

Infinite Earths and the Narrativization of  
Comic Book History.

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## Monitoring the Past: DC Comics' Crisis on Infinite Earths and the Narrativization of Comic Book History

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In 1985, DC Comics reached its fiftieth anniversary of publishing comic books.<sup>[1]</sup> To celebrate this landmark event in comics publishing history, the company put out a twelve-issue miniseries, titled *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, that promised to cause, "major and permanent changes to occur throughout the entire DC line" (*Crisis Compendium* 4). For once, such promises proved to be something less than hyperbolic. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (referred to hereafter as "*Crisis*") brought lasting change to DC Comics from a narrative point of view, and heralded even further-reaching changes for the comic book industry and fan community. As the first multi-part, universe-spanning comic book crossover of its kind,<sup>[2]</sup> *Crisis* showed the two major superhero comic book publishers (DC Comics and Marvel Comics) how they could utilize the continuity established by decades-worth of stories to weave together a cohesive, metatextual tapestry that both appealed to long-time readers and brought in massive amounts of money.

2 Beyond providing a template for a seemingly endless series of "events" and "crossovers" in the decades to come, *Crisis* was important to DC, Marvel, and other publishers of superhero "universes" by showing them that fans were just as interested in reading stories about these universes, themselves, as they were in following individual titles or characters. By examining the narrative process through which writer Marv Wolfman, along with the books' other creators, created *Crisis*, and comparing it to Hayden White's theoretical

conceptualization of the "chronicle" and the "narrative" in historiography, I will show that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was a watershed moment in the history of superhero comics, allowing creators and publishers in the ensuing years to become more engaged with the histories of their publishing lines and more fully aware of the impact of past stories upon the present.

### **Crisis on Infinite Earths: A Corporate History**

3 The first inkling that fans and readers of DC Comics got about Crisis on Infinite Earths was found in Giordano's "Meanwhile ..." column that ran as a text page in comics throughout the DC line. In the column that appeared in those comics with a June 1984 cover date,<sup>[3]</sup> Giordano noted that:

We felt it appropriate to save this blockbuster maxiseries [*Crisis*<sup>[4]</sup>] for this anniversary year because the changes in our universe and the startling events that will unfold within its pages will alter forever the DC universe and provide some wonderful stepping-stones for the next 50 years. Clue: look for odd occurrences in DC titles from now till the end of the year. They'll provide additional clues as to the who, what, where, when and why of the DC universe maxiseries. (*Crisis Compendium* 4)

Behind the scenes, these "odd occurrences" were the cause of a new kind of line-wide editorial wrangling that had not been seen before in comics. Indeed, the entirety of Crisis, from inception to publication, would include vast amounts of editorial control, imposed from the very top, over the creators of individual DC superhero books.

4 In a memo from Giordano, *Crisis* writer Marv Wolfman, and writer/editor Len Wein to all DC editors and writers,<sup>[5]</sup> the mandate was given that, "Because this series involves the entire DC Universe we do ask that each Editor and writer cooperate with the project by using a character called **The Monitor** in their books twice during the next year" (*Crisis Compendium* 4). In a follow-up memo to the entire editorial staff, Giordano reiterated that, "The need to include the Monitor in your plans is not optional but absolutely required for all designated titles" (*Crisis Compendium* 8). However, only three months later, Giordano, Wolfman, and Wein notified the editorial staff that plans for *Crisis* had changed: "after you use the Monitor twice, please do not use him again. He'll be gone by next summer" (*Crisis Compendium* 8). *Crisis*, then, revealed the full and confusing extent to which editors, and particularly senior editors, were beginning to impose their own demands upon the writers of superhero comics, so that the fuller universe of the characters would (ideally) become more united and cohesive.

5 The conflict of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* lay not just on the four-color pages of

the series, but within the offices of DC Comics, where writers and editors struggled, both with and against each other, to create a single, unified, cohesive "DC Universe" while at the same time maintaining the artistic integrity of individual titles. What these combatants overlooked, or perhaps more accurately simply were not (and could not be) aware of, was that in this battle over the present state of the DC Universe they were also shaping not only its future, but its past as well.

## Continuity in Crisis

- 6 From the first time that two superheroes teamed up to fight a common villain, comic book "universe" continuity was born. Very loosely considered, "universal continuity"<sup>[6]</sup> is the metatextual web that is created when various superheroes and villains meet, either in a team book (such as *Justice League of America*) or by crossing over into each other's individual books. For example, if the character of Batman's sidekick, Robin, dies in a given issue of *Batman*, then, in the meta-narrative of the DC Universe, Robin cannot appear alive in an issue of *Superman* or *Wonder Woman* (unless that story specifically occurs before Robin's death, or, given the conventions of superhero stories, after his resurrection). Significant changes or occurrences in any single book that takes place within the DC Universe are, by the strictures of this continuity, reflected in every other DC Universe title. Thus, a simple, working definition of this kind of continuity could be as follows: Continuity in a comic book superhero universe is the meta-narrative created out of the sum total of meetings, relationships, battles, births, deaths, and other twists of plot and characterization that have taken place within that universe.<sup>[7]</sup>
- 7 Given how many creators are constantly adding ingredients to this metatextual pot, however, confusion and inconsistencies frequently abound regarding the DC Universe's<sup>[8]</sup> "official" (or "canonical") continuity. If Robin *did* turn up alive in an issue of *Superman*, for example, then in order for that story and the story of Robin's death to both be considered part of the DC Universe canonical continuity, some explanation must be made (such explanations typically, though not always, involve some form of time travel, body double, magic, or alternate dimension, the easy out for such conflicting stories within a universe of science fiction and fantasy). As DC Comics is ultimately a moneymaking corporation,<sup>[9]</sup> it needs to cater to fans' demands, which in this case means that the editors and creators must constantly monitor and police the universe's continuity such that readers don't complain about inconsistencies. Literary critic Terrence Wandtke explicates the concern with continuity amongst comic book fandom:

Obsessed with superhero continuity, the superhero aficionado known as the fanboy may try to indentify various strands of superhero

revisions as canonical and non-canonical. However, the fanboy fights a losing battle in superhero worlds filled with imaginary cities (with an ever-changing landscape), informed by conceits of the medium (in which heroes almost never age), and redeveloped by regularly changing writers and illustrators (in ways that are sometimes slight and sometimes dramatic). (5)

Wandtke rightly points out that following continuity is not an easy task for a reader, and involves a fair bit of "obsessiveness."

- 8 By the mid-1980's, the "obsessed," fan-driven demand for cohesive continuity within comic book universes, combined with the creator-driven desire to constantly devise new scenarios and alternative narratives, had led to a cluttered, confusing mess in the DC Universe, as writer/editor Marv Wolfman saw it. *Crisis* was Wolfman's brainchild, and he wrote the entire twelve-issue miniseries, which would be illustrated by detail-oriented penciller George Perez. In the text page at the back of the second issue of *Crisis*, Wolfman outlined what had become the problem with DC continuity:

Writers like to complicate matters, and what began as a dream of a story—'Flash of Two Worlds'—had turned into a nightmare. DC continuity was so confusing, no new reader could easily understand it, while older readers had to keep miles-long lists to set things straight. And the writers ... well, we were always stumbling over each other trying to figure out simple answers to difficult questions. (*Crisis Compendium* 5)

The story to which Wolfman refers, "Flash of Two Worlds," was in many ways the beginnings of DC's continuity problems. The story featured the first appearance of DC's "Earth Two" concept, which invented a concept of parallel universes whereby, because "two objects can occupy the same space and time—if they vibrate at different speeds," it is possible for two earths to be "created at the same time in two quite similar universes! They vibrate differently—which keeps them apart!" (Fox 13-14). Through the existence of these different earths—"Earth-One," Earth-Two, "Earth-Prime," etc.—DC was able to create a "multiverse" containing a literally infinite amount of alternate realities, each of which (usually) contained some variation on DC's pantheon of superheroes and villains. Over time, however, as Wolfman indicates, the amount of earths that creators, editors, and fans needed to keep track of became so large as to be intimidating to new readers and confusing even to longtime DC followers. As Wolfman explained in the same essay:

For the past several years many people have suggested 'fixing up' the DC Universe. Simplifying it. Making it consistent yet in a way which would not prevent experiments that varied with an 'established'

future. ... Other writers and artists have often mentioned how they wished the morass of continuity could be repaired. Well, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* will attempt such a repair job. By series' end DC will have a consistent and more easily understandable universe to play with. We're pulling out all stops to make *Crisis on Infinite Earths* an epic you will never forget! (*Crisis Compendium* 5)

In addition to explaining the continuity purposes for *Crisis*, Wolfman also provided a mission statement for the series itself—to relate an unforgettable epic that would create a consistent DC Universe. Although the consistency of DC continuity after *Crisis* was, and still is, questionable, *Crisis* certainly was an unforgettable, and oft-repeated, moment for the readers and creators of superhero comics, even if, ironically, the superheroes themselves would not remember the epic events of the series at all.

## **Worlds Living and Worlds Dying: The Story of Crisis on Infinite Earths**

9 The plot of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is meandering, complicated, and not particularly easy to recount. It begins reasonably simply enough, with a recounting of the birth of the DC multiverse, slightly reminiscent of scientific descriptions of the Big Bang:

In the beginning there was only one. A single black infinitude ... so cold and dark for so very long ... that even the burning light was imperceptible. But the light grew, and the infinitude shuddered ... and the darkness finally ... screamed, as much in pain as in relief. For in that instant, a multiverse was born. A multiverse of worlds vibrating and replicating ... and a multiverse that should have been one, became many. (*Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Absolute Edition* 11)

During the course of *Crisis*, the DC superheroes and readers alike learn that the multiverse, indeed, "should have been one"—it was ruptured and fractured into a multiverse, instead of a single universe, due to the scientific inquiry of an alien named Krona who wanted to look back to the dawn of time and learn its secrets. Along with the multiverse was born a being known as the Monitor, whose job it was to learn everything about the multiverse, as well as to protect and maintain it. In addition to birthing the multiverse, however, Krona's actions also created an antimatter universe, an evil universe that contained the Monitor's polar opposite, the Anti-Monitor. In *Crisis*, the Anti-Monitor makes his move against the multiverse, attempting to engulf its infinite worlds in an equally infinite wave of antimatter that literally erases everything, and every positive-matter universe, that it touches.

## **Alternative content**

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- 10 In Image 1, from the very first page of *Crisis*, we see a representation of the initial birth of the multiverse, with an artistic interpretation of the Big Bang—a spark of light appearing in the darkness of a "black infinitude" in the first two panels, then exploding into life in the third. In this third panel, the "birth" and fecundity of the multiverse is literalized, with an image reminiscent of both a birth canal (a long tunnel with a bright light at its end) and of wriggling sperm (representing, it would seem, the various universes-to-be). This panel is immediately preceded by text that, itself, is reminiscent of a human birth, which notes that, "the darkness finally... screamed, as much in pain as in relief." The panel is dominated by uneven lines, immersed in the chaotic creation of something from the inky blackness of nothing.

## **Alternative content**

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- 11 Image 2, which immediately follows Image 1 (it is the final panel of that first page of *Crisis*), replaces the previous chaos with the tightly structured order of the "multiverse of worlds vibrating and replicating." In this portrayal of the cosmology of the DC Universe, disorder gives way to an uncomfortable rigidity of universes barely containing the sparking lashes of disorder, pictured in yellow and crimson at the edges of the panel. The multiverse, this page tells us through both images and words, was never meant to be.
- 12 During the course of *Crisis*, after a series of various plot twists, the Anti-Monitor actually does succeed in destroying the multiverse. He ultimately travels back to the dawn of time, where, following an epic battle with the DC superheroes, the universe is restarted, anew, albeit with a significant difference:

In the beginning there were many. A multiversal infinitude ... so cold and dark for so very long ... that even the burning light was imperceptible. But the light grew, and the multiverse shuddered ... and the darkness screamed as much in pain as in relief. For in that instant a universe was born. A universe with mighty worlds orbiting burning suns. A universe reborn at the dawn of time. What had been many became one. (*Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Absolute Edition* 297)[\[10\]](#)

Thus, the largest plot/continuity outcome of *Crisis* was the death of the multiverse, and its rebirth as a single universe, the universe that was always "meant to be." As a result, certain characters who survived this death/rebirth because they were present at the beginning of time, and yet who contradicted the continuity of this reborn universe—characters such as the Earth-2 Superman, Robin, and Huntress (Batman's daughter)—were erased from the memories of everyone in this reborn universe, such that they, like the multiverse itself, had no longer ever existed. Not coincidentally, the most

problematic of these characters all died in the final battle of the one, reborn Earth against the Anti-Monitor, a battle that dominated the final issue of *Crisis*.

- 13 However, the rebirth of the multiverse as a universe, and the attendant rebooting of the major characters in that universe, did not proceed as Marv Wolfman had originally planned. In fact, Wolfman wanted *none* of the characters to remember what had happened during *Crisis*, and for the entire DC Universe to start from a new, fresh slate, with new first issues for every ongoing series. According to a DC-published *Crisis* companion volume, though,

The other editors felt differently. One of them said, "If the heroes don't remember the Crisis it invalidates the book." Exasperated, Marv replied, "The heroes don't buy our comics. It doesn't matter if they remember the stories. The readers do and they'll remember them. Let's not complicate things." But Marv was outvoted. (*Crisis Compendium* 34)

Furthermore, Wolfman's plan for all of DC's superhero comics to reboot with new first issues was similarly shot down, this time by Dick Giordano himself.

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- 14 Image 3 shows the confusing results of this fluctuating continuity, which had still not been completely finalized by the time *Crisis* ended. Here, the aged Superman of "Earth 2," the Superman who initiated the very concept of the superhero with his appearance in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, has found that the world has seemingly no memory of him. His fellow heroes who were with him battling the Anti-Monitor at the dawn of time, such as the Superman of Earth 1 and Jay Garrick, Earth 2's Flash, do remember him, but the entire rest of humanity—represented here by Garrick's "civilian" wife, Joan—has no such memory. Wolfman and Perez situate this scene in a stereotypical suburban milieu—complete with two-story white house and a grill out on the patio—in order to juxtapose the familiar with the fantastic. Earth-2 Superman's dismay is made all the stronger by it occurring in a setting filled with the typical Americana that he has always fought for (along with truth and justice). His proclamation that, "Lois and I have eaten here a dozen times" indicates just how fully his erasure from history has taken hold—even his close friends and confidants don't recognize him, save for the handful who were involved in the battle with the Anti-Monitor.
- 15 Ultimately, the superheroes *did* remember *Crisis*, at least to an extent, and their books did not all restart, but to the rest of the population of the DC Universe *Crisis* consisted of just hazy recollections of red skies and a dire threat that the heroes eventually defeated. The outcome, according to DC researcher John Wells, was that, "For the most part, it was as if Earth-One still existed, albeit now peppered with immigrants from Earth-Two and the Charlton Comics universe of Earth-Four. And even this wasn't clear-cut" (Wells "Post Crisis" 87). Within a few years, however, Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, amongst other heroes, would all be "rebooted," and given new contexts, origins, and back stories that were consistent with this one, new universe. This universe was more in keeping with the "mature" readership that came to dominate the comic book industry in the 1980's, with more complex and morally ambiguous stories and characters. A line was drawn between the "pre-Crisis" DC Multiverse and the "post-Crisis" DC Universe. For the next two decades,<sup>[11]</sup> DC continuity would be a continual reflection of the changes wrought by *Crisis*, and the creators of DC's superhero tales would constantly be negotiating with the fact that fifty years worth of storytelling was now pre-Crisis and had to be rewoven into the ongoing post-Crisis tapestry through the process of "retroactive continuity."

### **Comic Book Continuity, Ongoing and Retroactive**

- 16 As *Crisis* displays, continuity in comic book superhero universes is a much more complicated matter than the earlier working definition would imply. Perhaps the first sustained reflection on the meanings of continuity came

from semiotician and critic Umberto Eco, in his analysis of the first superhero, "The Myth of Superman." In the essay, Eco compares Superman to heroes of ancient mythology, noting that a key difference between the two is the fact that, while Superman's story is continually being added to, myths are stories with a beginning and an end, embodying, "a law or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part *predictable* and cannot hold surprises for us" (148).<sup>[12]</sup> The problem with Superman, then, is that at the end of any given story he, "has made a gesture which is inscribed in his past and which weighs on his future ... [and he] has taken a step toward death, he has gotten older, if only by an hour" (150). Thus, "*To act* ... for Superman, as for any other character ... means to 'consume' himself" (150).<sup>[13]</sup> In order to avoid this problematic situation, and keep telling Superman stories in perpetuity, the writers of Superman, according to Eco, have devised a "shrewd" solution in which, "The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate—of which the reader is not aware at all—where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said" (153). When Eco wrote this essay, in the early 1960's, the "oneiric climate" did, indeed, dominate superhero stories, as the earliest form of continuity—things had happened before each issue, and things would happen after each, but the links between events were loosely-knit, without relying upon direct cause-and-effect logic.

17 However, this all changed with advent of the Stan Lee-helmed "Marvel Age" in the mid-1960's, during which Lee, as writer/editor, along with a handful of artists, created a cohesive tapestry out of the Marvel Comics universe, in which change did occur, characters aged, and the events of one comic book were reflected in future stories told within that universe.<sup>[14]</sup> Richard Reynolds, in *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, one of the first book-length academic analyses of superhero comics, takes a look at the kind of continuity that emerged in the wake of Lee's Marvel Universe. Reynolds notes that, "Continuity is a familiar idea for all followers of soap opera, but, as practiced by the two major superhero publishers, continuity is of an order of complexity beyond anything to which the television audience has become accustomed" (Reynolds 37). Reynolds views continuity as a kind of intertextuality encompassing the whole of those books that co-create the DC (or Marvel) Universe. He goes on to note, though, that this intertextuality is not simply of one kind, and that often, "fans tend to conflate several different types of intertextuality when using the word 'continuity.' Picking these meanings apart, it becomes possible to address some of the different levels at which the pleasure of continuity has become an expected and integral part of the pleasure of the superhero narrative" (38).

18 In Reynolds' analysis of the varieties of intertextuality at play in superhero comics and universes, he sees three different types of continuity. The first of

these is "serial continuity," the reflection of past issues/occurrences in the fictional universe, and the sense of consistency with all of that which has gone before (akin to the continuity in television soap operas). "Hierarchical continuity," on the other hand, is the catalog of the strength and fighting ability of every character, such that if Character A defeats Character B, and Character B defeats Character C, then Character A must be able to defeat Character C. This form of continuity, then, is literally a hierarchy of which superheroes and villains are the strongest and most difficult to defeat. Finally, when serial continuity and hierarchical continuity are put together, they form "structural continuity": "Serial continuity, which is diachronic (it develops over time), and hierarchical continuity, which is synchronic (the state of affairs at a given moment), combine to produce structural continuity, which is, in short, the entire contents of the DC or Marvel universes" (Reynolds 41). Thus, Reynold's three-tier continuity system is more akin to a system of overall continuity—structural continuity—that is subdivided into its historical (serial continuity) and present-moment (hierarchical continuity) aspects.

- 19 Though Reynolds' system of continuity is generally a strong formulation, I would argue that he is slightly off when it comes to the specifics of the synchronic nature of continuity, which I would more directly just call "synchronic continuity" rather than "hierarchical continuity." Instead of reflecting the hierarchy of who-can-beat-whom at any specific moment, synchronic continuity is, I believe, based on two aspects of the intertextual comics universe(s). The first of these, which I will call "geographic continuity," is a reflection of where each character is physically located at any given moment.<sup>[15]</sup> For example, if Batman is away from Gotham City for a period of time within the stories in the *Batman* titles, then no other story can show him as active in Gotham during that period of time, unless the story is specifically demarcated as occurring before or after the *Batman* storyline (thus do synchronic and diachronic continuity quite easily slip into each other). "Status continuity," the other half of synchronic continuity, is more akin to Reynold's hierarchical continuity, in that it reflects the set of known data and facts about a character's current state. For example, if Superman is depowered in a story in *Superman*, then he must be depowered in all stories across the line taking place at that moment. If he quits the Justice League, then he must no longer be a member in any of DC's books at that time. Geographic continuity and status continuity, taken together as synchronic continuity, work much like a tremendous chessboard, noting the location and potential movements for each and every character in the universe in relation to each other.<sup>[16]</sup> When these movements actually occur, and thus merge with the plot developments of diachronic/serial continuity, they come together to form Reynolds' structural continuity and its sum total of the contents of the DC and Marvel universes.

20 In addition to structural continuity and its diachronic/synchronic constituent parts, there is another particular type of continuity, made most clear by the distinctions between "pre-Crisis" and "post-Crisis," that Reynolds does not even approach: retroactive continuity, or "retconning." Retconning is the process whereby a comic book creator in some way alters some of the events of the origin, back-story, and/or history of a particular character—changing, for example, the identity of the mugger who killed Batman's parents. Retconning is most often utilized to literally rewrite some aspect of a character's past, in order to keep that character more contemporary (Batman could not have been active during World War II, or else he would now be in his eighties), to erase stories from continuity that no longer fit by today's standards (Batman either as carrying a gun, in his first appearances, or as a goofy, often-spacefaring, well-adjusted father figure in the 1960's), or to create future story potential (adding a character into the life of Batman from before his parents' death, who then becomes an important ally or enemy of the hero in the present day).

21 Retconning, in fact, is the key way in which comic creators are able to combat the "oneiric" problems of serial storytelling pointed out by Eco, as it allow creators to rewrite the past of characters so that they pulled back from the death that each action moves them inevitably toward. Retconning is revision of the comic book universe in order to make that universe fresh and exciting for contemporary readers, but it also involves the influence of the past, as it directly inscribes itself upon that past. As Terrence Wandtke notes, talking about *Crisis*:

the psychic trace of the original is never completely lost, despite the best efforts of comic book writers to obliterate the partially hidden past ... In the decades since this series was written, writers seemed incapable of making references only to the new post-Crisis history of superheroes. Past versions of superheroes are never completely lost and those past versions continue to shape the most recent versions.

(7)

While changing the past, then, retconning is still subject to that past, which threatens to reemerge at any time.

22 Literary scholar Geoff Klock, in fact, argues that this reemergence has direct psychological connotations. In analyzing the "revisionary superhero narrative" of the late 1980's through mid 1990's, Klock posits that, "any given superhero narrative stands in relation to its conflicted, chaotic tradition, and continuity as the ego stands in relation to the unconscious" (5). Relating these narratives to Harold Bloom's theory of "anxiety of influence," Klock argues that, "superhero comic books are an especially good place to witness the structure of misprision [active/critical reading/misreading], because as a serial narrative that has been running for more than sixty years,

reinterpretation becomes part of its survival code" (13). Though Klock uses the "anxiety of influence" to examine a specific set of revisionist superhero texts, his larger point here is valid to all of continuity, which is constantly affected and influenced by the histories of these superhero universe metanarratives.

- 23 However, as critic Roz Kaveny notes, it is not only the creators of the superhero stories who are subject to the influence of history, but the *readers* as well. She asserts that the metanarratives of the DC and Marvel universes are "thick texts," which, "are not only a product of the creative process but contain all the stages of that process within them like scars or vestigial organs" (*Alien to Matrix* 5). The enjoyment of a thick text is an *active* process, which involves a knowledge and appreciation of the history of the genre in which a story is enmeshed. In speaking of science fiction films, Kaveny notes:

Reading a film as a thick text encourages us to see it in its context, both chronologically in terms of its being influenced by other films, or influencing later ones, or re-imagined by critics or even its original makers in the light of that influence and its consequences. It enables us to create a criticism which includes a sense of the particular thick text as an object positioned in the broader space of the generic megatext of which it is a part. It makes it possible to include in our sense of it its particular role in the development of the cascade of particular technical competences that were needful to its conception and making. (*Alien to Matrix* 6)

Understanding superhero universes as thick texts, then, is, "a matter of coming to understand not only the specifics of continuity, but of its importance in the abstract," especially because the DC and Marvel continuities are, "the largest narrative constructions in human history ... [and] learning to navigate them [is] a skill-set all of its own" (*Superheroes!* 25).<sup>[17]</sup> This navigation, in fact, is one of the pleasures of continuity to long-term readers, who observe, "the slow unfolding of a career and the spins that different writers put on a character within the parameters that have been collectively created" (*Superheroes!* 34-35). To Kaveny, speaking as a reader, the massive tapestry of continuity adds a layer of enjoyment to superhero stories by giving them, "a scale and complexity achieved less by design than slow accretion of plot conveniences and periodic attempts to rationalize the result systematically" (*Superheroes!* 44). The biggest of these rationalization attempts, of course, was *Crisis*.

- 24 In fact, by creating a new, cohesive universe that combined characteristics of the various worlds of the multiverse, *Crisis* was in many ways the ultimate retcon. It completely and literally rewrote the entire history of the DC Universe, making it so that those stories, which occurred pre-Crisis, had, for the characters, never actually happened. Although, as Wolfman rightly

pointed out, the readers and creators still remembered those stories, the characters within the fictional realm do not. The massive retcon of *Crisis* erased their original history and replaced it, rewrote it, with a new one. As Geoff Klock points out, "The Anti-Monitor did not simply eliminate whole universes ... but made it so that they never existed in the first place... Characters made obsolete by *Crisis* were engulfed by white energy that looked a lot like the blank page taking over ... They had not been killed; they simply never existed in the first place" (20-21).

25 *Crisis*, then, served, and still serves, as a crucial moment of continuity change, what I call a "continuity node." These are moments that enact a change (whether direct or retroactive) on a superhero *universe*, not just within an individual story. This distinction is small but crucial, since, as media critic Henry Jenkins points out, contemporary superhero narratives are *all* somewhat "revisionist," by mixing in the building blocks of other genres with those of the superhero story. Jenkins notes that,

from the beginning, the superhero comic emerged from a range of different genre traditions; that it has maintained the capacity to build upon that varied history by pulling toward one or another genre tradition at various points in its development; that it has maintained its dominance over the comics medium by constantly absorbing and appropriating new generic materials; and that its best creators have remained acutely aware of this generic instability, shifting its core meaning and interpretations to allow for new symbolic clusters. (41)

Thus, we may accurately speak of superhero comics as "revisionary" from the very beginning, in a *literary* sense of the word.

26 However, when speaking of continuity nodes, I am referring to a more *literal* kind of "revisionism" that rewrites the DC or Marvel universe (or the universe of any other superhero publisher), an actual *event* of some magnitude (even if that "event" is a quiet, character-driven moment of realization) which "revises" past stories, the possibilities of future stories, or, frequently, both. Continuity nodes need not be retcons, as *Crisis* was, but are events which enact some fundamental, lasting change that is reflected across the publishing line,<sup>[18]</sup> such as the death of a major character or a crucial event that becomes a part of that character's history which cannot be ignored (without, of course, retconning it out of existence). Thus, though most continuity nodes reflect a change of either serial or synchronic continuity—some major battle or change in a character's powers/costume that must be reflected throughout the line—some, like *Crisis*, are, indeed, also sites of retroactive continuity, wherein the story told also serves as a re-telling, a re-writing, of past stories. This rewriting, which was and is in constant conversation with the dictates of continuity, is what, with the publication of *Crisis*, brought about the narrativization of history within the DC Universe, a

project that has had massive repercussions for *all* superhero comics and publishers since the mid-1980's.

## Turning "Stories" Into "A Story"

- 27 Several years before Marv Wolfman began forming the ideas about DC continuity that would ultimately lead to *Crisis*, historian Hayden White posited a new form of historiography that, while controversial and widely debated, has come to form a hallmark of the discipline of history in the contemporary era. White put forward the idea that objective history was ostensibly impossible to write, as every historian would constantly be imposing his or her own biases onto their work, whether consciously or unconsciously. The bare, dry facts of history—the "chronicle," as White calls them—are taken by historians and turned into narratives that are implicitly subjective to whoever writes, and even reads, those narratives. Choosing what facts to take from the chronicle to put into the narrative, for example (since the chronicle consists of every single detail of everything that ever happened, it would be impossible to reproduce it, even for a tiny sliver of history), requires subjective choices that ultimately cause the historian to become a shaper of history. As White points out, "Our explanations of historical structures and processes are thus determined more by what we leave out of our representations than by what we put in" (44).
- 28 However, in White's view, "history as a discipline is in bad shape today [1978] because it has lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination" (62). White was not arguing *against* the literary nature of history, and the process of narrativization that he saw as inherent in the discipline, but rather *for* a recognition of that literariness within the work of his contemporaries and colleagues. He felt that historians should put together their work in much the same way a fiction writer would:

no given set of casually recorded historical events in themselves constitute a story; the most that they offer to the historian are story elements. The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play... . Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral. Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic or ironic ... depends upon the historian's decision to configure them according to the imperatives of one plot-structure or mythos rather than another. (47)

What this lengthy quote displays is White's belief in the "emplotment," the narrativization, of history as being a crucial aspect of historiography.

Historians, like fiction writers, are telling a story, and they must be aware of that fact if they are to practice their crafts while harnessing "its own greatest source of strength and renewal" (62).

- 29 While White posits that historians must act as storytellers, *Crisis*, on the other hand, shows how storytellers must sometimes work as historians. In fact, in the pre-planning stages of the story, DC even hired a researcher to review the entire history of its comic book universe. This researcher, Peter Sanderson, spent three years reading all the comics that DC had published since 1935, taking extensive notes along the way (*Crisis Compendium* 6). Wolfman then took the reins from Sanderson, and instead of research-historian, worked as storyteller-historian. He grabbed the various narrative threads of DC history and tied them together into a larger tapestry, one that took a group of disparate concepts created by multiple writers and editors over half a century and turned them into a single, cohesive universe. Wolfman displayed a self-consciousness about this aspect of *Crisis*, when, in a memo to all DC writers and editors co-written with Giordano and Wein, he noted that *Crisis*, "will establish which characters exist in the [DC] universe, and therefore, by inference, which don't... . [Those that don't,] do not exist in the one cohesive timeline the 'DC Universe' represents... The series will correct 'mistakes' made in the past, eliminate repetitious concepts and generally make the DC Universe easier to understand for both us and our readers" (*Crisis Compendium* 6).
- 30 *Crisis*, then, was not just about telling an epic story and simplifying DC continuity, but was also in part a project geared towards taking control of the DC Universe with a firmer hand, deciding which stories and characters did or did not exist within that universe, and creating a single "cohesive timeline" out of the characters who did. Wolfman and his co-conspirators were, in a sense, narrativizing comic book history. This, in one sense, was nothing new, since readers had been nitpicking continuity for years, finding a pleasure in doing so that Roz Kaveny has pointed towards. In terms of one of the comic book *publishers* engaging in the continuity game on such a massive scale, though, *Crisis* was revolutionary, and heralded in a new era in which comic book creators were forced to adhere to the demands of readers and create a cohesive sense of universal continuity.

## Alternative content

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- 31 This "firm hand" of specifically-chosen universal continuity resonates with one of the images at the center of *Crisis* (seen here in Image 4), and at the center of the DC Universe—the giant hand holding a galaxy, or perhaps even a universe, inside of it, seen by the alien scientist Krona when he peers back to the dawn of time and accidentally causes the original splintering of the multiverse. This hand, which appears to cradle all of existence gently in its grip, is clearly a statement of a higher power of sorts within the fictional realm of DC Comics, [\[19\]](#) but can also be read as a metatextual representation of the creators of *Crisis*, who are now taking the DC Universe in hand and deciding what aspects of its continuity will survive the death of the multiverse and rebirth of the universe. The history that they are creating must pick and choose from prior continuity in order to rewrite/recreate a new DC Universe.
- 32 As Wolfman explained in an interview given at the time that *Crisis* was still being released, "anything we do not state happened, did not happen, unless it's brought back. So all the stupid stuff has to be brought back again" (quoted in O'Neill 24). He went on to state exactly how this process worked, editorially:

What we're trying to do: If it's not restated, it did not happen. The beauty of the way we're ending the Crisis, and the way we're rebuilding everything, is that all of that's gone. All of the dumb stuff is gone, and somebody's really going to have to go out of his way to bring it back ... *It's corrective history*. There's a big eraser that's gone over all of it. If an editor deems a character or storyline worthy enough to bring back, okay—but I don't think we should be held responsible for past mistakes. Starting in January [of 1986], we only use the past that was good. (25, my emphasis)

This is, then, not only a corrective history, but rather a selective history, one specifically constructed by Wolfman, Wein, Perez, and DC's other editors and corporate officers. It reflects what *they* saw as not falling into the realm of "dumb stuff," and thus worth keeping in a post-Crisis DC Universe which eschewed the perceived goofiness allowed by the concept of the DC Multiverse.

- 33 With *Crisis*, DC's panoply of multiple earths, instead of being an editorial jumble of continuity, were retroactively made into a single story of how, "a multiverse that should have been one, became many" (Wolfman *Crisis* 11), and then how, through the events and plot/continuity twists of *Crisis*, "What had been many became one" (Wolfman *Crisis* 297). The narrativizing of the multiple earths' history was in effect a retconning of reality. Wolfman took what had been creative and editorial inconsistency and turned it into a story that led up to a specific end point (or rather, given how the DC Universe continued forward after *Crisis*, to a specific mid-point). At the moment in *Crisis* where the Anti-Monitor has caused the restarting of reality which will turn the multiverse into a single universe, a caption box notes, "It is the end of all that was" (Wolfman *Crisis* 295). *Crisis* was, in the context of its time, literally an end to the story of the DC Multiverse—a *narrative* that Wolfman had created out of a *chronicle* of previous parallel earth tales—and a beginning of the narrative of the DC Universe.
- 34 From its very beginnings, though, the new DC Universe would have a strong sense of its own history. During the course of *Crisis*, the Monitor's assistant, Harbinger, taking notes of all of the events of the story through the Monitor's hi-tech machines, states that, "the HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSE—from the dawn of fiery creation to its last smoking ember—will be recorded here for all posterity" (Wolfman *Crisis* 294). While *History of the DC Universe* (hereafter referred to as *History*) was the original title for *Crisis*, it ultimately became its own entity, a two-volume illustrated prose story, written by Wolfman and illustrated by George Perez (who had also penciled *Crisis*) that told the history of the new, solitary universe. In the process, *History* also served as a re-narrativization of pre-Crisis (multiversal) stories into a post-Crisis (universal) milieu. Whereas part of the goal of *Crisis* had been to create a big, sprawling, superhero crossover epic, *History* did not have the same drive behind it, and was intended instead, as Wolfman says in his introduction, to, "be an epilogue to the Crisis," and thus, "to tell readers which heroes and worlds still lived and which were consigned to the double-bagged depths of their collection" (1).
- 35 *History*, then, was an attempt to provide a direct, clear-cut narrative of the new, unified DC universe. This is reflected not only in Wolfman's introduction to the book, but also within the text itself. *History* is narrated by Harbinger, at some undefined time after *Crisis* has ended. Her purpose for crafting such a text is, "because I must, because change must be recorded"

(5). Like Sanderson and Wolfman, Harbinger is taking on the guise of historian in order to craft a narrative of the DC Universe and, specifically, its superheroes. This is a narrative of, "the History of the Universe as seen through my eyes. Its concerns are with those men and women who fought and sacrificed their own lives to save the universe, whose courage and determination altered the past and future" (5). She further refines her purpose in writing such a history (while at the same time making a nod towards real-world heroes, not just super-powered ones), explaining that:

Throughout the history of the World there were freedom fighters, and this is their history, whether uniformed or not, whether powered or ordinary... I have been able to place them chronologically and thus show a continuity of events. The immortals who lived at the dawn of time returned through history, affecting man and his progress... What began many years in the past will be remembered and acted upon many centuries from now. What *was* affects what *is* and what *will be*. This, more than any other reason, is why this history of the universe is needed. To look at the heroic age without perspective, to understand one element without seeing the whole, is to do it a vast injustice. (54)

In this speech, Wolfman seems to be speaking, through Harbinger, about the nature of universal continuity itself (note the use of the phrase "continuity of events"). The purpose of *History* is to give an understanding of DC's continuity to readers, creators, and editors alike, so that they can "see the whole" instead of just "one element," and thus avoid recreating the confusing morass of contradictions that led to the need for *Crisis* in the first place. In order to make such a text palatable, though, the chronicle (in White's usage of the term) of events that make up DC continuity must be turned into an entertaining story, a narrative. Wolfman, via Harbinger, states this directly: "This is not a chronological retelling of historical events which can be read in any text—this is the history of heroism" (Wolfman *History* 55). The maintenance of clarity and consistency in the continuity of the DC Universe thus firmly relies upon a narrativization of its history and events. However, for the characters within that universe and for creators and readers alike, such a narrativization-via-crisis can often lead to a great deal of trauma, which is dealt with through the process of repetition.

## **Crises of the 21st-Century**

- 36 In the post-Crisis DC Universe, there has been a continual repetition of the themes, and the line-wide retconning, of *Crisis*, a repetition that has at times allowed for the events of the epic series to be worked through (by readers, creators, and/or characters), and at other times merely been a form of acting out, to use the terminology of Dominick LaCapra. As LaCapra defines it, "In acting-out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully

present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed," (716) a concept which resonates with Wolfman/ Harbinger's words in *History* that, "What began many years in the past will be remembered and acted upon many centuries from now. What *was* affects what *is* and what *will be*" (54). Terrance Wandtke's assertion that, "past versions of superheroes are never completely lost and those past versions continue to shape the most recent versions" (7), is also important here. The continual return to *Crisis* by DC shows how, once the chronicle of individual past comic book issues is narrativized into one metatextual history, that history will constantly emerge into the present despite any attempts to repress it, much like how the mind of a psychologically traumatized individual acts out, in Freudian theory.<sup>[20]</sup>

37 Various stories, particularly crossover "events," have dealt with the concept of universal calamity on an epic scale, have engaged with alternate dimensions and timelines, and most frequently have killed off heroes and villains and/or brought them back from the dead in a seemingly never-ending loop. Even Supergirl and the Flash, in various ways, have been resurrected, undoing and rewriting the two largest traumatic focal points of *Crisis*. As DC historian John Wells notes, "The continuity of the DC Universe has been elastic, though resilient, as an army of heroes and villains have been revitalized and reinterpreted to reflect changing sensibilities and a challenging marketplace... As a result, the continuity has seemed amorphous and possibly less important to the writers, artists and editors" ("Crisis 20 Years Later" 94). Thus, the conditions that had led to *Crisis* in the first place—an amorphous, confusing continuity—came to the surface once again over the ensuing two decades, leading to other epics of infinite proportions.

38 This continual repetition of *Crisis*-styled plot points and themes has not been without its share of complaints, however. Comics critic Douglas Wolk, for example, argues that the continual use of the universal retcon by DC Comics as well as other publishers is merely an expression of the problematic fact that, "significant, lasting change is almost impossible to get past the marketing department, or past sentimentally attached readers. If the new way doesn't work out—and it almost never does—it's time for the 'cosmic reset button,' as fans call it; a contrivance that restores things to their original state" (102). In 2006/2007, in fact, DC Comics *did* hit the cosmic reset button once more. After the conclusion of *Infinite Crisis* (a seven-issue crossover miniseries that served as an official, twentieth-anniversary sequel to *Crisis*, and which featured the return of several of its main characters), the weekly series 52, itself a follow-up to *Infinite Crisis*, ended with the rebirth of the multiverse as a set of 52 alternate universes, many of which were updated versions of their old, pre-*Crisis* forerunners. Writer Grant Morrison (who co-wrote 52 and who had previously penned several "*Crisis*-repetition" stories, himself) explored these new multiverses, in part, with his 2008/2009 story of ultimate evil versus ultimate good, *Final Crisis*. In the story, two dark,

extremely powerful gods—Darkseid of Apokolips and Mandrakk the Dark Monitor—threaten the entirety of the multiverse, leaving it to Earth's beleaguered superheroes, after losing the planet to Darkseid, to save the entirety of existence from being dragged into eternal darkness and damnation.

## Alternative content

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- 39 Image 5, originally presented in 3-D, shows just how serious a threat the multiverse faces, as Superman, the first and greatest Superhero (at least in Morrison's cosmology), faces the truth of the multiversal monitors (born from, and in the image of, the original Monitor, following the rebirth of the multiple earths in *Infinite Crisis*/52). They are, he realizes, "Vampire Gods," and thus, "The entire multiverse is the prey of celestial parasites!" The monitors can be seen as standing in for the readers and creators of the DC Universe, who are "draining it dry," and leaving nothing but misery for the heroes within it. In *Final Crisis*, the worlds of the DC Multiverse literally bleed for these monitors/readers, perched like vampire bats upon the dying Earths and filling themselves up at those worlds' expense. As Morrison himself explains:

The "final crisis," as I saw it for a paper universe like DC's, would be the terminal war between what is and isn't, between the story and the blank page. What would happen if the void of the page took issue with the quality of the material imposed upon it and decided to fight back by spontaneously generating a living concept capable of devouring narrative itself? A nihilistic cosmic vampire whose only dream was to drain the multiverse dry of story material, then lie bloated beneath a dead sun, dying... . This, I was trying to say, is what happens when you let bad stories eat good ones. (*Supergods* 368)

The monitors stand in for these bad stories, and thus for the readers whose patronage allowed for the financial success of such stories, which perpetuated the creation of other, similar stories.

## **Alternative content**

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- 40 In Image 6 we see the end of the multiversal monitors' world, after the *Final Crisis* has been met and defeated by the heroic ideal, as represented by Superman. Morrison describes this final showdown as follows: "In the end, there was nothing left but darkness and the first superhero, Superman, with a crude wishing machine, the *dies ex machina* itself, and a single wish

powered by the last of his own life force. He wished for a happy ending, of course" (*Supergods* 368). Image 6 shows the outcome of that wish, where the blank page, instead of devouring the narratives imposed upon it, is consuming the world of the "nihilistic cosmic vampires" who fed upon those narratives for their own strength. As the last of the monitors realizes here, "I loved among them [the narratives]. I saw the damage we were doing to them and what we'd have to sacrifice to save them... . The final crisis is ours." The "bad stories" are literally being subsumed into the blank page, so that "good ones" can be rewritten on it. This echoes the original *Crisis*, wherein the antimatter wave destroying the multiverse was in the form of a pure, blank whiteness, thus erasing that multiversal concept so that DC could rewrite its history upon the blank page of a new universe.

- 41 As the title and the recurrence of the central "blank page" imagery suggests, *Final Crisis* was meant to be the culminating story in the "*Crisis* trilogy" that started with *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (although, of course, the original *Crisis* was not launched with the idea of two sequels in mind), and served as the final tale of the multiversal Monitors. However, Morrison is, as of the writing of this article, working on a new series, referred to as *Multiversity*, specifically meant to map out several of the worlds of the new multiverse. This project, scheduled for 2012, is, whether explicitly stated or not, a sequel to (the now somewhat misleadingly named) *Final Crisis*. Morrison himself has said, "I want this to be big. I kind of thought 'Final Crisis' would be the big one and then I realized I had to tell this Multiverse one. So this is the real big epic that comes up next" (quoted in Renaud). His hope for the series is that he will explore these new Earths, one per issue for seven issues, and then, "in the eighth issue, I would tell a new big story to link things up in into one big epic" (quoted in Renaud).
- 42 Hence, the ongoing cycle of repetition regarding the multiverse and the "big" events and "crises" that threaten it continues more than a quarter of a century after *Crisis* was meant to clean up the continuity confusions that such stories have the strong potential to produce. However, the fact remains that crossover comics *do* sell, in large numbers, and something about them is thus appealing to readers.<sup>[21]</sup> *Crisis* may have been the first big event comic of its kind, but it was certainly not the last, nor are superhero comics likely to be free, any time in the near future, of the creative and sales potential of crossovers that *Crisis* pointed the way towards. The tricky part, for creators, is to mold and craft epic stories that match not just the scope of *Crisis*, but also the widespread respect and acceptance of it by readers.
- 43 For now, though, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* stands out as one of the few crossovers, if not the only one, that delivered on fan expectations of major, long-reaching (though not, ultimately, "permanent") change to a superhero universe, while at the same time also delighting fans by simply being an engaging, exciting, and enjoyable story. In the wake of *Crisis*, the DC Universe

became one master narrative, and other superhero publishers followed suit. Though also constantly looking to the past, superhero comics were now moving inevitably towards an ongoing, "non-oneiric" future. In the words of Marv Wolfman, through the voice of his proxy, Harbinger, at the conclusion of Crisis, "life must never stand still. It must constantly move ahead. We should never forget the past, but we should always look to the future ... because that's where we're going to spend the rest of our lives. I don't know about you guys, but I can't wait to see what tomorrow will bring" (363).

## Notes

[1] Though DC Comics was the first comic book publisher to reach this anniversary, technically the corporate entity itself was not quite that old. Rather, according to Shirrel Rhoads, "in 1935, Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's **National Allied Publications** came out with *New Fun: The Big Comic Magazine* #1 the first time original characters and stories had appeared in a comic book format." This is the anniversary that DC Comics celebrated in 1985, despite the fact that, "In 1937, Major Wheeler-Nicholson found himself financially overextended with his printer. In order to continue publishing, he had little choice to take Harry Donenfeld on as a partner. **Detective Comics, Inc.**, was formed early that year, with Wheeler-Nicholson and Donenfeld's business manager, Jack S. Liebowitz, listed as owners. The new company's first productions, *Detective Comics* #1 (March 1937) was the first true DC comic book." See Rhoads 12 & 15. Rhoads, as a former Executive Vice President and Publisher at Marvel Comics, has an interesting insider's view into the comic book industry, though his history of it is a bit simplistic, reductive, and narrow. However, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* is a decent enough source for some basic facts.

[2] Technically, Marvel Comic's twelve-issue *Secret Wars* story was published prior to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. However, as a potentially apocryphal story (perpetuated by DC Comics itself) has it, Marvel Comics' Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter caught wind of DC's plans and rushed production of *Secret Wars*, to tie in with a toy line of Marvel characters. Whether or not this is true, *Secret Wars*, though a sales success, was a critical failure, and did not have the same long-reaching affects as *Crisis*, either industrially or narratively. Nevertheless, DC was aware of the sales impact that *Secret Wars* had, and planned *Crisis* accordingly. See, for example, a memo from Marv Wolfman to all DC editors: "One thing we've learned from SECRET WARS is that the main book feeds all the others. Sales went up on all the titles connected to that catastrophe and I'm sure they will with this one, too [that doesn't sound right, does it?]." Quoted in *Crisis Compendium* 19. For the purposes of this paper, I will be taking this story at face value, and, given that the planning of *Crisis* preceded *Secret Wars* (public mentions of *Crisis*, in its early stages, date back to at least 1982), continue to refer to *Crisis* as the "first" major company-wide crossover, as that is



*the legacy it has achieved in hindsight.*

[3] The cover dates of comic books and the dates on which they are published are off by about three months. Accordingly, the comics that had a cover date of June 1984 likely reached fans in March or April of 1984. As the difference between publication date and cover date fluctuates over time, though, comic book historians tend to rely on cover dates, as the actual publication date is often lost as years go by.

[4] At this point, *Crisis* was known under its working title of *The History of the DC Universe*. See *Crisis Compendium 4*.

[5] Though the "artists," whether they are pencillers, inkers, letterers, or colorists, are equally as important in the creation of a comic book as the writer, because this essay is focused on the narrative(s) at play within and surrounding *Crisis*, it will mostly focus on the writers as the creative thrust behind various comic books. In addition, at a big-company publisher such as DC or Marvel Comics, the editor of a particular book plays an integral role in its creative direction, both by choosing the writer/artist teams and by suggesting, or sometimes demanding, particular story points.

[6] In contrast to the internal-narrative continuity of a particular book or character, such as *Action Comics* or Superman, respectively.

[7] As will be addressed later on in this essay, continuity is a good deal more complicated than this, but for simplicity's sake this is the definition I am referring to when I use the word "continuity," unless otherwise noted.

[8] Or the Marvel Universe's, or the "Universe" of any other superhero comic book publisher; I use DC here as my prime example simply because *Crisis*, the text under examination, was published by DC.

[9] DC Comics is corporately owned by Time Warner.

[10] Marv Wolfman, writer/editor, and George Perez, penciller, *Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Absolute Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 297. Ellipses in original.

[11] Until *Crisis*' official sequel, *Infinite Crisis*, and its follow-up 52, discussed in more detail below.

[12] Emphasis in original.

[13] Emphasis in original.

[14] For more information on this era, see Pierre Comtois' excellent, if somewhat hyperbolic, *Marvel Comics in the 1960s*.

[15] The geography of these fictional universes is so well-defined that both DC Comics and Marvel Comics have, at different points, published "atlases" of their worlds. See Kupperberg and Hoskin.

[16] Indeed, the chessboard, and the game of chess more generally, is often used as a metaphor within the superhero comics, themselves. In the DC Universe, one of the (many) government agencies responsible for reacting to trouble spots around the country/globe, and for policing superheroes, supervillains, and other "metahumans," is named Checkmate. Its hierarchy is organized around the pieces of a chessboard, with kings and queens as the heads of the agency and pawns as the field workers. See, also, the extended use of the chessboard as a metaphor for synchronic continuity throughout the weekly, year-long DC crossover series *Countdown to Final Crisis*.

[17] Kaveny attributes this latter concept to Nick Lowe.

[18] Change in superhero comic books is, of course, never truly "lasting," as sooner or later every character appears to die and/or comes back from the dead. However, for my purposes, I'm discussing changes that last for at least several years, if not decades, thus having time to influence and be reflected by dozens, or even hundreds, of books that follow in the wake of that moment of change.

[19] Later in *Crisis*, it is implied that this hand may belong to The Spectre, a superheroic ghost originally created in the 1940s who, by the time of *Crisis*, had come to represent the literal embodiment of "the wrath of God" in the DC Universe.

[20] As Freud notes, "What interests us most of all is naturally the relation of this compulsion to repeat to the transference and to resistance. We soon perceive that the transference is itself only a piece of repetition, and that the repetition is a transference of the forgotten past not only on to the doctor but also on to all the other aspects of the current situation. We must be prepared to find, therefore, that the patient yields to the compulsion to repeat, which now replaces the impulsion to remember, not only in his personal attitude to his doctor but also in every other activity and relationship which may occupy his life at the time." See Freud, 151.

[21] Further research into *Crisis* and its repercussions would, of course, look towards this confusion as well as to the appeal of crossovers in general, and would examine just how much confusion readers actually felt/feel and how much editors and creators simply *worried* those readers might feel. This would require the use of reception studies, to examine how fans and readers actually interpreted *Crisis*, as well as research into contemporary reviews of *Crisis* in fanzines and other industry press, and an examination of sales figures on the series. My interest in *Crisis* is tied into a larger project that will

attempt to create a cultural and literary history of comic book superhero crossovers, from the late 1930's through to the post-9/11 era, tying moments of increased crossovers and tightened continuity to real-world moments of national tension (specifically, World War II, the 1960's, the 1980's, and post-9/11). I will hopefully explore how comics creators and readers respond to these national crises through the escapism of the four-color world of comic books, but also assert that the crossover/continuity tendency during these times nevertheless is a reaction to and reflection of those crises, not purely escape from them. Such an exploration will help to elucidate the way in which "escapist" fiction is used in ways both productive and unproductive as a mode of dealing with large-scale trauma, expanding upon the assertion of John Girling that myths (which many scholars, including myself, consider superhero stories to be a modern version of), "are the product of specific historical conditions," with "critical change [as] the crucial factor," and that, "periods of peace and stability, conversely, usually do not evoke myths." As Girling notes, tellingly, "With new crises, new myths appear." See Girling, 2-3.

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