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Never-Ending Battles: Aging and the American Super-Hero

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Abstract

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By Tim Webber

Super-heroes were never designed to grow old. Today, they have far outlived their original purpose as children's entertainment to become cultural relics of a bygone era, present day celebrities of the screen, and beacons of what tomorrow may bring. Due to the narrative weight that decades of stories across media have created, the modern super-hero comic book must maintain the status quo established by previous stories, move ahead long-running narratives, tell mature stories with these characters and address the complex continuity formed in the wake of a lifetime's worth of adventures. Accordingly, the main function of any super-hero story is to provide the illusion of change without altering the character in any meaningful way. In order to deal with concepts of aging in this context, creators turned to setting stories in alternative realities, including those created by super-hero stories in other media, where they are free to kill or change characters in any way they please without affecting the main narrative. In order to deal with themes of maturation within the main comic book narrative, creators introduced younger characters, who were meant to make the comic book world more accessible to younger readers. Over time, these 'access point' characters gradually grew older while the adult characters around them stayed the same age. This process repeated itself every few years so that by the late-1980s, the Batman franchise featured a major character from every age bracket in some form of media or alternate reality, creating a full generational cycle that gave readers of any age bracket a potential 'access point' character of their own. While some characters were allowed to age and others allowed to die, these changes were almost always temporary, as a super-hero's continued survival and youthful longevity have become some of these characters' defining qualities.

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What lies before you is truly a life's work. I've been thinking about some of the facts and concepts presented here since before I could read, and I've been pouring new information about the topics covered into my head up until just a few minutes ago. By the time you read this, I'll have doubtlessly somehow crammed some more comic book knowledge into my head.

While this is hardly my definitive statement on comics, or even super-heroes for that matter, it's a good encapsulation of how I think comic books and the stories within them can be discussed intelligently and be considered in an enlightening, and hopefully entertaining manner.

Absolutely none of this would have been possible without the ongoing support of my parents, Cliff and Denise Webber. I dedicate this work to them as small sign of gratitude for their two decades of entertaining and encouraging my never-ending journey into the world of comic books.

I'd also like to recognize and thank Michael Moon and the Department of American Studies for allowing me to study comics academically and the Department of Journalism for helping me figure out how to write about comics (among other things) intelligently. Since this is the work of a lifetime up to this point, there are too many friends, teachers, and professors who deserve a tip of my hat to list here, so an overly general thanks will have to suffice for now.

And if you make it to the end, thank you for reading.

Table of Contents

Part 1: The Never-Ending Battle

Super-heroes were never designed to grow old. From the genre's very

beginnings, super-heroes were a product of young minds, as in the case of the first

super-hero, Superman, who sprouted from the teenage imaginations of writer Jerry

Siegel and artist Joe Shuster. The two Cleveland-bred creators had their creation

rejected by thirteen different publishers before Vincent Sullivan, an editor at National

Periodical Publications, turned in desperation to their pitch, which had been

languishing in a desk drawer.[1] Even after Superman made his debut on the cover of

Action Comics #1, Harry Donenfield, the company's owner, thought the character was

too ridiculous to appear on the cover of the new anthology title and ordered the

character to be confined to the title's interior pages. However, Donenfield would

reverse this stance a few months later, when the hero's earliest adventures propelled

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[1]Benton, p. 22

sales on the fledging title to over the half-million mark.[2] With a single stroke, Siegel and Shuster had established the genre and the character that would define the comic book form in America, creating an insatiable hunger for super-heroics in readers that continues to this day.

While Superman was created as a symbol of distinctly mid-western values and human decency in response to the struggles of the Great Depression and the ominous rumblings coming from Hitler's Germany, the basic concepts behind the character and others like him would prove to be malleable enough to outlive the times that spawned them.[3] Since then, each subsequent generation has manipulated and tweaked super-heroes into creations they can think of as their own. Super-heroes have acted as ciphers that can address the complex issues of the day on a fundamental level that's easy enough for a child to understand, while concurrently keeping up with the major trends in fiction of the day. While the media through which these stories are told have been as varied as comic books, film serials, Saturday morning cartoons, video games, blockbuster summer movies, and even theatre, the characters ultimately remain the same on a basic level from generation to generation.

Accordingly, super-heroes occupy a unique space within Western culture. They're simultaneously relics of bygone eras, celebrities in the present day, and one of society's collective best guesses for what tomorrow will bring, especially in stories with heavy science fiction influences. These pop icons are constantly evolving, with their ongoing adventures captivating audiences the world over. These characters have

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[2] Benton, p. 23

[3] Morrison, *Supergods,* p. 4

firmly entrenched themselves as beings that can be used for entertainment, education, and enlightenment for the most dedicated fans and casual observers alike.

Given their trans-generational appeal and the many functions that super-heroes can be used to perform on a societal level, some have claimed that super-heroes are a kind of modern mythology. While this work does not embrace that concept, that interpretation has been pervasive across the super-hero genre. Comic book publishers, creators, and scholars alike have all embraced this idea to various extents, and in recent years the theory has influenced the way that super-heroes are depicted, most notably in the work of the artist Alex Ross.[4] As the Italian author and literary critic Umberto Eco theorizes, one of the primary functions of super-heroes as mythical beings is to maintain things as they are.[5] He argues that they accordingly "must become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders [them] easily recognizable… but must be subjected to a development which is typical of novelistic characters."[6]

Even with Eco's mythical interpretation of the characters removed, his words highlight some of the unique challenges the super-hero genre faces. Super-heroes have become cultural icons, which by their very nature are fairly static creatures. In a less abstract sense, these characters are also corporate entities, which must be maintained in their role as perennially lucrative franchises for publishers like Marvel Comics and DC Comics. Even the logos that simply decorate the costumes of many of the most popular characters have become symbols that carry a deep cultural meaning, far beyond mere

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[4] Ross, p. 5

[5] Eco, p. 15

[6] Eco, p. 15

brand recognition. However, given the serial nature of super-hero stories, these characters must still move along long-gestating narratives in new and exciting ways that must continue to satisfy a notoriously fickle audience.

Moreover, the primary audience for super-hero comic books has changed as well. Whereas super-hero comic books were once an intrinsic part of the American childhood, readership among children dwindled as the twentieth century barreled on. As more and more comic books were released, a kind of continuity developed where one story would be taken in the context of all of the stories that came before it. As this continuity began to naturally grow, a new kind of reader emerged, the fan with an encyclopedic knowledge of the characters and what came before. While film and television adaptations of super-heroes flourished among the general public, the comic book-reading audience shifted to these obsessive fans of the characters, advocates of the comic form, and collectors who saw the physical object of the comic book as an investment. As comic book scholar Geoff Klock writes, "the very demographic shift… made the target audience of the comic book companies 18 to 24 year-old college educated males. Comic books were now expected to tell stories for adults using the building blocks of children's literature."[7] To put it simply, super-heroes had to grow up on a conceptual level with their readership.

Taken individually, none of these factors poses any real kind of problem. If super-hero comics did not have to address the continuity that these characters exist in or the older fan base that developed around it, the same tales could be told over and over again with complete ignorance to any and all prior stories and character

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[7] Klock, p. 21

development. If the audience remained merely children, the past wouldn't matter. Similarly, if pure storytelling or continuity were the only focus, characters could age, evolve, and eventually die out with ease. However, that is not the case. The strange reality of super-heroes is that they must be kept in a kind of stasis throughout time while advancing their ongoing narratives. Characters must evolve while "hold[ing] on to the illusion of a continuous present."[8]

Ultimately, all of these factors have created a situation where the kinds of stories that can be told with super-heroes and the techniques used to tell them have been allowed to expand and evolve to an extent with the audience, but where many of the characters themselves must remain the same within the world of the stories. Complex continuities have become the centerpiece of the modern super-hero comic book, with the very maintenance of past continuity becoming a driving factor in many stories. As a result of this, super-heroes who appear to be in their twenties or thirties have to deal with the narrative weight of fifty years or more worth of stories and remain unchanging in the midst of new tales. Over the course of thousands of issues, hundreds of television episodes, and innumerable other venues, these characters have been put through multiple lifetimes worth of adventures, with each divergent interpretation potentially becoming the definitive one for some sect of fans. Accordingly, every subsequent appearance of one of these characters must operate in and reference a context created by each one of these often wildly divergent and sometimes outright contradictory interpretations.

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[8] Eco, p. 20

In an environment where even the smallest change to a character must be agreed upon by a corporate committee, the primary function of a super-hero comic book is to give the illusion of progress without actually altering the character in any meaningful way. A common practice that helps maintain this illusion is to alter ancillary characters that are not world-famous instead of changing the main ones. On the rare occasion that such an alteration is made to a primary character, it is almost certainly made only on a temporary basis before the character returns to the status quo, a state of circumstances that any given character normally exists in, often established and referenced by stories across multiple types of media.

For example, Superman must always recognizably be Superman. Regardless of the context in which he appears, the character must always appear with the iconography of his red-and-yellow stylized "S"-shield, red cape, and blue tights that make up his costume. Furthermore, Superman must always be a Caucasian male with black hair in early adulthood. In his embryonic appearances, Superman was portrayed as a social crusader and iconoclast, like a young man on a power trip who had a great deal of power but lacked a full understanding of the responsibilities that power carried with it.[9] Once the character was fully developed, he became the world-famous protector of the innocent who fights for 'truth, justice, and the American Way' that he is known as today. Subversions of these core concepts and ideas are plentiful, but they are recognized as subversions that only carry merit in contrast to the established tenets of the character. While the character recently returned to his iconoclastic roots as part

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[9] Teiwes

of a publisher-mandated attempt to rejuvenate the character,[10] the character must still act in a way that the fully-developed Superman conceivably would, as it is only a matter of time before the character returns to his status quo.

With this resistance to change comes a resistance to the act of aging. If a super-hero is not allowed to go through the kind of events that normally mark the passage of time and represent the movement from one stage of life to another, such as marriage, the death of a parental figure, or the birth of a child, then there is no real impetus for a character to age physically. More importantly, most super-heroes could never complete the aging process by taking the final step of dying. On a conceptual level, several of the most popular super-heroes, including Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and the X-Men's Wolverine, are survivors. If a basic part of a character's nature is to survive, then he or she can never die. And if they can never die, then they can never really begin to age, since that would ultimately culminate in death by old age. Where death essentially validated a hero's existence in Greek epics,[11] the opposite holds true for the American super-hero, as a kind of immortality propels their stories forward so that new tales can be told by future generations.

One of the main issues that super-hero comic book creators have dealt with in the modern era has been to find ways to make some kind of narrative sense out of all of these dualities. Some creators have tried to give readers reasons that fit within the logic of the comic book world that explain why characters never appear to age, especially when held in contrast to ancillary characters that do age to a point. Meanwhile, creators also attempt to get around the problem of keeping characters in stasis by finding

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[10] Itzkoff

[11] Foucault, p. 2

loopholes that allow them to tell stories where characters change, advance in their lives, grow old, and die. While a handful of characters have been allowed to go through this process within the construct of the main story-telling continuity, the most common method through which these stories have been told is the "imaginary story."[12]

These 'imaginary stories' are stories that take place outside of the primary story-telling continuity in a way that creates an alternate reality that does not affect the "established" primary continuity.[13] Since these stories have no effect on the main continuity, creators receive a far greater amount of freedom to treat the characters in experimental fashions. If a character or concept from one of these alternate realities proves to be especially popular, then it may then be introduced into the main continuity. As writer Alan Moore wrote in the introductory essay to his version of the final Superman story *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, 'imaginary stories' "may never happen, but then again may."[14] Publishers would sometimes deal with the idea of alternate realities explicitly under imprints or titles such as *Elseworlds* and *What If?,* even going so far as to have characters in the regular continuity interact with alternate versions of themselves.[15]

While not explicitly treated as imaginary stories, adaptations of super-hero comic books in other mediums fall under this definition of alternate realities. These stories have no immediate bearing on the main continuity of the books, but can greatly

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[12] Moore, *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* p. 1

[13] Klock, p. 22

[14] Moore, *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* p. 1

[15] Cronin, "Comic Book Legends Revealed #323"

influence the direction of a comic series if any one element proves popular enough in its own medium.

Between alternate realities, including those depicted in non-comic media adaptations, and the various machinations of writers working within the main continuity of the books, a pattern begins to emerge. This thesis will show that imaginary stories work with the primary continuity to create generational cycles that allow characters to age through ciphers and on a conceptual level, if not a physical one. This creates underlying narrative arcs that work across media to allow each generation to develop alongside a character that they call their own.

Part II: Paper People

During a question and answer session at the 2010 San Diego Comic-Con, an audience member asked then-current *Batman and Robin* writer Grant Morrison the deceptively simple question, "How old are Batman and Robin?" Morrison answers his question with a sprawling response that deals with the very nature of super-heroes. He replies:

> It doesn't matter. These people aren't real…You're dealing with
>
> characters that only exist on paper. In that context, they're much more
>
> real than we are because they have much longer lives and more people

know about them than you or I…They never grow old because they're

different from us. They're paper people.[16]

In his words, Morrison alludes to the idea that the characters that he writes and

creates will outlive creators like him who are only human. This holds true for all

creators, including Superman's creators, Siegel and Shuster. While there is an urge to

consider the creator of any piece of art primarily as an artist first and foremost,

Morrison casts Siegel and Shuster as two creative professionals who were "creating a

product to sell" that would "put them in demand as content providers" with their

Superman character.[17]

With all of the above in mind, it is perhaps fitting to turn to Roland Barthes'

essay, "The Death of the Author." If Barthes' use of the word "author" here is

understood to refer to the collective team of one or more writers and artists that

produces a comic book, his words hold especially true. As Barthes wrote, "To give a

text an author is to impose a limit on that text."[18] While Barthes used this concept to

refer only to the interpretation of a work, the words take on a new meaning when

applied to comic work of a serial nature. If the intentions of a character's original

creators were the determining factor in a character's ongoing stories, many super-

heroes would bear only a passing resemblance to the characters that they are popularly

known as today. To return to the previous example of Siegel and Shuster's Superman,

their character was not the almost God-like being that could soar over the skies of

Metropolis. Their Superman could only 'leap tall buildings in a single bound' in a

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[16] Morrison, "Grant Morrison Spotlight Comic-Con 201."

[17] Morrison, *Supergods*, p. 32

[18] Barthes, p. 147

world that lacked Kryptonite, *The Daily Planet*, and several other important elements of Superman's mythology.[19] As Morrison wrote, "Set free of his creators, [Superman] was to change radically and constantly over the next seven decades," even though he "wouldn't age a single day."[20] While Morrison was referring specifically to Superman, the same basic principle holds true for the majority of corporately-owned super-heroes, regardless of whether they were created in the pre-WWII era or in the middle of the comic boom of the 1990s.

To be sure, some creators have had character-defining runs on the characters they created, most notably writer Stan Lee and co-plotter/artist Jack Kirby's run on *Fantastic Four* and Lee's tenure as writer on *Amazing Spider-Man*. However, due to the corporate nature of these characters, these tenures invariably always come to an end. As respected as any creator's individual work on a character or series might be, it is always reduced to fodder for future stories within the continuity for the next batch of creators who serve as caretakers of that character.

Given the collaborative process through which most comic books are created, the issue of creator qualification comes up as well. The standard credits page for a modern comic book might credit one or more writers, pencilers, inkers, colorists, editors, assistant editors, publishers, and an editor-in-chief. However, this neglects to offer any attribution to the editorial boards and corporate influences that helped shape the content of the book as well. Moreover, as Michel Foucault posits, "It is easy to see that in the sphere of discourse one can be the author of much more than a book–one

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[19] Greenberger, p. 174

[20] Morrison, *Supergods,* p. 13

can be the author of a theory, tradition, or discipline in which other books and authors will in their turn find a place."[21] By this logic, any creator who had a hand in developing any of the characters or concepts used in a comic book could be considered a kind of author, even the creators of a tangentially related character could be counted for their influence. Moreover, any creator who developed any story-telling techniques used within the pages of the book could claim authorship, despite never having encountered or dealt with the characters featured in the book. The full ramifications of this concept can become dizzying when dealing with an ongoing narrative that takes place in a shared fictional universe, where the authorship of a single comic book could reasonably be stretched into the hundreds.

Comic creators, defined broadly, may be an ideal example of the very specific type of author that Foucault identifies, whose most important contributions lie not in the work they create, but in the "possibilities and rules for formation of something else" that they have established through their work.[22] Any individual issue of a comic book may be wholly unremarkable taken on its own terms. However, when viewed in context of the larger multimedia serial narrative, its value could be theoretically heightened, as a seemingly inconsequential character or plot point could become the basis for a substantial future work.

In his essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot wrote about the dialogic relationship that exists between poets and the tradition of work that came

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[21] Foucault, p. 10
[22] Foucault, p. 10

before them.[23] He argues that poets must be aware of their role within the larger Western literary tradition and represent that influence in their work while addressing the issues of the day. He goes on to argue that the merits of any poet can be found in the individual variations that they bring to the theme. The role of the individual artist then changes. As Eliot writes, "What happens is a continual surrender of himself [the artist] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."[24]

Eliot's comments in the essay are almost eerily applicable to the realm of corporately-owned super-hero comic books. Just a year after his creation, Superman's various adventures in print and on radio commanded the creative talents of "tens of men."[25] The number of writers, artists, performers and other creators who have sacrificed their own talents to stoke the eternally young flame of Superman alone is legion. Creators have built upon past works since the very inceptions of most of these characters, and the shadow that those works cast has grown ever longer over the years. Especially in the modern era, creators have found themselves increasingly beholden to the past, simply due to the increasing volume of stories held within it. Today's creators are in almost complete service to the past, forced to retread old storylines and deal with ideas first put forth decades ago, often in specific editorially-mandated directions.[26] As the number of past issues made easily available through reprints soared over the past decade, creators have used increasingly obscure references to fuel full-fledged

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[23] Eliot, p. 29

[24] Eliot, p. 30

[25] Morrison, *Supergods,* p. 13

[26] Parkin

storylines.[27] While the American comic book industry is almost completely built around corporately-owned super-hero comics, a long-standing anti-corporate super-hero movement has been led at times by giants of the field like artist Jack Kirby, writer-artist Frank Miller, and writer Robert Kirkman. These creators have encouraged their contemporaries to stop "wasting time" on super-hero comics for Marvel and DC to create something new instead, in hopes of revitalizing the field.[28]

In order to fully appreciate the amount of maintenance that these characters require on a regular basis in print comic books alone, it would be worthwhile to look at the frequency with which new stories are published. Most comic book series are released on a monthly schedule, although quarterly, bi-monthly, and more recently bi-weekly or weekly release schedules are not uncommon either.[29] Given the fact that many of the more popular characters appear in multiple titles every month, the number of appearances for the most popular comic book characters in a single month can easily reach into the double digits. While the multitude of appearances of any given major character allows more creators the opportunity to work on said character, the various titles often feature different creators working at slightly different points in the character's individual chronology. Moreover, a popular character may make a special guest appearance in a usually unrelated book by a completely different set of creators, who may not be aware of that character's current status in another title. As such, the exact relationship between stories involving the same characters in different series can be perfectly interwoven if the series' respective creators are working in sync with one

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[27] Klock, p. 17
[28] Kirkman
[29] Johnston, "Marvel Double Dipping Like Never Before in Feburary"

another or can be conflicting to a point where they seem to be completely

incompatible.

As publishers have shifted their books to more frequent release schedules, some

have used weekly and bi-weekly release schedules to tell stories as they occur in real

time. The DC Comics series *52* used its weekly release schedule to tell a year-long

story about lesser-known characters within the main continuity of DC Comics in

weekly installments, with each issue covering a week's events in real-time to high sales

and critical acclaim.[30] Despite *52*'s success, two weekly sequel titles, *Countdown to

Final Crisis* and *Trinity* met lukewarm reviews and sales, due in part to complicated

relationship between the way time passed in these series and the rest of the DC Comics

line.[31]

While these weekly "real-time" titles present unique challenges, chronology can

become similarly complex within the pages of a single comic book. As Scott McCloud

writes, "Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm

of unconnected moments."[32] While these moments are usually mere seconds apart, the

space between two panels, also known as "the gutter,"[33] could easily contain days or

weeks. Due to the panel-based structure of a comic book page, all of this time can pass

without disrupting the flow of the narrative, since there is no discernible difference on

a page between two subsequent panels that depict actions occurring seconds apart from

one another and two subsequent panels that depict actions that take place years apart

from one another. With this fairly minimal intrusion into the story, it could be easy for

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[30] Morrison, *Supergods*, p. 391
[31] Cowsill, p. 325
[32] McCloud, p. 67
[33] McCloud, p. 66

a reader to gloss over the amount of time that has passed while paying attention to the main narrative. For instance, a panel where Batman realizes that he must travel from Gotham City to New York might be immediately followed by a panel showing Batman swinging across the New York skyline, possibly accompanied by caption that gives some indication of the amount of time that has passed within the narrative such as "one day later." During the day that occurred between those two panels, Batman could have had other adventures that took a smaller amount of that narrative time, which could have left room in the continuity for another story, published elsewhere, to take place in the interim. But while these events may have occurred within the continuity of the character, they may not necessarily be reflected as having occurred in between those two original panels for the sake of the story being told.

The inverse of this also holds true, as the events of a single day within comic book continuity could very well take the better part of a year to publish. In stories that take place over the course of several issues, the last page of one month's issue could be separated by the first page of the next month's issue by a single moment, while a full month has passed by in the real world. If this process is repeated over the course of several months, the disparity between the amount of time that has passed in the real world and within the continuity only grows. When comic books that use this technique are reprinted in collected editions, the dissonance between comic book time and real world time is minimized, as the individual issues are recontextualized as chapters of a larger work rather than objects unto themselves. While this technique can be found in use as far back as the 1960s, it has become ubiquitous in super-hero comics of the

modern era, as these collected editions have become an increasing focus of the comic industry over the past decade.[34]

When explaining how time works on a single page from a comic book, McCloud writes, "Both the past and future are visible all around us."[35] While McCloud was referring to the relative ease with which a reader can move backwards and forwards through time by glancing at different areas on the page, his comments hold true when applied to the concept of individual comic book as an object. Unless the comic book in question is the final or most recently released issue of a series, it can exist alongside any other comic book that contains part of a narrative. A collection of sequentially-numbered comic books from a single series forms an inadvertent timeline, one where pieces of a narrative puzzle can be shuffled into almost any configuration imaginable. If these comic books are read out of order, a reader could form a highly-individual concept of continuity where plots and events are recontextualized by past and future developments within continuity.

As writer Judd Winick explains, simple story-telling techniques can muddle the way that time passes in the comic book world. While speaking about the issues that the character Robin presents when dealing with aging mechanics within comics, which will be addressed in greater detail later on in this work, Winick said, "There are a handful of characters within the DC Universe…where someone said, we're going to allow them to grow old."[36]

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[34] Klock, p. 149
[35] McCloud, p.104
[36] *Robin: The Story of Dick Grayson*

While Winick was referring specifically to the main DC Comics continuity, the same largely holds true for the majority of super-hero comics, regardless of publisher. Many of the major Marvel Comics characters like Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four seemed to age in something close to real-time for their first decade of publication before ceasing to age in any kind of meaningful way for the next several decades.[37] In the cases of Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four in particular, this pause in aging seemed to coincide with the end of co-creator Stan Lee's direct involvement in the monthly creation of new issues, when his new duties as publisher forced him to cede writing duties to "a new generation of writers," many of whom counted themselves among the characters' first fans.[38]

Today, the vast majority of comic creators have their first experience with the industry as fans, either as children or later in life.[39] As comics theorist Chris Sims writes, these creators "want to play with their favorite toys" and have a tendency to "set things back to the way they were rather than progressing them to what they should be next, rendering huge swaths of their fictional universe irrelevant."[40] While this certainly does not hold true as a rule for all creators, proof of this idea can be found in the innumerable returns to status quo found at some point in every major super-hero comic book. With regards to aging, this provides yet another motivation for some creators to maintain a character's constant age.

Some publishers have attempted to deal with the issues maintaining a character's age brings up by using a device called the "floating" or "sliding" timeline,

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[37] Harrigan, p. 6
[38] Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics,* p. 155
[39] Sims
[40] Sims

which changes the history surrounding a character instead of aging the character.[41] For

instance, the character Iron Man's origin, when he first appeared in the 1960s, took

place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War.[42] However, in subsequent decades,

Communist China and the Gulf War took the Vietnam War's place in retellings of the

character's origin.[43] Modern retellings, including the 2008 film *Iron Man*, shift the

setting of his origin to Afghanistan.[44] As a result of this continual chronal shifting, any

given character has, theoretically, never had more than a decade of adventures within

the comic book universe. Some problems can arise with this concept when 50 actual

years worth of stories are now compressed to have taken place in a decade of comic

book time. Former DC Comics editor K.C. Carlson, who oversaw the continuity-

resetting series *Zero Hour*, has stated that this device was "confusing" and often

required "some work to get everybody on board," both within publishers and the fan

community.[45]

To further complicate matters, not all characters who age in comics age at the

same rate. Characters who began their lives as teenagers in *Uncanny X-Men* issues

released in the 1960s aged into adulthood into the 1970s. However, by the 1990s and

the 2000s, characters within the X-Men universe that made their first appearances as

teenagers in the 1970s or 1980s had aged in a similar manner, even though their fellow

X-Men had not aged in any appreciable way. The end result of this sees characters that

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[41] Carlson

[42] Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics,* p. 98

[43] *Marvel Encyclopedia,* p. 27

[44] *Iron Man*

[45] Carlson

were teenagers in such disparate periods as the 1960s and the 1980s appear to be within a few years of each other in the modern era.

Within the primary X-Men continuity, this phenomenon is best exemplified by the character Kitty Pryde. Created by writer Chris Claremont and artist John Bryne in 1980's *Uncanny X-Men* #129, Pryde was a young teenager with the ability to walk through solid objects who was meant to serve as an "access point" for readers to the rest of the adult X-Men, according to the publisher.[46] Access point characters, like Kitty Pryde, are meant to serve as surrogates of sorts for a book's younger readers, providing them a method though which they could connect to the narrative with a character that is closer to their own age than the adults that populate most stories. Like many young readers, one of the chief aspects of an access point character is a aspiration to become more like the primary adult super-heroes that they exist alongside. In a 1982 interview, Claremont highlighted why she was such an integral part of his X-Men, beyond being a simple access point, "Kitty's at the age where the hormones are just beginning to kick into gear and she's just beginning to figure out who and what she is and what she wants and how she wants it. There's an infinite set of directions we can go with her."[47] For the decade and a half that Claremont remained the primary architect behind the X-Men's world, Pryde became a popular character who became closely associated with Claremont as he aged her into young adulthood. When Claremont launched the X-Men spin-off title *Excalibur* in 1988, he moved the character from the main series, which was filled with characters, to the more ancillary

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[46] Morse
[47] Sanderson, p. 51

one, where he could focus on her as part of a smaller group of characters.[48] When Claremont left the X-Men universe in 1991, the character, once a focus of the franchise, was relegated to a supporting role in an ancillary title for much of the next decade. When Claremont returned to X-Men in 2001 to write the ancillary title *X-Treme X-Men*, he put a focus on the now college-going Pryde once again for his brief tenure on the title. Pryde would not be a major character within the X-Men universe again until writer Joss Whedon, a fan of the character, made her a member of the primary X-Men team in his 2004 series *Astonishing X-Men*.[49] In this series, she appeared as a young adult, only a few years younger than the rest of the team, several of whom appeared not to have aged since she served alongside them as a teenager.

The trajectory of Kitty Pryde's role within the X-Men harkens back to Barthes' argument about the role of an author's intentions. While Claremont and Whedon saw her as a primary figure within the X-Men's continuity, the creators who worked on the franchise in between those writers apparently did not share that point of view, or if they did, did make that same point of view explicit within the various series. Despite Claremont's long and influential tenure on the title, his thoughts about the character's place within the X-Men's world were disregarded by subsequent creators, save for Whedon. Instead of becoming a universally accepted part of the basic makeup of the X-Men's world, she became a key part of only of Claremont's, and later Whedon's, interpretation of the X-Men's continuity. Again, this example highlights a larger trend

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[48] "Kitty Pryde"

[49] Grossman

where a character can go from being a star of an ensemble series to nothing more than a background cast member in only a few years time.

Kitty Pryde's initial appearances served as a precursor to the creation of *New Mutants* in 1983, a spin-off of the main X-Men title that focused on the team's teenage recruits (not including Pryde, who Claremont was using in the main series.)[50] Like Pryde, these characters matured collectively throughout the 1980s in *New Mutants*, a series that chronicled their adventures. While the series was originally proposed as one featuring a rotating cast of young characters who would 'graduate' from the series as they came of age, the title's initial cast proved to be so popular with fans that they soon became the sole focus of the title.[51] As columnist Carla Hoffman noted, these characters were closer in age to their readers than their adult counterparts and that they were "allowed to adapt and grow through the 80s and 90s…like these characters [were] friends."[52] She continues to say "all that experience allowed into continuity makes for some fine adults."[53]

However, despite almost three decades of character development, Pryde and the New Mutants are currently depicted as characters in their late-twenties or early-thirties at the most. If a reader started following these characters when they were roughly the same age in the early 1980s, those readers would be well into middle age in the present day. If the readers these characters were meant to age along with have outgrown their comic book counterparts, this leaves Pryde and the New Mutants in an uncertain

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[50] Benton, p. 138
[51] Sanderson, p. 111
[52] Hoffman
[53] Hoffman

position within the X-Men universe.[54] They are no longer the youngest members of the franchise, but they are not fully integrated into the primary X-Men team either, despite appearing to be close to the same age as the series primary protagonists. In order to give young readers new "access points" in subsequent years, Marvel Comics would repeat the now-established formula of placing one teenager on the main X-Men team before creating another series about the X-Men's teenage recruits with the character Jubilee and the series *Generation X* in the 1990s and the character Armor and the series *New X-Men* in the 2000s.[55]

Here, a trend of introducing new "access point" characters along a generational cycle that occurs roughly every ten years begins to take shape within the X-Men's world. The same holds true for any super-hero world in which 'a handful of characters' are allowed to grow old. The next section of the paper will attempt to address this issue in relationship to how readers age and how the "access point" for a readership group of a specific age can shift from one character to another as that readership ages.

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[54] Brothers

[55] Misiroglu, p. 648

Part III: Forever Young

Batman's eternally youthful sidekick Robin stands as the most famous "access point" character in the history of American super-hero comics. Robin made his first appearance in April 1940's *Detective Comics #*38, less than a year after Batman's first appearance in May 1939. The character was originally created as a means to attract younger readers by making Batman more relatable to children.[56] The brightly-garbed, smiling, acrobatic adolescent Dick Grayson stood in sharp visual and tonal contrast to the grim, mono-chrome Dark Knight. But while Robin has been a near-constant presence at Batman's side, Grayson has not. The character of Dick Grayson is one of the handful of characters that has been allowed to age, even if it has only been at a glacial scale. Still, as Winick said, "Robin growing up in comics was a very rare thing."[57]

Robin's role as the audience's surrogate in Batman's adventures is perhaps best encapsulated by his nickname, "the Boy Wonder," which was introduced alongside the character on the cover of *Detective Comics* #38.[58] Dissecting this phrase reveals the character's twofold purpose. First, the character was a young 'boy,' usually depicted in early appearances between the ages of eight and twelve. The target audience would have been around this age or younger. Readers of a comparable age would have been able to easily imagine themselves swinging across rooftops as Robin, while younger readers could have viewed Robin as an inspirational figure that promised a life of adventure in just a few short years. Both of these ideas tie into the equally important 'wonder' aspect of Robin. Despite his acrobatic training, Robin was still a relatively

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[56] Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History*, p. 37
[57] *Robin: The Story of Dick Grayson*
[58] Finger, *Detective Comics* #38

inexperienced newcomer to the world that he and Batman populated. As such, he was able to bring a sense of awe and perspective to the fantastic situations that the Dynamic Duo found themselves in. Accordingly, artist-writer Bob Kane, writer Bill Finger, and artist Jerry Robinson created the character with a strong sense of humor and light-heartedness. The character was an instant success with readers, doubling sales on *Detective Comics* and living up to the promise on the cover of *Detective Comics* #38 that Robin was the "sensational character find of 1940." [59]

Before Robin entered the Batman mythos, Batman stories had a decidedly darker tone that was heavily influenced by darker pulp magazine characters like the Shadow and the Spider.[60] Both of these crime-fighters dressed in all black and wore masks to cover their faces, much like Batman. Unlike their comic book counterparts, many pulp characters had no aversion to using guns or killing their enemies, ranging from exotic criminals and average thugs alike. In his earliest appearances, Batman similarly showed no mercy towards criminals, shooting sleeping vampires at point-blank range[61] and plowing through enemies with a machine gun.[62] Soon after Robin's arrival, an aversion to guns and refusal to kill became key components of Batman's moral code that helped lighten the tone of the stories. Along with this adoption of a more palatable moral code, the character of Robin brought a sense of "compassion and adventure" to the Batman mythos.[63] Finger wrote Robin as someone with whom Batman could relate to as a big brother and aspire to be, as well as someone who Batman could trade

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[59] Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History*, p. 37

[60] Vaz, p. 21

[61] Fox, *Detective Comics* #32

[62] Finger, *Batman* #1

[63] Vaz, p. 12

expository dialogue with.[64] From a story-telling standpoint, creator and historian Jim Steranko argues that the presence of Robin played a large part in establishing Batman's dominancy and longevity within the comic book industry.[65]

Robin's role within the Batman mythology would remain largely unchanged until the 1960s. The character was a constant presence in Batman stories throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Between 1947[66] and 1952,[67] Robin was popular enough to be the feature character in *Star-Spangled Comics*, which chronicled his solo adventures without Batman. When the popularity of super-hero comics gave way to the rise of crime and horror comics, Robin and his elder partner Batman were among the few super-heroes to remain in multiple monthly titles. While continuity was largely disregarded in this era, Dick Grayson gradually aged enough to outgrow the "Boy Wonder" moniker to become the "Teen Wonder." [68] In 1964, Robin was a founding member of the Teen Titans, a team made up of the young sidekicks of other heroes.[69] Appropriately, Robin was made the leader of the group. While the in-text reason for this was his years of training at the hands of Batman, Robin's influence as the first and most notable sidekick made him the only real choice to lead the team.

Robin's age inched further a few more years when the twenty-year-old actor Burt Ward portrayed the character in the 1966 television series *Batman*. The show, which starred Adam West as the titular character, took a hip, campy approach to the

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[64] *Robin: The Story of Dick Grayson*

[65] Steranko, p. 47

[66] "The Teen-Age Terrors," *Star-Spangled Comics* #65

[67] "Stone-Deaf Robin," *Star-Spangled Comics* #130

[68] Cronin, *Was Superman A Spy? And Other Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed?,* p. 64

[69] Cronin, *Was Superman A Spy? And Other Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed?, p. 64*

Batman mythos.[70] Despite his age, Ward's Robin continued to be referred to as the Boy Wonder on *Batman*.

Despite the show's campiness, Ward's Robin was still young enough to act as an audience surrogate for adolescents who understood the show as pure adventure. Meanwhile, a child who had grown up following Robin in the 1950s would have been in their late teens or mid-20s by that point. For these viewers, the actor Burt Ward was close enough to their own age that Robin naturally became a different kind of surrogate who fully understood the show's humor and was in on the joke, so to speak. Finally, viewers who were around Robin's age when the character was introduced in 1940 would be in their mid-30s by this time. For this audience, Adam West's Batman was the access point, with the first generation that related to sidekicks now able to relate more to Batman than Robin. Much like Batman, these audience members were fully-grown adults who were likely in an authority position, perhaps even with children of their own who were accessing the show through Robin. These viewers fully understood the show's campiness but found a connection to their own youth that they were able to pass on to the next generation in the same way that Batman passed crime-fighting down to Robin.

While the Adam West show embraced the campiness of the Batman universe, writer Denny O'Neil spear-headed a post-*Batman* effort to return the character to his dark pulp noir roots. "When the TV show went out of business suddenly, they couldn't sell camp anymore and [DC Comics editorial] came to me and said, what can you do

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[70] Gabilliet, p. 59

with Batman?"[71] One of the first things O'Neil did with the character was to send the now late-teens/early-20s Robin away to study law at Hudson University, a fictional equivalent to Columbia University.[72] By removing the brightly-garbed Robin, O'Neil was able to instantly differentiate the series' newer, darker tone and reject the campiness of the television show. While appearances from Robin in the main Batman series became more sporadic throughout the 1970s, the Teen Wonder never strayed too far from his mentor. Throughout this period, Robin still routinely appeared in *Teen Titans* as well as in back-up features in *Batman* either alone or with Batman.[73] By 1975, Robin found a new regular home for his adventures alongside fellow sidekick Batgirl in the anthology series like *Batman Family*, which showcased supporting Batman characters in their own adventures along with reprinted stories from previous decades.[74] With the inclusion of these reprinted strips, Robin could be seen at age 12 or attending university classes all within the pages of one issue, making the character a potential access point character for any reader between those ages.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, a second version of Robin could be found in stories that took place on Earth-2, an alternate reality where the heroes of the 1930s and 1940s aged closer to real time.[75] In these stories, Dick Grayson operated as an adult super-hero while maintaining the Robin identity, a lawyer and the American ambassador to South Africa in his civilian life.[76] All of the pre-war and wartime adventures of these characters, many of whom had not aged at all, were subsequently

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[71] Vaz, p. 106-107

[72] *Robin: The Story of Dick Grayson*

[73] Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History,* p. 143

[74] Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History*, p. 143

[75] Morrison, *Supergods,* p. 112

[76] Morrison, *Supergods,* p. 113

said to have occurred in this 'imaginary story,' while the characters that were now being featured in books were to be considered the primary versions of those characters as far as continuity was concerned.

By 1983, the now young adult Dick Grayson formally gave up the Robin costume as a troubled youth named Jason Todd became the new Robin.[77] While he was largely absent from the Batman titles, Grayson was still a prominent player in the Teen Titans series, which primarily focused on characters who were now in their mid-20s and was now DC Comics' highest selling property.[78] After operating for a time without an alter ego,[79] Grayson adopted the new identity Nightwing in the 1984 Teen Titans storyline "The Judas Contract." As longtime writer Len Wein states, Nightwing was designed to "be more independent than Batman."[80] This coincided with an industry-wide shift in focus from newsstand sales to a new direct market of comic book specialty stores that would buy books directly from publishers. The direct market was focused on catering to a smaller, older audience of more specialized fans instead of casual readers. [81] Fittingly, *The New Teen Titans* was one of DC Comics' first successful titles published exclusively to the direct market.[82] The more dedicated audience that the direct market focused on was able to appreciate longer character arcs like Grayson's on deeper levels than before. As DC Comics Co-Publisher Dan Didio

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[77] *Robin: The Story of Dick Grayson*

[78] Morrison, *Supergods,* p. 290

[79] *Robin: The Story of Dick Grayson*

[80] *Robin: The Story of Dick Grayson*

[81] Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics,* p. 197

[82] Benton, p. 107

recalls, "As I fan, I was growing up with the character. I felt myself changing and it was fun to actually watch a character change with us."[83]

In 1986, Frank Miller's four-part alternate reality story *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* was published. The story featured an older Batman, coming out of retirement to fight crime in a dystopian future alongside a young, female Robin. As an even more vocal rejection to the silly Adam West-era Batman, Miller's story became a landmark work of the comic medium that would go on to set a decidedly darker tone to Batman tales for years. As Klock writes, this story is "the first work in the history of super-hero comics that attempts a synthesis of forty-five years of preceding Batman history in one place.[84] Furthermore, the prestige-format series took full advantage of the new direct market audience, dealing with dark themes and graphic violence. Miller has stated that both his own aging and Batman's age were part of the impetus for the series.[85] As Miller said in 2008, one of the main questions he sought to answer with the series was "What if [Batman] was the age of the legend?" [86]

If we take Miller's words quite literally, *Dark Knight Returns* fits perfectly on the leading edge of the first all-encompassing generational cycle. At the time of *DKR's* publication, the character or "legend" of Batman would have been 46 years old. Batman's original birth date was April 7, 1915, which would have made Bruce Wayne 70 years old within the context of the character's original iteration.[87] Within that same context, Dick Grayson, the original Robin, would have been around 60 in 1986, if we

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[83] *Robin: The Story of Dick Grayson*

[84] Klock, p. 27

[85] Strike

[86] Strike

[87] *World's Finest Comics* #33 (1948) established the month of Bruce's birth as April; *Star-Spangled Comics* #91 (1949) indicated that his birthday was the 7th.

understand him as roughly a decade younger than Batman. While it is quite difficult to imagine someone who would have been the same age as Batman reading comics continually since 1938, it is not a terribly large stretch of the imagination to consider someone who was Robin's age (especially considering his original role as a character who was roughly the same age as the audience) to have kept up with Batman since his initial appearance. Miller portrays a Bruce Wayne that could reasonably be considered either 60 or 70. Miller's Bruce Wayne could be a battered 60-year-old, scarred and aged by years of battle and its accompanying stresses. By that same token, he could be an athletic man in his 70s in peak physical condition for that age. In the Batman titles that took place in the regular continuity, Batman would still be at his benchmark age of roughly 30.[88] In *The New Teen Titans*, Dick Grayson in his Nightwing guise was in his early 20s.[89] Jason Todd, the then-current Robin, would have been 13.[90] Meanwhile, director Tim Burton's *Batman* was just a few years away from being released, staring a 38-year-old Michael Keaton as a Batman entering middle age.[91]

And thus, a complete generational cycle can be seen for the first time. Every age bracket that could reasonably produce fans is represented by at least one major character within some facet of the Batman universe, incorporating the alternate realities created by both *DKR* and the film *Batman*.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, this variety in the protagonists' age in the Batman world continued. Although Jason Todd was killed in 1988,[92] he was replaced

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[88] Klock, p. 22
[89] Misiroglu, p. 592
[90] *Robin: The Story of Dick Grayson*
[91] Morgenstern
[92] Starlin

by then nine-year-old Tim Drake who would become the third Robin. He would hold

that title until 2009, aging roughly ten years over the following two decades. In 1999,

the animated series *Batman Beyond* debuted, focusing on the sixteen-year-old Terry

McGuiness.[93] The young hero was mentored by an elderly Bruce Wayne, who appeared

to be in eighties, even older than his counterpart in *DKR*. Moreover, various alternate

reality versions of Batman were featured in 'imaginary stories' that ran under the

Elseworlds imprint during the 1990s and early 2000s.

As the average age of the typical Batman reader increased, Batman took an

unexpected step into aging, when it was revealed that Bruce Wayne had fathered a

long-lost son named Damian in 2006.[94] Wayne was no longer just a surrogate father to

his various wards. Now, Batman had a blood-and-flesh son whose existence pushed the

primary continuity version of Batman into his mid-thirties. Shortly after this, Bruce

Wayne was temporarily thought dead, which would have been the final step in the

aging process, in the wake of *Final Crisis*, a publishing-line-wide storyline that

involved most of the company's major characters.[95] As a result of this, Dick Grayson

assumed the mantle of Batman, fulfilling the long-promised destiny and becoming a

surrogate father figure to Damian Wayne. Unsurprisingly, the junior Wayne became

the new Robin, while the now-college age Drake adopted the moniker Red Robin.[96]

While Bruce Wayne was soon revealed to be alive and returned to the role of Batman,

this was a watershed moment for Grayson. Finally, the character that had been

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[93] Harris

[94] Morrison, *Supergods*, p. 391

[95] Morrison, *Supergods,* p. 391

[96] Morrison, *Supergods,* p. 391

relegated to being a sidekick for decades had finally gotten to take on the roles of his one-time mentor, both as a surrogate father figure and as Batman himself. Despite this monumental achievement in his ongoing character arc, Grayson would return to his Nightwing identity soon after Bruce Wayne's return, negating much of the impact of his time as Batman.

While the Batman that exists in the primary continuity of the comics was depicted as slightly older than he historically had been, the cinematic Batman grew younger. In 2005's *Batman Begins*, the 31-year-old actor Christian Bale portrayed a young Bruce Wayne as he trained to become Batman in an origin story updated for the modern era.[97] Bale played a slightly older Batman in the next film, 2008's *The Dark Knight*, which took place a few months after the end of *Batman Begins*.[98] However, in the final part of director Christopher Nolan's envisioned Batman trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises*, scheduled to be released in 2012, Bale is said to play a Batman who is eight years older than the character he portrayed in *The Dark Knight*.[99] Notably, this is the same amount of time that has passed since Bale's first role as Batman in 2005, so a kind of real-time aging takes place, whether intentionally or not, within the continuity of the first and final film in the series.

In response to the success of the younger Batman portrayed in the alternate realty of Nolan's films, DC Comics returned Batman to his benchmark age of thirty as part of a company-wide effort to "reset" the continuity of all of its major characters,

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[97] Misiroglu, p. 68
[98] *The Dark Knight*
[99] O'Hara

making their major characters younger in the process.[100] The next section of this paper will examine how successful resetting the continuity of characters is, what other possible less invasive procedures could accomplish the same goal, and the nature of how past stories can be recontextualized in the present.

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[100] Snyder

Part IV: Younger Than Yesterday

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot writes, "Whoever has approved this idea of order…will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."[101] The recontextualization of the past has been the heart of super-hero comic books since DC Comics Editor Julius Schwartz oversaw the updates of character concepts from the 1940s to kick start the so-called "Silver Age" of comic books in 1956, breathing new life into the super-hero genre.[102]

At the heart of Schwartz's super-hero line was Barry Allen, the character better known as the Flash, the Fastest Man Alive.[103] In one tale, Allen was shown reading a comic book about the adventures of the World War II-era Flash, Jay Garrick, which was published by DC Comics in the 1940s.[104] In the same way that a reader understands Allen to be fictional, Allen understood Garrick to be fictional. However,

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[101] Eliot, p. 29

[102] Benton, p. 55

[103] Benton, p. 55

[104] Fox, *Flash of Two Worlds*

Allen discovers that he can run fast enough to cross-over into alternate dimensions and travels to a world populated by Jay Garrick's Flash and the rest of DC Comics' World War II-era characters. This story from 1956 redefined all of these stories that had been published in the 1930s and 1940s as having occurred in another world, an alternate reality, exemplifying Eliot's above words. This story recontextualized a whole decade of DC Comics' actually output as having taken place in a world outside of the main stream of continuity. While those older stories were not quite relegated to the status of imaginary stories, the role that they played within the larger continuity of DC Comics changed drastically.

Taken alone, this concept is fairly easy to understand, if a bit convoluted. However, when this formula was repeated, the relationships between the primary continuity and various parallel worlds and alternate realities became increasingly complicated. As comics theorist Henry Jenkins states, "writers have to avoid contradicting that complex and multigenerational continuity when it is clear that the collective intelligence of the fan community will always far outstrip the memory of any given creator."[105] Whereas the super-heroes of Marvel Comics were designed to be a collective universe that contained all of its characters from the 1960s onwards, the primary continuity of DC Comics was put together over time in a more piecemeal fashion.[106]

At various points throughout its publishing history, DC Comics has attempted to "clean up the mess of narrative parallel universes…in order to start afresh with a

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[105] Ford, p. 306

[106] Morrison, *Supergods* p. 121

single, easy-to-follow continuity" that combined all of the publisher's various alternate realities into one."[107] This was first attempted with the 1985 series *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.[108] As comics scholar Will Booker writes, this did "make DC's narrative universe more accessible to new readers. However, it also served the purpose of wiping out almost five decades of super-hero history."[109] The series was not entirely successful in that it also created enough problems within the new streamlined continuity that another series, 1994's *Zero Hour* was created just to deal with unresolved issues caused by the series.[110] However, by 2011, the DC continuity was too unwieldy once again. In an effort to fight off declining sales and make the overarching continuity more accessible, the publisher attempted to streamline its entire narrative yet again.[111] Many of the past two decades' worth of storylines were disregarded, including, somewhat ironically, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, as most characters were returned to an earlier point in their individual narratives and saw their over-arching continuity simplified.

This almost-complete rejection of what came before flies in the face of Eliot's thoughts regarding tradition. After these continuity cleaning events, creators are under explicit editorial mandate to ignore what has come before. Moreover, some super-hero fans have turned against publishers in the wake of these types of events, due to worry about their extensive body of knowledge becoming irrelevant.[112]

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[107] Klock, p. 19
[108] Benton, p. 85
[109] Klock, p. 19
[110] Misirigolou, p. 310
[111] Itzkoff
[112] Klock, p. 22

While many of these continuity-simplifying events have been encouraged by weak sales figures, usually accompanied by a desire to return a character to their former greatness, they are often redundant.[113] Almost every major super-hero franchise has some kind of way to make characters younger that fits within the internal logic of the continuity. These alternate solutions to deal with the aging issue have been used at times by both Marvel and DC Comics. The same "Super-Soldier" formula that gave Marvel Comics' Captain America his super-powers slowed his aging down, giving the World War II veteran the appearance of a young man in the prime of his life.[114] A variation of this formula, called the Infinity Formula, has subsequently been given to Captain America's allies Bucky, Nick Fury, and Dum Dum Dugan, among other Marvel Comics WWII veterans, who all have stopped aging in a similar manner.[115] Similarly, the supernatural Lazarus Pit has been used to keep several heroes and villains within the Batman universe eternally young with its restorative abilities.[116] Green Lantern's ring slows down the aging process of its bearer,[117] while the Speed Force, the source of the Flash's power, keeps him young as well.[118] With the various types of supernatural, magic, and science fiction concepts that are commonplace aspects within most of these super-hero worlds, there's almost no limit to the number of potential anti-aging storytelling engines could exist and serve as viable alternative to the nuclear option of disregarding large swaths of previous continuity.

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[113] Klock, p. 22
[114] Misiroglu, p. 111
[115] Thomas
[116] Greenberger, p. 307
[117] Misiroglu, p. 240
[118] Misiroglu, p. 564

To be sure, several attempts to rejuvenate characters using the logic of whichever comic book universe they exist in have failed. Most notably, an attempt to turn Iron Man into a teenage version of himself through the machinations of the time-traveling villain Kang was reversed mere months after it first occurred.[119] Another attempt to make Spider-Man seem younger, through a deal with the demon Mephisto, Marvel Comics' version of the Devil, that erased his marriage to longtime girlfriend Mary Jane Watson from existence, met almost universal panning from critics and fans alike.[120]

While complex continuity-manipulating techniques and the like are used to make some characters seem younger, other characters avoid this trouble altogether by never aging in the first place. Most characters based on mythological figures, like Marvel Comics' Thor, Hercules, and Ares would not theoretically grow old due to their divinity, and presumably remain unchanged from the ancient eras from which they sprang. Even characters who are merely rooted in the world of classical mythology, like Wonder Woman, share this power of seeming divine immortality. For characters that seem to have broad or ill-defined power sets, immortality or the inability to age is often cited as an apocryphal power. The most common examples of this occur in the characters of Superman and Wolverine, both of whom have been seen in stories that take place in the far future having seemingly their usual age or only slightly older than they usually appear.

While real-time aging has largely been eschewed in mainstream American super-hero comics, a small handful of titles feature protagonists who age in real time.

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[119] Johnston, "Did Anyone Demand Avengers: The Crossing Omnibus?"
[120] Colton

Eric Larsen's Savage Dragon, who stars in the independently-published series of the same name, has aged in real time since his debut in 1992.[121] Over the course of the past two decades, the character has married, became a widower, remarried, and had children.[122] Judge Dredd, one of the most iconic characters in British comics, has also aged in real time since his first appearance in 1977 in the weekly British anthology *2000 A.D.* In recent years, the age and declining health of the now-over-70 Judge Dredd, have been major plot points, as he was diagnosed with brain cancer[123] and appointed to his world's equivalent to the Supreme Court.[124]

Several noteworthy newspaper comic strips, the cousins of super-hero comics, have also aged characters in real time in a similar manner. The characters of Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*, have aged as the strip has changed hands from Bill Perry, Dick Moores, to Jim Scancarelli since its 1918 debut.[125] Lynn Johnston's semi-autobiographical *For Better or For Worse* featured a cast that aged parallel to her own family.[126] Both Gary Trudeau and Tom Batiuk began aging the characters in their respective strips *Doonesbury* and *Funky Winkerbean* during the middle of their runs.[127] Characters that began their lives as teenagers in both strips are now middle aged and have families of their own. With the exception of *Gasoline Alley*, all of the aforementioned comic strips have been the work of singular creators, who have been able to shape and change their strips at their whims, allowing them the freedom to

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[121] Larsen
[122] Larsen
[123] Wagner, *2000 AD* #1595
[124] Wagner, *2000 AD* #1693
[125] Harvey, p. 42
[126] Harvey, p. 161
[127] Harvey, p. 144

address the issues that aging presents. In the case of *Gasoline* Alley, each iteration of

the title essentially becomes the work of a singular creator, despite the universe's

shared history, as different characters are spotlighted and play different roles within the

strip.

Among the handful of real-time aging characters in super-hero comics, the most

notable is the occult detective and magician John Constantine, who began his life as a

full-fledged member of the primary DC Comics universe. Originally created by Alan

Moore, Steve Bissette, and John Totleben as a supporting character in the horror series

Saga of the Swamp Thing in June 1985,[128] Constantine interacted with Green Arrow

and members of the Teen Titans in some of his early appearances. Constantine was to

be one of the main protagonists in "Twilight of the Superheroes," an abandoned

company-wide storyline that would have crossed over into all of the major super-hero

titles and placed Constantine at the center of the DC Universe.[129]

Despite these interactions, the Swamp Thing stories featuring Constantine

largely existed on the periphery of the DC Universe during this period, due to the more

mature themes those stories dealt with. By February 1987, the series, now simply titled

Swamp Thing, carried a "for mature readers" warning on the cover,[130] putting a

thematic distance between the title and the rest of the DC publishing line. As a result of

the character's popularity in *Swamp Thing*, the adventures of John Constantine moved

to his own "mature readers" series, *Hellblazer* in 1988.[131] The universe of Swamp

Thing and John Constantine would later be completely separated from the main current

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[128] Moore, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #37

[129] Moore, "Twilight of the Superheroes"

[130] Moore, *Swamp Thing* #57

[131] Delano

of the DC Universe in 1993 as a result of the creation of the "mature readers" publishing imprint Vertigo. This total split from the time-handicapped DC Universe allowed Constantine to age in real time, along with his readers.

Both *Swamp Thing* and *Hellblazer* were among the first books aimed squarely at adults, as exemplified by the 'mature readers' label on the cover. In the same way that adolescents followed the various Robins' adventures as contemporaries, in terms of age, over the years, readers in their late twenties and early thirties found a contemporary in Constantine. In an early issue, Constantine's birth date is given as May 10, 1953.[132] Within the *Hellblazer* universe, this seems to be a firm date that's seen the series protagonist handsome, sharp features become battered, saggy, and scarred over the course of two decades. Where super-hero comics usually transition their younger characters from adolescence into adulthood with their readers, *Hellblazer* has seen Constantine age through various states of adulthood including marriage, bouts of lung cancer and depression, and the deaths of siblings.[133]

Constantine's aging is most clearly observed by looking at *Hellblazer* covers from the various eras of the character's narrative life. In his earliest stories, Constantine's appearance was explicitly based on the musician Sting, according to co-creator Alan Moore.[134] In those earliest years, Constantine was a charismatic loner with a full shock of blonde hair. His early appearances are best encapsulated by Tom Canty's well-remembered cover to 1992's *Hellblazer* #50. On the cover, Constantine is seen wearing his trademark brown trench coat and smoking a cigarette. His face is

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[132] Delano

[133] Ennis

[134] Moore, "Alan Moore On (Just About) Everything," p. 42

relatively wrinkle-free, save for the beginnings of some crow's feet around his eyes, and he has what can reasonably be described as a full head of hair.[135] While later depictions of the character would make Constantine look especially young in this particular image, the character could quite reasonably be a 38 year-old male who looks good for his age. Even though this was over five years into the character's history, his appearance had not changed all that much from those first Swamp Thing stories. This can be attributed to the fact that the character was still tenuously connected to the DC Universe. The Vertigo split would not come for another year, and the toll of the years would not begin to become apparent until years after that.

By 2000, Constantine looked decidedly middle age. As Tim Bradstreet's July 2000 cover to *Hellblazer* #150 shows, Constantine had more wrinkles on his face, specifically around his forehead. Whereas his face was relatively unscathed in 1992, various small little scars and scrapes were visible, along with the hint of a five o'clock shadow.[136] Moreover, the full mane of hair he had as a young man had since been cut down into a short, spiky style that made his receding hairline evident. Constantine remained in his brown trench coat, which battered and soiled, now showed its age, much like its wearer.

Constantine's aging became much more pronounced around this period. In Tim Bradstreet's February 2002 cover to *Hellblazer* #169, Constantine appears visibly older than he had less than two years prior. His hair is considerably thinner and has begun to lose some of its color.[137] Scars and wrinkles have become increasingly predominant on

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[135] Canty
[136] Bradstreet, *Hellblazer* #150
[137] Bradstreet, *Hellblazer* #169

his face, as what appears to be the beginnings of a wart or boil can also faintly be seen on the cover. He remains in his trademark trench coat, which appears increasingly worn. While the artistic license and styles of various artists must be accounted for in depictions of Constantine and his aging, this cover and the previous one offer the chance to see how the character ages in the hands of one artist over a two year period. The most noticeable difference between Bradstreet's two covers is the weight gain that Constantine appears to have undergone. On the second cover, Constantine is depicted as carrying more weight on his cheeks and lower jaw. His once sharp facial features have been blunted and softened in his older age.

Almost a decade after this cover, Simon Bisely's cover to *Hellblazer* #276 depicts an even older Constantine. His once model-like facial features have become hardened like chiseled granite.[138] Multiple cuts and scars are visible on his face, including one prominent scar across his left eye. One of his hands appears bandaged, suggesting that he might be more susceptible to injury in his older age. While still blonde, his hair almost looks white on this cover. Although his hair color in this particular instance can be attributed to a lighting angle, the angle coloring on the page still clearly indicates that this is an older Constantine.

While *Hellblazer* is still being published, Constantine was reintegrated back into the DC Universe proper as part of its most recent continuity streamlining. Tellingly, the effects of the past two decades of his adventures in the Vertigo world go unnoticed,

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[138] Bisley

and the primary DC universe interpretation of the character remains the youthful spitting image of Sting that he was in *Swamp Thing*.[139]

While most of the main continuities have focused on ways to keep characters youthful, the inverse of this has also been explored, as characters have encountered potential versions of themselves from possible futures through stories involving time travel. The concluding portion of this paper will briefly examine this inverse alongside how these characters, or their future counterparts, deal with death, the final step in the aging process.

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[139] Milligan

Part V: World of Tomorrow

Science fiction casts a large shadow over super-hero comics. Science fiction pulp magazines were direct antecedents to super-hero comics, while the science fiction comics of the 1950s helped inform Julius Schwartz's revival of DC Comics' super-hero line which would go on to initiate the start of the super-hero's domination of the comics format in America. This lineage is clear through the large number of science fiction genre staples that populate the adventures of modern super-heroes. One such staple, time travel, is of particular interest to this discussion, as it offers some of the only inter-textual clues as to how many of these characters would age, if they were ever allowed to do so.

Every time travel story can ultimately be boiled down to the simple concept of characters from one time period traveling to another time period. In super-hero comics, that may take the form of characters from what the story establishes as the current era

traveling into what the story establishes as the future or characters from that future traveling back into the past of the current era. Within the continuity of any given comic, any possible future is best considered another kind of 'imaginary story,' or alternate reality that sits parallel to the main continuity. To echo Alan Moore's introduction to *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, these stories present realities that "may or may not happen" within the parameters of the main continuity.[140]

Because of this indeterminate relationship to continuity, futures may diverge wildly from the rest of the established narrative world. Accordingly, this allows a degree of freedom from both the 'surrender' that Eliot would argue creators of modern comics fall under as they can simply disregard any part of a book's past that inhibits them from telling the story that they want to tell. Moreover, creators also have the capability to further distance themselves from the original intentions of a character's creator, as the classification of being imaginary stories allows them to subvert, invert, and otherwise alter the core concepts of a character in ways made impossible within the confines of regular continuity.

One of the most prominent examples of this comes in Chris Claremont and John Bryne's "Days of Future Past," originally published during their tenure on *Uncanny X-Men*. In the story, they transfer the core concept of the X-Men from what is essentially a fantastic version of the real world to a post-apocalyptic wasteland where the majority of the X-Men are dead. In the story, an adult version of Kitty Pryde mentally travels back in time to possess her teenage self in an attempt to alter her future by changing

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[140] Moore, *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, p. 1

events in the continuity's present.[141] Here, Claremont and Bryne offer a subversion of their own creation, as they turn the innocent, inexperienced Pryde into a hardened war veteran.

The cover to the comic book that originally contained the second half of the story, *Uncanny X-Men #142*, features a surprisingly graphic image of the seemingly invulnerable X-Man Wolverine, slightly grey around the temples, dying as his flesh is charred to the bone by one of the future's dystopian robot rulers, accompanied by a text box which reads, "This Issue: Everybody Dies!"[142] This image is made all the more shocking within the context of Wolverine's role as a survivor character. While the primary continuity version of this character can never die because of that role, the death of this older alternate, or for that matter any non-primary continuity version, is the closest thing to death as the character will ever really experience.

While characters between the X-Men's present and future interacted in that story, potential future versions of characters do not always interact with their present selves within the pages of the narrative. For example, the grim, elderly Batman who stars in *The Dark Knight Returns* never encounters his younger counterpart in the continuity's present. Despite that, that older Batman had an enormous effect on the main continuity for reasons that exist outside of the story's narrative. Creators transferred the darker take on the character and overall tone of the piece to the character's present incarnation, and aged the main continuity Batman slightly as well.[143] In the same way that Wolverine dies in his future tale, Batman, another character that is defined by his

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[141] Clarmeont, *Uncanny X-Men #141*
[142] Clarmeont, *Uncanny X-Men #142*
[143] Vaz, p. 182

ability to survive, apparently dies at the end of *DKR*. However, unlike Wolverine, he is revealed to be alive and well, having faked his own death in the book's final pages.[144]

While both of these stories are considered to be among the best stories ever told with these respective characters, *DKR* is lauded as one of the finest works the medium has produced while "Days of Future Past" is merely considered a very good X-Men story. While there are multiple other factors that play into these reputations, this interestingly correlates with an inversion of the tradition in Greek epics in which the death of a hero becomes a key part of defining their status,[145] as the American super-hero seems to be validated by surviving, thus achieving a kind of cultural immortality.

But while these core characters have achieved a kind of cultural immortality, the serial pieces of media that these characters inhabit, and accordingly the alternate continuities that these media create, can end.

In the final episode of *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*, an animated series featuring a light-hearted take on the character that often commented on the nature of the Batman character himself, a father and son can be seen watching that very same episode of a Batman television show on television together. At one point, the father turns to his son and says, "Boy, the show sure has taken a nosedive this season," before asking him if he wants to change the channel. The son then replies to his father, "Let's keep watching dad. Batman won't let us down. He never has before."[146]

The son's comments here are deeper than they appear at first glance. When any one version or interpretation of Batman, or any other super-hero character really,

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[144] Miller
[145] Foucault, p.2
[146] Dini

begins to dim in the eyes of the public, some fresh interpretation will capture the audience's attention all over again after a new set of creators offer a fresh take on a comic book or a visionary director highlights a hitherto unconsidered aspect of a character on film. With the rich traditions that have emerged between the combination of primary continuity and imaginary stories, the possibilities for further interpretations of characters are almost endless.

These traditions have enriched super-heroes far beyond their original intended purposes. For some characters, scores of creators have offered these characters their entire careers, offering their best work to the cause of making these characters come to life. As a result of this, these characters seemed to age in their own way, giving readers an empathetic entry point into fantastic worlds. To some readers, they even served as friends who grow up alongside them, at least for a time. But when readers outgrew the characters they initially grew up along with, they found that the spirit of those characters, and their generation, had been passed along to another character as the generational cycle progressed.

Despite the merits of having such close relationships form between characters and readers as they grew together, the corporate entities that published them often tried to wipe the slate of continuity clean, disregarding all of that progress in an effort to keep the characters frozen in stasis in the forms that made them famous in the first place. While these characters began their fictional lives as mere pieces of children's entertainment, these beloved icons of popular culture would go on to define an art form and represent the hopes and dreams of fans of all ages.

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While this is hardly my definitive statement on comics, or even super-heroes for that matter, it's a good encapsulation of how I think comic books and the stories within them can be discussed intelligently and be considered in an enlightening, and hopefully entertaining manner.

Absolutely none of this would have been possible without the ongoing support of my parents, Cliff and Denise Webber. I dedicate this work to them as small sign of gratitude for their two decades of entertaining and encouraging my never-ending journey into the world of comic books.

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