeed and plot practicalities have never stood in the way of a potentially profitable part two, or even three.

"Sure and in the game world, you can just be rebooted, and come back. I mean certainly Clu doesn't represent the Clu of the first movie. He was originally a goofy aberration of Jeff's character, he was lighthearted, and this is a much different one."

The story has even spawned an animated series similar to Japan's Manga cartoons and will feature on the Disney XD channel.

"Yeah, I'll be playing *Tron* again on that, with Elijah Wood and a whole bunch of other people. The animation is terrific for it, very much akin to the look of this film, but it has its own kind of statement."

Called *Tron: Uprising*, two of the writers are Ed Kitsis and Adam Horowitz, who also worked on the new movie and the incredibly popular TV series *Lost*.

"It's sort of a rebellion led by a young program that I train – I'm the older *Tron*," he laughs. "It's like *The Mask of Zorro*, the older *Zorro*, Anthony Hopkins, trains him to take over his persona."

Clearly, Bruce Boxleitner is enjoying reprising his role, both in the new blockbuster movie and the animated project, albeit he now sees himself more as *Tron Snr*. Regardless, we can look forward to seeing him in action again in just a few months. **Tron: Legacy opens on 17 December**