Universe Diving: Phenomenologically Feeling the “Universeness” of DC and Marvel Comics

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doi: https://doi.org/10.57709/23774077

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This dissertation takes advantage of comics studies as a relatively young field of research to conduct a needed phenomenology of the industry’s universe-oriented practices and how they require and elicit cognitive activity from the reader. Where world-building scholars have studied the narratological construction and serialization of superhero universes in relation to similar fictional constructs, this dissertation’s intervention is to foreground the cognitive phenomenology of the reader as they engage with these industrially motivated techniques.

My argument begins from the assertion that our own universe’s history and geography are directly imperceptible to our bodies, meaning any attempt to conceive of its totality relies on mental representations (mental-images) interrelated in a cognitive act Edward S. Casey calls imagining-that. Since the universe contains everything, any attempt to conceive of this “nexus of
relations” is unachievable. Over their histories, DC and Marvel’s narrative universes have expanded to impart a similar experience to readers. Comprised of evocative aesthetic-images, superhero comics have marshalled the industry’s resources to construct vast narrative universes from interconnected texts and paratexts. I propose six components born out of these resources that use aesthetic-images to encourage readers to make connections across texts, IPs, publishing eras, and authors to build a sense of the universe in readers’ minds. Designed like a hyperlinked series of cross-references, these comics encourage readers to conduct research deep dives that generate the daunting cognitive connections which resemble the unachievable feeling of the actual universe. The conclusion suggests the “universeness” of superhero comics as an instructive model for understanding the present-day dissemination of misinformation online.

Thick description case studies of the Marvel crossover event Secret Wars and my own deep dive through various DC comics starting from Suicide Squad #5 enable me to show how the sense of these universes rely upon an exchange between the aesthetic-images on the page and the mental-images in our minds. Casey’s phenomenology of memory in Remembering and imagination in Imagining serve as scholarly support.

INDEX WORDS: Comics studies, Phenomenology, Industry studies, Cognition, Memory, Imagination
UNIVERSE DIVING: PHENOMENOLOGICALLY FEELING THE
“UNIVERSENESS” OF DC AND MARVEL COMICS

by

JAYSON QUEARRY

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctorate of Philosophy
in the College of the Arts
Georgia State University
2021
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Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Academic Assistance
College of the Arts
Georgia State University
August 2021
DEDICATION


For Amy.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No aspect of this dissertation was accomplished without support.

Dr. Greg M. Smith was foremost among the voices guiding my hand, pushing me to explore when I was apathetic, talking me down when I was frantic, and doling out the soil that every idea presented here grew from. Most important, he was a friend to talk comics with. During study group sessions and private conversations, Dr. Ethan Tussey was the source of needed reassurance and practical advice on an enigmatic process whose structure regularly vexed me (and another comics conversationalist!). Surgical in her insight, criticisms, and textual recommendations over three seminars, comprehensive exams, and now a dissertation, Dr. Jennifer Barker’s wisdom has been internalized inside my subconsciousness, interrogating my choices during every writing session. Negotiating a vast time difference and his own demanding schedule, Dr. Jason Bainbridge’s input during the prospectus and final defense phases determined the case studies, their application within the project, and other vital aspects.

Beyond my committee yet still within the sphere of Georgia State, Nedda Ahmed gave up her valuable time to not only read portions of the dissertation, but act as a de facto therapist during a final push in March 2021. While one of the chapters she read was scrapped, I was ever mindful of her advocacy for conciseness, clarity, and cogency during my last marathon revision session.

Without a doubt, the generous funding of the Graduate School’s Provost Dissertation Fellowship – overseen by Dr. Lisa Armistead and Katrina Helz – granted me the privilege to focus solely on my dissertation. The monthly check-ins with other Fellowship dissertators kept me motivated to finish. While I missed teaching tremendously (even during a Pandemic year), I am indebted to the fellowship supplanting it as a necessary income source.
My friends in the School of Film, Media & Theatre are due major thanks for keeping me sane during insane times. Dan Van Jelgerhuis and Ashley P. Jones were a consistent source of moral support and superficially distracting conversation about podcasts, video games, movies, and television when the dissertation was the last thing I wanted to think about, but also frustrated commiseration when necessary. As she was throughout my time as a doctorate student, Tanya Zuk was forthcoming with resources and instruction when trying to navigate byzantine systems.

Two faculty members within the Department of Communication Studies at UMKC were integral to me pursuing a career in higher education. Mitch Brian not only stirred my passion for film studies as an undergraduate student, tightened my prose style as a thesis committee chair, and forever influenced my pedagogical persona, he initiated my lifelong deep dive into comics before I ever met him through his co-creation of *Batman: The Animated Series*. Without the sincere mentorship of Dr. G. Thomas Poe, I would never have found my passion for teaching. The last time we spoke before he passed, the conversation concerned my acceptance to the doctorate program at GSU – the same state where he had earned his Ph.D. Teaching film courses up to the end of his life, Dr. Poe’s commitment to the classroom was unrivaled. If I can replicate even a modicum of that educative spirit, I will be satisfied.

Finally, thanks to my family, both immediate and adopted. While suffering through quarantine and health scares, my mom was a reliable source of encouragement, even if she usually did not understand what I was rambling about. My grandfather passed away before I entered the Ph.D. program and my grandmother followed him in my second semester at GSU, but the encouragement and love they showered me with throughout my life lingered through the entire process; I wish I could share this accomplishment with them in-person, because I know they would be proud.
Without Jeff Helmig letting me borrow his Marvel Unlimited and DC Universe Infinite subscriptions, each case study would have been a far more tedious challenge to complete. At my lowest, Bradley Roberts (my son) and Marini Santos were a foundation of positivity that buoyed me repeatedly; having them available to FaceTime with and travel to during the holidays literally kept me alive. I owe them forever.

When I began the doctorate program in 2016, Amy sacrificed to support me. Even though we did not end the program together, the support never went away, evolving into a different type of compassion. I will never know if we made the right decisions, but they were the decisions that led here. Though a bittersweet reward, this dissertation is for her.
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INTRODUCTION: WHAT DOES A (SUPERHERO) UNIVERSE FEEL LIKE?

After continuously publishing serialized stories for over eighty years, DC and Marvel Comics have become purveyors of intricate ongoing narratives.¹ To characterize how expansive and interrelated the titles published by these companies have become in comparison to other storyworlds, Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin have labeled them as “vast narratives” (2). While Bart Beaty argues that “the ever-increasing complexification of superhero storytelling . . . has narrowed the audience to only the most committed readers,” immense interconnectivity abides as the industry’s chosen business model (“Superhero” 319). These practices create the illusion that a fictional narrative told through static, two-dimensional drawings is as organic and vast as the natural universe. The industry exploits that feeling, encouraging readers to dive deeper into a publisher’s catalog of titles to enrich their conception of the narrative universe. I argue it is the qualities of static imagery and interconnectivity that recreate the same cognitive sensation as processing our own universe. But that claim first requires we know what a universe feels like.

What Does a Universe Feel Like?

More than the matter comprising it, the universe is defined by its inconceivable size. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of “universe” stresses that daunting magnitude, stating that the concept refers to “all existing matter and space considered as a whole” (emphasis added). In other words, the universe is everything – from subatomic particles to the lightyears of blackness between galaxies. The universe also encompasses previously existing and all future “matter and space,” not just what exists in the present. The universe, then, is not just big, it is the biggest of

¹ Originally founded under the name of National Comics, DC was formed in 1934, while Marvel (originally Timely Comics) originated five years later in 1939. Some IP who were first introduced during those early years are still being published eighty-seven and eighty-two years later, respectively.
all possible things because it contains all possible things. Given that unthinkable vastness, how can we ever experience the universe in any comprehensible way? Put another way, what does a universe feel like?

In *The Sense of Space*, David Morris suggests that “depth perception is perception of the perceiver’s relation to the place that she or he is in, and that relation involves life and movement” (28). However, we cannot *live* or *move* through most of the universe outside of our narrow terrestrial boundaries. Therefore, if perception relies upon existing and moving through a space, as Morris suggests, then all space beyond Earth is unknowable to us in any direct way. Since we cannot directly experience any of this matter and space at any point but the present, the universe’s past and future are equally imperceptible to our bodies. Without perception, we are only left to do as the *OED* specifies and “consider” the universe.

In her article entitled “Twelve Conceptions of Imagination,” Leslie Stevenson describes this challenge as “scientific imagination” or “The ability to think of something that one has never perceived and that no one has told one about, whose existence one infers from perceived evidence by induction, or scientific method in a wider sense” (240). Unable to summon mental pictures that originate from direct perception, I am left to picture generic representations. For the universe: a swirling turquoise ring of cosmic clouds dotted with stars, all orbiting around a glowing center; for our solar system: concentric orbits of eight planets centered around the sun; for the Big Bang: a sudden explosion of sparking lights. These stand-ins are amalgamated memories of illustrations, diagrams, digital models, and descriptions that I have archived throughout my life. Therefore, considering the universe actually means “scientifically imagining” representations of the universe stored in our memory.
In *The Imaginary*, Sartre considers these mental-images to be “physical or psychic content that is given not as itself but in the capacity of ‘analogical representative’ of the object aimed at” (20). Additionally, he notes that humans are habituated to replacing perception with imaginary analogs. Comparing a physical cube with an imagined one, Sartre writes that the former “is indeed present to me, I can touch it, see it; but I can never see it except in a certain way, which calls for and excludes at the same time an infinity of other points of view” (8). He can perceive the cube sensorially, but he recognizes that some aspects of the cube will always remain hidden. Instinctually, he fills in those gaps; with the imagined cube, Sartre can “apprehend its entirety in one glance” (8). Every side and angle becomes available to him, even though the cube image lacks the physicality of the real object. Sartre’s cube example helps us understand our relationship to the universe: Earth is the cube we can sensorially perceive and directly experience, while the rest of the universe is the image-cube, the infinite aspects of which we can only comprehend using our minds and imaginations. However, this means “the object as imaged is an irreality,” which brings into question whether these images are an accurate analog of reality at all (Sartre 125).

Most of us do not let that doubt disrupt our certainty that the hidden sides of the cube or the unknowable portions of the universe do exist. Why? Sartre’s description of images notes a kind of “corporeality” to these analogs. This word choice suggests that mental-images have a connection to our bodies even though they are not created through bodily perception. Even though these images have no physical presence, they are part of our bodies because they are generated by and stored in our brains. Even images of images, like my memories of universal diagrams and models, are stored alongside images of perception and imagination, regardless of
their ontological differences. This corporeality brings me closer to my initial question, suggesting that we do indeed feel these images of the universe through cognition.

But the *OED* definition has a stipulation: the universe has to be “considered as a whole.” How do we go about this daunting task? As Edward S. Casey describes in *Imagining* and *Remembering*, any cognitive process involves an “act phase” that formulates the intended “object,” or mental visualization (*Imagining* 38; *Remembering* 48). An act of “scientific imagination” would be referred to by Casey as “imagining-that,” or the process of mentally bringing together various imaged objects into a “state of affairs” (*Imagining* 42). Intended to form a “nexus of relations,” the act of imagining-that does not seek “objects or events in their separateness,” but a singular image object (*Imagining* 42). Imagining-that for something as vast as the universe, however, is too all-encompassing; a unified “state of affairs” becomes impossible. There are too many images to hold in our minds at once. When considering the universe’s scope, we must instead create images of individual aspects of the universe and organize them under a heading, interrelating images whenever we can.

These combined approaches become my means for sensing the universe. As I begin the exercise of universal contemplation, my mind instinctually goes to the vastness of space. I picture all the planets in our solar system as a rainbow of marbles bobbing on an oily black surface. Then I see a ring of floating space debris full of crags and divots. Zooming out, I return to my memory of the swirly blue disc rendering of the universe that seems to be my “go-to” for the concept. Remembering that the universe includes aspects that I can perceive, not only memories of artistic representations, my mind bounces wildly from the macro to the micro. First to appear are my immediate surroundings: the dark walnut stained wooden desk where I sit to work, the wire mesh pencil holder and pastel green thermos of water sitting atop it, and the silver
MacBook Air laptop I am typing on. By now, my mind races through images so quickly that their details blur. My imagination falters at this laughably impossible task.

Met with the endless possibilities of everything that has ever existed, my mind defaulted to those things which are readily accessible to me. Even then, what resulted was a cognitive mush. Although each image summoned was part of the universal whole, my mind could not efficiently organize, sort, and present them in any logical way. Like a runner’s muscles straining at the end of a sprint, my mind resisted the physical directives of my body. Attempting to phenomenologically imagining—that state of affairs we call the universe, all I receive is the absence of the impossible.

Which brings me back to the original question: how does a universe feel? Not being able to directly perceive anything but an infinitesimal fraction of the universe, we must resort to contemplating it through mental-images crudely cobbled together by our scientific imaginations as acts of imagining—that. This “nexus of relations” does generate a residual sensation, though. As my mind strains against the task, I feel my powers of cognition fail as the unfathomable vastness overwhelms me. How does the universe feel? It feels like an unachievable task of cognitive imaging.

There’s a “Universeness” to Superhero Comics

The superhero universes of Marvel and DC Comics require readers to engage in the same universal imagining—that process outlined in the previous section, making it a tool for maintaining reader interest and promoting sales. However, fictional universes are created by human hands and minds, which only allow for an “illusion of completeness,” as Benjamin J. Robertson puts it (“Completeness” 82). Inconsistencies, incongruities, and informational gaps arising from stories being told over a span of decades by an ever-changing ensemble of authorial
voices can shatter that illusion. However, that same serialization and joint authorship provides opportunity for mistakes to be fixed as the story progresses. Effectively, these universes can never be as all-encompassing as the actual universe, but they can attain “universeness.”

I use this term to signify a state that can never be as immense as the actual universe yet is designed to replicate the cognitive phenomenology detailed previously. Like our own universe, these fictional universes are not directly perceivable. Although readers can read, touch, and smell the physical or digital objects that describe and chronicle these universes, we cannot live and move through the Bat Cave or the Daily Bugle offices the way Morris stipulates for spatial perception. Instead, we are reliant on narrative information given by the comic’s aesthetic-images to form a “nexus of relations.” I will describe that process further in the last section of this chapter, but for now suffice to say that a comic’s illustrative content embeds in the reader’s mind as mental-images that can be summoned or triggered at will. Henry Jenkins observes that “Publishers have become adept at distributing information relevant to one story line across multiple titles,” which trains readers to cognitively link these comics together (Ford 306). By producing deep catalogs of content spread across single issues, collected volumes, print and digital encyclopedias, and a variety of other paratexts, superhero publishers have created narrative universes that are nearly as challenging to contemplate in number of mental-images and cognitive undertaking as the actual universe.2

In superhero comics, that accumulated narrative information is called “continuity,” which refers to the narrative shared between the paratexts Jenkins’ mentions. Since comics are a

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2 When I use ‘paratexts’ here and throughout the dissertation, I am thinking of them as Gérard Genette described in Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (“A paratextual element . . .necessarily has a location that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself”) and Jonathan Gray furthered in Show Sold Separately (“paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans; they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them”) (4 ; 6)
medium of static illustrations, graphic visuals are the industry’s means of imparting continuity. David Hyman suggests that to “understand superhero continuity” is to understand that “each individual story is also part of vast and ongoing intertextual continuums that serve as the fictional ‘realities’ in which they take place” (16). However, continuity does not simply refer to the continual narrative serialization of superhero comics, nor does it only mean the cinematic idea of continuity as a consistency of action and detail throughout a film or TV show. Likewise, continuity is not only about canonicity: what has and has not diegetically occurred. Continuity in the context of superhero comics encompasses all of these ideas, while also denoting the overlapping narratives shared between all of the ongoing series that have ever been published by a company. If “universe” is a synonym for vastness, then superhero comics attain universeness not only through the sizable number of issues published throughout their lifetimes, but also the complex narrative continuity they contain. In this way, continuity is similar to the “matter and space” of the actual universe, encompassing all that ever was and ever will be, incomprehensible in its entirety, and impossible to completely and accurately describe.

I have chosen to emphasize “universeness” over “worldness” specifically to characterize superhero comics’ informational scale and cognitive response. In his introduction to Revisiting Imaginary Worlds, Mark J.P. Wolf touches on the preference for “world” as a catch-all term within narrative studies:

the term [world] has been used for places of varying size and scope: entire universes or multiverses, solar systems or planets, continents, countries, or even cities or towns. This broad variation is due to the connection to the experiential meaning of “world”; that is, all of the things within the sum total of experience of a particular person or character.
Everything encountered by a story’s main character becomes a part of his or her world.

(xxv)

By using “world” and its associated process of “world-building” to encompass such a wide-ranging variety of fictional constructs, nuanced distinctions in scale and cognition become muddled or lost entirely. Counter to world-building scholarship’s blanketed application of “world,” I argue that narrative worlds and universes exist on a spectrum of informational expansion. There is no pinpointing when a world becomes a universe, nor is there any guarantee that all worlds attain “universeness.”

Although Wolf stresses the “sum total experience” of diegetic characters, I am concerned with the experiential response of the audience and how it differentiates a world from a universe. As the continuity of a superhero universe expands there is necessarily more information to learn, to commit to memory, to correlate, to organize, to forget, to sift through. An expansion of continuity results in what Casey refers to as an “expansion” of memory, or “one memory.”

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3 While this dissertation restricts itself to the narrative universes of superhero comics, both Marvel and DC have expanded further into narrative multiverses. The history of the multiverse in superhero comics has grown from and interacted with alternate timeline fiction and multiversal theory in physics. In his article on the history of “Parallel Worlds” in literature, philosophy, and science, Andrew Crumey locates an increase in the usage of the term “multiverse” and the associated idea of alternative historical outcomes cropping up in literary works during the 1800s up to the early 1900s. As Guy Lawley recounts in his article on the “Secret Origins of the Multiverse,” it was in 1957, that physicist Hugh Everett would turn those literary fictions into a scientific theory. Renamed a decade later by Bryce S. DeWitt as the “many worlds” theory, Everett’s concept solidified what we now largely think of when considering a multiverse: branching possibilities that yield a multiverse of parallel realities (Lawley). After over a century of gradual build-up of terminology, changes in meaning, and theorizing, superhero comics provided what could be considered the first pictorial instruction manual for understanding Everett’s theory. Gardner Fox and Carmine Infantino’s The Flash #123 released in 1961, only four years after Everett’s initial work, introduced the first instance of the DC Multiverse into existence (though the term was not used yet). Michael Moorcock’s 1965 novel The Sundered Worlds would synthesize the various literary and physics understandings of a “multiverse,” allowing superhero comics to popularize the notion as a trope of the genre.

Once multiverses became common in superhero comics, the industry began using them as another way to expand their narrative continuity, but in a way that did not disrupt, erase, or pollute the main universe’s continuity or IPs. While the two concepts regularly interact to the point that the multiverse could be considered part of the main universe, I have chosen in this dissertation to keep my focus on superhero comics universes proper. This project concerns itself with the foundational components the industry used to build and connect their basic universes. While the multiverse developed alongside the Marvel and DC Universes, the way it interacts with readers’ cognition prioritizes the retention of conflicting IP representations (one for each alternate reality) within memory in a way that deserves a separate in-depth study.
branch[ing] out into other memories” (Remembering 39). Since the continuity of superhero comics depends upon an interrelation of paratexts through a dispersal of narrative, memories of those comics automatically become associated with one another. When a reader involuntarily recalls a panel, page, or issue, the likelihood that those mental-images will branch off into others is increased. The mutual expansions of continuity and memory are repeatedly instigating processes where a “nexus of relations” begins to form, keeping the universeness of these comics at the forefront of readers’ minds.

Depending on the same cognitive processes used when conceiving of an actual universe, yet never able to replicate its scale and completeness perfectly, superhero comics have grown into a state of “universeness.” Their expansive continuity has pushed them beyond the parameters of a standard storyworld, which can be felt through mental-images expanding or branching into one another to create a “nexus of relations.”

**Why Comics Aesthetic-Images Create Potent Mental-Images**

From the start, the iconographic nature of comics and superheroes have encouraged memorization. Likewise, the sequential arrangement of comic books trains readers to juxtapose mental-images, using cognitive linking to feel the vastness of the narrative universe. Going forward, I will refer to these visual components as aesthetic-images to differentiate them from mental-images. This final section will introduce characteristics unique to superhero aesthetic-images and establish why they facilitate mental-image production and association.

What aspects of a comic book do aesthetic-images entail? Broadly, any physically or digitally illustrated combination of lines and colors within the comic or adorning its front or back covers. As a medium, comics organize those illustrative elements into what are traditionally referred to as panels, which are bracketed-off illustrations depicting an action. What isolates
these panels from one another are demarcating lines colloquially described as “the gutter.” Together, the individual panels and the separative space of the gutter make up the grid of a comic page. The interplay between the grid and the individual panels attains a kind of figure and ground exchange where a reader’s gaze switches between single panels, sequences of panels, and the totality of the page. Because of this interplay, both the panels and their cumulative whole are types of aesthetic-images.

In *The System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen has called attention to what he names “braiding” within comics, or “a model of organization that is not that of the strip nor that of the chain, but that of the network” (146). What Groensteen captures with the concept of braiding is the interrelation between all of the panels and pages that comprise an *entire* comics work. The first page of a comic will, in this way, influence the reader’s interpretation of the last panel on the last page, with all of the artwork across the volume influencing and playing off of everything else. That networked interplay across the whole of a comic then makes for another type of aesthetic-image.

Special attention also needs to be paid to the namesake of superhero comics as aesthetic-images in their own right. While I will dedicate further discussion to the signification of the superhero and how their origins are indebted to the resources of the comic medium in Chapter One, here I want to establish superheroes as chevronic figures. John Jennings (borrowing the term from ostentatious comic book creator Jim Steranko) used “chevron” as a way to describe the emblems that adorn superhero costumes (61). Though the original meaning of chevron related to markings of rank on a uniform, Jennings and Steranko widen the term to encompass any and all iconic markings that help identify superheroes, like Batman’s bat, Spider-Man’s spider, or Green Lantern’s lantern. Though isolatable as aesthetic-images, those Chevrons are
part and parcel with the hero’s overall design. The individual chevron works in tandem with the entire superhero costume to create a chevronic figure. The Superhero-as-Chevron, then, is a kind of aesthetic-image that originates in comics, making it a pivotal factor in their ability to create the potent, interrelated mental-images that help readers feel the scope of these fictional universes.

If these are the types of aesthetic-images unique to superhero comics, what about them helps to create potent mental-images? First, I need to clarify which kind of mental-image I am concerned with since my perception of a comics object produces two distinct types. The language of Edmund Husserl will help me delineate these two. Husserl suggests an act of image consciousness combines three image types: “a physical image (the perceptive material), an image object (the image that arises), and an image subject (the intended or represented subject in the image)” (Katz 344). When I engage in an act of image consciousness related to a comic book, I can recall a memory of the “physical image” – the glossy texture of the printed issue in my hands, the artificial gleam of a digital comic on my phone, and the setting in which I read the issue. For example, I can distinctly picture myself as a teenager re-reading portions of the DC comic Kingdom Come in my childhood bedroom; in this mental-image, I can make out the lacquered wood of the three-tier, corner bookshelf I was leaning against and the sunlight streaming through an adjacent window to illuminate the well-worn pages of my collected edition. These details are comprised of “physical images” archived from my lived perception of that moment. However, throughout this dissertation I will be primarily concerned with the “image object” and “image subject” detached from these perceptual experiences. In terms of Kingdom Come, I can recall a panel near the end of the story, where elderly versions of Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman are out-of-costume, sitting around a table at gaudy superhero-
themed restaurant named Planet Krypton. That image apprehends for me free from the context in which it was originally perceived. Instead, it appears as a free-floating, two-dimensional recreation of the panel, as if I had cut it out of the original comic and stored the “clipping” in my memory.

The inherent issue with both forms of mental-image is that they lack the stability and permeance of direct perception. As Casey describes:

Although we normally apprehend an imagined object with remarkable facility, we do so only for an instant, since it tends to elude us in the very next instant. . . . An imagined object does not remain present to us in an abiding manner, as do many perceptual objects; to keep it before our mental gaze, we must constantly reimagine it, and even then it is difficult to say whether we are continuing to imagine exactly the same object again and again.” (Imagining 7)

Imaged objects of superhero aesthetic-images cannot overcome this foundational phenomenological ephemerality, but fittingly for a genre fixated on superpowered fisticuffs they do fight against it. Qualities prominent to the comic book medium and the superhero genre, in particular, create boldly graphic, minimalist, strikingly memorable aesthetic-images. Here I propose three characteristics that help combat the elusiveness that Casey mentions while also maintaining a degree of consistency across the reimagining needed to keep these images “in mind.” Those three characteristics are the Superhero-as-Chevron, a static-kinetischer tension, and an encouragement to re-view aesthetic-images.

**Superhero-as-Chevron:** With the arrival of Superman in 1938, Jean-Paul Gabilliet claims “costumed crime fighters had become the first character types designed primarily for comic books thanks to their graphic and visual potential” (E-book; emphasis added). Part of that
potential is the iconography of the Superhero-as-Chevron. The basic emblems that adorn their costumes are simplistic, minimalist, rarely more than two colors, and primordial in their iconography. The iconic simplicity and graphic punch of those emblems extends outward into their overall design. The same abiding guidelines are at play in superhero costumes across both major publishers, with artists sticking to swaths of contrasting primary colors, hard lines, clean shapes, and bold silhouettes. Those tendencies arise from the industry’s need for bold visual figures that can be tracked on the page, replicated efficiently by the artists contracted to draw these characters, and partake in what Shawna Kidman calls a “fundamental visuality” that “produce[s] reliable intellectual properties” ideal for licensing and merchandising (24). All of which causes the entirety of each superhero to become a chevron.

That chevronic quality sticks in reader’s minds, so that these figures and the aesthetic-images they are a part of are quickly recognizable to the eye and easy to memorize. Comprised of only a few constituent parts – usually “blocks” of color broken into stark sections – chevronic superheroes are uncomplex figures. Those limited details do not require close scrutinization to recreate as a mental-image. That same combination of minimalism and vibrant coloration usually causes a superhero to leap out at the reader’s eye, standing apart from muted, often single-colored backgrounds. That high contrast means the reader’s memory can focus on solely on the details of the superhero. However, the graphic brilliance and limited complexity of a superhero can also act like a memorial anchor for the rest of the panel, holding the panel’s other visuals in-place within my mental-image. In total, the chevronic qualities of superheroes resist the ephemerality of imaging to provide a cogent analog.

**Static-Kinetic Tension:** Comics are a visual medium of still pictures and words, but that does not mean they cannot *move.* Tracing a history of successive motion from the panorama to
comics, Tom Gunning has suggested that “the power of comics lies in their ability to derive
movement from stillness – not to make the reader observe motion but rather participate
imaginatively in its genesis,” while Andrei Molotiu has named “sequential dynamism” as a
defining feature of comics, considering it “the formal visual energy. . .that. . .propels the reader’s
eye from panel to panel and from page to page, and that imparts a sense of sustained or varied
visual rhythms” (40; 89). Gunning and Molotiu are capturing a foundational creative impulse
within comics where creators use static images to imply kinetic motion. Ultimately, as both
authors suggest, the illusion of motion will be experienced through the reader’s cognitive
response to the illustrative flourishes on the page. Artistic techniques like “speed lines” that
stand-in for the force, impact, and directionality of an action, exaggerated posing of illustrated
figures to impart vigorous physicality, and dramatic compositions are what convey the idea of
kinetic action to the reader. As such, superhero aesthetic-images exist in a state of tension
between the static and the kinetic.

Besides implying motion, I argue that the “sequential dynamism” that “derive[s] movement from stillness” also contributes to the evocation of memorable mental-images. This
does not mean that the imaged version apprehends with added motion that was not present in the
aesthetic-image; these mental-images remain as static as the artwork they translate. Instead, the
way superhero comics exist as a static-kinetic visual means they can be perused and studied in
their unchanging stillness, allowing the reader to notice and store minute details within their
memory. Yet, the hyperbolic scenes, figures, and actions “frozen” in a moment of distorted
motion provide distinctly unusual visuals to study, supplying qualities that are conducive for
memory to latch onto.4 I will regularly be able to recall a panel because I lingered over the

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4 In the chapter “Will Eisner, Vaudevillian of the Cityscape,” Greg M. Smith studies these “highly energized pause[s] where characters are on the verge of doing something narratively significant” in Eisner’s influential work
abnormal artistic choices used to insinuate motion: the contorted torso of a character reeling from the impact of a punch, the elongation of a vehicle meant to suggest high-velocity, the veiny biceps of a hero straining to lift crumbling rubble. I fixate on these irregular artistic choices on the page, which allows them to stand out and define the mental-image that follows.

**Re-Viewing:** Flipping through a comic happens almost involuntarily. Even the sizable page counts of longform graphic novels or hefty collected editions require almost no time to lazily shuffle through. A novel can be thumbed through pretty quickly, too, but since comics narratives are told with vibrant, concise pictures, someone can still pick up the general beats of a story by only glancing as the pages pass by. For that reason, the medium encourages readers to repeatedly return for re-viewings.

My own habit is to ‘preview’ an issue before I actually read it front-to-back. On that pass, my eyes will glance around, only catching on aesthetic-images that are especially beautiful or important diegetic details. At the same time, I am casually storing those details in my memory. On a second pass, I process the story through a closer inspection of each panel, page, and word balloon. The mental-image that I form from the artwork has now had two chances to be recalled, stabilizing the details through repetition. After reading an issue, I might casually flip back through the pages, now looking for panels that stood out during the previous passes. If I keep an issue (which I almost always do), the likelihood that I will pull it out of a box and flip through it again increases. At that point, I will have perceived that comic’s aesthetic-images at least four times. Each re-viewing of the issue will spur me to recall image objects of the artwork that I formed previously. Through that re-view of both the aesthetic- and mental-images, the

(188). Seeing these exaggerated postures as part of a tradition with Vaudeville’s gestural performativity, Smith hits on a quality in Eisner’s artwork that reappears in the amplified posturing and physicality of superhero bodies.
details I am recalling are stabilized and reinforced, improving my ability to remember those images frequently and clearly in the future.

Along with encouraging rereading, superhero comics will frequently reprise aesthetic-images that have become significant to continuity, are associated with important moments from the industry’s history, or have gained notoriety with the readership. In these instances, artists may re-draw or reinterpret the work of the original creator or occasionally the original artwork will be reprinted. Though many of these homages change major details of the original aesthetic-image, they maintain the general elements and create an avenue for reimagining the original artwork. Reprising an aesthetic-image increases its notoriety within the fandom, marking it as an important moment to remember and creates a circumstance where readers are spurred to recall any memories they have of the original aesthetic-image or recreations of it. These re-viewings, cement the particularities of that image in the reader’s image consciousness.

These characteristics help to evoke lasting eidetic images, but for the feeling of “universeness” to be complete, these images have to be connected. As a medium, comics train readers to cognitively fill-in gaps dividing aesthetic-images on the page. In their own language, Scott McCloud and Groensteen have argued that the interrelation of aesthetic-images across a comic is essential to what the medium does. Defining comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer,” McCloud foregrounds the two forms of interrelation that are vital to comics: those between the aesthetic-images and the way those connections are mirrored in acts of image consciousness (20). Specifically, the notion of “closure” is proposed by McCloud as an act of cognition on the part of the reader where the “human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (66-67). Likewise, Groensteen proposes “the
relational play of a plurality of interdependent images as the unique ontological foundation of
comics,” emphasizing that the systematic arrangement of these aesthetic-images across a text
causes readers to consider them in relation to each other (17). Following the arguments of
McCloud and Groensteen, this dissertation asserts that the “universeness” of Marvel and DC
Comics depends on the medium’s capability to foster cognitive connections between images.
Because the perception of interrelations between aesthetic-images on the page becomes
normalized for readers, they become similarly comfortable with replicating those relations and
creating a new “nexus of relations” to conceive of these universes.

I propose that the comics industry prompts a cognitive process similar to conceiving of
our own universe through a company-wide interrelation that depends on the connectivity
McCloud and Groensteen foreground. Over time, DC and Marvel have developed a hyperlinked
network of connections between texts from throughout their publication histories. Through a
series of references, footnotes, and gestures to characters, paratexts, and previous continuity,
these publishers use each individual issue as an opportunity to point readers in the direction of
other texts and paratexts. I contend that this cross-reference design takes part in a long history of
encyclopedic citations that presages the hyperlinking of the world wide web. Of course, in
superhero comics, these hyperlinks are, on one level, intended to sell more merchandise by
tantalizing readers with other stories and characters related through continuity. However, the
narrative interrelationships of these texts also intend to generate interest and, in turn, profits by
conveying the idea of a vast shared universe that readers want to explore. Ideally for the
industry, that exploration takes the form of a “deep dive,” whereby readers dedicate time and
effort to follow these intertextual hyperlinks in a perpetually chaining act of ongoing research.
Just as juxtaposed aesthetic-images within these comics required cognitive input to piece
together, the deep dive produces connections between mental-images on a universal scale. It is through the relation of the mental-images this industry is adept at producing in readers’ minds that they are able to “feel the universeness” of these fictional constructs.

Chapter Breakdown and Conclusion

The argument I have laid out in this introduction and will expand upon throughout the dissertation can be summed up in four central claims:

1. Since we cannot directly perceive most of our universe, we are left to conceive of “all existing matter and space as a whole” through an impossible cognitive interrelation of mental-images.

2. Superhero comics published by Marvel and DC have marshalled their resources to build vast narratives that attain a “universeness” by being conceived of in the same fashion.

3. To facilitate that feeling, the aesthetic-images particular to this medium encourage the creation of vivid mental-images and memorization of those images in readers.

4. Comics foundational dependency on readers “closing” a “system” of interrelated aesthetic-images works in tandem with the industry’s hyperlinked, “deep dive” design to create cognitive connections between the reader’s mental-images.

To make these claims, I will be documenting cognitive processes that arise from the perception of superhero comics through a combination of comics studies, industrial studies, and phenomenology. As comics studies is a relatively young field of research and phenomenology one that has only expanded beyond philosophical departments within the last forty years, the two have only recently started to overlap. Even within that limited range of research, no one has yet examined how the practices of the industry require and elicit certain cognitive activity from the reader. For that reason, the significance of my project comes from how I apply
phenomenology’s interest in the interaction between body and world to the experience of an industrial logic. Edward S. Casey’s *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* and *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* will serve as a terminological guide for the dissertation, but I will be applying his work to an artform, industry, and form of narrative that he nor any other image consciousness scholar has previously broached.

In Chapter One, I will present a history of the industrial resources that have made universe-building possible. I break these resources into categories around comics’ materiality, the archetypal qualities of the superhero, corporate and creative influences, and interactions between the industry and its audience to argue the culmination of these resources came in the direct market, or retail sector of the comics industry, and its influence on the multimedia and retail forms that have come after it.

Chapter Two will be comprised of an uncommon structure – divided into a series of case studies outlining “How to Build a Universe Using Superhero Comics.” Each case study will focus on how the industry uses its resources in varying ways to allow aesthetic-images to create “components” of the narrative universe in reader’s cognition. These case studies will use a major crossover event miniseries called *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars* to cover the topics of Colliding Chevrons, Hero Tableaus, Exquisite Corpse Creation, Retconning Inconsistencies, Sedimented Timelines, and Reminiscence.

After a universe has been built from these components, readers are able to deep dive into it as a means to acquire and link together mental-images of the universe. Chapter Three will chart a deep dive experience that begins with John Ostrander’s *Suicide Squad #5* through a series of thick descriptions.
In my Conclusion, I make gestures towards the “universeness” of superhero comics acting as an instructional model for understanding the dissemination of conspiratorial misinformation in recent United States history.

For nearly two thirds of my lifetime, I have felt intimately connected to the DC and Marvel Comics Universes. My relationship to these fictions began with a handful of issues but grew exponentially deeper as I was ferried further into the “nexus of relations” formed from their decades’ worth of continuity. While devouring the issues that contain that continuity, I would mull over the artwork on the page – studying it, memorizing it, and later talking for hours about it with friends. Because of that invested interest, to this day I can recall with complete clarity many of the panels and pages that were instrumental to developing my fascination with the superhero comics of my youth. With every mental-image I archived, the collective “universeness” of these fanciful stories revealed itself to me through their steady sedimentation onto one another. Eventually, I would come to work at a comic book store in my hometown, which only furthered my ability to dive into corners of these universes that were previously unknown to me. But along with facilitating my own ongoing deep dive, my ten years managing Pulp Fiction Comics and Games allowed me to repeatedly observe others feeling the “universeness” of these comics, too. That firsthand experience not only makes this project a personal one, but also means that the industry and phenomenological responses I am detailing are expressly familiar to me. My intention is to make that familiarity universal.
CHAPTER 1: HOW TO BEGIN A SUPERHERO UNIVERSE USING INDUSTRY RESOURCES

“Where do I begin?” A customer would ask that question on a near daily basis during my ten years working at Pulp Fiction Comics and Games. They asked because the breadth of options lining the shelves was staggering. That immensity of content results from Marvel and DC Comics evolving into vast narrative universes. Universes are felt through the indefiniteness of the deep dive which requires there to be enough of a back catalog for readers to never hit bottom. Before that can happen, though, the customer needs to have a first, memorable encounter with aesthetic-images on the page.

Over the industry’s lifetime, resources unique to the medium have become DC and Marvel’s means for building their universes and, ultimately, creating a sensation of “universeness.” As two publishers started pursuing universe-oriented narratives, the combined system of comic book distribution and retail stores known as the Direct Market became a confluence of resources and a major facilitator for introducing these vast narratives to readers. The Direct Market acted as a localized point of access to physical copies of older comics (known as back issues), bound collections (whether as hardcovers, trade paperbacks, or otherwise), current releases, and a deep dive guide. As Benjamin Woo points out, they were also “integral to the reproduction of comic-book culture” (133).

Rather than recount the origin story of the comics industry, this chapter explains how its resources were developed over its lifespan to generate and perpetuate the “universeness” central to this dissertation.⁵ “Industry” here refers to the symbiotic relationship between the

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⁵ For a history of the industry, see Jean-Paul Gabilliet’s *Of Comics and Men* (2009), Fred Van Lente and Ryan Dunlavey’s *The Comic Book History of Comics* (2012), Jared Gardner’s *Projections* (2012), and Shawna Kidman’s *Comic Books Incorporated* (2019).
conglomerate corporate owners of DC and Marvel comics, the administrative and editorial managers of those specific publishers, the creatives who work for those publishers and generate the narrative content, and the aforementioned Direct Market. I have broken the industry’s resources into seven categories, including the materiality of comics, the superhero, corporate and creative influences, interactions between the industry and its audience, the Direct Market, and developments beyond the Direct Market. These resources developed intermittently across extended periods of time, making them difficult to order lucidly, so I will maintain a loose chronology within each of these categories. As Shawna Kidman states in *Comic Books Incorporated*, “The comic book business has always been (and remains today) small in size relative to other media industries,” which makes some of its resources appear like limitations (6). However, superhero comics have conformed their storytelling practices to these restrictions, using them to their advantage when building narrative universes that feel too vast to imagine as a whole.

**Comic Book Materiality**

The comic books themselves seem a fitting place to begin, as their physical characteristics are largely what distinguishes the medium from woodcuttings, comic strips, or Scott McCloud’s definition of single panel cartoons. Whereas business practices of the industry have altered with time, “In all meaningful aspects the comic book is essentially unchanged as a physical product” (Palmer 233).

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6 To people only tangentially familiar with comic books, DC and Marvel (and superhero comics, for that matter) may appear to be the extent of the medium. However, the direct market equally services a variety of other publishers. Image, Dark Horse, Boom! Studios, IDW, Dynamite, Valiant, Aftershock, Black Mask, Top Shelf, and First Second Books are but a few of the other prominent publishers within the industry. Some of the latter even produce superhero stories that facilitate their own narrative universes. Due to the longevity of Marvel and DC and the wealth of content produced over that lifespan, this dissertation will solely focus on them as guiding examples of superhero universes.

7 In the highly influential *Understanding Comics*, McCloud separates single panel comic strips from his broader definition of comics, describing them as both cartoons and akin to a film still (20-21).
That physicality formed over a lengthy period of trial and error on the parts of multiple publishers. Like nearly all media, comics are indebted to the medium that preceded it: newspaper comic strips. As Jean-Paul Gabilliet details in *Of Comics and Men*’s early chapters, the repurposing of folded tabloid sheets as bound booklets of reprinted syndicated strips came to establish the general size, length, and paper standards for American comic books (E-book). While the dimensions of the average comic book issue or “floppy” have fluctuated with time, most remain somewhere around seven to eight inches wide and nine to ten inches tall, relatively close to those initial tabloid sheet reprints. Page layouts (how panels are arranged on a page) had to conform to these dimensions or risk cluttering the page and muddling the storytelling. As such, superhero comics learned to rely on striking, minimalist images and action-focused narratives to suit the restrictive canvas determined by Golden Age printing practices.

Along with dimensional restrictions, these early “floppies” ended up establishing an average page length for comic books going forward. The number of pages per issue has fluctuated repeatedly across comics history. As Paul Lopes summarizes, during the Golden Age, “The regular length was sixty-four pages. . .[which] dropped to forty-eight, then to thirty-two,” with the average single issue now coming in around twenty to twenty-two pages (10). Page count limitations shaped how comics stories were told from the outset, as diminishing page counts meant less space to convey narrative. Golden Age creators adapted by favoring plot-focused installments that could be told through static-kinetic imagery.

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8 Maxwell C. Gaines and Harry I. Wildenberg’s *Funnies on Parade* being the first instance of this practice.
9 “Superhero comic books are traditionally thought to have at least two distinct periods. . .the golden age and the silver age. The distinction between the two periods is as blurry as the distinction between any two movements in the history of literature or art. . .The golden age was the birth of the superhero proper out of the pulp novel characters of the early 1930s” (Klock 2). The Silver Age is usually said to begin with DC’s rebooting of The Flash, Green Lantern, etc. and Marvel’s launch of The Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, etc. during the late Fifties and early Sixties. Other eras, like the Bronze Age, the Modern Age, or Klock’s own Revisionary period, have been proposed, but the Golden and Silver Ages are referenced most often.
10 These page counts exclude advertisements and other non-narrative content.
These restrictions meant that episodic installments were common from the start (see Fig. 1). Inexpensively made and sold, the medium was viewed as disposable entertainment. Publishers knew comics were passed between friends or purchased with allowance money, leaving opportunity for issues to be missed, so they had creators write accordingly. Golden Age comics tempted the reader to purchase the next issue, while making sure each installment was comprehendible on its own. As such, cliffhangers were usually resolved swiftly during the beginning of the following issue. With time, these episodic cliffhangers evolved into stricter serialized narratives when the industry began appealing to fans’ collector mentality. The dynamic has shifted from the prioritization of the issue to the entirety of a series. Continuity arose from this shift, with storylines spanning multiple issues of the same series and/or other series released by the same publisher. Now comics are written for the arc, impressing upon the readership a need to stay apprised of the entire narrative universe. This intertextual

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11 I want to distinguish this collector mentality from collectors-for-profit or speculators. Speculators purchase comics with the intention of reselling them when or if they become a rare commodity. Rather, I am referring to completists, those readers who desire to own an entire consecutive run of a series.

12 Story arcs are now regularly five or six parts/issues to conform to standard page counts for trade paperback collections.
serialization has become the primary resource for linking the titles together, directing readers to other series, and generating new sales.

Where issue numbering began as a holdover from pulp magazines and newspapers, it has morphed into an industrial tool for structuring and developing the narrative universe. Originally, numbering was included to help newsstand vendors and other retailers determine when to pull outdated material from shelves and return it for credit. Increasingly, the numerical sequencing of issues has taken on a different connotation for continuity-minded readers. Once narrative serialization became prevalent, numbering helped readers track ongoing story arcs; if a reader missed part of a storyline, they could track down that issue by its number. The sequencing of issues now works in tandem with the serialization of narrative, reminding readers of the ongoing universal timeline each title exists within.

DC and Marvel have grown to use milestone issues as a reason to raise price points and draw fans in with a continuity development, such as a character introduction, a death, a marriage, a costume change, or the culmination of a long-running story arc. Where first issues have always been an easy way to generate sales, promoting anniversary installments (#25, #50, #75, #100) around continuity changes gradually came into vogue. Comics like Famous Funnies #100 in 1942 or Flash Comics #100 in 1948 did little more than include a banner championing the “Smash Issue” or acknowledge the landmark with a celebratory cover (see Fig. 2). It was not until Amazing Spider-Man #100 in 1971, Amazing Spider-Man #150 in 1975, and Showcase

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13 When Phil Seuling initiated the direct market of distribution in the seventies, returnability for credit was eliminated (see Gearino 30-34). To the frustration of comics retailers everywhere, non-returnability remains the standard today, leaving stores to carefully estimate ordering numbers months in advance or else be out money and burdened with excess backstock.

14 First issues have always been appealing to comic book publishers, as they offer a jumping-on point to lure in new readers. During the 2010s, DC and Marvel both frequently toyed with restarting ongoing series at #1 (DC with The New 52 and Rebirth initiatives, Marvel with Marvel Now) in order to drive up sales. For a detailed explanation of legacy numbering over comics history, see John Jackson Miller’s “How Legacy Numbering Has Changed Over Time” at Comicron.com.
Figure 2 Celebratory covers for *Famous Funnies* #100 and *Flash Comics* #100

Figure 3 From top left to right, the final panel of *Amazing Spider-Man* #100, the final panels from *Amazing Spider-Man* #150, and the opening page of *Showcase* #100
#100 in 1987 that the model prominently used by Marvel and DC today came into focus (see Fig. 3). The former Spider-Man issue concludes with Peter Parker waking up from a nostalgic hallucination to discover he has grown four extra arms (a development that would carry forward for multiple issues), while the latter resolves a storyline about Spider-Man being a clone. Showcase #100, however, brings all of these elements together in an oversized issue featuring sixty characters from across the title’s history joining forces.

Since comics were initially printed on cheap, wood pulp paper stock, publishers could affordably increase print runs or content output when customer demand arose, borrowing “[a] pulp magazines. . .logic of selling whatever the buyer desired” (Lopes 6). That inexpensive nature has impacted how continuity develops. Superhero comics’ low production and sales costs compared to other media allows publishers to explore untested characters, concepts, and content with little long-term risk. Using DC’s Action Comics series as a case study, David Palmer has charted the gradual increase in cover price from $0.10 in the late thirties to $2.25 in the 2000s (234). Now the average issue sells for $3.99 or $4.99. While that inflation reflects an improvement in paper and printing quality as well as superhero comics now being marketed to adult incomes, the overall production cost is still relatively low. For that reason, the continuity of superhero comics has been littered both with quickly dismissed narrative failures and unexpected successes. That creative experimentation is both a boon and a challenge for creators and fans alike. The cheap costs allow unconventional ideas to see the light of day, but rectifying

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15 At the end of Amazing Spider-Man #150, Peter discards a document which would have revealed whether he was or was not a clone, believing he already knows that to be untrue. Years later, that folder would segue into a controversial story arc called “The Clone Saga.”

16 Special thanks to Paul Levitz, Jonathan Olson, Mike Rhode, Håkan Storsäter, and Paul Young for pointing me in the right direction on the topic of anniversary issues.
choices within the universal continuity requires coordination by creators and cognitive management by fans.

The material characteristics that I have covered within this section – the size, shape, page count, numbering, and price point of comic books – have developed from a long history of printing and marketing decision to become a standard within superhero comics. The “universeness” of superhero comics has benefitted from these resources’ impact on the genre’s use of vibrant, action-oriented aesthetic-images and interconnected, serialized narrative continuity.

**The Superhero**

As much as they are frequently conflated, comic books and superheroes are not synonyms. However, they are intrinsically linked. “Universeness” does not exist without comic books, the medium, nurturing superheroes, the genre. Romance, horror, crime, and monster comics have all had their heyday, but none have generated the scale of narrative complexity that superhero comics have. That expansivity only occurred because the conventions and tropes of the genre found a purchase within an industry readymade for them. This section is concerned with how the Superhero-as-Chevron’s appearance during the Golden Age set a precedent for these figures as aesthetically memorable and reproducible images.

Comic books were the only medium that could have successfully birthed the superhero. In the thirties, the practical effects of cinema were not yet capable of producing these same stories and images convincingly and inexpensively, the prose of novels diminished the vibrancy inherent to the archetype, and while animation excelled at the *kinetic*, it eschewed the *static* quality that let audiences pour over and lock these figures in their image consciousness. Where illustrations of pulp heroes, like Doc Savage or The Spider, inspired superheroes, most only wore
stylized version of regular clothing that lacked the brightness and peculiarity of superhero costumes (see Fig. 4).

Realized only through imagination, artistic ability, and the restrictions of what could be rendered in two-dimensional space, the superhero was birthed from the “limitations” of the comics medium. The blue, red, white, and yellow costumes of Superman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, and other early superheroes derived from the narrow range of color printing options at the time (all combinations of yellow, cyan, magenta, and black) (see Fig. 5). Those colors stood out compared to other magazines on the stand and gave the eye a recognizable combination of shape and hue to track throughout the panels. Likewise, the need for swift, low-cost turnaround forced artists to develop character models that could be easily replicated. Those necessities caused artists to create brightly colored characters with distinct silhouettes and minimal details. These decisions mean superheroes are costumes, with readers remembering the lines and colors that comprise Superman or Captain America’s outfits rather than their faces or physicality.

That iconicity is what makes superheroes ideal for mental-image creation, but it also contributes to the meaning accumulated in memory over the deep dive. When defining the archetype in Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre, Peter Coogan adds that “a simplified idea. . .is represented in the colors and design of the costume” (33). That means when a reader saves these costumes in the recesses of their mind, they come attached with definitional ideas and information for the hero. That begins with basic superhero principles: a power set and a history.

17 Printing capabilities and paper quality (transition from newsprint to glossy paper) have increased over the lifetime of superhero comics, making possible an advanced level of artistry. As such, the renderings of superheroes have come a long way since their minimalistic beginnings. Artists like Frank Quietly, Alex Ross, Jim Lee, J.H. Williams III, and Marguerite Sauvage have taken advantage of the medium’s changing aesthetic possibilities to nuance not only the depictions of established IPs, but the plots and narratives they are involved in.
Figure 4 Covers depicting Doc Savage and The Spider

Figure 5 The first covers to feature Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman (from left to right: Action Comics #1, Detective Comics #27, and Sensational Comics #1)
Where a reader in the forties would have immediately recognized Superman from his color scheme and emblematic design, they would equally have been able to distinguish him from the various knockoffs and superhero progeny he inspired (or the pulp heroes that inspired him) because of what he did that they could not.\(^\text{18}\) He could leap tall buildings in a single bound, but Batman had to use a grappling hook; he could bounce bullets off his chest, whereas Captain America used a shield. When a reader perceives, involuntarily recalls, or is made to recall these chevronic costumes, they are also prompted to remember the powers that costume represents.

Additionally, the Superhero-as-Chervron comes attached to a basic history. At a foundational level, the emblems central to these costumes are constantly reasserting the hero’s origin story. Spider-Man’s black spider is a reminder that he gained his powers from the bite of a radioactive spider, just as Wonder Woman’s eagle/W emblem recalls her heritage as an Amazon of Themyscira. As these narratives progress, an additional web of relationships gets associated with each superhero’s chevronic meaning. Thinking of Superman means thinking of his romantic partner, Lois Lane, his best friend, Jimmy Olsen, and his arch-rival, Lex Luthor. As time goes on, these foundational significations remain, but are glommed onto by additional ideas or continuity. Struggles with alcoholism were attached to Iron-Man-as-Chevron in the late seventies and Batgirl’s paralyzation at the hands of The Joker in 1988’s *The Killing Joke* became

\(^{18}\) DC Comics tested this theory legally on a few famous occasions, including a legal suit against Bruns Publications’ similar superheroic character, Wonderman (Harris 256). DC claimed that, aside from an alternately colored costume, Wonderman’s powers and mission were a ripoff of Superman’s (Harris 257). While DC won that case, a similar legal dispute initiated by DC (then National Comics) towards Fawcett Comics’ Captain Marvel became “one of the longest-running legal battles in the history of comic books, lasting over 12 years” (Lee). In that case, DC/National compiled evidence that attempted to indicate that Captain Marvel’s power set, costume, and personality were facsimiles of Superman’s. As Neil Harris explains, DC lost the case over a technical error, as “Some of the ‘Superman’ strips had omitted copyright notice, suggesting an unintentional surrender” (259). Ultimately, DC “bought the rights to all of Fawcett’s superheroes in 1972,” adding Captain Marvel to the DC Universe (Lee). While DC was trying to protect their financial and copyright interests in these cases, comics fans would never confuse Captain Marvel for Superman because of the signifies I highlight in this section. Not only are their costumes distinguishable by color and design, but Captain Marvel’s power set notably includes the ability to change from adolescent Billy Batson to the superpowered adult Marvel by shouting “Shazam!” (which has now become the character’s name due to other legal battles with Marvel Comics).
central to her chevronic signification going forward. These additions cause the reader to sediment other associations onto the chevron as they deep dive further into character’s narrative histories.

There are then two tensions battling at the core of the Superhero-as-Chevron: they have to retain their ontology as minimalist aesthetic-images, yet their signification can be complicated by additional continuity. These tensions are what makes them ideal for mental-image creation. In one respect, they are aesthetic-images made to look essentially the same across eighty-plus years of narrative, which makes them immediately recognizable to perception and eidetically recallable through cognition. Umberto Eco’s famous article, “The Myth of Superman,” studies this cyclical nature, considering superhero comics to be oneiric or dream-like in how they return to the same foundational ideas, plots, characters, and conflicts.19 Eco evocatively describes this tendency as “The narrator pick[ing] 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” (17). While Eco’s language acknowledges that details can be added, his argument depends upon the parameters of the dream never changing too much for fear of it ending or becoming something else entirely. In Eco’s view, “Superman cannot ‘consume’ himself;” by which he means that “If Superman married Lois Lane, it would of course be another step toward his death” or the essence of the dream being lost (Eco 16 & 18). Eco is obviously correct: the chevrons and their associated meanings remain the same to avoid formula breaking disruptions.

In another respect, Eco is wrong. The serialization of the industry necessitates that these chevronic figures do change from time-to-time in order to keep audiences invested. By now, Superman has married Lois, died, and changed costumes multiple times. The industry has

19 In this article, which has become a foundational text for superhero studies, Eco analyzes a selection of Superman comics from the Fifties.
followed suit, making marriages, deaths, resurrections, costume changes, power set updates, and other continuity additions a promotional tactic for selling comics. In *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril*, Ruth Mayer views these kinds of impermeant alterations to a recognizable intellectual properties (hereafter IPs) as a non-narrative form of seriality:

Seriality relies on iconicity, on emblematic constellations, and on recognizable images, figures, plots, phrases, and accessories that, once established, can be rearranged, reinterpreted, recombined, and invested with new significance and thus constitute major parts of the serial memory that upholds complex serial narratives and representational networks. (10-11)

Mayer’s quote divides almost evenly into the two tensions of the superhero in that they are established as iconic aesthetic-images caught up in Eco’s oneiric plotting, while, at the same time, granted a malleability because their minimalist parts are easily reconfigured yet still recognizable. Readers’ memories respond to this tension, made to recall their stored memories of a superhero in the notable instances where some aspect of the chevron is altered. When this happens, a conflict occurs between the aesthetic-image and the reader’s stored mental-images. Working with Mayer, Shane Denson has characterized the superhero as a “serial figure” who “exists as a series” (536). On the page and in our memories, Denson’s description is accurate. Superheroes-as-Chevrons are as much a series of juxtaposed images as the medium, itself, always pushing readers to compare the aesthetic-images they are perceiving against memories of past perceptions. The superhero, then, encourages the “nexus of relations” needed to conceive of a universe.
Superheroes had to be represented as chevronic costumes because of the limited aesthetic capabilities of early comic books. Because those chevronic costumes are symbols, though, the superhero also develops signification. The Superhero-as-Chevron, then, is caught in a state of tension between the oneiric and the serial; remaining aesthetically recognizable, yet malleable. That tension causes readers to constantly think of these figures as a series of mental-images – of the old and the new – placed against one another.

Corporate Ownership

As Larry Tye recounts in Superman: The High-Flying History of the Man of Steel, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were paid a meager $130 by Jack Liebowitz and Harry Donenfeld (then owners of National Allied Publishing, the company that would become DC Comics) for “not merely the thirteen pages of that first Superman comic, but the right to do what they would with the character” going forward (29). This contract would not only result in a decades-long rights battle between DC and the estates of Siegel and Shuster, but also heralded similar legal disputes between DC, Marvel, and other creators. The precedent was established: creators work-for-

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20 Even though Siegel and Shuster may have been the “canaries in the coalmine” for superhero comics, pulp magazines had been inexpensively purchasing and not crediting freelance writers since the late 1800s. As Lee Server recounts in Danger is My Business: An Illustrated History of the Fabulous Pulp Magazines, “the owners of the weeklies realized that to maintain a steady flow of usable material, they were going to have to pay for it. And from this need, the hack fiction writer was born the cheap story weekly publishers found out that fiction...could be manufactured to specifications and on demand. . . .Fiction became a commodity” (18).

21 Joe Sergi’s The Law for Comic Book Creators provides a fairly boilerplate account of twelve major litigations from comics history (including the multiple court cases involved in the Siegel and Shuster families versus DC dispute). The similarity that runs throughout most of the cases Sergi studies are writers and/or artists claiming some form of ownership over an IP that the publisher argues was created under a work-for-hire contract. For instance, Joe Simon initiated two separate copyright claims over the character of Captain America, whom Simon contends he created as a freelancer even though he later signed over the IP under a work-for-hire contract (Sergi). Gary Friedrich and Marvel underwent a similar legal conflict, with the former claiming he devised the character of Ghost Rider (the motorcycle riding, skull-headed version) long before working at Marvel. However, the publisher claims Friedrich proposed the character in 1971 as a villain for the Daredevil comics. Friedrich pursued copyright claims following the release of the Ghost Rider (2007) film, with Marvel later suing Friedrich for profiting off of Ghost Rider at comic book conventions (Sergi). Jane Gaines’ “Superman and the Protective Strength of Trademark,” relatedly uses Superman’s transmedia history and the legal cases surrounding the IP as a case study for the way in which corporations (DC, specifically) utilize copyright and trademark laws to retain ownership. Rights disputes between creators and publishers dot the history of superhero comics as these companies attempt to retain the ability to disseminate these IPs across their narrative universes and transmedia adaptations.
hire and the corporations own the characters created under their banner. While that may leave creators undercompensated for their work, it provides an extensive back catalog of IPs for the publishers to link together. Once the industry transitions into telling universe-oriented narratives, an openness of copyright restrictions facilitates the sensation of a universe.

The industry’s willingness to capitalize on their stables of IP occurred gradually. As the popularity of superhero properties grew during the Golden Age, publishers took the opportunity to transition characters from short installments in anthology issues into their own, self-titled ongoing series. For instance, Namor the Sub-Mariner first appears in *Marvel Comics #1* in 1939, only to transition into *Sub-Mariner Comics #1* two years later. Moving these IP to standalone series gave creators the latitude to fill out their storyworlds.

With the individual worlds of IP developing, companies started to pursue team-ups between characters from separate storyworlds. Captain Marvel (now known as Shazam) and Spy Smasher first appeared in unrelated stories within *Whiz Comics #2*, but only a year later their publisher, Fawcett Comics, was pitting them against each other in *Whiz Comics #15*. Seeing these two characters collide in battle across an issue’s worth of aesthetic-images confirmed their existence within a shared storyworld, creating continuity for readers to remember.

As work-for-hire creators churned out IP, their corporate owners explored new opportunities for team-ups and ongoing team series. The *Young Allies #1* in 1941 was a team book that brought together Bucky and Toro, the sidekicks of Captain America and the original

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Human Torch, respectively (see Fig. 6). Because of their popularity, team books have become its own subgenre of superhero comics, with the Justice League, Teen Titans, X-Men, and Avengers titles as notable examples. Publishers exploiting their blanketed IP ownership in this way pushed their narrative universes to take shape. As Richard Reynolds puts it: “With enough team-ups. . .links are established between all the costumed characters published by a particular company” (38).

Figure 6 Cover to Young Allies #1

Once publishers generated enough links to bind their universes together, the crossover event miniseries appeared in the 1980s. In a crossover event, the full breadth of a publisher’s IP catalog is at play. Though there may be a core character or group at the center of these events, the potential for nearly any superhero from the company’s long history to turn up for a panel or two solidifies the shared continuity of these universes. Crossover events like Secret Wars, Crisis on Infinite Earths, House of M, Civil War, Blackest Night, and others continue to sell and appeal to the fanbase because they promise a glimpse of the universe as a whole. My case study in
Chapter Two will dedicate further attention to crossover events but suffice to say they exemplify how the corporate ownership of IP benefits universe-building.

Finally, each publisher settling on a blanketed corporate label helped to unify their properties under one universal banner. Both companies eventually chose monikers harkening back to series titles where long-running characters first appeared (Batman in *Detective Comics* #27; Namor and the original Human Torch in *Marvel Comics* #1). DC Comics was “founded [as] National Allied Publishing in 1934” (Cowsill et al. 12). Following Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz’s reorganization of the company to Detective Comics, Inc., those “initials, [were] emblazoned on the covers of all its comics by 1940,” remaining as DC Comics into today (Cowsill et al. 16). Marvel Comics began as an imprint of Martin Goodman’s pulp magazine publishing company, dubbed Timely Comics, in 1938, only to experience an ongoing identity crisis for over twenty years (Saunders et al. 10). During a fallow period for superhero comics, “Goodman. . .experimented with a new corner logo ‘A Marvel Magazine’. . .[only to later try] a circular cover symbol reading ‘Marvel Comic,’” both of which were inspired by sci-fi pulps from his magazine publishing days (Saunders et al. 10 & 34). Starting in 1951, the company published numerous romance and monster comics under the name of Atlas Comics, before settling on Marvel Comics during the company’s pivotal Sixties revitalization (Saunders et al. 34). Each choice speaks to the integral lineage of the superhero for the two companies, while providing a brand for their respective narrative universes to exist under.

By owning the rights to an extensive catalog of IP, DC and Marvel are able to create linkages that produce the feeling of “universeness” in readers. Over each publisher’s lifetime, interlinking of these IP has exponentially increased from separate series to team-ups and
eventually crossover events. Settling on singular monikers provided a brand shorthand for encapsulating each of their shared universes.

Creative Influences

By the end of the Golden Age, the superhero genre had waned in popularity, Jean-Paul Gabilliet recounts how “the few survivors were Fawcett’s Captain Marvel and DC’s Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, Green Arrow, and Aquaman” and many of those series were canceled eventually (E-book). The industry had been assailed culturally by senate hearings and general anti-comics sentiment partially whipped up by Frederic Wertham’s 1954 publication, *Seduction of the Innocent*. While the stigma that grew out of the Fifties never fully subsided, the publishers’ efforts to lure readers back resulted in a commitment to building narrative universes.

DC Comics began updating pre-existing IPs for the “space age,” spearheaded by editor Julie Schwartz and publisher Jack Liebowitz. As Gil Kane – the artist who redesigned Green Lantern during this time – explained in an interview with *The Comics Journal*’s Gary Groth, the editorial department of DC Comics launched an anthology series called *Showcase* which allowed them to reintroduce IPs with little risk; if the issue featuring the character did not sell, they would never have to appear again (77). Lucky for DC, *Showcase #4* including the first appearance of a rebooted Flash (now a forensic scientist named Barry Allen) was a big hit in 1956. Four years later came John Broome and Gil Kane’s Green Lantern (now an air force test pilot named Hal Jordan) in *Showcase #22*, which was followed in 1961 by Kane and writer Gardner Fox’s

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23 That fervent cocktail resulted in the industry developing the Comics Code Authority, an agreed upon system of content guidelines and ratings that could calm the panic and reassure consumers. For further accounts of this period in comics history, see David Hajdu’s *The 10 Cent Plague*, Amy Kiste Nyberg’s *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*, the chapter “Wertham and the Critique of Comic Books” in Bart Beaty’s *Frederic Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, and Bradford Wright’s *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. 
reinterpretation of The Atom in *Showcase #34*. This succession of well-received relaunches not only reignited the popularity of superhero comics, but also established diegetic connections back to Golden Age titles.

Figure 7 Cover to *Flash #123*

Foremost to practice this tactic was *The Flash #123*, titled “The Flash of Two Worlds,” written by Gardner Fox and illustrated by Carmine Infantino (see Fig. 7). In the issue, Fox brings back the original version of the Flash (named Jay Garrick) – whom he created in 1940’s *Flash Comics #1* – to interact with Barry Allen, the Silver Age Flash. Fox’s inclusion of the Garrick-Flash made that character’s Golden Age stories relevant again for readers and continuity. Jack Kirby and Stan Lee would replicate Fox’s tactics in 1963’s *The Avengers #4*,

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24 This trio of DC re-imaginings introduced the idea of the “legacy character,” or the diegetic transferal of a superhero identity to a new character. Legacy characters keep a publisher from having to create a new IP and potentially retain the fans of the previous incarnation. Both DC and Marvel have made legacy characters a staple of superhero comics. Both companies regularly boost sales by introducing new legacy characters, including a litany of additional Green Lanterns, Ben Reilly becoming Spider-Man in the Nineties, and Kamala Khan being reassigned the Ms. Marvel namesake in the 2010s, to name only a few instances.
with the duo not only reviving Captain America (whom Kirby created with Joe Simon in 1941), but also establishing a diegetic connection between the Marvel stories of the forties and the Sixties. Linking the Golden Age stories with the new Silver Age stories brought together these two periods of continuity to expand the overall history of the narrative universe.

Those creative choices led to an intensified reliance upon serialized references to previous issues and events during the Silver Age. Editor’s notes, dialogic references, or cameos by other IPs were increasingly used by editorial departments and creators. Even though it would take the formation of the Direct Market to simplify the process, these cross-references began urging readers to follow these links backwards or sideways to other paratexts. With IP from all eras and throughout the publishers’ catalogs appearing together on the page, these dense aesthetic-images helped readers feel these universes coming together in their minds.

Marvel Comics’ brand revitalization, beginning with 1961’s *The Fantastic Four #1* overseen by Stan Lee, fully capitalized on the trend by launching a shared Marvel Universe of titles. With the successive creation of Ant-Man, the Hulk, Spider-Man, Thor, Iron Man, and The Avengers, the joint creative powers of Lee, Kirby, Steve Ditko, John Romita, Sr., and Larry Lieber (Lee’s brother) designed a storyworld where characters lived only a few blocks from each other in a heightened version of New York City. Reed Richards might be seen reading a Daily Bugle newspaper (the imprint Spider-Man worked for) or Namor might show up at the Law Offices of Nelson and Murdock (Daredevil’s alter ego) for legal help. These acknowledgements of a shared universe were an outgrowth of Lee and his collaborators taking advantage of Marvel’s umbrella ownership of the IP they had created.

As creators at both publishers continued to take advantage of the unencumbered copyrights of these IP, it meant that multiple writers and artists might be handling the same
character simultaneously. This was not unheard of in superhero comics, since as early as *Detective Comics #29* Gardner Fox was assigned to write Batman (only two issues after his creation), despite Fox not being one of the character’s two co-creators. Though this practice was introduced early into the Golden Age, it was more common at that time for a single creator or team of creators, like Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster with Superman, to consistently steward a character for years. With IP moving between titles with more frequency during the Silver Age, a shared conservatorship became the norm. This tendency resulted in a creative practice that I will dedicate a case study to in Chapter Two, which I refer to as Exquisite Corpse Creation.

Borrowing the name from a surrealist parlor game where multiple artists add to a single drawing, I see a similar creative method at play in superhero comics. The increase in universe-oriented storytelling during the Silver Age demanded that creators coordinate with each other in a collaborative way making sure that a character’s continuity was maintained across multiple titles. An IP’s voice, personality, and narrative history had to remain consistent for a sense of “universeness” to persist for readers.

Exquisite Corpse Creation does not only refer to parallel authorship of IP, but the practice of creators adding onto a character’s continuity into the future. Since the industry operates off of a work-for-hire system, creators are regularly rotated off and onto different IPs. A creator’s tenure on a title, colloquially called a “run,” might be followed by the next creator either undoing or elaborating on the continuity established by the previous writer. And this Exquisite Corpse Creation does not have to occur in a consecutive fashion. Authors might set-up plot beats, only to be removed from the series and be succeeded by a creator who chooses not to follow those

25 Fox is credited as the writer of multiple early Batman issues in DC’s official *The Golden Age Batman Vol. 1*. 
beats through to fruition. Just as commonly, creative teams months, years, or decades later may pick up on unresolved storylines or simply add onto continuity from a beloved or pivotal run. In these instances, the material, corporate, and creative resources unique to the medium make superhero comics a particularly reflexive genre where creators and their works “talk back” to each other routinely. As that reflexivity becomes a convention, the universes expand. Creators making these connections, in turn, spurs the audience to join eras, issues, and aesthetic-images within their cognition.

In an effort to lure back longtime readers while simultaneously attracting new ones, creators at DC and Marvel comics begin expanding these narratives from worlds to universes. By linking together the Golden and Silver Age Flashes, The Flash #123 started a trend that Marvel Comics would popularize in the early Sixties. A greater emphasis on continuity and interconnectivity necessitated a reliance on the Exquisite Corpse style of collaborative creation, which further united publishers’ IP within a shared narrative universe and the audience’s sense of those universes.

Industry/Audience Interaction

As a niche medium, the comics industry has never had access to the marketing reach of film, television, or literary publishing, lacking the budget to promote products via television commercials, billboards, poster ads, radio spots, or other forms of multimedia marketing. Instead, Marvel and DC depend on self-promotion (called house ads), ordering solicitations, and

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26 A helpful list of unresolved superhero storylines has been compiled by Comic Book Resources’ Brian Cronin (see “Left Unresolved Archive”). To provide an idea of how narrative threads were left dangling only to later be picked up, I will provide a summary of the first example off of Cronin’s list. In the series Web of Spider-Man, a mystery surrounding the identity of a new villain dubbed F.A.C.A.D.E. was left unanswered when a new storyline (“The Clone Saga”) began. The writer who had devised the mystery, Terry Kavanagh, never returned to the title to provide closure. However, other comics, like Dark Reign Files #1 and Amazing Spider-Man #678, have made subtle gestures to F.A.C.A.D.E.’s identity, tugging on the thread almost twenty years later.
press releases through online news and social media. Foremost, comics publishers rely on the semblance of discourse between creatives and the readership to generate discussion and sell product to an impassioned fanbase. That approach keeps readers invested in the continuity of the universe, which encourages repeated recall of archived memory through reminiscence and conversation. Repeatedly, the fervency of the readership has led to cross-pollination, with previous fans transitioning into creators. When this occurs, the continuity knowledge of those fan-creators influences the universe in ways which directly respond to and invigorate the feeling of “universeness” in fans’ consciousness.

A dependence on industry/audience interaction replicates what newspaper comic strips were doing before comic books appeared. Jared Gardner is adamant about how “serialization’s shared deferrals open up space for collaborative reading and interpretation” (56). The gap between publications allowed comic strip audiences to mail in questions, suggestions, demands, or any other comment to the strip’s creator(s) (56). The recurrence of a serial story paired with the period of deferral Gardner stresses creates the illusion of a back-and-forth conversation. Being engaged in that conversation keeps the details of the narrative at the forefront of readers’ minds by providing an avenue to recall mental-images of what they have read and imagine what they hope to read in the next installment.

Comics were slow to adopt these practices, with only a few outlier publishers in the forties including letters pages. Gardner names Novelty Press and, in particular, EC Comics as exceptions, with “EC encourage[ing] readers to share their opinions but also their ideas. . .inviting them to contribute suggestions for the twist endings which were EC’s trademark” (98). These isolated instances were precursors to the heyday of fan outreach during the Silver Age. The Superman titles began featuring letters columns in 1958, with “this practice. . .soon
spread[ing] across the DC line” as a means of creating “a new type of proximity. . . between readers and publishers” (Gabilliet).

DC may have normalized letters pages, but Marvel Comics and Stan Lee capitalized on a sense of community. Besides including letters pages, recurring columns like Stan’s Soapbox and fan club organizations like The Merry Marvel Marching Society, made readers feel included, like they had a window into the creative process. The process itself was presented by Lee with a little creative license, as he regularly wrote about the “Marvel Bullpen” of authors and artists; a fictionalized account of the tightknit comradery between staff writers and artists. In reality, hardly any of the creators worked regularly in the head offices, but that was not the point. Instead, Lee sought to engender a spirit of friendship between Marvel and its readers as a means of encouraging continued patronage. Intentional or not, Lee’s tactics fed off of an already growing fandom that obsessed over both the process and people behind their favorite superheroes, but also the continuity of these nascent universes.

Another byproduct of Marvel and DC’s appeal to readers during the Silver Age was what Gabilliet calls “a growing community of fans who cared deeply about individual creators” (E-book). Since work-for-hire was the industry standard and publishers prioritized promotion of IP over creators, accreditation inside and on the covers of comics has been a long fight. The eventual crediting of creators worked in conjunction with letters pages to allow for what Daniel

27 Stan’s Soapbox – a reappearing column featuring words of wisdom and snappy comments written by Stan Lee – was part of Bullpen Bulletins, a feature included in all Marvel comics that contained news and promotional information about the company. To become part of the M.M.M.S., fans could send off $1 to receive a kit that inducted them into this Marvel fan club. One of the notable trinkets included with the kit was a record of various Marvel creators and staff members speaking to each other and the fans. Along with a gimmick like the “No-Prize” (where Lee and various editors would “award” readers with nothing but recognition for answering questions or pointing out errors, continuity and otherwise), each of these promotional tactics created the semblance of camaraderie amongst the readership and the Marvel employees.

28 For a detailed history about the incremental crediting of comics creators, see Jean-Paul Gabilliet’s section on “The Era of Contracts” in Of Comics and Men’s tenth chapter.
Stein describes as “detailed discussions of [the] individual styles and authorial voices” of comics authors (169). With certain writing styles, story arcs, and creators gained popularity through discussion, the continuity they introduced and the characters they stewarded held greater purchase in the communal consciousness of the fanbase. When some of these fans would enter the industry, those preferential memories would shape which continuity they referenced in their own stories. These references on the page would contribute to acts of Re-Viewing that encourage memorization.

In “From Love to Money: The First Decade of Comics Fandom,” Peter Coogan explains how around this same time fanzines formed out of “nostalgia for the comics of their youth” (50). Among these were Xero, Comic Art, and, most prominently, Alter Ego. These zines became an avenue for “The transition of fan into pro [that] has driven the comics industry since 1965, when Roy Thomas made the shift,” with these fan-creators now “concerned with telling. . .longer stories that were interconnected” (“For Love” 59 & 61).²⁹ In his history of Marvel Comics, Sean Howe recounts how Thomas especially earned a reputation for pulling from the company’s past: “Instead of creating new characters, Thomas filled in the backstories of what already existed” (98). Michel Fiffe has described Thomas’ DC work during the eighties as “map[s] of information” that read like a tapestry of esoteric superhero history. Thomas and other fan-creators like Jim Shooter, Paul Levitz, and Dennis “Denny” O’Neil would go on to become group editors or editors-in-chief at Marvel and DC, granting them greater ability to shape continuity. Comics created out of fannish nostalgia generate that same mentality in the reader, with callbacks to pre-existing continuity eliciting cognitive reminisce.

²⁹ Other fan-creators who benefitted from this pipeline are Gary Friedrich, Cary Bates, Len Wein, and Marv Wolfman.
Organized by Phil Seuling in 1968, the first comic book convention (the Convention of Comic Book Art) externalized the fan conversation and continuity mindedness that was already occurring in letters pages, fanzines, and the work of fan-creators (Gearino 16-17). At this convention and the thousands that would recreate its model, fans gather to both mingle with creators and peers to discuss the universes they are passionate about. In a pre-Internet era, finding, reading, and memorizing issues was the most efficient way to learn about pre-existing continuity, so conventions also became the first venue where fans had access to a glut of difficult to locate older comics. With an excess of comics in a single location, the potential for fans deep diving was made possible. Con-goers could spend hours or days digging through bins full of comics, connecting these universes with an immediacy that was previously unavailable. However, conventions are held infrequently and require travel to reach. For the deep dive to become a customary process for feeling these universes the same benefits of conventions needed to be met on a smaller, localized scale.

During the Silver Age, superhero publishers developed a semblance of open communication with readers via letters pages and other community building tactics. Fanzines similarly organized nostalgic fans around discussions of continuity and love for certain creators. Select fans transitioned out of those zines into the industry, given the opportunity to impact continuity going forward with an eye to the past. Finally, comic book conventions provided an environment where these communities could meet face-to-face and deep dive into comic collections.

The Direct Market

In recent years, the centrality of comic book stores within the industry has diminished. With digital alternatives replacing print media, competition from highly discounted online
sellers, and a continued mainstream stigma towards “lowbrow” or “kiddie” comics, retail shops are feeling the pressure. However, comic book stores were and still are the natural outgrowth of the resources recounted to this point. They act as an archive for back issues, serve as a localized gathering point for discussion, and supply a comprehensive range of new titles. Moreover, they allowed creators and publishers to write longer, serialized, interconnected narratives because fans no longer had to worry about missing an issue; if they did, a store might have it in a collected volume, as a back issue, or, failing those options, order a copy. With the Direct Market, fans finally had a means to deep dive into the entire history and continuity of these narrative universes.

The newsstand market that preceded the Direct Market lacked those universe-oriented resources. As Dan Gearino describes, during their Golden Age “comic books were a mass medium, sold through grocery stores, candy stores, newsstands, and about anywhere else newspapers could be found” (15). Following the cultural downturn of comic books in the late Fifties, that model had evaporated, leaving the industry to find a new outlet for sales. Born out of thrift stores and bookshops selling old comics issues, “The direct-marketing of comic books to

30 Having managed a store from 2006 to 2016, I know the stress of keeping a comics shop afloat during inhospitable times. Shipments were frequently damaged or missing product, leaving us to apologize to customers who were quick to see the store as the problem. I grew tired of hearing customers lament that they could not buy an issue or collected volume that they desperately wanted because they did not have the money (usually, a friend would offhandedly suggest they just “buy it cheaper online”). Then there is the ubiquitous hassle of placing orders two months out with the knowledge that they cannot be returned for credit; if you order too high you will be stuck with overstock and if you order too low customers will go elsewhere to find issues you have sold through. Customers placing pre-orders is supposed to remedy the problem, helping you to estimate order numbers. But customers will often vanish entirely or lose interest in a title before it arrives, leaving the store to shoulder the cost of product they thought would sell. The comic retail environment is a difficult one.

31 A requirement of my job at Pulp Fiction was to maintain an encyclopedic knowledge of the major storylines happening at both companies. That way I could hype up the impact those storylines would have on continuity as a way to convince customers to purchase issues. I received just as much pleasure chatting about these details and seeing customers react with interest or excitement as I did from making a sale. I got even more pleasure from introducing a customer to superhero comics. Welcoming someone into the fandom was simultaneously self-aggrandizing – a way to reward my own knowledge – but also vicariously exciting because I was seeing someone start down a path I had already walked. Obviously not everyone takes to the intricate, vast continuity in the same way, but I always hoped they would.
specialty retailers developed in the 1970s as a ‘win–win’ solution for publishers with declining newsstand circulation and retailers with a clientele of adult collectors, and the system was firmly entrenched by the 1980s” (Woo 127). After organizing the first comic conventions, Phil Seuling approached comics publishers proposing an alternative model of distribution to replace the inefficient system that had existed since the Golden Age. As quoted by Michael Dean, one of Seuling’s eventual competitors, “Friendly” Frank Mangiaracina describes Seuling’s pitch as “Give me 50 percent off and I’ll keep every comic book that you give me. And if anything is left over, I will sell it as a back issue” (50-51). This was a revolutionary idea since up to that point unsold comics – of which there were many, because sellers had little control over the product they received – could be returned for credit. Convinced by the offer, publishers began selling product to Seuling who would then directly fill orders placed by stores.

With the direct distribution model in place, multiple parties attempted to join with or copy Seuling, leading to rivalries, lawsuits, and refinements of the system. As Dean describes, “In those early days, the Direct Market was not so much a unified network of comics fans and comics businessmen as a lot of autonomously functioning regions linked to the major publishers” (54). After Seuling passed away in 1984, a changing market, bad business decisions, and competition led to Steve Geppi (who had purchased one of Seuling’s early rivals, Irjax) buying up or merging with what remained of these independent sellers in the early Nineties. As such, the distribution network for the direct market was winnowed down to, essentially, a singular entity: Diamond Comic Distributors. Though the company has been legally cleared of monopolistic practices, they are the sole distributor for nearly every major comics publisher, including DC and Marvel.32 With Diamond as the singular shipment provider, publishers are

32 Even though Diamond is largely recognized as being monopolistic, Dan Gearinio explains that “the Justice Department did investigate Diamond in the late 1990s. . . .[but] never brought charges. . .[because] there was no
able to place – often unfair – mandates on comics stores, making the comics retail business a challenging one to thrive within and one that is inherently shaped by the whims of the publishers as mediated by Diamond.

The Direct Market that formed over the late Seventies and into the Eighties allowed readers to keep up with the progression of a narrative universe’s continuity as well as research its history. They gave customers the ability to “pull” comics (have new issues automatically held to avoid missing them) and stockpiling older comics in a variety of forms. Whereas tracking down back issues in the newsstand days posed a challenge – as those points-of-sale were oriented around exclusively new periodicals, not back stocking old ones – the Direct Market could maintain (the semblance of) an organized archive. In the Nineties, reading older storylines was simplified with the rise of bound collections of reprinted issues, referred to inconsistently as either trade paperbacks (TPBs or trades), graphic novels, or collected editions. Unlike a back issue, TPBs contain a full storyline of curated and chronologically organized issues. By housing a constantly in flux, purchasable library of each universe’s history in the form of back issues and collected volumes, each Local Comic Shop/Store (LCS) contains a portion of all superhero continuity. While an LCS is more localized than a convention, the dispersal of issues (stores buy in and sell off troves of back issues frequently) across multiple, distanced locations still requires evidence that Diamond was using its status in a way that was harmful to the market” (148). Regardless, Diamond’s monopoly on distributing the “Big Two” publishers was halved on June 5th, 2020 when after twenty-five years of cooperation DC Comics broke ties with Diamond. On March 25th, 2021 another blow was dealt to Diamond when Marvel Comics announced a distribution deal through Penguin Random House, reducing Diamond to a wholesaler rather than their sole distributor.

As Bart Beaty describes in “The Recession and the American Comic Book Industry,” “Graphic novels…[came] with a more marketing-friendly name” that allowed them to gain a foothold outside of the direct market, specifically in popular book selling chains like Barnes and Noble or the now defunct Borders (204). Even though the term “graphic novel” has become a common descriptor for any bound volume of comics material, there is a history of discourse that associates the term specifically with comics content exclusively created for that thicker, book-length format. For my purposes, TPBs collect material previously released as single issues, graphic novels contain only original content.
a “hunt” to find a precious piece of continuity. It is hunting through the archive, though, that brings readers in contact with the aesthetic-images of comics, facilitating the cognitive connections that make them feel like universes.

As Benjamin Woo emphasizes, LCSs also serve as “a fixed space that multiple, contingently related groups and communities access,” physically realizing the distanced discourse fanzines and letters pages facilitated during the Silver Age (130). In this way, the LCS becomes a sort of subcultural public sphere as Jürgen Habermas describes it: “com[ing] into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (49). Like the pubs and coffeehouses Habermas envisioned as the outlet for his utopian concept, when LCSs originated they were (along with conventions) a gathering place where fans could organize and talk passionately. Where Habermas was concerned with private politics entering into a public discourse free from governmental intervention, the LCS brings together each fan’s private understandings of the DC and Marvel Universes. Each fan has their own privileged memories, formed from their own unique deep dive through the comics. In the public sphere of the comic shop, those memories can be shared through group reminiscence, filling in knowledge gaps and pointing the participants off in new directions.

However, Habermas’ public sphere was never a true utopia, as Nancy Fraser has argued; its inherent patriarchal influences do “not foster participatory parity” (64). Unfortunately, that trait has been replicated by LCSs too often. Benjamin Woo points out that “staff members. . .are endowed with high levels of social capital within the store,” oftentimes pointing new and veteran readers alike in unexplored directions or simply catching them up on aspects of continuity (132). That position within the store’s sphere has too often led to gatekeeping, where “the identities of. . .fans (particularly in terms of gender and race) may shape. . .which fans get to pass through, and
how the fandom is mapped out for those new fans,” as Derek Kompare discusses when writing about these “fan curators” (113). When this occurs, the universe-enabling resources of the Direct Market are impeded. In these situations, the industry’s deep dive and universe-building intentions cannot happen (or must happen through other means). Taking fandom online has alleviated and extenuated gatekeeping in equal measure. Previously ostracized groups can now converse about and explore a universe anonymously or through the unifying potential of social media. However, those same features result in harassments that replicate the same gatekeeping as before.

When the public sphere discourse of a LCS does work as it should, the deliberately rhythmic release schedule of comics recreates the deferrals that Jared Gardner recognized in newspaper strips. At a micro level (individual series), content is released monthly, but at a macro level (the fictional universe as it exists across all the series published) there’s a steady drip of content every week. If that release schedule were to be visualized, one individual series could be represented by a dotted line, like this:

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Another with differently spaced dashes, represents a title releasing on opposite weeks:

- - - - - - - - -

But once they’re aligned and added to additional, differently spaced lines, they create:

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34 As a comic shop employee, I was always keenly aware of this gatekeeper reputation. At Pulp Fiction, from the owner on down we were conscious of being inclusionary. Though I am sure we did not always succeed at this, I remember having numerous conversations with female customers about their negative experiences at other stores in comparison to ours. Over the ten years that I worked at the store, there was a noticeable increase in female and transgender customers. That said, our customer base was disproportionately white. Our location within a predominantly white suburb of Missouri was a likely influence, but I am sure the general exclusionary history of comics also contributed. Though we attempted to create a welcoming environment, there is no getting around the fact that the store’s staff conformed to the white, straight, cisgendered male stereotype (me included). Over the store’s fifteen year existence, there have only been two female employees, both outside of my time at the store.
Those monthly and weekly gaps of time create two periods where Gardner’s fan conversations can occur. Those regularly take the form of fan-to-fan communication or letters (and social media posts) directed at publishers. This schedule also creates an oscillation between over and under saturation where readers are simultaneously left wanting more and given enough to not lose interest. As that final dashed line indicates, though, the release schedule is consistently putting readers in a position to remember and think about comics they read the previous week or month, continuity details, or to imagine what may happen in the next issue. That approach keeps the universe at the forefront of reader’s minds, repeatedly asking them to consider how it fits together as a whole.

That weekly-monthly rhythm works as it does, because the industry has settled on a standardized release day. Prior to the direct market (and even during its early history), “there was no uniform day of the week on which all the nation’s new comics hit the stands at once,” which disseminated conversation through disorganization (Dean 52). In a post-newsstand era, “New comics go on sale every Wednesday. . .[encouraging] the most dedicated comic-book readers and collectors [to] do their shopping,” but also to mingle (Woo 131).  

By creating a singular release date, publishers weaponize the eagerness of the diehard fans. The likelihood that those fans will interact on New Comics Wednesday increases the possibility that they will be

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35 With DC separating themselves from Diamond Comics for different distribution channels, New Comics Wednesday has, at least temporarily, been disrupted. DC’s new releases now ship on Mondays with a Tuesday sale date. In response, Marvel has announced a series of alternate “New Comic Book Day” variant covers for a handful of titles (“Marvel Launches”).

36 Part of my job at Pulp Fiction was initiating or enabling these kinds of conversations. New Comics Wednesdays were usually the most hectic days in that regard, as our “regulars” came in during a narrow, post-workday window and would gather into pockets of energetic discussion. I would find myself ping-ponging back-and-forth, often intentionally or accidently bringing these pockets together; as a fan, the urge to pipe up when a character or topic you are knowledgeable about or interested in becomes too great, pulling you into a new conversation. Even though it is a common refrain, many of Pulp’s customers were not socially outgoing people. Surrounded by likeminded diehards these shy customers would feel comfortable enough to socialize. While conversations would oscillate between multiple topics, hypotheses about where certain Marvel or DC storylines were headed, opinions about new costumes or characters, praising writers and artists, swapping of continuity factoids, and recommendations were staples of discussion.
embroiled in passionate conversation. The industry foremost intends those discussions to generate “word of mouth” sales, but they can also accelerate a feeling of “universeness” through joint sharing of memories and information.

When Seuling proposed the direct market model to publishers, he did so in part because of the difficulty fans were facing when trying to locate back issues. Culminating from the industrial resources developed to that point as well as the desires of a growing fandom, LCSs realized a public sphere in which readers could gather and the history of these narrative universes could be archived (as issues or eventually TPBs). At their best, LCS employees act as purveyors of DC and Marvel continuity as well as facilitators for the impassioned conversation. The industry’s rhythmic release schedule works in tandem with comic shops and their customers to focus that passion into continued investment and increased sales. By doing so, the direct market simultaneously benefits the universe-oriented storytelling and marketing of the publishers and the fandom’s devotion to continuity.

Beyond the Direct Market

In his article on “The Evolution of the American Comic Book Industry,” David Palmer argues that three distinct waves of the comics market have existed: 1) wide-ranging newsstand distribution, 2) the niche direct market, and 3) the current wave of online and transmedia distribution. Where Palmer suggests that “Wave 3 may entail. . .a radically different distribution and business model,” I believe that this third wave has instead translated and concentrated the universe-oriented practices of the Direct Market into a newly mediated form (238).

The Direct Market and print comics have long partaken in Susan M. Pearce’s three forms of collection – souvenirs, fetishistic collecting, and systematic collecting. Each of these depend upon the materiality and presence of an object “to create a satisfactory private universe” that can
be returned to, interacted with, used to recollect (literally collect once more the memories
associated with it), and ordered as desired ("Collecting" 201). The possibility of collecting every
comic produced by Marvel and DC over eighty-plus years might be theoretically possible, but is
hardly realistic for the average customer. Instead, fans might content themselves with the
prospect of owning an entire run by one creator or every issue of a single series. These goals can
be just as challenging to accomplish, but they stem from the “possibility of completion” that
Pearce associates with collecting ("The Urge" 158). A collector could never own the fictional
universe as a whole, but they could completely acquire a private corner of the universe. That
potential made collecting a tenet of how the Direct Market aided fans in wrapping their heads
around the DC and Marvel Universes.

But that is changing. After interviewing LCS owners, Dan Gearino found that “shops
that opened in the last ten years give little space to collectible back issues,” because the arrival of
online retailers and digitized libraries of content mean fans will eventually have access to the
universe as a whole (113). As e-books and digital reading became commonplace during the
early and mid-2000s, a service now known as ComiXology was developed by David Steinberger,
Peter Jaffe, and John D. Roberts, initially for use by LCSs “so that customers could place orders
directly with retailers who subscribed to the service” (Wershler 132). Between 2009 and 2010,
ComiXology began carrying and selling select Marvel comics digitally, only to be hired by the
latter as well as DC “to build custom apps” that would evolve into each company’s own
platforms for selling digital comics (Wershler 133).37 Additionally, both companies currently
offer digital subscription services that operate on a Netflix-style model (Marvel Unlimited and
DC Universe Infinite, respectively), where subscribers gain access to an ever-increasing digital

37 In April 2014, it was announced that ComiXology would be purchased by Amazon, providing the digital comics
provider the potential for an even broader audience (McMillan).
back catalog of issues.\textsuperscript{38} They are often spotty about which runs and issues are available, but both publishers continue to add titles. As they improve, these digital libraries act as, optimistically, a supplement to the Direct Market archive of continuity and, pessimistically, a replacement.

The curatorship once associated with the Direct Market has been translated online, as well. The advent of online comics journalism and fan websites offer informed guidance for long-time and uninitiated readers. Websites like 	extit{Comic Book Resources}, 	extit{Comics Alliance}, and 	extit{Bleeding Cool} not only cover comics news and developments within the industry, but also major changes to continuity, while still promoting classic continuity through listicles and “Must Read” articles. Wikis and other encyclopedic databases include detailed summaries for characters, storylines, back issues, and important continuity changes, acting as an alternative to the idle chitchat between customers or employees at an LCS; conversations that would oftentimes introduce readers to previously unknown corners of the Marvel and DC Universes. A new crop of podcasts and YouTube channels dedicated to explaining and exploring superhero comics offer another avenue for pointing readers in new directions.\textsuperscript{39} Both publisher’s subscription services also include “You Might Enjoy” style recommendations that act as deep dive assistance. The emergence of these online resources does not replace the Direct Market’s “fan curators,” but it has provided supplemental channels for readers to explore these universes.

\textsuperscript{38} During the writing of this dissertation, the DC Universe platform was rebranded as DC Universe Infinite. All of the film, television, and video content was moved over to the HBO Max streaming service, making the platform a dedicated subscription service for reading DC comics digitally.

\textsuperscript{39} A few podcasts of note would be 	extit{Jay & Miles X-Plain the X-Men}, 	extit{Talking Comics}, 	extit{iFanboy}, 	extit{Comic Geek Speak}, 	extit{Around Comics}, and 	extit{War Rocket Ajax}, all of which either consistently or intermittently provide discussions about particular eras, series, creators, or characters from Marvel and DC history along with reviews of current comics. In terms of YouTube channels, 	extit{Comic Book Girl 19} might be one of the longest-running examples (even though the channel’s content recently moved to Twitch because of YouTube’s demonetization practices). 	extit{Comics Explained} and 	extit{Comicsstorian} both upload videos recounting character histories, major aspects of continuity, or synopses of current or older superhero stories. Channels that produce video essays analyzing comics are rarer, but 	extit{Strip Panel Naked} and 	extit{The Unintentional Fallacy} are welcome exceptions.
For Gregory Steirer this “new, digital comics culture, no longer shaped by the values and practices of collecting, will be a culture determined largely, if not solely, by the experience of reading comics,” which means the conversion of Direct Market resources online is more about the industry’s universe-oriented design that ever before (466). If information stored and interconnected within image consciousness is the way we conceive of a universe, then Christoph Zeller’s suggestion that “In a digital environment, the physical presence and diversity of objects diminishes in favor of their informational value” means reading superhero comics online emphasizes the foundations of feeling a universe (396). Like the shift from the newsstand market to the Direct Market, the transition of the continuity archive to online platforms intends to improve fans’ ability to deep dive.

Fans are no longer constrained by what is available in the back issue bins or on the TPB shelves at their local shop. If they please, fans can work through the entire interconnected continuity of these comics. At first glance, that immediacy and ubiquity seems to eliminate the time and energy involved in traveling to and searching through the back stock of the Direct Market. However, anyone who partakes in these online resources is now barraged with the full breadth of an entire universe’s worth of continuity at once. That abundance requires an exponentially greater amount of time to shift through and can regularly suck the reader into periods of research where any sense of the time being expended evaporates altogether. That experience concentrates the underlying “universeness” of superhero comics by spurring the reader to mentally register these connections in quicker succession and greater quantities. Being able to move from one connection to another so readily emphasizes to our minds the number of

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40 A close friend of mine has been chronologically reading through every comic available on Marvel Unlimited and DC Universe Infinite for years, partially to gain the full scope of these universes’ continuity. Of course, there will always be new comics added to these platforms, making his task an endless one.
links that exist across the narrative history of these comics, which moves the cognitive experience even closer to that of considering the actual universe. These sites are designed so that the user sticks around – either subscribing or purchasing – as long and as often as possible. That design puts pressure on fans to read it all, to acquire all of the information held in this archive (even though more will perpetually be added).

The third wave of the comics marketplace uses digital resources to prioritize information acquisition over physical collecting. Online platforms house an amount of information or continuity that the Direct Market or individual fans cannot match. The Internet equivalent of “fan curators” supplement the Direct Market’s ability to guide readers through these archives of information. These re-mediations of the Direct Market concentrate the unachievable processing of information that defines a (narrative) universe.

Conclusion

The comic book industry has turned its limitations into resources for building vast narrative universes. Comics’ materiality has negligibly changed since its dimensions were first based on folded newspaper inserts. That limited space influenced the broad, action-oriented visual storytelling and seriality of superhero comics that would help make them feel like a universe. The Chevronic iconography of the superhero was similarly born out of the medium’s characteristics; a vibrant serial figure whose minimalism and tension prompts readers to frequently juxtapose their stored memories. Work-for-hire contracts have allowed Marvel and DC to not only own all of the superhero IP created for them, but also bring those IP together in increasingly interconnected permutations. During the Silver Age, creators working for DC and Marvel took advantage of the publishers’ catalogs to start building shared universes. As a slew of creators were handling the same IP, an Exquisite-Corpse-style collaboration took shape,
enriching continuity as time went on. As fanzines, letters pages, and other community fostering outlets came into vogue around the Silver Age, the industry began poaching continuity-minded fans for creative positions. Those fan-creators would set the universe-oriented model of the industry going forward. When Phil Seuling planted the seeds of the Direct Market, its design around the archival of back issues and a subcultural public sphere bolstered readers’ ability to deep dive into the vast narratives that were being created by publishers. In the digital era, online comics sellers, like ComiXology, and subscription platforms, like Marvel Unlimited and DC Universe Infinite, have exponentially increased the potential for fans to experience the overwhelming “universeness” that these fictional narratives generate.

The components that DC and Marvel use to build their narrative universes begin with these resources.
CHAPTER 2: HOW TO BUILD A UNIVERSE USING SUPERHERO COMICS

Our universe began with one instantaneous Big Bang that sent all matter and space expanding out in all directions. The superhero universes of Marvel and DC Comics did not have that luxury. Over decades, both publishers (often called The Big Two by fans) have steadily deployed the resources of the comic book medium to the task of expanding their narrative continuity – their version of matter and space – from storyworlds into vast fictional universes. Chapter One presented a description and history of how those resources result in evocative aesthetic-images and interconnectivity. This chapter will examine how those unique resources are combined into six components used to build a universe.

To analyze these components, this chapter will be broken into an unconventional structure of six case studies, each dedicated to one of the components. Think of it as a “How To” guide for creating your own superhero universe! All of the components rely upon an admixture of the medium’s resources, but also overlap with each other. I have broken them into individual case studies to isolate the purpose of each component within the grand scheme of universe-building. Likewise, this will allow me to home in on the phenomenological response each component causes in the reader, even though in the process of reading a standard superhero comic a combination of these components are usually experienced simultaneously. All of these case studies will rely upon a thick description account of my own experiences reading comics. The six components are:

- **Colliding Chevrons**: Creators pitting two (or more) Superheroes-as-Chevrons with no previous shared continuity against each other to create additional connections.

- **Hero Tableaus**: Ownership of IP catalogs allow aesthetic-images containing large ensembles of Superheroes-as-Chevrons to convey the scope of the universe.
• **Exquisite Corpse Creation:** Multiple creators adding onto the continuity of an IP over time turns narrative “satellites” into landmark moments within the universe.

• **Sedimented Timelines:** Since the passing of time in comics is unrealistic, an accumulation of continuity to a character across an extended period of real time cause that character to feel “fleshy” or realistic.

• **Retconning Inconsistencies:** Creators “retcon” mistakes that inevitably arise when building a fictional universe to fill-in cognitive gaps of information.

• **Reminiscence:** Superhero comics act like “reminiscentia,” spurring readers to recall past continuity alone or in groups, stabilizing or acquiring mental-images in the process.

To aid my case studies for the first five components, I will be using panels, panel sequences, and full page examples from *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars* (hereafter *Secret Wars*), a twelve issue miniseries published between May 1984 and April 1985. I have chosen *Secret Wars* over the millions of other superhero comics in existence, because it is a crossover event. More than that, it created the model for crossover events going forward. However, I am not studying crossover events in this chapter. Rather, *Secret Wars* signals a point in the industry’s history where its universe-building resources had aligned: The Direct Market had been established, Marvel was actively bringing its bountiful catalog of IPs together, and fan-creators were running the company. Because *Secret Wars* could only exist once these resources had been committed to universe-building, it handily participates in all of the universe-building components practiced by ongoing superhero comics. Put another way, crossover events are not the only superhero comics that build universes, but the progenitor of crossover events *necessarily* includes universe-building.
Since *Secret Wars* will feature prominently in the following case studies, the remainder of this introduction will provide some context about the miniseries’ genesis, plot, and influence on the crossover event format. To bring all of these heroes and villains together, a crossover event like *Secret Wars* takes full advantage of the publisher’s blanketed ownership over the IPs created for them. Holding the copyrights to these characters removes the licensing agreements or expensive contractual payouts that hinder other industries’ efforts to merge together properties overseen by disparate rights holders. At this point in Marvel’s history, the company was starting to explore that potential as a commodity for higher sales, but the additional boon was that they provided a sweeping view of the connections that create the narrative universe.

*Secret Wars* was not the first effort on Marvel’s part to bring together its characters in one series. Two years prior, a three issue limited series called *The Contest of Champions* saw the Marvel heroes forced to fight each other by an alien known as The Grandmaster. Unlike what *Secret Wars* would become, however, *Contest* did not, as Henry Jenkins has asserted about crossover events, “require readers to buy titles that they were not otherwise reading to understand their full ramifications” (Ford and Jenkins 304). But *Secret Wars* editor Tom DeFalco has told *SyFy Wire* that *Contest* “sold really well,” making Marvel eager to repeat and expand its success, to the point that “*Secret Wars*. . .was kind of based on that concept. . . .[with] the top Marvel superheroes versus the top Marvel Supervillains” (McLaughlin). “In the fan mail every day” there were calls for a spectacle that eclipsed *Contest*, a demand for “one big, epic story with all (or many) of the heroes and villains” (“Secrets”).

It was happenstance, then, that *Secret Wars* was brought about because of a cross-promotional venture. Kenner Toys had recently acquired licensing rights to a handful of DC IPs, which caused rival toy company, Mattel:
to hammer out a similar deal with Marvel. . . . All Mattel required of Marvel was that a big-event comic be launched to coincide with the toy line – and that the comic carry the title of *Secret Wars*, which, according to its market research, were two words that made kids go wild. (Howe 263)

Mattel did not have many creative requests beyond the title, but they did push for “three new female characters [to be] introduced,” that Doctor Doom and Iron Man’s armored outfits be “made more high-tech,” and that “new fortresses, vehicles and weapons” be included as potential playsets (Howe 270; “Secrets”). While no other crossover event has originated from a toy deal, the cash grab mentality that underlies *Secret Wars*’ creation has been replicated by its offspring. Sean Guynes writes that “events, like blockbuster films, dominate the publishing schedules of Marvel and DC, punctuating their regular schedule of serial comics at least once a year” (186). Like a studio tentpole, these annual or biannual events intend to boost The Big Two’s quarterly sales by promising a spectacle of universal proportions.

As the editor-in-chief at the time (and because “nobody wanted to work on a ‘toy book’”), Jim Shooter took on writing duties for *Secret Wars*, with artists Mike Zeck and Bob Layton sharing artwork credits across the twelve-issue run (McLaughlin). With the creative team in place, the twelve-issue event was decided: an unseen godly force dubbed The Beyonder would transport The Avengers, The X-Men, The Fantastic Four (minus The Invisible Woman), Spider-Man, and The Hulk to a planet comprised of pieces from Earth and other worlds called

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41 Titania and Volcana, two new female villains, were introduced in *Secret Wars #3* and a new Spider-Woman (named Julia Carpenter) was introduced on the first splash page of *Secret Wars #7*.

42 The sales tracking website Comichron.com’s “#1 Comic Books by Month” listing proves crossover events selling power. Aggregating sales data for each month’s top selling title (based on the number of units ordered by Direct Market stores) from September 1996 to March 2020, the compiled table shows issues for crossover events like *Infinite Crisis, Civil War, World War Hulk, Secret Invasion, Blackest Night*, and other miniseries dominating successive months. For instance, *Secret Invasion #1-7* consecutively outsell all other series between April and October 2008 with hundreds of thousands of units ordered (Miller).
Battleworld. There the heroes would engage in multiple skirmishes with a cadre of supervillains, including Magneto, Ultron, The Wrecking Crew, The Enchantress, The Absorbing Man, The Lizard, Kang the Conqueror, Doctor Octopus, Molecule Man, Galactus, and, above all, Doctor Doom. Amounting to little more than a succession of fights, the hero and villain teams break up and reassemble in different arrangements across the miniseries, with everyone ultimately squaring off against Doctor Doom once he has stolen The Beyonder’s omniscient power.

Even though the story was not complex, *Secret Wars* set precedents in terms of continuity additions, promotion, and publishing tactics. Once the narratives of superhero comics became universe-oriented, coordination between creators became paramount, nowhere more than during crossover events. As would become the norm for these events, *Amazing Spider-Man* #251, *X-Men* #180, *Captain America* #292, *Avengers* #242, *Iron Man* #181, *The Incredible Hulk* #294, and *The Thing* #10 (for the Fantastic Four) acted as precursor tie-in issues, depicting their respective characters discovering a mechanized structure in Central Park that would transport them to Battleworld. Since Marvel did not want to stall the progression of their ongoing titles while the characters participated in *Secret Wars*, an unusual strategy was hatched. Shooter:

told all the writers to get your characters to Central Park at the end of December. Then they're going to vanish, and they're going to come back in January. And a lot of them will be a little different than when they left. This minimized any disruption to any given title's ongoing story. On the other hand, if something dramatic happened to a character or

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43 Crossover events are structured around a main, “backbone” miniseries accompanied by peripheral, shorter tie-in miniseries and/or (sometimes hundreds of) tie-in issues of ongoing series. The “backbone” miniseries is rarely less than four issues and usually fewer than thirteen. Increments of six issues became the standard to suit trade paperback printing norms and provide publishers a sales booster for half (six issues) or a whole year (twelve issues).

44 Even though Sean Howe states that “*Secret Wars...*finally came out in January 1984,” the first issue actually got delayed (268). It eventually shipped with a May 1984 cover date.
team during the mini-series, readers wouldn't have the full story revealed to them for
another some 11 months, when the limited series ended. (McLaughlin)

Of course, that choice required a great deal of cohesion on the part of the Marvel writers and
artists, each of whom had to make sure the details of their individual series appropriately
matched the new looks, team line-ups, and continuity of the post-Secret Wars developments.45

Leading up to the miniseries’ release, “Shooter’s ‘Bullpen Bulletins’ column and...
articles in Marvel Age hammered it through the minds of readers and retailers alike: this is going
to change everything about these characters, and you are going to buy it;” even though, in the end, “nothing much had really changed in the Marvel Universe. Which, maybe, was what the fans wanted all along” (Howe 269-270). If high sales are any indication, fans of Secret Wars and its offspring are satisfied with crossover events simply providing a heightened version of what superhero comics do best: slamming chevrons together in new and interesting ways, connecting a “company’s past, present, and future products,” and bestowing a glimpse of the fictional universe as a whole (Parille). Superhero comics, crossover events, and Secret Wars never want to break a universe, they want to build one.

45 Since these miniseries are profit leaders and efficient means of conveying a united narrative universe to new and old readers alike, creators must balance the macro demands of the company’s line-wide events with the micro of their own titles. These tie-in issues often read poorly to fans of a series, as they disrupt the rhythm of that series ongoing narrative. Someone interested in the broader storyline of the crossover event will usually be able to understand it by sticking to the “backbone” miniseries, but the possibility of missing out on “the whole story” or important additions to continuity found in those tie-ins will often be enough to convince some completists to purchase any issue stamped with a logo signifying its connection to the event.
Component #1: Colliding Chevrons

After its release, Jim Shooter summed up *Secret Wars* as “a way to ‘teach the kids how to play with the toys’” (Howe 270). Shooter is specifically referring to the Mattel line of action figures and vehicles that motivated *Secret Wars'* creation, but his remark expresses a larger association between superhero comics and play. When we play with our toys as children, we imagine elaborate scenarios to act out, we slam their hard plastic bodies against each other, we pose them in dioramic compositions. What Shooter is acknowledging is that comics creators are equally “playing” with the publisher’s “toys” when they depict chevronic characters colliding with one another on the page. Fetishistic in its devotion to superhero fights, *Secret Wars* is elementally representative of that trope within superhero comics. Foundationally, the genre is about seeing what different combinations of IP look like slamming into each other in static-kinetic layouts.

But that is how they teach the reader. What kind of play are they teaching? Readers cannot rip these “toys” off the page like they would action figures off a blister card. Instead, they have to transfer the aesthetic-image into their image consciousness in order to play with these superheroes. Once our perceptions have become memorial-images, we can re-image them through imagination, connecting them with other mental-images, thinking of them in a different context, using these imaged objects as components for building a complex “nexus of relations.”

Though not writing about superhero comics in “*Transformers: The Movie – Making Modern Mythology the Marvel Way,*” Jason Bainbridge nonetheless touches on the play that is at play in the superhero genre. Bainbridge argues that audiences who consume paratextual relays end up having the “textual origins” for the IPs involved “erased,” until those IP “simply become ‘familiar’” as characters (37). Appropriate for Shooter’s sentiments, Bainbridge calls
this process “toyesis,” augmenting the merchandising phrase “toyetic,” which refers to properties that make it “very difficult to separate any memory of a text from its accompanying paratexts” (Bainbridge 32-33). What underlies Bainbridge’s transmedia-focused contentions is the notion that memories of IP glom onto each other, that they are easily connected in audiences’ minds. As Bainbridge argues, Marvel has successfully mastered the “toyesis” of their properties in film, television, and other media, but the action-oriented nature of Superheroes-as-Chevrons exemplified that ability within their own medium long before they ever transcended its boundaries.

This case study will phenomenologically show how superhero comics play with the static-kineticism of their chevronic IP/toys in ways that spur the reader to play with them as mental-images. Perception of the artwork’s “sequential dynamism” is where the process begins. The energy that the artist has conveyed through the static linework creates the sense of a collision between two immobile chevrons. A secondary collision occurs through cognition as readers mentally replicate that “play” by searching through and for related memories, then smashing them together with new mental-images. This is how readers are taught to play with the toys, but the why of that play is universe-building. By mentally imaging perceptions of aesthetic-images, then connecting those with saved memories, readers are being made to have a fuller conception of the fictional universe as a whole.

My case study will be a sequence of five panels from early in Secret Wars #2. This sequence depicts a fight between The Avenger known as She-Hulk and one of Thor’s archenemies, The Enchantress (see Fig. 8). At this point in Marvel Comics continuity, these two characters had never shared a panel with one another.46 As a fan-creator and editor-in-chief,

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46 Both characters appear in Avengers #225 two years earlier, but The Enchantress is only depicted in a flashback.
Figure 8 She-Hulk and The Enchantress battle across five panels
Shooter had to know that and would have assumed fans would, too. Shooter and artist Mike Zeck are “playing” with Marvel’s “toybox” of IP by pitting these two characters against each other to create continuity between them. Doing so, these creators are prompting readers to complete a gap in their mental conception of the Marvel Universe.

Case Study – She-Hulk vs. The Enchantress in Secret Wars #2

My gaze is led into the sequence by a set of speed lines at the left edge of the first panel. Colored-in with a creamy yellow and drawn at a sharp, diagonal slant, these lines imbue the still aesthetic-image of a crouched She-Hulk with an illusionary sense of downward momentum. Out of the five panels that include these two characters, this is the only one where they are shown touching each other; She-Hulk’s right hand latches onto The Enchantress’ upper right arm. This is Zeck and Shooter announcing the collision of these chevrons. The toys are being forcefully slammed together (aided by the speed lines) to make the reader consider this combination of colors, lines, and silhouettes.

Zeck composes their bodies in an almost heart-shaped arrangement (She-Hulk and Enchantress’ legs come to a point near the bottom of the panel, while the negative space between their heads make the trough at the top of the heart). That causes me to unconsciously perceive them as a single unit. When my eyes first “land” in the panel, the merger of She-Hulk and Enchantress’ vivid color schemes distracts me from Rogue’s unconscious body. Colorist Christie Scheele’s choice to leave the background stark white and the rocky landscape a discreet brown, affixes my gaze to the shades of green that dominate this collision. The loudness of She-Hulk’s neon green hue stands out to me first, but then I find my eyes shifting over to the emerald bustier that makes up Enchantress’ torso. My eyes struggle to rectify these competing shades, bouncing back-and-forth between them, then zooming out to take them in as a whole. Seeing the
mélange of the two, I am next drawn to the most prominent strip of black in the panel: Enchantress’ outstretched right leg. Following the leg’s downward curve, its intersection with She-Hulk’s left ankle causes me to realize the ringlets running down Enchantress’ tights are the same neon green as She-Hulk’s body. I study the curves of this paper-chain-like band, tracing them up and down a few times. Besides Enchantress’ jagged tiara, these ringlets are the most emblematic detail of her chevronic make-up. It is at the point where those ringlets intersect with the brilliant green of She-Hulk’s calf that I sense the clash of these two chevrons the most. My eyes zoom back out from that point to once again take-in the whole of them together.

As I stare at this assemblage of shapes and colors grappling with each other, a murmur of a thought comes to me: this combination is irregular. Even though Secret Wars #2 is an “old issue” from my perspective, this panel hits my eyes with a sensation of “the new.” I have seen these characters before, but as I look at their particular aesthetic markers in juxtaposition with each other I get the feeling that I have never seen them collide before. Wondering if they interacted in Secret Wars #1, I do some Re-Viewing. I flip backwards in my TPB to the point where they most likely appeared together. During the opening of the first issue, the entire cast of heroes and villains are transported onto two separate space stations. There is a page where both of them appear – She-Hulk at the top with the heroes, Enchantress at the bottom with the villains – but they do not share a panel (see Fig. 9. With this second viewing, I realize why their joint appearance here did not register for me in the way the first panel from issue two does. One, She-Hulk is tiny! Situated in a row of heroes, she is reduced to her most chevronic state; mere stripes and patches of color. Though Enchantress is more defined in her bottom panel, the two are so spread out I would never consider relating them. Only by slamming them together in static-kinetic combat in issue two did Zeck and Shooter force me to reckon with my memories of their
Figure 9 She-Hulk and Enchantress share a page in Secret Wars #1
chevrons. Only then was I able to sense the continuity gap that these creators were intentionally playing with.

As I flip back to the original sequence, an involuntary cognitive response triggers. Edward S. Casey refers to what I experience as a “search.” Part of Casey’s act phase, a search involves “a number of allied moves or procedures which are employed in the effort to remember something better or just to remember it in the first place” (Remembering 37). My search entails a filtering through mental-images of Marvel comics I have previously read. The “actually recovered memor[ies],” or what Casey considers the “display,” ascertain for me as eidetic representations of panels or pages from comics with She-Hulk or Enchantress (Remembering 38). For She-Hulk, I recall a panel drawn by David Finch where her physique has inflated to an immense size.47 The heavily inked shadows that Finch uses to define the rippling skin and pulsing veins of She-Hulk’s muscles displays for me along with the spittle flying off of her clench teeth. Along with this comes a cover to the TPB collection from Dan Slott’s She-Hulk series. It is She-Hulk’s updated costume – a purple leotard with a white stripe running down the center – that first apprehends, then the rest of the details (the crumbling rubble created by the hole she is hunching to step through) are tugged along behind, as if bound to her costumed form. Having read only a handful of Enchantress comics, I have fewer memories to access. Appearing to me most clearly are the smooth, but angular lines of Kris Anka’s version of her from a recent issue of Runaways.48 The panel is of her in Central Park, but what stands out are the blindingly bright tints of her golden hair and lime green arm bands. In all of these memories, the idiosyncratic style of each artist has not been dulled by time. It is the costumes and constituent

47 This memory is of Brian Michael Bendis’ and Finch’s “Avengers Disassembled” storyline in Avengers #500.
48 Specifically, Runaways #10 written by Rainbow Rowell.
parts of these figures that have secured these memories for me, allowing me to re-image them when spurred to do so by *Secret Wars*’ aesthetic-images.

However, none of the memories returned by my search reveal these characters interacting. I realize that omission is why the collision of their two chevronic parts felt unusual to me before. I have never seen these two “toys” get slammed into each other. At the time of publication, neither had anyone else. Choosing these two IP was a calculated effort on Shooter and Zeck’s part. Superhero comics are foundationally about the pleasure of colorful fisticuffs rendered through static-kinetic linework, but the premise of the crossover event provided these creators the leeway to aesthetically image a collision that had never happened.

Besides the glaring lack of continuity between them, She-Hulk and Enchantress were undoubtedly an appealing combination for a couple of other reasons. One, their power sets make for an unconventional match-up. She-Hulk is all brute strength, giving Zeck the freedom to embellish the force and physicality of her strikes. As a god from Thor’s homeland, Asgard, Enchantress is also super-strong – making her stiff competition – but her power set favors hypnotic suggestion and magical trickery. Those abilities make Enchantress an appealing visual contrast for Zeck to play with. Two, their chevronic color schemes share the color green (though in different hues) which both visually links and differentiates them. The shared neon green of She-Hulk’s skin and Enchantress’ ringlet emblems help bind them together in the first panel, but the primary yellow of Enchantress’ hair and the inky black of her tights lends a visual friction to the collision. Zeck unites them in composition (the heart-shape), but their chevronic color schemes create a tension at the level of my vision. All of which makes them a novel pairing to explore in *Secret Wars*. 
She-Hulk’s neon green skin guides my eyes through the rhythms of the next three panels. Figures to a sparse ground, my cognitive energy is being directed toward Zeck’s dynamic posturing of these flamboyant bodies, ignoring all of the background details. His linework captures physical contortions and exaggerations that would be invisible in motion, which makes them an alluring oddity for my eyes and memorable to my image consciousness. Enchantress’ pivoting swipe in panel two shifts She-Hulk’s orientation 180° from the previous panel. I study the rigid lines of Enchantress’ outstretched arm. As I start to form a mental-image for this panel, my mind locks onto the implied force of the swipe in contrast to the forward orientation of Enchantress’ body (the crook of her leg points in the opposite direction of her arm); it is the implied motion of the action hanging in stasis that I remember more than the exact details of the illustration.

Reeling from the backhanded slap, She-Hulk’s body is now like an arrow. Zeck has made her a perpendicular neon green band pointing me to her corresponding position in the bottom panel’s leftmost corner. Where the preceding panels were action-centric, this is a pause panel that builds to a climax in the fourth. Zeck has purposefully made Enchantress the center of attention here. Presenting her in a pause panel prompts me to stall my progress and survey each facet of Enchantress-as-Chevron. Her limbs are extended outward, filling up the space of the panel; the rosy energy that radiates from her hands adds a new hue to the color palette; she has been posed expressively rather than passively, her body making a lopsided T-shape. I will remember the vividness of the pink and the silhouette of her posture; those choices are iconographic.

But there is another purpose here. The third and fourth panels are complementary halves. The horizontal frames match as does the composition of the characters within the panel.
However, the change of their stances – She-Hulk lunges forward, while Enchantress falls backward – works in conjunction with the page divide to create momentum for the final blow. As my gaze moves diagonally upward to the top of the adjacent page, my eye fixes on She-Hulk’s extended posture. However, the periphery of my vision still registers the radiant green of her face from panel three. Perceived together – as a splotch of neon green expanding to a streak – I get the sense of compression and release. I follow the line of She-Hulk’s sprawling figure from the leg bisected by the panel border up her torso and down through her outstretched arm. Even though my mental-image of this panel lacks movement, the implication of kinetic action created by the exchange between panels three and four overlays onto the static portrayal of She-Hulk’s punch. That sense of energy partners with another expressive rendering of physicality (the raised knee, the twisting of her spine accentuating follow through) gives me iconographic attributes to benefit eidetic retention. With time the particularities of what displays for me will likely fade, but the outline of She-Hulk’s active posture and its illusion of motion will help me to re-image it during a future cognitive search.

Like the page from Secret Wars #1 that I flipped back to earlier, the final panel of the sequence, reduces She-Hulk and Enchantress back to their most basic chevronic state. Zeck uses fewer lines to render both characters and Scheele relies on solid patches of color. She-Hulk is a smudge of black hair on top of three strips of green intersected by a blotch of blue capped by two muted grey blocks that fall into the background; Enchantress creates an even more reductive, linear figure of black, emerald green, and canary yellow, her emblematic ringlets directing the eye along her chevronic composition. Their perpendicular orientation to one another supplements that minimalism to underscore the end result of this exercise in play: two chevrons, two combinations of color and line evocatively collided until one dominated the other.
However, this collision has been in service of a larger universe-building purpose. Universes in superhero comics are built through the expansion of narrative information conveyed through aesthetic-images. By playing with these two characters, Shooter and Zeck have checked off another one of a million permutations possible within Marvel’s extensive catalog of properties. She-Hulk and Enchantress clashing creates new continuity, a rivalry between these two characters that future writers can reference. Besides instigating a relational history, the sequence likewise asserts a stricter form of diegetic continuity. In *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* Richard Reynolds proposes “hierarchical continuity,” a quantitative ranking of superhero powersets, as one of three types of overall continuity: “if superhero A defeats supervillain B in one comic and superhero C is defeated by supervillain B in another comic, then . . .superhero A is stronger than superhero C and should be able to defeat him in a head-to-head combat” (40). Creators and fans alike could cite She-Hulk’s defeat of Enchantress as evidence of exactly how strong she is (she can outfight a god).49 Reynolds’ formula is not as unerring as he makes it out to be, but regardless of whether She-Hulk’s strength remains consistent across the work of future creators, *Secret Wars #2* has erected narrative scaffolding that can be added onto. The aesthetic-images of this sequence become a document that 1) introduces new information into the universe and 2) can be pointed back to by future comics.50

Besides being a continuity “document,” these five panels prod the reader to save them as memories. Above I mentioned a number of instances where Zeck’s particular aesthetic choices have been replicated in my image consciousness. By converting those aesthetic-images into

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49 Shooter does have She-Hulk proclaim that, “I don’t often duke it out with someone solid enough to really unload on,” suggesting she has untapped strength that can be unleashed if she so chooses.

50 In the 2019 crossover event *War of the Realms #2*, written by Jason Aaron and illustrated by Russell Dauterman and Matthew Wilson, She-Hulk and The Enchantress once again share a panel, but they do not fight or communicate with each other.
mental-images, I was just as much filling-in a gap as Shooter and Zeck were filling-out the narrative information that comprises the Marvel Universe. When I laid eyes on the first panel, I unconsciously registered the gap in my memory. Perceiving this combination of chevronic elements made me realize that I had no pre-existing memories of these two characters colliding, which registers as a sort of nothingness. That absence of memory imbues the aesthetic-image with the appeal of the “never been seen,” which makes me want to study it all the more. Now that I have lingered over and returned to the evocative linework and coloring of these five panels, I have a greater potential for recalling memories of this collision during an act of “searching.”

Which gets at the cognitive “play” that mirrors the aesthetic “play.” Now that I possess mental-images of these panels, they are available to me as connective tissue between the memories of David Finch’s She-Hulk or Kris Anka’s Enchantress that I recalled while reading the issue. Affectively my mental-images of *Secret Wars* #2 are now colliding with those previously saved memories. When I next “search” for memories of She-Hulk or Enchantress, these mental-images are likely to all chain together, with one triggering the others. Even though these mental-images all retain the stylistic signatures of each artist, there is nothing jarring about them cognitively “smashing” into each other. I think of them as all being part of these characters’ and this universe’s narrative because their chevronic minimalism grants them “toyesis.” Bainbridge’s study of “toyesis” is directed at transmedia adaptations and how an IP’s “distinction between different texts becomes obscured,” but it applies equally to superhero comics paratexts (33). Even though these characters are written and illustrated by an ensemble

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51 For other readers, *Secret Wars* might be their first interaction with Marvel Comics. That reader cannot experience the same type of newness from these two chevrons crossing one another that I did (for them, all of it has “never been seen”). Whereas I brought pre-existing memories to this first fight, an unfamiliar reader will be able to carry a memory of this collision forward. For either of us, this sequence is an “origin point” for the relationship of these characters. However, where I retroactively connect this origin to my other memories of these characters, this sequence could intrigue unfamiliar readers, spurring them to deep dive into other She-Hulk and Enchantress stories.
of creators, their basic chevronic characteristics remain similar enough to make it “very difficult
to separate” memories of stylistically distinct aesthetic-images. Each artist may have their personal “take” on She-Hulk, but they have to adhere to the chevronic tenets of her character model. Just like the neon green skin acted as a visual touchstone across this sequence, that same characteristic makes sure that my memories of her play well together.

Conclusion – How This Component Builds the Universe

While a minor collision between two characters out of thousands may seem insignificant, it is the multiplication of those individual connections that exponentially grow the narrative universe. These components come from creators recognizing areas of unexplored continuity, as Shooter and Zeck did with She-Hulk and The Enchantress, then bringing those chevronic characters into a collision. Though Shooter and Zeck had the freedom to dig into a deeper toybox during a crossover event, this universe-building component operates the same way in all superhero comics:

1. The collision is conveyed through aesthetic-images that rely on the chevronic and static-kinetic qualities of superheroes to evoke mental-images within the reader.

2. The filling of diegetic continuity gaps is mirrored by a mental-image gap being closed.

3. Readers can then begin “playing” with those mental-images by connecting them, forming a clearer sense of the universe in the process.

Readers are able to overlook stylistic differences when “playing” with these mental-images, because their chevronic designs provide them “toyesis.” As such, the fact that they are all found in separate paratexts authored by a variety of creators does not hamper these memories colliding into the “nexus of relations” that creates a sensation of “universeness.”
Component #2: Hero Tableaus

If the components of a superhero universe start with smashing two Superheroes-as-Chevrons together, then the next extrapolation of that tactic is cramming even more chevrons together. I will refer to this component as a “hero tableau,” because they echo the stationary, posed bodies of a *tableau vivant* (see Fig. 10). A hero tableau takes advantage of comics’ stillness and “share of space” to present these chevronic assemblages to the reader for perusal (Groensteen 21). While creators have included hero tableaus in a variety of panel and page sizes over the decades, their ideal layout is as a two-page spread or an aesthetic-image that extends across two adjacent pages like one large panel. In that format, the accumulated visual punch of multiple vibrant IPs presented in unison demands to be poured over, both in its excess of space relative to other panels, its visual busyness, and by being unobstructed by the demarcations of a typical grid. If the two-page spread is the ideal format, then crossover events have long been the best opportunity for creators to glut themselves on hero tableaus. Having become a trope of superhero comics, film and television adaptations of Marvel and DC properties frequently homage this type of aesthetic-image, as well (see Fig. 11). For mainstream audiences, these live-action equivalents are likely the most familiar examples of the tableau component. No matter the medium, hero tableaus exploit the industry’s resources for amassing a kaleidoscope of jointly owned IPs.

In *Understanding Comics*’ first chapter, Scott McCloud makes a case for the comic book medium as a descendant of illustrative works like the Bayeux Tapestry and Egyptian

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52 While the moving image versions of hero tableaus will regularly use slow motion or a longer shot to replicate the static-kinetic quality of comics, they inherently lack the freedom for perusal that benefits the aesthetic-image. Performed by actors, the Superhero-as-Chevron has to also struggle against star personas; these moving image tableaus then become as much about an assemblage of star power as they are about a combination of super powers. Finally, digital effects considerations, such as low-key lighting benefiting the compositing of live action footage, CGI, and green screen backgrounds, diminish the vibrancy that color printing offers these tableaus in comics.
Figure 10 Hero tableau examples (From left to right: *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #5 and *Civil War II* #1)

Figure 11 A sample of hero tableaus from Marvel and DC film and television (Top row, from left to right: *The Avengers* (2012) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019); bottom row, *DC’s Legends of Tomorrow* “Crisis on Earth-X, Part 4” and *Zack Snyder’s Justice League* (2021))
hieroglyphics, particularly relating them to “whole page compositions” in comics (12).

Inarguably, the DNA of that artistic history has influenced hero tableaus, but the magnificence of certain High Renaissance frescos have been a similar inspiration to the hero tableau. Like the use of a two-page spread, these works were regularly painted onto walls, ceilings, or the whole interior of buildings, using larger than normal canvases to convey a sense of grandeur. The abundance of visual information that characterizes this period of frescos was a similar influence. Both artforms are intensely stimulating to the eye, even disorienting to parse, which motivates the gaze to wander aimlessly. There is often so much visual detail and information to scrutinize that the process generates a feeling of immensity, which these particular aesthetic-images in superhero comics try to replicate. The unified immensity of the art piece and the space in which it was exhibited were meant to be awe-inspiring, using the artistic splendor to allegorize the divine. The superhero genre replicates that fresco experience, but in service of “universeness.”

The cumulative iconicity of Superheroes-as-Chevrons in these tableaus become arguably the most idiosyncratic tool that superhero comics command to let readers glimpse the universe as a whole at one time. In Hellboy’s World, a study of the Dark Horse Comics pulp character, Scott Bukatman has described comics as “a continual act of opening, of unfolding” (135; emphasis added). Here Bukatman refers to an unfolding at the level of the text’s materiality. In one regard, Bukatman’s use of “unfolding” encompasses what his “body experiences. . .[a] more tactile, engagement” that relates to the flip of the page central to the act of reading a comic (135). Comics unfold their narratives through each page turn, unveiling another bold layout of aesthetic-images that ask readers to connect what they saw on the last page with what they are currently perceiving. That comparison makes the vibrancy of a grid-less spread all the more impactful – an opening up of the comic medium’s inherently delimiting folds.
On the other hand, that material unfolding in turn helps the reader to unfold their memories of the universe. Like looking through a window, the panel entails only a fraction of the fictional universe’s totality. What the hero tableau offers, however, is both a literally larger window (in terms of the panel size) and a greater portion of the universe (in terms of the ensemble of characters). When a page turn reveals one of these hero tableaus, the accumulation of IPs from throughout the universe becomes the industry’s most distilled means for initiating an act of imagining-that. By bringing these chevrons into close proximity on the page, the hero tableau spurs the reader to draw forth memories of all the characters within their image consciousness. Those mental-images are normally “folded” or separated from one another, but the hero tableau’s accumulation of superheroes-as-chevrons incites an act of expansion in the reader’s consciousness that overcomes those demarcations. Having all those memories crop up simultaneously and related to one another through the spatial juxtaposition of the tableau, readers experience an intensified burst of the cognitive connectivity that allows us to feel a universe.

My case study for this component comes early in the *Secret Wars* crossover event. The second and third pages of the first issue are a two-page spread featuring all nineteen Marvel heroes (and Magneto) who will become the main cast of the story (see Fig. 12). Coming so early into the miniseries, this spread announces the event’s intention (and main selling point) to give fans the most comprehensive configuration of characters from the Marvel Universe to date.

**Case Study – Hero Tableau from Secret Wars #1**

Opening up *Secret Wars #1*, I only have to turn one page before being hit with a two-page spread hero tableau. Artist Mike Zeck and writer Jim Shooter could have chosen to open the issue with a “splash” page of all the heroes together, but their decision to make the reader
Figure 12 Two page spread hero tableau from Secret Wars #1
turn the page is a deliberate one. The visual impact of the hero tableau depends upon having a page with a standard grid and layout for the reader to compare it with. In contrast to the first page, the grid-less spread of the aesthetic-image across the next two pages hits the eye with a forceful impact. I can detect my eyelids faintly pulling back as my gaze widens out to take-in the entire two-page illustration. Where the solid white lines of a gutter will normally corral my vision within the upper leftmost panel, halting it from sliding further down the page, this spread is not interspersed with a grid. Instead, the boundaries of the panel are nearly as wide as the page borders, which allows me to ignore them and get lost in Zeck’s composition.

And getting lost is what I do. My perception of the spread begins with me automatically ignoring the visual cues included by the creators. Since this is an American comic, technically I should begin at the top left corner, where letterer Joe Rosen has run the issue’s title along the top of page in blocky, magenta-colored text. Rosen has also positioned the first word balloon in the top left, where the reader theoretically should “enter” the page. However, my attention resists the text, as my eyes immediately descend to the row of superheroes running along the bottom of the two pages. The medley of discordant colors that comprise these characters dominate the page, causing the magenta of the title and the white of the word balloons to blur at the periphery of my vision. By placing nearly all of the text at the top of the two pages, Rosen has caused me to respond this way. In not overlaying any of the balloons or text over the characters, he keeps the tableau “clean” and decluttered, letting the chevrons explode outward toward the reader. Even when I return upward to read the word balloons, I consciously have to force my gaze in their direction. I find my eyes momentarily straying from the dialog to make another winding path through the line-up.

53 If a two-page spread is like a panel spread out across adjacent pages, a splash page is a single page comprised of one panel or illustration.
The visual overload forces me to pause and take more time studying the page than I might in a comparable comic. When I first flip onto the page, my eyes ping-pong between the details of each costume. With no particular anchor point, my gaze runs along the blue outline of Reed Richards’ outstretched body, then leaps over to the angular line of Iron Man’s bent legs, with the rigid bubblegum pink of his jet propulsion sending me downward again. I then return to the left side of the spread to study the inky creases on Captain Marvel’s white cloak only to jump over to the opposite side of the spread, lured by the bunched up outline of Nightcrawler in the bottom right corner. This darting movement continues as I work back-and-forth through all of the characters (sometimes two or three times) scattered across this spread. Besides studying individual characters, my gaze also intermittently widens out to take in the cumulative image of the two pages as a whole. When that occurs, I am appreciating less the individual costumes, chevrons, and silhouettes of these IPs and more a mélange of them. The almost monochromatic background of the metallic satellite (Christie Scheele takes the same approach here as she did in the She-Hulk/Enchantress fight) allows this smear of colors to burst outward, as if it is separating from the surroundings.

As a group, these IPs become a clash of contrasting tones: Thor’s dark blue breastplate sits across the page divide from the latticed linework of The Thing’s sandy orange skin; Magneto’s red and purple costume is sandwiched in between the greens of Rogue and She-Hulk; Captain America’s reds, whites, and blues are framed by the monochromatic costumes of Captain Marvel and Storm. Individually, the color schemes of these chevrons are designed to be minimalist (no more than four hues), but when combined they create a chromatic patchwork. That contrast in color becomes a shorthand for the disparate assemblage of characters from distinct corners of the Marvel Universe. Each character or team hails from a separate title, yet
here they are side-by-side. Zeck seems to have intentionally stressed that admixture of worlds by dispersing the teams amidst each other rather than as their traditional units; thus, Nightcrawler and Colossus are on the opposite end of the spread from their other X-Men teammates, just as The Human Torch flies at a distance from Mr. Fantastic. Combined together, the jumbling of the team line-ups and the cacophony of the colors makes the whole spread a visually busy aesthetic-image to work through.

The overload of visual data that has wrenched my vision haphazardly around the spread partakes of techniques used by High Renaissance murals. Here I am thinking of three works in particular: Antonio da Correggio’s *Assumption of the Virgin*, Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgement*, and Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (see Fig. 13). First off, all three of these works are portions of larger pieces (for instance, *The Last Judgement* is adjacent to Michelangelo’s segmented rendition of The Book of Genesis) or they abut other visual ornamentations (*The Last Supper* sits below semicircle arches with decorative flourishes). Those juxtapositions make them something like early “splash” pages to the “paneled” artwork surrounding them. Likewise, the inordinate size of the canvas each artist was working on – as the two-page spread did for Zeck – fosters the abundance of visual information represented by each painting. Each adorns either a full wall or ceiling of the building they occupy: *Assumption of the Virgin* graces the ceiling of the Cathedral of Parma, *The Last Judgement* takes up an entire wall of the Sistine Chapel, and *The Last Supper* was created as a mural in the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie. Working on such a scale enabled these Renaissance painters to embellish their respective scenes with a degree of visual complexity that incentivizes lingering on and carefully scanning through the ample details that make-up the painting.
Figure 13 High Renaissance fresco examples (From top to bottom: Correggio's *Assumption of the Virgin*, Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement*, and Leonard da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*)
In its variegated costuming and linear arrangement of its subjects, the da Vinci resembles the composition and characters of the *Secret Wars* hero tableau most closely. The formation of the heroes and their figural remove from the muted (back)ground keeps the reader’s eye on the surface of the aesthetic-image, moving back-and-forth across its two-dimensionality. I find myself doing the same with *The Last Supper*, my gaze panning across the row of apostles not as figures but as blocks of color (my eyes only shift upward to their faces *after* first landing on their robes). As I scan, my eyes move in staccato bursts, locking onto the salmon pink of James the Less, then stiffly moving over to focus on Saint Andrew’s mustard yellow and dark green combination. It is the bold contrast between these colors that both draws my attention and allows me to regard each character as a separate entity despite their proximity. When I bounce between the Marvel heroes in *Secret Wars #1*, their solid blocks of color (Cyclops’ dark blue against Hulk’s neon green, for instance) are similarly what enables me to see the tableau both as a spectral mélange and individually delineated chevrons.

Where the lineage between the Correggio and Michelangelo frescos and Zeck’s hero tableau can be seen is in their excessive decoration. Where *The Last Supper* has the rectilinear rainbow of colored figures that Zeck replicates, it lacks the teeming bodies and disarray that the other two frescos inspire in hero tableaus. *Assumption of the Virgin* especially utilizes its cyclorama format and one-point perspective to induce a vertiginous sensation in the spectator, where I feel as though my eye is being pulled upward into the heavens. The saints and other figures surrounding Christ in the upper center of *The Last Judgement* likewise create a false sense of receding depth within the top third of the mural. While the issue one spread eschews the vertiginousness of the former two frescos, it does recreate their busyness. Like when I turn the page to discover a hero tableau, there is an initially overwhelming sensation when my gaze
first comes upon Assumption of the Virgin or The Last Judgement. The abundance of minute details to examine hits my eyes as an overload of visual stimulation. My eye cannot remain stationary for long, once again latching onto prominent splotches of color. In The Last Judgment, the different shades of blue in the folds of Mary’s lap blanket (to the left of Christ) draw my eye first, but then I quickly oscillate over to the olive green half-dress of the saint to Mary’s left and diagonally slide down to the matching green of Saint Catherine cradling her spiked wheel before haphazardly roaming around the rest of the painting. The Secret Wars #1 hero tableau and its ilk derive from the combined visual chaos and discordant colors exemplified by these three High Renaissance frescos.

When looking at the frescos, I am ashamed to admit that I understand little of the “narrative” being imparted, which limits the amount and kind of memories brought forward. Most are clichéd mental-images of heaven and hell or memories of Biblical adaptations from media. For The Last Judgement and Assumption of the Virgin what displays for me are generic imaginary representations of beings in white robes playing harps and bodies engulfed in flames which I can imbue with a painterly style similar to the original frescos or a cartoonish crudity. In these mental-images, I can make out supplemental details like the wishbone shape of a golden harp or the orange-ish yellow of the flames, but they have no substance, no associative context. The Last Supper does bring forward memories of actor Jim Caviezel as Jesus Christ dragging a massive wooden cross down a corridor of fomented onlookers from Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ (2004). My memory of this shot may recreate the stationary camera angle (framed by the shadowy walls of an alcove off the corridor) and Caviezel’s movement (the slow motion progression of his frame hunched gradually crossing the frame), but this mental-image has no
direct connection to the fresco or other forthcoming images. These displays are only associated through subject matter, not the shared connections of narrative continuity.

On the other hand, the dense iconographic data of Zeck’s hero tableau causes me to experience a mirrored cognitive response. Where my eyes were compelled to dart around the aesthetic-image, wildly fixating on individual chevrons within the assemblage, I likewise filter rapidly through stored memories of these characters. When I fixate on particular characters within the group, memories of that character display for me, much like what happened with the previous She-Hulk and Enchantress comics case study. Where that sequence of panels exclusively featured those two characters, the hero tableau’s mélange of chevrons exponentially increases the number of memories that display. By arranging these IP as a single unit, then giving me the literal space (of the two-page spread) to linger and admire them as chevrons, the hero tableau creates the opportunity for these memories to be unified in a single act of imagining-that.

Capturing in words the flashes that apprehend for me is impossible, but I can offer an approximation of what happened during my initial traversal of the spread. As my gaze traced the intersection between the lines of Thor’s pointed shoulder pad, the billow of his cape, and swoop of his helmet feather, I began having memories of Esad Ribić’s gauzy painted interpretation of a bearded, metal-armed King Thor astride his throne, which gave way to an image from Walt Simonson’s Eighties run of a thickly inked, chunkier Thor swinging Mjölnir on the Rainbow Bridge. Since Thor is next to the Hulk and my gaze shifts over to look at him, those Thor memories expand into Hulk memories, namely him first encountering Wolverine for the first time in The Incredible Hulk #181. In that mental-image, I can fixate on Wolverine’s stubby claws and “cat-whisker” mask, which are directly contrasted with my perception of the
Wolverine that Zeck has placed diagonal from the Hulk. As my vision trains on that version of Wolverine, my cognitive expansion likewise moves in that character’s direction. A display of the cartoonish, but hyper-detailed version of headmaster Logan from the *Wolverine and the X-Men* era is immediately proceeded by one of Old Man Logan as drawn by Andrea Sorrentino, wearing a dirty duster coat, his face shrouded in heavy shadow by a wide-brimmed hat. This memorial expansion continues as I roam across the tableau, but it all replicates this same interlinked cognitive expansion. By having these chevrons brought together in my perception, I am being made to imagine—that these memories of disparate series, issues, and eras of Marvel Comics are all part of a shared whole.\(^5^4\)

It is in my cognitive response to the *Secret Wars* hero tableau that superhero comics’ appropriation of frescos becomes clear. High Renaissance frescos deploy their busyness and dwarfing scale to inspire awe in the spectator. Depicting Biblical scenarios, the awe-inspiring detail and size of the frescos transfers to their subject-matter, striving for a sense of the holy or divine. The heavenly or sacred scenes they visualize are as unknowable and imperceptible to our bodies as are the far reaches of our universe and its history. Only through the spectator’s bodily perception of the architectural canvases these paintings decorate is a corresponding experience imparted. By standing within a space where the physical size of the canvas and the overload of its visual data are daunting to the body, the spectator is humbled. Experiencing the body’s smallness in relation to the artwork’s bigness allegorizes the meagerness of corporeality in

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\(^5^4\) For a neophyte reader, the opening spread of *Secret Wars #1* is unlikely to create the same expansion of memory, as that reader will not possess memories to display. Since I was an unfamiliar reader when I first became interested in superhero comics, I can remember the different experience of perceiving a hero tableau then. The stimulation of the aesthetic-image was no different; my eye rapidly studied the assemblage of chevrons in the same way. However, these unfamiliar costumed characters made me curious to learn more. Instead of calling forth saved memories, I was imaging new ones by studying their chevronic designs and storing those in my image consciousness. This meant that I was similarly relating these characters as they went into my memory bank. By introducing me to multiple IPs simultaneously, these tableaus still opened up the universe for me, giving me a peak into its various interconnected corners and urging me to explore them further.
comparison to the divine. Hero tableaus strive for “universeness” rather than holiness, but their implementation of the medium’s formal qualities are similarly daunting to the reader.

Comics are inherently folded. The demarcation of issues, series, creator runs, and publication eras separates periods of continuity and individual IPs from one another. Within an issue, the gutter and borders delineate panels and pages in a similar fashion. However, as Bukatman describes “Each act of reading is. . .uniquely physical,” always unfolding those separations through actions like the page turn or simply cracking the spine of an issue (135). The unfoldings that Bukatman describes are happening at a material level, opening the text in a codicological way as the reading process flattens out the separative folds intrinsic to comics. As a universe-building component, the hero tableau becomes the industry’s most consolidated means of using Bukatman’s material unfolding to visually impart “universeness” to the reader.

In the exchange between the fresco-influenced visual stimuli of the hero tableau and the connection of wide-ranging memories that I described there exists a parallel unfolding of the universe. As frescos use their busyness and grandeur to communicate a semblance of holiness, my cognitive response to hero tableaus as aesthetic-images presents the most concentrated view of their narrative universe through compounding memories. The disassociation of IP from the demarcations of separate series, individual issues, and different creative teams are necessary for the industry to establish these IP individually, but the publisher’s umbrella ownership lets them smooth out those folds whenever they please. The gutter-less two-page spread of Secret Wars removes those folds briefly, letting the combination of The Avengers, The Fantastic Four, The X-Men, Iron Man, and The Hulk be openly exhibited to the reader.

It is through that open exhibition that the reader can engage in their own cognitive unfolding. Where Colliding Chevrons spurs a cognitive impact between mental-images about a
few IPs, the mélange of the hero tableau creates a sensation of hundreds of memories bubbling up within my image consciousness. Those memories are usually individualized, which makes the hero tableau a rare opportunity for me to flatten out the mental folds that demarcate them and let an abundance of memories crash into one another. As the artistry of frescos impart a sense of the divine, the material unfolding Bukatman details creates an occasion for memorial expansion to be triggered. Those memories are overcoming their own divisionary folds in that experience, flowing together in a burst of connectivity that offers the fullest possible glimpse of the whole universe within superhero comics. In those instances, the window of the two-page spread engenders a cognitive equivalent. Where Colliding Chevrons spurs me to entwine my memories of a few IP, the hero tableau opens the shutters of my memory, an occasion to mentally access the most unfolded image of these characters interrelationships. Only a glimpse, that unfolded experience nonetheless reminds the reader of these narrative universe’s vastness and how that ultimately depends upon folds being smoothed out in favor of connectivity.

**Conclusion – How This Component Builds the Universe**

Aesthetic-images containing a substantial number of IPs posed for the reader to peruse and appreciate as an aggregate – which I call hero tableaus – have become a common trope within the superhero genre. The industry’s foundational stillness and ability to unite multiple distinct properties puts to use the chevronic qualities of superheroes to replicate techniques of High Renaissance frescos. The visual stimulation, expansive canvases, and kaleidoscopic color palettes that the hero tableau borrows from these classic frescos cause the reader’s gaze to haphazardly wander across the page, perceiving the chevronic figures individually and as a unit. Through this spatial unfolding, the reader cognitively experiences a sizable portion of the universe unfolding:
1. By configuring these chevronic IPs as a group, a reader’s perception of these tableaus triggers memories for each individual character, but in relation to the others. Borrowing these visual techniques from frescos likewise enables hero tableaus to echo the awe-inspiring tendency of the High Renaissance. Where those paintings utilized the scale of their architectural canvases to simulate humanity’s meagerness in relation to the divine, the material unfolding of the hero tableau evokes a mental echo.

2. As the triggered memories expand into each other through cognition, they are being connected to provide the most comprehensive glimpse of the fictional universe possible. Through this process, hero tableaus become a visual means of imparting “universeness” by flattening folds, both material and mental.

Component #3: Exquisite Corpse Creation

Repurposing a term from *Secret Wars*, Derek Johnson has written that “Shared worlds are *battleworlds* to the extent that they require negotiation and management of their shared status by the multiple producers and industries that exploit them” (140; emphasis added). While Johnson is concerned with the battleworlds that exist between transmedia producers and IP, there is a reason the language of his argument has been influenced by the superhero comics industry. Having long relied on the work-for-hire model, the creators of Marvel and DC Comics are only temporary managers of the properties controlled by these publishers. That status requires coordination with fellow creators, editors, the publishers, and the conglomerates they exist within. While that system has the potential to shut down innovation, it also brings about an artistic practice sustained on collaboratively shaping fictional universes. Creators add onto or recontextualize the work of their peers, altering the continuity of an IP as the serialized narrative moves forward. I see this as something akin to an ongoing game of Exquisite Corpse.
In the introduction to their collection on the legacy of the Exquisite Corpse in media and education, Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, Davis Schneiderman, and Tom Denlinger narrow the origin of the game to “a 1935 meeting of . . . [a] Surrealist group,” that included “Victor Brauner, André Breton, Jacques Hérold, and Yves Tanguy” (xix). While the authors acknowledge that “The ‘rules’ of the Exquisite Corpse never veer toward an ossification of dogma,” in the foreword to the same collection Paul D. Miller outlines the basic “dialectical process” of the game in which:

a collection of words or images is assembled collectively. Each collaborator adds to the collage composition in sequence. It’s the sequence of the game that makes the tension between each player a connected and ultimately enriching experience. Each person is only allowed to see the end of what the previous person contributed. (xxiii; xii)

In the illustrated version of the game, this process plays out on folded paper, with each participant drawing the next section of a body until the paper is unfolded to reveal the cumulative result. In any form, the exercise of the Exquisite Corpse boils down to participants successively building on what came before them to fabricate a unified creation.

While the goal within superhero comics skews closer to the semi-real rather than the surreal, the collaborative building of a fictional universe reproduces the sequence of creative conversations that Miller finds rewarding in the Exquisite Corpse design. While superhero creators do often build upon the continuity that appeared “across the fold” from where they start, responding to what the managers immediately prior to them did with an IP, they have a greater leeway to expand upon whatever “limb” of the universal body they please. Since that process in superhero comics has been largely continuous for over Eighty years, creators have an extensive foundation to build upon, often adding onto continuity that was introduced years or decades in the past. Unfolding the sheet of paper at the end of an Exquisite Corpse game gets mirrored in
the superhero comics equivalent. A counterpart to the visual unfolding of the previous component, the Exquisite Corpse involves an unfolding of continuity. In this case, the “folds” that need to be smoothed out are lengths of time and different authorships. The “dialectical” exchange of the Exquisite Corpse affords a potential for those separative barriers to be transformed into building opportunities.

Like the way one folded section of an Exquisite Corpse can recontextualize the intention of the previous section, these additions-at-a-distance can retroactively make a minor continuity detail into a major one. Narratologist Seymour Benjamin Chatman distinguishes these major and minor events in all forms of narrative as “kernels and satellites.” In the Exquisite Corpse Creation of superhero comics, satellites becoming kernels after the fact leads to what I call a “landmark” event. Landmarks are distinguished (1) by coming from a minor, pre-existing event, (2) creators returning to and elaborating these events, and (3) those returns providing the event a renewed prominence within continuity, like a geographical landmark built onto a foundational landscape. Because Exquisite Corpse Creation entails a sequence of collaborative additions, landmarks become integral within the overall sequence.

The collaborative recontextualization caused by the Exquisite Corpse practice affects the way readers cognitively respond to these landmark moments. In the original game, adding another layer to the corpse altered the overall visual by linking two sections of the paper together. In superhero comics, turning a previous satellite into a landmark not only creates a connection between the previous satellite and the new elaboration, but also causes readers to perceive both events as part of a narrative continuum. The reader recognizes the continuity addition in the original satellite/landmark and vice versa. It is at this point the reader has an analogic experience to Exquisite Corpse participants viewing the final drawing. In the reader’s
mind, a landmark event has unfolded – or been connected – to a sequence of continuity. Like the finalized drawing, this sequence depends upon each Exquisite Corpse creator’s additions forming a unified whole. In this situation any event from the continuum causes readers to recall other connected events saved in their memory. Doing so elevates those memories in importance within the continuity and enhances their eidetic clarity through frequent returns.

To illustrate how Exquisite Corpse Creation can recontextualize narrative continuity in reader’s memory, I have chosen the moment from Secret Wars that has arguably had the longest lasting resonance. In Secret Wars #8, Spider-Man discovers a black liquid that bonds to and redesigns his costume. A satellite detail during the original miniseries, creators after Jim Shooter have recontextualized this moment, turning the black costume into a narrative landmark for the character now known as Venom and all of his associated continuity.

**Case Study – The Origin of Spider-Man’s Black Costume in Secret Wars #8**

On the final two pages of Secret Wars #8, Jim Shooter and Mike Zeck end the issue with a cliffhanger revelation. At the heroes’ base of operations on Battleworld, Spider-Man discovers a machine that can fabricate whatever the user imagines. Spider-Man activates the device to repair his tattered costume, but instead it generates an obsidian orb that spreads across his body, fashioning a redesigned monochrome costume (see Fig. 14).

In the diegetic chronology, Secret Wars #8 marks the first time Spider-Man donned this black costume. However, by this issue’s release in 1984 there had already been seven months of Spider-Man comics with him wearing the same outfit. That nonlinearity arose from Jim Shooter’s mandate that every tie-in series pick-up where the crossover event’s narrative concluded months before the final issue was released. This meant that Amazing Spider-Man #252, which was co-written by Secret Wars editor Tom DeFalco, was actually the first time
Figure 14 The reveal of the black Spider-Man costume in *Secret Wars* #8
readers saw the black costume. As such, Spider-Man’s new outfit became an instance of Exquisite Corpse Creation for DeFalco and Shooter. *Amazing Spider-Man’s* continuity had to both be retrofitted onto what Shooter was planning to do in *Secret Wars* and continue that event’s narrative long before anyone had actually read those issues.

At first, it looked like the black costume would be a forgotten footnote in Marvel history as “word that Spider-Man was going to get a new costume leaked out to the fan press [and]... Everybody hated the idea” (McLaughlin). Shooter and DeFalco scrambled, originally agreeing to faze the costume out after an eight issue storyline in *Amazing Spider-Man*, only to find that “the day after...[Amazing Spider-Man #252] went on sale...they were all sold out” at many comics shops (McLaughlin). That shift in the fandom’s attitude factored into Marvel creators returning to the costume down the line. Beyond popularity and high sales, Exquisite Corpse Creation in superhero comics also feeds off gaps in information or unsatisfying explanations, both of which *Secret Wars #8* represents. Spider-Man stumbling upon the suit with minimal fanfare or exposition left DeFalco room to add onto its continuity in *Amazing Spider-Man*, recontextualized the costume as a sentient alien symbiote that was gradually corrupting Spider-Man. There is also no denying that the eye-catching, minimalist design of the black costume contributed to creators and readers alike wanting to see more of it. The black and white color scheme stands in contrast not only to the primary reds and blues of Spider-Man’s original costume, but also those same design elements in most superhero costumes. These factors ended up motivating future creators to recontextualize the costume in the years following *Secret Wars* and DeFalco’s *Amazing Spider-Man* run.

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55 That hate likely stemmed from fans viewing the costume as a transparent way to sell two different Spider-Man toys in the Mattel line and a gimmick that Marvel could market Spider-Man comics around. Not to mention that any drastic change to a long-lived aspect of continuity – like Spider-Man’s traditional red and blue costume – usually meets with some form of fan resistance.
In a genre where a storyline is dispersed over separate series and managed by multiple creative teams, the delineation between kernels and satellites becomes tricky. In *Story and Discourse*, Chatman suggests that kernels are “major event[s]” that provide “branching points which force a movement into one or two (or more) possible paths,” whereas satellites are “minor plot event[s]” responding to the kernels by “filling in, elaborating, [or] completing” the plot beat they establish (53-54). In relation to *Amazing Spider-Man, Secret Wars #8* is technically the branching point for the black costume storyline, which would seem to qualify it as a kernel. However, its release seven months after *Amazing Spider-Man #252* means that it does little more than elaborate on the mystery of how Spider-Man got his new costume. In that respect, #252’s introduction of the costume’s mysterious origins situates it as more of a major branching point. Furthermore, DeFalco was the primary author to add onto this Exquisite Corpse, exploring the mystery in the *Amazing Spider-Man* series. Chatman also contends that “Kernels cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic” (53). In the scope of *Secret Wars*, Spider-Man gaining the costume could easily be removed without altering the overall narrative. Though the nonlinear release of these series and the creators’ participation in an Exquisite Corpse process complicate the standard satellite/kernel breakdown, the event from *Secret Wars #8* can best be characterized as a satellite.

As someone reading the issue with hindsight, Spider-Man discovering the black costume comes off as a continuity landmark. Having been connected to so many other characters, eras, and series through the additions that followed, the end of *Secret Wars #8* gained importance in the wider sweep of the universe. If Chatman’s kernel test were to be applied at this point, the deletion of that event would upend a great deal of narrative continuity. But because the event within the *Secret Wars* miniseries remains inconsequential, it is inaccurate to consider it a kernel.
This is why I am proposing landmarks as a way to encompass an event somewhere in between a satellite and a kernel. Kernels and landmarks can be tricky to differentiate for the same reasons that kernels and satellites can be in the ongoing, multi-authored serial narratives of superhero comics. However, I see landmarks as having three criteria that distinguish them from kernels.

First, landmarks are formed out of pre-existing satellite events. Unlike a kernel, landmarks are the reverse of Chatman’s litmus test: at one time they could have been deleted without causing major narrative shockwaves, only after-the-fact gaining the same importance that a kernel event has at its inception. That importance comes about from the second criteria, which is that landmarks arise from the Exquisite Corpse model enabling creators to return to and elaborate on a pre-existing satellite event. Because a kernel event – like a detail from a superhero’s origin story – is already pivotal to how the narrative progresses, they are automatically brought up repeatedly. However, creators choose whether to keep returning to a satellite detail and transform it into a more vital event. Through creators continually returning to what once was a satellite detail, the event gains a new prominence within the universe’s overall continuity – a molehill becomes a mountain. This third criteria influences why I have chosen landmark as a descriptor: in terms of geography a landmark stands out from that which surrounds it. Like a recently constructed skyscraper redefining a city’s skyline, the perpetual process of building a superhero universe results in new landmarks forming all the time, changing which events within the continuity standout to fans.\(^5^6\)

\(^5^6\) To further clarify the difference between a kernel and a landmark, I offer an example from the Distinguished Competition (DC). In the 1988 Batman storyline “A Death in the Family” the second Robin, named Jason Todd, was beaten to death by The Joker. Over the years that followed, Todd’s death was referenced frequently and became a defining source of guilt for Batman. While those returns and earned prominence might suggest this event is a landmark, it is undoubtedly a kernel. Had Todd lived, his continued presence would have drastically changed the narrative trajectory of Batman’s ongoing storyline. However, fourteen years later, “Hush” teased Todd’s resurrection (he was revealed to be another Batman villain masquerading as Todd an issue later). Had fans reacted poorly or been disinterested in this turn, it would never have had to go any further, becoming a footnote. However, three years later, author Judd Winick returned to that satellite moment when he brought Todd back permanently as
In this way, Exquisite Corpse Creation not only entails a forward addition of continuity, but also a backwards recontextualization of the continuity being added onto. The comics medium’s perpetual serialization riddles the superhero genre with landmarks, as creators frequently collaborate not only with their peers, but also at-a-distance with work published long before they were part of the industry. By collaboratively forming an Exquisite Corpse out of new and old continuity creators are encouraging the kind of connective thinking that imparts a sensation of “universeness.” As much as landmarks gain prominence on the page, they equally standout in reader’s memory as the comics repeatedly encourage fans to remember them. By Exquisite Corpse Creation associating events in the comics, the memories of those events are associated, as well, which means the apprehension of one usually triggers the others. Being made to recall all these memories together any time one is triggered improves the eidetic clarity and consistency of all of them.

When I flip to the last two pages of *Secret Wars #8*, the minimalism of the monochrome costume design – made all the more striking in contrast to Christie Scheele’s radiant pink background – pulls at me like a tractor beam. As my eyes drift up to the panel, it is the jagged legs of the spider emblem that first draw my attention. Sliding up the top of the leftmost set of legs, then across to the downward slope of the opposite set, my optic movement resembles the peaks and valleys of a blipping heart monitor. Passing across the emblem makes me aware of the sharp polarity between the pure white and black of the costume. However, there is color here. As my eyes settle at the end of the spider emblem’s right side, they are deposited next to a patch of steely blue under Spider-Man’s armpit. My gaze pulls back at that point, noticing how

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the Red Hood. After Winick’s story, Todd/Red Hood was heavily featured in *Batman* and numerous other series. The Exquisite Corpse model allowed Winick to elaborate the minor tease from “Hush,” turning it into the landmark first re-appearance of Todd since his death.
that same blue encases the outline of the costume, causing me to follow that blue around the chevronic totality. Studying that “overall configuration” is what ultimately “allows. . .[me] to recognize” my memories of its narrative future (Remembering 133).

I cannot separate the black costume from those recontextualizations. Rather than think of this panel as the answer to DeFalco’s Amazing Spider-Man mystery, my inclination is to see it as the origin of the Venom symbiote. An Exquisite Corpse addition that had not been conceived of at this time, the continuity of Venom, as Casey evocatively writes, “haunts it in advance” (Remembering 133). It would not be until four years after this issue, in Amazing Spider-Man #300, that the creative team of David Michelinie and Todd McFarlane would introduce Eddie Brock, an ex-reporter rival to Peter Parker who had bonded with his discarded symbiote and taken the name of Venom. As John Jackson Miller reports, the increase in sales figures that happened “the year following the new-costume [sic] appearance. . .begin to build again in the run-up to the Todd MacFarlane [sic] era,” indicating how readers were hungry for further elaborations of this storyline (“Amazing Spider Man”). That reader interest paired with fan-creators’ own love of the IP caused the Exquisite Corpse that Shooter, DeFalco, Michelinie, and McFarlane had already been building to develop further as the years passed. Part of the symbiote latched onto a serial killer, creating Carnage; later the Venom symbiote and moniker were passed onto another Spider-Man villain named The Scorpion; Peter Parker’s friend, “Flash” Thompson, even became Agent Venom when using the symbiote on covert government missions (see Fig. 15).57 Reading Secret Wars #8 while knowing how these additions (and many others)

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57 Carnage first appears in 1992’s Amazing Spider-Man #361 by Michelinie and artist Mark Bagley; The Scorpion dons the Venom symbiote at the end of Marvel Knights Spider-Man #10 written by Mark Millar and drawn by Terry and Rachel Dodson; Agent Venom debuted in a back-up story from Amazing Spider-Man #654 written by Dan Slott and drawn by Paulo Siqueira and Ronan Cliquet de Oliveira.
Figure 15 Exquisite Corpse additions to the black costume continuity (From top to bottom: Cover for the first appearance of Carnage in Amazing Spider-Man #361; the first appearance of The Scorpion as Venom on the final page of Marvel Knights Spider-Man #10; a page from Amazing Spider-Man #654 showing Agent Venom’s power set)
evolved from this instance of Exquisite Corpse Creation changes the context of the original satellite event.

The root words of context imply an act of weaving together which the Exquisite Corpse has facilitated here, making it so that my memories of the comics published after this issue have been woven into the foundation of the aesthetic-image. As a reader who knows the narrative future of the costume, it is my memories of later additions to this Exquisite Corpse that I am “recognizing-in” the chevronic lines and colors of the costume. Edward S. Casey considers “recognizing-in” a cognitive act where “In what we now apprehend, x, we can recognize the presence of at least some of the significant features of y,” comparing this process to Picasso seeing artistic traits of Matisse’s later work in his earliest paintings (Remembering 132-133).

However, in the panel where Spider-Man’s new costume is revealed, I am not recognizing the work of one artist, but a multitude of creators who have supplied the additional “folded sections” that comprise this narrative Exquisite Corpse.

What I find myself recognizing-in the chevronic details of the costume are an association of aesthetic-images saved within my memory. In Marvel continuity, each time the symbiote moves from one host to another, it retains the memories of the previous host. Readers experience something similar: they carry forward memories they acquire about a character, later made to recall them when encountering that character or an associated one again. Since Todd McFarlane’s design for Venom preserves the elements that made the black costume iconic (the monochrome color scheme, the steely blue outline, the broad spider emblem), perceiving those same elements in the Secret Wars panel causes me to think about how they are replicated in Venom. The first mental-image that displays recalls McFarlane’s cover for Amazing Spider-Man #316 (see Fig. 16). In the display, I get a clear sense of Venom’s slumped posture conveyed
Figure 16 Todd McFarlane’s famous cover to *Amazing Spider-Man* #316
through the humps of his rounded, hulking shoulders. In comparison to the spider emblem on the page in front of me, the one on my mental-Venom feels about three times wider, stretched across his barrel chest. However, my display contains a key element that McFarlane did not include in his cover: a winding, serpentine tongue spilling out from Venom’s agape mouth. A signature detail of the character and one that visually distinguishes him from black costumed Spider-Man, I know that tongue well enough to trace its curves and ascertain its salmon pink color and slime green saliva with marked clarity.

Studying the details of that mental-image causes an expansion into three more memories, as if each “limb” of the Exquisite Corpse is unfolding before me. Having fixated on the shape and size of Venom’s shoulders, my mind leaps to another memory of the character at his most bloated. An indelible panel from the 2007 run of the Thunderbolts displays for me, with artist Mike Deodato, Jr.’s heavily shadowed rendition of The Scorpion as Venom. When the character would become agitated, Deodato would exaggerate his size, drawing hundreds of intricate ripples and veins into his bulging torso. The excess of detail that Deodato included in Venom’s absurdly misshapen frame was such a grotesque amplification of McFarlane’s original design that I consistently recall it when spurred to think about the character.

My memory of Deodato’s Venom expands into one of Carnage, a character created by David Michelinie and Mark Bagley as a further variation on the symbiote continuity. I have positioned Carnage in a hunched position similar to my original Venom memory, possibly a subconscious recognition of the character’s outgrowth from a strand of Exquisite Corpse Creation. Unlike the previous two memories, I cannot place the exact art style this memory is replicating, as it is more an amalgamation of Carnage media prevalent during my childhood, including a TPB of the “Maximum Carnage” Spider-Man crossover that I owned. Even though
Carnage’s crimson red color scheme stands out in my memory, where I am recognizing-Venom-in this mental-image are the black swirls interspersed throughout the character’s body. Those swirls had to be Bagley’s way of acknowledging Carnage’s connection to Venom, here becoming visual tissue to link these memories together.

At the end of my cognitive expansion, my mind once again jumps to a recent Exquisite Corpse addition to the Venom IP. Having fixated on the inky veins running through Carnage’s chevronic design in the preceding memory, I make a cognitive connection to the dark, viscous tendrils of the symbiote crawling onto the unclothed body of the double amputee “Flash” Thompson. The panel I am recalling comes from Rick Remender and Tony Moore’s 2011 Venom run, where each issue followed Thompson’s Agent Venom on a different mission. What is eidetically poignant for me are the intersection points between the symbiote and Thompson’s amputated legs. I believe that attribute displays for me so clearly because it is a marker of how Exquisite Corpse Creation has grown the symbiote IP, now associating it with an espionage story and a heroic character instead of the villainous Venom.

These four memories (and others I did not mention) have attained an eidetic lucidity in part because I recall some combination of them whenever I perceive an aspect of the black costume’s Exquisite Corpse sequence. In his introduction to Remembering: A Phenomenological Study, Casey has stressed that the act of forgetting supplements our ability to remember (7). There are countless memories of continuity which I do not return to as frequently, causing them to lose detail or fade entirely. As creators build onto landmark events, memories of

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58 Of course, not every reader will have these same four memories or any memories of Venom, the symbiote, etc. My recollection of these panels and aesthetic-images depends upon me having read them; there are thousands of additions to this Exquisite Corpse sequence that I have never encountered that others have. As such, this experience benefits from deep diving, which is why it is such an integral part of the industry. Reading a wider array of comics within a narrative universe will provide fans a more comprehensive understanding of how the universe has been built through Exquisite Corpse Creation.
those additions push out memories of other panels, issues, and stories. The memories I am left with – like the previous four – attain a consistency through frequent recall. No mental image is ever an exact copy of the original perception, but by returning to particular memories repeatedly eidetic details of what has been imaged will stabilize and become defining features. That does not necessarily mean the mental-image accurately recreates the aesthetic-image, but the nuances (a pose, the color of a costume, the chevronic totality) retain a similarity every time I recall them. The more a character appears in the comics or an aspect of continuity gets referenced, the more frequently I am encouraged to remember the mental-images I have of the comics related to them. Landmark events gain a cognitive landmark status for this reason. While the four memories I describe above may or may not display for me each time I read about the symbiote, the panel from Secret Wars #8 certainly will. Having retroactively become the origin point for such an extensive strain of Exquisite Corpse Creation, that panel’s primacy in my mental hierarchy of symbiote/Venom continuity necessitates that I recall it above all else.

This succession of mental-images speak to how Exquisite Corpse Creation affects the reader. I remember these aesthetic-images because they are tied to particular art styles or eras of Marvel Comics. Eidetically that differentiates them within my mind, yet like the collage of artistic techniques that form an Exquisite Corpse their extrapolation from the same starting point (the black costume in Secret Wars #8) causes me to think of them in relation to one another. Even though these memories span a period of twenty-seven years (from 1984 to 2011) and are additions made by a litany of creators, comics have trained me to think of them as parts of a continuum of continuity. Accustomed to cognitively “closing” the gaps between a network of sequential aesthetic-images, my image consciousness is comfortable removing the folds – the decades and different creative teams that contextualize these memories – to instead
recontextualize as part of a sequence. As my memories associated with this Exquisite Corpse for the symbiote/Venom expand into one another, I am left with a continuum of continuity. When I “look” at this totally through my mind’s eye, it is like seeing the final drawing resulting from an Exquisite Corpse game. Rather than see each folded section individually, the expansion of memory unfolds them into a totalizing sense of the character’s history.

**Conclusion – How This Component Builds the Universe**

Superhero comics are serialized narratives told collaboratively, which resembles the collaged art resulting from a game of Exquisite Corpse. Like how each successive addition to an Exquisite Corpse drawing recontextualizes what came before, the work-for-hire model of superhero comics encourages extrapolation of previous creators’ work. For this reason, the narrative kernels and satellites that Chatman finds in all storytelling are often in flux within superhero comics. The overall importance of past events will often be altered, yielding an event that falls somewhere between a kernel and a satellite, what I call a landmark. Distinguishing landmarks from kernels can be difficult in superhero comics, but three interdependent criteria define them: (1) coming from a satellite narrative event that *could* have been deleted, (2) but was instead returned to within the Exquisite Corpse model, grants the event (3) a new prominence within continuity.

This system of Exquisite Corpse Creation affects how readers retain and connect the memories of what they read.

1. The industry’s collaborative extrapolation results in and prompts recognizing-continuity-introduced-by-one-creator-in continuity introduced by a different creator.
2. That recognition causes readers to do in memory what they are used to doing on the page: using gaps in space and time to connect mental-images.
3. Once associated, Exquisite Corpse Creation will spur the joint recall of these memories through expansion, improving their eidetic clarity through repetition.

By cognitively relating mental-images that depict the evolution of an aspect of universal continuity, Exquisite Corpse Creation binds together these vast narratives. For the reader, the creative additions made to a satellite-cum-landmark and those that result from it do not retain their original authorial or temporal context. Instead, they are unfolded in the mind as one flattened continuity continuum.

Component #4: Sedimented Timelines

Expressing the passing of time has been a conundrum for superhero comics. In his chapter on fictional “History and Timelines,” Benjamin J. Robertson suggests that “Timelines convey to readers a sense of the facticity of an imaginary world,” a linear progression that infuses something of our experience of reality into an unreal creation (107). However, Marvel and DC cannot allow their IPs to progress in real-time or else they would have to diegetically age and die off. Those side effects would require the publisher to either retire an established IP with a dedicated fanbase or pass the IP’s superhero identity to another character. Both approaches have been attempted by Marvel and DC alike, but the change never lasts long. Either because the new iteration sells poorly, the publisher receives backlash from readers, or the return of a beloved IP means higher sales, The Big Two frequently reset to the previous status quo.

Instead, as Mark J. P. Wolf describes, each publisher has committed to a form of time where “characters do not age as one would expect them to. . .[with] many of the superheroes

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59 DC and Marvel have toyed with transferring a superhero identity to another property. With too many examples to mention here, a few notable instances are Jean-Paul Valley replacing Bruce Wayne as Batman after the “Knightfall” storyline, “Bucky” Barnes becoming Captain America after Steve Rogers death, Wally West taking on The Flash identity after Barry Allen’s death, and Thor passing control of Mjölnir to Jane Foster once he became “unworthy.” In all of these examples, and most others, the original mantel holder returns, either alongside their replacement or once more as the sole carrier of the identity.
[kept] in their 20s and 30s” on a sliding timeline (“Narrative” 49). This option grants the IP perpetual youth, the ability to explore abundant narrative beats, and the capacity to exist within and comment upon contemporary culture. However, this choice comes with its own drawbacks to creating a semblance of reality. If characters cannot age or mature as a human does over a lifetime, the IP runs the risk of stagnating in narrative cul-de-sacs that impede a sense of realism.

The solution has been to let select narrative events, divested of any temporal context, slide with the timeline. This means events, like a character’s origin story or a major death, remain relevant to their continuity even as the amount of diegetic time that has elapsed between those events is ambiguous. Because the industry requires creators to churn through hundreds upon thousands of plot points every year, many events will not carry forward. Inversely, the repeated referencing of a landmark event grants it a degree of prominence on a character’s timeline, gaining a pretense of historical accuracy through its consistency. It is not simply the

60 While this component deals specifically with timelines from a universe’s mainline continuity, I want to acknowledge the prominence of alternate timelines in superhero comics. Aside from the sliding timeline method, the use of multiverses or alternate realities has become another tactic for the industry to experiment with IP while not corrupting their most recognizable version. Since 1961, superhero comics have entreated readers to hold multiple versions of an IP in their memory simultaneously. In Search of the Multiverse, John Gribbin’s book on the history of multiversal theory, considers the “the essence of the quantum world” to be the double-slit screen experiment and its findings are replicated in the way readers are made to cognitively engage with these alternate timelines (E-book). Setting out to determine whether light behaves like a particle or a wave, permutations of the double-slit experiment revealed that it unexpectedly does both. This means that, under certain conditions, light separates into simultaneous, but contradictory forms. The narrative timelines of superhero universes have frequently diverged in a similar manner, with the primary version of Superman (Earth-1) existing alongside one where he aged realistically and married Lois Lane (Earth-2), for instance. These alternate timelines are not cognitively sedimented with their mainline counterparts in the same way that I will describe with narrative events here. Instead, these alternate timelines inform, but never replace the main timelines, as the industry cannot financially risk unsettling the brand version of an IP. Holding these alternate timelines in memory forces readers to oscillate between entertaining the overwhelming creative freedom inherent in the multiversal concept and understanding that the main timeline is the dominant one by nature of its financial importance. That is to say, Earth-2 Superman will never replace Earth-1 Superman. These contradictory cognitive tensions have produced a double-mindedness in the fandom, where one subset favors order and regimentation, while another appreciates creative experimentation.

61 The Iron Man origin story is an instructive example of how this works. In Tales of Suspense #39, Tony Stark builds the Iron Man armor during the Vietnam War. As the distance from that war has increased, Marvel has altered the military conflict in which Stark was a POW, updating it to the Gulf War and then America’s post-9/11 war in Afghanistan. In this way, the events of his origin—an imprisonment that forces him to build the first Iron Man suit—remain the same, but the setting and time period are updated.
number of events that provide the character’s timeline complexity, but also the variety of events that come from Exquisite Corpse Creation. With many different creative voices collaborating on these characters, all trying to find novel avenues into long-running IPs, the assortment of states and scenarios characters are put through convey an impression of growth and change. Over the course of sixty, seventy, or eighty years for some characters, the amount and range of narrative events that accrue on a timeline can become substantial. In superhero comics, then, the facticity that Robertson associates with timelines comes less from the reader knowing exactly how much time has elapsed and more from the knowledge that so much has happened to a character within the indeterminant span of their timeline. Multiplied on a macro level, these densely packed character timelines combine to give the impression that the fictional universe’s evolution is as convoluted as our own.

DC and Marvel’s decision to represent the temporality of their fictional universes in this way affects how the reader cognitively conceives of them as having a realistic “universeness.” A reader may understand how much real world time has elapsed between issues or how long it took to read the issues detailing these events, but those are perceptions of the reader’s lived time. Because the events that mark a character’s timeline eschew temporal context, readers are left to connect them together in the “quasi-narrative form” that Edward S. Casey ascribes to memory (Remembering 43). The longer a superhero IP has been around in real world time, the more events accrue within the undefined window of diegetic time that makes up their timeline. When readers are imagining—that quasi-narrative scope of a character’s timeline, those events sediment into one complex whole. I choose to describe this cognitive experience as sedimentation, because like matter settling at the bottom of a lake these events are being compressed into a
densely packed conception of a character’s timeline. The extent of my knowledge about a

Figure 17 Three panel sequence of Klaw being rematerialized on Galactus’ ship

superhero’s narrative history does not attain a veneer of realism because I have a sense of how

much time has passed, but from how I mentally compound these events together into the

approximation of a lifetime. A sedimented timeline’s insinuation of distinct stages of life give

these characters a sense of “fleshiness.”

Using two panel sequences from Secret Wars #6 that introduce the character known as

Klaw and his earlier and later appearances in the Dazzler and Daredevil series, respectively, the

following case study will exemplify superhero comics’ reliance on accrued narrative moments to

convey the passage of time. Comprised of solid or “hard” sound, Klaw’s reintegration by Doctor

Doom during Secret Wars gives Jim Shooter a reason to change his personality into that of a

rambling crackpot. Though a minor villain in the Marvel Universe and a relatively one-

dimensional character in Secret Wars, Shooter’s portrayal of Klaw is only one of multiple

interpretations and landmark events from throughout the character’s publication history.
However, when memories of these different iterations and landmark events are connected within the reader’s image consciousness, they become sediment for layers of a complex timeline. Ironically, this makes a fictional character made of intangible sound feel “fleshy.”

**Case Study – Klaw’s Timeline**

Exploring Galactus’ spaceship in *Secret Wars* #6, Doctor Doom inadvertently uses an energy storage device to revive the villain known as Klaw (see Fig. 17). When Klaw is revealed by the page turn, my vision cannot help but gravitate to his conspicuous silhouette at the bottom of the second page. One chunky stripe of blood-red broken up by lavender trunks and an asymmetrical concave radar dish hand, Klaw’s chevronic design has always been noticeable, if not inelegant. Since he has not appeared in the miniseries to this point (nor even been referenced), seeing him on the page causes a cognitive search for answers to when he died and how he is associated with Galactus. Since I have only read about Klaw in comics that were published post-*Secret Wars*, his inclusion in this issue gives me an opportunity to sediment information from earlier in his timeline into my memory.

The Klaw memory that comes to mind upon seeing him is from the character’s diegetic future in the 2011 *Daredevil* series.62 The mental-image that displays for me is one of Daredevil standing on a rickety wooden staircase leading down into a basement full of Klaw duplicates.63 What is eidetically clear to me is a diffuse red glow effect used by the colorist and how the artist has perforated the Klaw bodies with imperfectly curved holes that suggest they are intangible (and malfunctioning) holograms. Based on those details, I think of Klaw as a robotic, calculating

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62 This series was written by Mark Waid, but had a rotating list of artistic contributors including Marcos Martin, Paolo and Joe Rivera, Emma Rios, Khoi Pham, Chris Samnee, and others.
63 This memory is specifically from *Daredevil* #2, which was drawn by Paolo and Joe Rivera. However, I have flipped the “camera’s perspective.” Whereas I remember Daredevil standing on the staircase in the background, in the panel he is in the foreground and the Klaw copies are in the background.
character. The three terse pencil strokes that Mike Zeck uses to represent Klaw’s expressionless eyes and mouth in the first panel from *Secret Wars #6* initially align with my memories of the character’s future.

Glanced out of my periphery, Klaw’s expressive posture in the adjacent panels immediately contradicts (and complicates) that memory. The motion lines Zeck has included near Klaw’s elbows and left knee suggest a franticness contrary to the zombie-like behavior he displays later in his timeline. The cadence of Shooter’s dialog – “Home? Home, home, home, home…” – is likewise counter to the monotone speech pattern I remember from the *Daredevil* issue. Going forward, I have a new memory that is incongruent to one that previously defined Klaw as a character for me. I recognize that this is the same Klaw I read about in 2011, but the initial dissonance that I feel between these two portrayals will require connective tissue for me to understand why Klaw’s behavior differed earlier in his timeline.

On top the next page, there is a sequence of four panels with rounded bottoms, a semiotic indicator that the events of these panels are a flashback (see Fig. 18). The sequence explains how Klaw was absorbed by Dazzler (an X-Man who transforms sound into energy) in a previous fight. Later, Dazzler fired Klaw, now a transmuted beam of sound, at Galactus. As I read through these panels, I mentally contextualize the Dazzler fight as occurring before *Secret Wars* which, in turn, occurred long before *Daredevil #2*. Because of superhero comics’ Exquisite Corpse methodology, I become curious if this sequence is a flashback to previous issues (by a different creative team) or an explanation Shooter has invented to bring Klaw into the narrative.

Pausing my *Secret Wars* read through, I do some research and find out that these events took place in *Dazzler #9-11*. Pulling up a copy of *Dazzler #9* online, I quickly scan through until my eyes catch on a three panel sequence near the end of the issue (see Fig. 19). Illustrated by
Figure 18 Flashback sequence of panels showing Dazzler's defeat of Klaw

Figure 19 Original sequence of Klaw's defeat from *Dazzler* #9

Figure 20 Recreation of sequence from *Dazzler* #9 in *Dazzler* #10
Frank Springer and Vince Colletta three years before *Secret Wars*, I see how the beats of this sequence were echoed in Zeck’s interpretation. In panel one, the duo has placed a yellow swoop interspersed with solid black bubbles that Zeck repurposes into variously sized yellow and orange bubbles in the background of his first panel. Though Klaw’s dematerialization has been rendered differently in both second panels, the dulled coloration of Klaw’s lower body in the *Dazzler* sequence calls to mind a similarly muted red in Zeck’s version. Finally, the speed lines that Springer and Colletta use to indicate Klaw’s satellite hand bouncing to the ground link up with a cross-hatch of lines that Zeck has included to convey a similar motion; cognitively, I erase the minute differences of those lines and, instead, remember the dropping motion they are both expressing. Now I have two depictions of this same event comingled in my memory.

Interested to see if the fourth panel of Zeck’s sequence is another re-interpretation, I move on to *Dazzler* #10. What I find is unexpected, but even more intriguing. On the issue’s third page, Springer and Colletta have redrawn the same beat-by-beat event as a recap of the previous issue (see Fig. 20). With the sequence from *Dazzler* #9 stored in my short term memory, I immediately register that the inking and linework are more crisply defined here and the duo have changed the composition of each beat (for instance, the middle panel has “pulled back” to a “low angle” from behind Dazzler). However, the same three aesthetic details that linked together the original sequence and Zeck’s flashback in my mind are repeated once more. A C-shaped ring of bubbles in panel one; the muted pink of wispy lines streaming off Klaw’s head, arm, and legs; bright yellow bounce lines trailing Klaw’s satellite hand. What is more, in studying the first panel I feel like I am looking at the exact same panel from *Secret Wars* #6; Dazzler’s upright, fanned out hair and rigid posture are nearly identical. Returning to my *Secret

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64 Christie Scheele did the colors for both issues, so I am actually sensing that shared creative DNA in these color choices.
 Wars TPB, tiny details, like the straight versus jagged lines on Klaw’s briefs and the placement of Dazzler’s necklace, confirm that Zeck did not trace Springer and Colletta’s panel, but he undoubtedly used it as a reference. These are the lines of an artist who has worked quickly to replicate someone else’s lines rather than sketching out his own thoughts.  

Before reading Secret Wars #6, the Daredevil issues were my primary memory of Klaw in the Marvel Universe. Now that I have read Secret Wars #6 and the Dazzler comics it led me to, I have acquired memories of one event depicted three times by two sets of artists. In his interdisciplinary study of the Walking Dead franchise, Matthew Freeman argues for commonality between our understanding of history and fictional universes, writing that “Both the consuming of a transmedia world and the learning of history operates on the basis that people will gain both a richer and fuller understanding of a given story/event if they consume as many documented fragments relating to it as possible” (25; emphasis added). By documenting this same event repeatedly, these issues have made it a landmark moment in my conception of Klaw’s timeline of continuity. While the stylistic signatures and minutia of each version of this landmark will fade from memory with distance, I will not forget the essential beats (the fight, the dematerialization, the absorption). The consistency of the bubbles, the way Klaw evaporates, and how the satellite hand remains after he is gone cause my mind to treat them as facts that have been recorded. As Freeman insinuates, there is an air of authenticity that arises from those beats remaining consistent, as if Springer, Colletta, and Zeck were beholden to a series of historical details about Dazzler and Klaw’s encounter.  

To Freeman’s point, memories of a landmark event like this are not dissimilar from how I conceive of actual history and historical figures. Unable to interact with the people and events of the past, I nonetheless am able to accept them as real because of consistencies in how they have
been documented. For instance, I have multiple memories of an event like the assassination of Malcolm X gained from reading historical accounts or watching reenactments in films like Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992) and Michael Mann’s *Ali* (2001). Each variation on the actual event shares certain details – the assassins wielding a shotgun, X being knocked back from the podium by the blast, and the subsequent shots being fired after the initial shooting – that coalesce within my memory as the facts of what happened, even though I was not there. Coming to those facts through documents and not firsthand perception and my further relation to them through memory does not stop me from thinking of the assassination as a tragedy or letting it be a gauge of who Malcolm X was as a man. My mental conception of Malcolm X’s death ripples with flesh and blood realism despite its intangibility to me.

With the particularities of Klaw’s (temporary) death being fleshed out across three accounts, this landmark moment on his fictional timeline attains something similar to my mental relationship to Malcolm X’s assassination. Because I know Klaw is a fictional character and Malcolm X was real, the landmark on Klaw’s timeline can only ever apprehend for me as “fleshy” instead of an actual flesh and blood person. However, the equivalent consistency in documentation to real history as well as how I mentally store and conceive of the event from memory imbues the character’s timeline with a stable, defining event. Besides presenting me with “factual” information about how Klaw’s physiology works (he is made of energy that can be dissolved), the significance of this landmark sits in the recesses of my memory ready to influence other events from his timeline that I encounter. When I read about a future event in Klaw’s timeline, the writer does not have to reference his previous death and resurrection for me to impart their ramifications onto the moment. Like the way my memories of Malcolm X’s assassination emotionally relate me to his life, a cognitive search bringing up memories about
Klaw’s disintegration and reintegration will color his other appearances. This landmark defines his timeline going forward, influencing how I relate to him as a character.

Alone, the landmark status of that event makes it stick in my mind and distinguish it as a pivotal event in Klaw’s continuity. However, together with my memories of Klaw from Secret Wars and Daredevil, I possess three distinct memories of stages in this character’s timeline. The length of real time between these Klaw appearances (1981 to 1984 to 2011 – thirty years overall) is irrelevant to me once they are stored in memory.65 While I understand that an amount of time has passed between these three periods in Klaw’s history, the exact diegetic time period they occurred in and length of time between them is unclear. I also did not read these comics in order over the years they were released, which frees my memories from the experience of real time elapsing between their publication dates. Instead, I experience them as one sedimented quasi-narrative about what I know of Klaw’s continuity.

The sensation of cognitive sedimentation originates in the way these events slide forward narratively. I know that Klaw’s reintegration during Secret Wars was written twenty-seven years before he appeared in Daredevil, but diegetically I only know Secret Wars took place sometime before Klaw fought Daredevil. As if I were looking at a cross-section of a riverbed, when I think about the progression of these memories as a whole, I can tell that each layer accrued at a different time – for instance, I know all of this did not happen to Klaw in a week – yet the exact distinction between them is difficult to parse. I am left with an overall sense of them as one abridged representation of Klaw’s continuity. In my mind, the quasi-narrative of these three distinct stages reflects a character who has changed and evolved in major ways: his body was transmuted into pure energy, then he was resurrected as a madman, and then he reappears in a

65 This does not mean Klaw had no other appearances between 1984 and 2011. He has shown up in multiple issues during that period, but I personally have little to no familiarity with them.
Of course, Klaw’s existence has been narratively constructed. When prompted to think about Klaw’s timeline, I am unable to ignore that fictionality, which is why he can only attain fleshiness. The issues that these memories originate from were written by different authors, who brought fresh ideas to the character. My memories of these events likewise retain the signature art style of the aesthetic-images. When compressed together into a sedimented whole, the individualistic characteristics of these creators ensure a tension between these different periods that gives me the sensation of variance across Klaw’s timeline.

Three different authorial voices came up with these events: the two Dazzler issues were written by the team of Danny Fingeroth and Tom DeFalco, then Shooter took up the reins with Secret Wars, and Mark Waid wrote the Daredevil story twenty-seven years later. This is but a tiny fraction of the creators who have added continuity to Klaw’s timeline over the years. The Exquisite Corpse collaboration of all these voices on Klaw’s timeline is what contributes a signification of growth and change. One creator may be able to grow a character in this way, but over the course of thirty or so years their ideas are likely to become predictable. The ongoing serial narrative of Marvel Comics depends on a cadre of creators contributing new “takes” to a character like Klaw, always working to avoid redundancy. Creators regularly revive an IP after years of disuse, adding another layer of continuity to a stagnant timeline. If I had only read Secret Wars, Klaw would remain a one-dimensional lacky with an unhinged personality to me. I conceive of his timeline as varied because I have memories of other authors’ divergent
interpretations of him before (in *Dazzler*) and after (in *Daredevil*). What is rare about superhero comics is that supporting characters, like Klaw, are touched by so many creators that they end up being fleshed out to the same degree as a protagonist in another medium. Though Klaw exemplifies that situation, he is still a relatively obscure IP, which should indicate the sedimentation that can occur with more prominent, marquee characters, like Spider-Man, Captain America, or Captain Marvel. For each, there are thousands of issues worth of narrative events comprising their timelines.

That multiplicity of writers is complimented by illustrative variability. Coming from the same publication era, those *Dazzler* and *Secret Wars* panels adhere to the rules of the Marvel House Style, which means they eschew personal flourishes in favor of keeping characters “on model.” I notice this most in Klaw and Dazzler’s consistent body types and the omission of intricate details on their costumes. Scheele’s color contributions to both series also mean the palette remains in a narrow range of yellows and reds. Once these aesthetic-images have been saved in my memory, those similarities make it easier for me to erase the publication gap between them in sedimentation. The residue of their proximate release during the Eighties nonetheless influences how I conceive of these events in the context of Klaw’s overall timeline. Even though I still have no exact idea of the diegetic interval between Klaw being disintegrated and reintegrated, the aesthetic similarities replicated in my memory make me think these occurred closer together than his return in *Daredevil*. Admittedly, my mental-images of Springer, Colletta, Zeck, and Scheele’s panels cohere easier than theirs do with Paulo and Joe Rivera’s *Daredevil* panel. Released during an era of improved paper and printing quality, my

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66 Not every fan will have read these issues or possibly any issues about Klaw. Rather, this example stands in for the way readers attain more timeline markers for a character the deeper they dive. Another reader may have similar befores and afters for Klaw, but from entirely different issues. A sense of sedimented time does not come from memories of particular narrative events, but the compressing of events that convey change across time.
display of the Riveras’ work has a cleanness that the other memories lack. Part of that clarity is attributable to the duo’s partiality to a smooth, tightly inked line as well as colorist Javier Rodriguez’s balance of hue and tone. Much as the Eighties panels register as closer events, these traces of contemporary artwork and printing translate to the feeling of a diegetic gap of time.

When abridged in my image consciousness, these contrasts in art style lend a sense of progression to the timeline. Because the memories are visually delineated, the events on Klaw’s timeline are demarcated. They become different periods in time without having to be specific time periods just as the advancement of art techniques suggest a passage of time without clearly expressing how much time has passed. The variation of styles similarly becomes a visual compliment to Klaw’s succession of states. I feel like he has undergone recurring changes because the art styles replicated in my memory alter across the timeline. The more aesthetic-images I save to memory, the greater the potential for visual variance. As I compress those memories together into a sedimented totality, the fleshier the character becomes through the implication of variance and change. It is through cognitively distinguishing the layers, yet still responding to them as a whole span of undefined time that the character appears complex.

Conclusion – How This Component Builds the Universe

In lieu of the universe’s diegetic time paralleling real time, Marvel and DC have settled on narrative timelines that slide forward to align with the present. The method has the potential to sap the fictional characters that populate a universe of any facticity or realism. Superhero comics’ serialization and Exquisite Corpse Creation have become the industry’s means of supplanting that lost sense of realistic time. Event details being reprised consistently turns them into landmarks on a character’s timeline, a practice which grants the event an air of historical documentation. By compressing landmark and other narrative events into the amorphous
parameters of the sliding timeframe, superhero comics engender the reader to experience these characters as realistic or “fleshy.”

Since these superhero IP are not flesh and blood, that “fleshiness” should be contradictory. The industry’s resources allow creators opportunity to evolve a character incrementally over multiple decades and serialized texts. Because the narrative events that define that evolution are reiterated like historical accounts and compressed into a fluid mental approximation of the character’s timeline in readers’ minds, those readers are given a false impression of something akin to the change and growth of a real human. The reader never forgets that these IP are fictional, but the cognitive sensation of a sedimented timeline makes it easy to relate to them as something that has corporeality. That end result arises from this process:

1. As readers acquire memories of events from throughout a character’s publication history, those memories are sedimented as a mental conception of the character’s timeline.

2. In sedimentation, context about when the events were first published and the time between publications is ignored as cognition replicates the sliding timeline by compressing events together.

3. When sedimented together, the creative variation – both narrative and aesthetic – that is attached to these event memories implies that the character has something like the growth and change of a real lifetime.

As creators expand on each character’s timeline, more events become available for readers to sediment in memory. Eventually, a publisher’s entire IP catalog has been given extensively documented timelines. This means, the further readers venture into a publisher’s catalog of titles, the fleshier the whole universe becomes.
Component #5: Retconning Inconsistencies

In *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Mark J.P. Wolf grants that “The likelihood of inconsistencies occurring increases as a world grows in size and complexity” (75). While Wolf’s contention can apply to storyworlds overseen by a single authorial voice, inconsistencies are especially unavoidable in vast narrative universes managed by a collaboration of creators. Since a feeling of “universeness” depends upon fluid cognitive connectivity, “Inconsistencies. . . [can] distract and disrupt the audience’s mental image of the story,” halting the imagining-that process (*Building* 76).

While the sequential additions of Exquisite Corpse Creation and the ongoing serialized narrative of superhero comics are often responsible for continuity discrepancies between one creator’s work and another’s, they are also the industry’s best resources to fix the problems that do arise. In their article on consistency control in fictional creations, Rodrigo Lessa and João Araújo note that imaginary constructs are “Often. . .intentionally designed to house inconsistencies,” a mechanism superhero comics are so adept at that the practice has been given a specific name: retroactive continuity or retconning (91). In his book on the subject, Andrew J. Friedenthal describes the practice as “the revisiting of past stories. . .and adding a new piece of information to that older story, literally rewriting the past” (6). The revisiting and rewriting that retconning entails has frequently been an impetus for expanding narrative continuity. Creators lean on retcons to alter or update a character’s origins or personality to avoid stagnation. Retcons have been used to revive canonically deceased IP, frame a new IP or aspect of continuity as always having been part of the universe, revise a choice that was unpopular with

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67 Comics writer Roy Thomas claims to have been the first adopter of “retroactive continuity” as a term, used when he was responding to a fan letter in 1983’s *All-Star Squadron* #18 (Friedenthal 9). Thomas was an avid practitioner of the retcon, often writing issues that took place between two or more Golden Age era comics or heavily referencing pre-existing continuity in order to update or alter it.
the readership, and make other major changes to the ongoing narrative. When retcons of the sort occur, they stem from the medium’s perpetual serialization favoring/requiring a churn of original story ideas.

This component chapter does not seek to cover the extensive variety of retcons that exist across superhero comics’ history. Instead, the retconning of narrative inconsistencies will be the focus, as those retcons particularly utilize the medium’s resources to enable the coherent narrative connectivity that fuels universe-building. The gaps of time inherent to the medium’s serialization leave room to notice, then revise mistakes in later publications. As Lessa, Araújo, and Friedenthal are acknowledging, retconning happens in a variety of narrative mediums, but the “closure” and networked nature of comics have made readers amenable to continuity altering information being referenced, but never depicted or only being visualized after the fact. Aside from eidetically completing what lies unseen in the gutter, the serialized, installment nature of superhero comics necessitates a form of storytelling that points outside of the present text to interconnected paratexts. In this way, the narrative gap-filling that retconning accomplishes is expressly baked into comics.

Just because readers have become inured to retconning in superhero comics does not preclude inconsistencies from causing a cognitive dissonance. Coming across a contradiction in or omission of continuity causes the reader to notice the gap in their memory. Cognitively, the dissonance stems from grasping for a mental-image that does not exist or butting up against a conflict between perception and memory. Once a creator has retconned the inconsistency, the gap gets filled-in by the mental-image resulting from the retcon.
Between the Secret Wars tie-in issue Uncanny X-Men #180 and the first two issues of the crossover event, there is an inconsistent representation of Professor Charles Xavier’s disability. I

Figure 21 Xavier walks with his teammates will use these issues as a case study for discussing how these discrepancies register phenomenologically and how their retconning reinstates the universe-building process by supplying the reader material for cognitive connection.

Case Study - Inconsistencies with Professor Xavier

A few pages into Secret Wars #2, I come across a sequence of three large panels, with the first showing the heroes walking through a massive steel structure they have commandeered as their base of operations (see Fig. 21). When my eyes land on the panel, I register it as a whole, with the line of superheroes-as-chevrons along the bottom and Spider-Man perched at the top right creating a rough arrow leading into the panel’s bottom right corner. At this point, I am only
perceiving the characters as blurry silhouettes of color rather than zeroing in on their individual details. From there, my eyes focus in on the small, orange text box in the top left and start working down through the word balloons adjacent to it. Following those word balloons down to the character speaking – Reed Richards – I start examining the costume details for the first time. As my gaze moves past Richards and Captain America, I pause.

Looking out of place amongst the ostentatious outfits he is sandwiched between, a bald man in a navy blue suit, white dress shirt, and black tie walks alongside Captain America and Hawkeye. Though not as graphically iconic as his peers, the curved line of the character’s bald head suggests this is Professor Charles Xavier, the founder of The X-Men. I have paused, though, because I am not immediately sure. If this is Xavier, he is missing a defining feature. Famously one of the few disabled superheroes at either major publisher, Xavier’s wheelchair paired with his bald head are the two iconographic details that delineate him as a chevron. Manifested in the halting of my gaze, this aesthetic-image causes a cognitive dissonance between the (assumed) Xavier on the page and the generalized model of him saved to my image consciousness.

That is not to say I have no memories of an able-bodied Xavier. Responding to an aesthetic-image of Xavier walking, my mind calls forth mental-image displays from periods where the character was briefly abled: the rigid line of Xavier’s posture as he stands at the penthouse window of an X-Corporation building and the sleek black silhouette of a ganglier, black bodysuit-wearing Xavier, the curve of his head exaggerated by a rounded silver helmet.68 However, these memories are of continuity that takes place long after Secret Wars. Those

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68 These memories are of issues from Grant Morrison, Frank Quitely, and Igor Kordey’s New X-Men run and the tandem House of X and Powers of X miniseries by Jonathan Hickman and Pepe Larraz, respectively.
memories are a precedent for Xavier regaining the use of his legs, but they do not alleviate the

![Figure 22 Xavier wheelchair-bound in a previous issue](image)

...dissonance that caused this aesthetic-image to stick out in the first place. What I am registering is an absence of any memory that explains why Xavier does not require his wheelchair at this point in *Secret Wars*.

In search of an aesthetic-image that will supplant that omission, I instinctually start to Re-View the preceding pages. Scanning back through panels I have already read as I leaf through the pages of my TPB volume, I am looking for Xavier’s chevronic characteristics – the bands of blue that make up his suit and the smooth curve that outlines his head. Not noticing him by the time I reach the beginning of the issue, I realize that the panel of Xavier walking is the first time he appeared in *Secret Wars #2*, which explains why I had not experienced any dissonance before then. I continue into the first issue to confirm if I had overlooked a change in his ableness there. As my gaze scrolls across the pages, a panel in the upper right corner of a page catches my eye: the professor sitting between Colossus, the Human Torch, and Mr. Fantastic (see Fig. 22). I possess no distinct eidetic recollection of this specific panel, but my subconscious memories of Xavier being wheelchair-bound in this issue must have lingered behind my perception of him
walking in issue two. Not only was I sensing the incongruity between those stored memories and the aesthetic-image in the panel, but also a gap in mental-images to bridge those dissimilarities.

Since my TPB copy of Secret Wars includes excerpts from the tie-in issues that led up to the event, I think to check Uncanny X-Men #180 and see how Xavier was rendered there. Another inconsistency: artist John Romita, Jr. includes two wideshot panels of The X-Men walking in Central Park, with Xavier’s silhouette clearly omitting the outline of his chair. This seems to confirm that Mike Zeck incorrectly illustrated Xavier in Secret Wars #1. While these minor slip ups are not uncommon in a collaborative Exquisite Corpse system, it does imply that Shooter and Tom DeFalco (the editor of Secret Wars) did not notice Zeck’s error until after the first issue went to print. Whether caught by one of the creators after the fact or keen-eyed fans, the industry has become accustomed to patching over these minor errors by retroactively changing the continuity to explain away the inconsistency. Retcons are a prevalent tool for managing consistency in the universe building of superhero comics because of how appropriately they suit the resources of the industry. Given that these are stories released as installments with, usually, a month delay between them, the intervening time between issues offers creators, like Zeck and Shooter, the opportunity to retroactively explain an irregularity, like why Xavier arrived on Battleworld in his wheelchair.

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69 Though not included in this TPB edition, Uncanny X-Men #180 opens with Xavier playing basketball and thinking about his recovered ability to walk, further confirming he was not disabled at this point in continuity. 70 What is intriguing about Zeck, Shooter, and DeFalco’s mistake is how it suggests that the wheelchair is so essential to Xavier-as-Chevron in their memories that none of them noticed the inconsistency in the multiple passes it would have taken to approve the issue for publication.
Riffling back to the inciting panel from *Secret Wars #2*, I discover that six pages later Shooter uses a dialog exchange between Mr. Fantastic and the leader of The X-Men, Cyclops, as

![Image](image.png)

Figure 23 Mr. Fantastic’s dialog acts as a retcon of the previous Xavier inconsistencies an opportunity to retcon the Xavier error (see Fig. 23). Mr. Fantastic theorizes: “Professor X said he wasn’t in his wheelchair when he disappeared, though he arrived here in it! It’s as though The Beyonder ‘fixed’ little things.” Here Shooter uses the implication of an unseen action to, as Friedenthal phrases it, “rewrite the past,” letting The Beyonder’s limitless powers serve as a sort of metacommentary on the revisionary freedoms of superhero creators.

In an optimistic assessment, Wolf claims that “inconsistencies are treated by. . .fans as though they are merely gaps in the data, unexplained phenomena that further research and speculation will sort out and clear up” (*Building 78*). However, there are limits to how far fans will tolerate inconsistencies. Successfully building a fictional universe requires that gaps do not accrue beyond a fan’s ability to research or speculate. The cognitive dissonance gaps generate inevitably harms the cohesion of the universe, pulling back the curtain to reveal the fictionality of its construction. Too many of these gaps and the connectivity needed to conceive of a
universe begins to lose purchase between mental-images, as their incongruity bars their relatability. As the construct weakens so too can the temptation to venture further into the universe.

The job of the retcon, then, is to supply readers with the cognitive material to bridge the gap and facilitate continued connectivity. Throughout the industry’s history, retcons have ranged from a line of dialog to a panel or sequence of panels to an entire issue or storyline’s worth of new narrative information. Retcons may also add new information without a pre-existing inconsistency as motivation, a byproduct of the creative riffing inherent to the Exquisite Corpse process. Even in those cases, the retcon still imparts material for readers to cognitively recall, alleviating dissonance with any related continuity.

The retcon’s triggering of mental action, then, is aligned with the foundational principles of comics. Because the gutter is already a gap of space which foregrounds the mental input of the reader to tie together individual aesthetic-images, comics automatically train readers to rely upon imagination as a means of fording those gaps. Scott McCloud’s asserts that the “Human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” every time our eyes pass across the gutter, making cognitive connectivity a foundational characteristic of the medium (66). Likewise with comics, I am used to the medium’s brevity and minimalism requiring an omission of unnecessary aesthetic-images and an implication of narrative

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71 Not unintentionally, McCloud’s words echo Sergei Eisenstein’s cinematic montage theory. In The Film Sense, Eisenstein allows that “a work of art must reproduce that process whereby. . .new images are built up in the human consciousness” in order that a “recognizable whole image is gradually composed out of its elements” (16 & 18). These are basic functions of perception and cognition that apply to existence, by and large. However, while those processes may apply broadly, as Eisenstein is suggesting, there are nuanced differences. Whereas cinema does require a mental engagement to perceive still frames as fluid motion despite edits, the movement ferries the viewer through the whole text. Page layouts in comics may also direct the reader, but the comprehension of narrative within a text and across paratexts necessitates an active and continual mental connection at the level of the panel and page as well as the paratextual issues that comprise a narrative universe. Both mediums rely on cognition to facilitate montage, but the stillness and sequential segmentation of comics foreground the action of mental-image connection constantly.
information without visual representation. Where in a film, television show, or novel I would be dissatisfied with a narrative that relies on a previously unseen *deus ex machina* to solve its conflict, superhero comics since the Golden Age have implemented such a tactic because of spatial and length restrictions. This is why retcons have become so natural within superhero comics. An insertion of information into a pre-existing sequence was already present at the level of the gutter.\(^\text{72}\)

When I read Mr. Fantastic’s explanation of Xavier’s change in mobility, I am not surprised to experience an act of imagination that fills the gaps between the incongruent aesthetic-images from *Uncanny X-Men #180* and the first two issues of *Secret Wars*. Since there is no visual representation of The Beyonder enacting these changes, my mind formulates images to approximate what Reed Richards describes. In *Imagining*, Edward S. Casey accurately states that “no aspect of any imaginative experience. . .presents itself as both spontaneous and controlled at once,” which captures both how involuntarily a display apprehends for me upon reading Shooter’s dialog as well as the way I contribute to what that mental-image entails (65).

Having been given no depiction of The Beyonder to this point outside of a glowing gash in the blackness of the cosmos, my mind automatically forgoes any explicit visualization of the character. Instead, I cognitively amalgamate my previous perceptions of Zeck’s artistic style and Christie Scheele’s color palette into a mental-image that aligns with the panel of Xavier in *Secret Wars #1*. The content of the display includes Xavier sitting in his wheelchair alone amidst the rocky outcroppings that comprise most of Battleworld. Unlike memories of comics panels, the

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\(^{72}\) Once again, there is overlap here with processes in cinema. Jean-Pierre Oudart in “Cinema and Suture,” applies a psychoanalytic concept to the way a viewer aligns themselves with the invisible position of the camera. Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” elaborates on the same process by suggesting that Classic Hollywood Cinema sutures the viewer into a “male gaze.” Jean-Louis Baudry’s work on the “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus” likewise sees this suturing as a means to associate the viewer with an ideological viewpoint. The comics readers is using a similar absence – not of the camera, but of the gutter – to insert themselves through cognitive imagination.
elements of this imaginary mental-image fluctuate frequently, causing me to re-image them repeatedly. What appears with the most clarity are the colors – the royal blue of Xavier’s jacket, the muddy tan of the rocks, the pure white of Xavier’s shirt. While the nuanced details of his tie, the mechanisms of the wheelchair, or the patterns on his lap blanket are muddled, his silhouette is rigid, available for me to trace around its boxy bottom half up around the rounded peak of his head jutting above the chair. I have surrounded him with a glowing aura – whose color and details shift with each re-imagining – to represent the powers of The Beyonder at work. Another “panel” apprehends for me, maintaining the same color scheme, but now Xavier is standing, walking away from his chair. I contextualize these mental-images as occurring somewhere between the ending of Secret Wars #1 and #2, providing them an arranged order in relation to my pre-existing memories of panels from those issues.

When I first came upon the panel of Xavier walking in Secret Wars #2, my mind reflexively groped for a memory that was not present in my image consciousness. Without any mental-image to explain why Xavier was standing upright in the panel, I experienced a dissonance between what I was perceiving and the stored, subconscious memories of Xavier from Secret Wars #1. Spurred by this inconsistency to Re-View the previous issues, I found no aesthetic-image to fill-in the gap in my memory. Shooter’s later retconning of this inconsistency, however, did provide me that mental-image. Though imaginary, this mental-image nonetheless slots into the cognitive gap caused by the inconsistency between Uncanny X-Men #180 and the first two issues of Secret Wars. By prompting me to generate that mental-image, Shooter’s retcon lets me connect these issues, which keeps my conception of the Marvel Universe coherent.
Conclusion – How This Component Builds the Universe

As vast narrative universes maintained by a multitude of creators, superhero comics are frequently riddled with inconsistencies. With enough of these inconsistencies, the universe being built begins to fall apart for readers, because cognitive dissonance disallows connectivity. The medium-specific characteristics of comics aid creators in forestalling this dissonance and continuing to build the universe:

1. Because of their need for brevity and use of the gutter, comics acclimate readers to cognitively input narrative information that has not been visualized.

2. That foundational tendency makes the retcon an acceptable tool for fixing narrative inconsistencies. By supplying the mental-image (either through imagination or a newly imaged memory) that was originally experienced as a gap, the connectivity necessary to universe building is repaired.

As stated upfront, the retroactive addition of continuity frequently serves as a tool for supplying superhero comics’ serialized narratives with original ideas and new creative avenues to explore. While those forms of retconning can aid the Exquisite Corpse and Sedimented Timeline aspects of universe-building, the retconning of inconsistencies particularly assists readers in overcoming any cognitive dissonances that hamper universal connectivity.

Component #6: Reminiscence

In my phenomenological description of previous components, there have been frequent occasions where aesthetic-images cause me to remember comics I read in my past. She-Hulk colliding with The Enchantress capacitated a search for previous memories of the two fighting; the appearance of the black Spider-Man costume in Secret Wars #8 brought up memories about the symbiote’s later continuity; Dazzler #10’s flashback to the previous issue called to mind
mental-images saved in my short-term memory. Superhero comics exploit the medium’s resources to precipitate this kind of reminiscing.

By doing so, comics qualify as what Edward S. Casey names “reminiscentia.” While Casey describes how family documents elicited memories of his deceased grandmother, he allows that any “external factor acting as a memorial support” can be considered a reminiscentia (Remembering 110). In particular, the networked “relational play” of comics that Thierry Groensteen emphasizes in The System of Comics fosters reminiscence by training readers to think back to previous panels as they read (17). Superhero comics extrapolate that networked nature further in their referencing of interlinked paratexts that house the narrative universe’s continuity. Each of the universe-building components that I have proposed so far affect some cognitive “looking” forward or backwards on the reader’s part. Colliding Chevrons and Hero Tableaus draw up memories about superheroes in conflict; Exquisite Corpse Creation and Sedimented Timelines involve the interrelation of the past and future work or continuity of a creator or character; retcons get the reader to think about what was and now is in terms of continuity. As a genre, superhero comics are also concerned with longstanding rivalries (every hero has an archenemy), the retelling of origin stories, and on-again, off-again romances (think of Peter Parker and Mary Jane or Batman and Catwoman). Superhero comics are reminiscentia par excellence, materially constructed and narratively penned to make readers reflect on their history with the universe.

When I engage in reminiscence with the aid of a comic reminiscentia, I am re-imaging previously stored memories of the narrative universe. Casey’s description of the process stresses how it is not about simply “seeing” mental-images again, but experiencing them anew:
To relive the past in reminiscence is not merely to re-present to ourselves certain experienced events or previously acquired items of information. . . . Rather, it is a matter of actively re-entering the "no longer living worlds" of that which is irrevocably past. In reliving the past, we try to re-enter such worlds not just as they were – which is, strictly speaking, impossible – but as they are now rememberable in and through reminiscence.”

(Remembering 107)

Casey’s language about “no longer living worlds” seems to specifically imply past lived perceptions, so the process takes on a different meaning when applied to universes that were never “alive” to begin with. Comprised of aesthetic-images, readers can never enter a superhero universe in any spatial manner. It is only through the cognitive interlinking of our mental-images of those worlds/universes that we “enter” them by grasping at their conceptual whole. Reminiscence about these fictional universes, then, allows the fan to stabilize and clarify the re-imaged details and connections of comics’ aesthetic-images. Doing so helps to codify, harden, and reenforce the lines, colors, shapes, and chevronic elements that make these aesthetic-images beneficial to mental imaging in the first place. Because superhero comics are excellent reminiscentia, it is these frequent acts of stabilizing reminiscence that make these universes so personal to each reader.

My phenomenological descriptions of previous components have favored comic-as-reminiscentia engaging me in what Casey distinguishes as “auto-reminiscing,” where I was “Treating myself as a reminiscential partner” (Remembering 118). Having focused on auto-reminiscence in the previous components, this final component is concerned with group reminiscence’s contribution to the reader’s cognitive universe-building. Aware that

“Reminiscers naturally seek partners in a common enterprise of reliving the past,” Casey
recognizes that the reason for group reminiscence differs from its solitary counterpart as participants are “checking out each other’s memories in view of differing experiential modes and perspectives” (Remembering 114-115). The fanzines, letters columns, and conventions of superhero comics’ past and the social media, online forums, and listservs of its future each facilitate group reminiscence, but the comics stores of the Direct Market furnish group gatherings that are localized and immediately interactive. When fans gather at these stores, they become a “sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body,” as Jürgen Habermas describes, making the private acts of auto-reminiscence into a shared activity (52). Whereas Habermas’ conception of the public sphere enables bourgeois citizens the ability to participate in political discourse free of government scrutiny, fannish spheres not only validate a private hobby through group approval but expand the act of reminiscence beyond the self.\footnote{In Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation, Carolyn Cocca contends that the industry’s shift from “when comics were sold on newsstands, [and] companies knew they had to appeal to many different types of people” to the Direct Market resulted in a “concentrating [of] the fan base” that “fostered...a culture in many shops of exclusivity and gate-keeping” (216). Unfortunately, women, people of color, and queer fans have bore the brunt of this gate-keeping, which inevitably means that public group reminiscence has not always been available to all readers. As I share my own group reminiscences, I acknowledge that my identity as a white, straight, cisgendered man was what allowed me to hold these conversations without rebuke or harassment.}

Group reminiscence has the same stabilizing benefits as auto-reminiscence, but the move from private to public comes with the opportunity for recounted memories to influence the image consciousness of other participants. The shared discourse of group reminiscence can authenticate a universe’s continuity through the sharing of perspectives. Reminiscers mutual validation of each other’s conception of the events and characters that comprise a universe, makes them resemble reality through consensus and appreciation. Additionally, the differing perspectives Casey writes about are potential avenues to learn about new continuity or recontextualize the details and connections of associated memories; group reminiscence at local
comic book stores (LCS) has long been a means for fans to discover unknown comics or aspects of the universe’s history.

Moving away from *Secret Wars* in this final case study, I will instead rely on memories from an impressionable period in my burgeoning fandom. A group reminiscence session at my LCS, Pulp Fiction Comics & Games (where I would later work), epitomizes the public sphere mentality enabled by the Direct Market. On this night, I was part of a group of comic book fans, including two of my closest friends (Al and Joe) and two future industry professionals (Dennis “Hopeless” Hallum and Kevin Mellon), brought together within the meeting space of the store. It was in this environment, that the five of us were able to publicly exchange our notions about these fictional universes through reminiscence. During our winding discussion, my understandings of Batman and Kraven the Hunter were reasserted and complicated, respectively.

**Case Study – Comic Store Reminiscence**

During my senior year of high school, the weekend ritual for my friends and I was to loiter at Pulp Fiction on Friday and Saturday nights, lazily combing through back issues while swapping opinions about DC and Marvel, campaigning for our favorite creators, and hypothesizing about where storylines were heading. While superhero comics had been a hobby of mine since adolescence, my fandom flourished once Pulp Fiction afforded me an environment to speak with other fans. While I had visited plenty of comics stores before, I had never found one with a welcoming atmosphere. Pulp’s first owner and Dennis (an early hire) became the “fan curators” Derek Kompare described in Chapter One, coaxing me into sampling a wider

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74 At this time, Dennis and Kevin were outlining a miniseries (*Gearhead*) that would later be published by Arcana Comics. Dennis would go on to write multiple series for Marvel (*Avengers Arena, All-New X-Men, Spider-Woman, Spider-Man: City at War*) and Boom! Studios (*WWE, WWE: NXT Takeover*), while Kevin continued to illustrate comics (like the Image Comics’ miniseries *Heart*) before transitioning into storyboard work for animated television, like *Archer*. 
array of comics every time we started a conversation. I would rest my forearms on the cool glass of the display cases, until some topic led Dennis to come around the counter, pull an issue or TPB off the shelf, and plop it in my hands, followed by a confident “You should read this!” As customers would filter in and conversations drifted from subject to subject, my knowledge of the Marvel and DC Universes was nurtured by the discourse. With everyone sharing memories of comics read and speculating about those yet to be read, my image consciousness was stimulated, both recalling comics I had absorbed and storing imaged depictions of those being described.

On the night I have chosen as my case study, Al, Joe, and I first progressed up the wall of newly released comics, then transitioned over to the block of custom-built back issue cabinets running up the center of the storefront. We casually chatted as the metallic click of the retractable drawers punctuated our conversation. Unbeknownst to us at the time, this tradition was predicated less on finding merchandise to purchase and more on using these comics as reminiscentia. I slipped a mylar bagged copy of *Kingdom Come #4* out of the back issues, making it a prop for reminiscing about future Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman commiserating over dinner. That issue became a gateway for us to jointly recall and vocalize information we had saved in our memory.

As Casey puts it, “We reminisce not only to savor but to understand, or re-understand, the past more adequately,” here a process involving the clarification and interconnection of aesthetic-image memories (*Remembering* 117). By coming across *Kingdom Come #4* in Pulp’s bins, their *back issue* archive enabled me to reassert my own *mental* archive. While describing the issue’s ending to my friends, I was spurred to image its panels before I put them into words. A formative comic for my understanding of DC’s “holy trinity,” my reminiscence concerned the issue’s characterizations of these IP, using the opportunity as a way of codifying them for
myself. As I clutched the issue’s plastic sleeve, holding it out to Al and Joe, the photorealistic brush strokes of its artist, Alex Ross, displayed in my image consciousness. As an artist, Ross excels at “performance.” When I effusively described Batman’s begrudging reaction to Planet Krypton (a tacky superhero-themed restaurant the trio have chosen to eat at) it was Ross’ expressive rendering of the character that I channeled (see Fig. 24). In my memory, the nuanced contour of Ross’ line imparts Batman’s disdain through a cocked eyebrow; in another, a dismissive posture, as he hands off a menu without making eye contact. Telling my friends about this scene, where Batman scoffs at a waiter dressed as Robin, I do not indicate these gestural details, but instead the attitude that they convey in my mind. In reminiscing about the grouchy, snide personality encapsulated in Ross’ linework, I was reminding myself of behaviors that define Batman as a character. As Casey implies, reminiscence of the sort is how I not only experience nostalgia for this formative superhero memory, but also how I reset my internal understanding of that which is being remembered – what is and is not Batman-esque. Our gathering at the store motivated that remembrance. By relating the substance of those panels, I affectively re-entered the scene, reasserting my foundational ideas about Batman in the process. In this way, reminiscence can be a potent tool for upholding the tenets of a universe.

The benefit of group reminiscence in a public sphere is that I am not reasserting my understanding in isolation. By granting the three of us access to the Kingdom Come back issue, Pulp Fiction provided a reminiscentia that spurred all of us to consider our understanding of Batman’s personality. Though far more superficial than Habermas’ bourgeois political assembly, as a gathering space the LCS enables fans to “confer in an unrestricted fashion.

75 To describe the responsibilities of comics creators, film terminology has occasionally been used as a shorthand. Comics artists are said to be the equivalent of the cinematographer (choosing the shots) as well as the actors in that they define the expressions, body language, and all-around “performance” of characters on the page.
Figure 24 Alex Ross' expressive brush strokes convey Batman's gruffness as he dismisses "Robin"
As I wriggled the *Kingdom Come* issue snuggly into its bin, Joe was inspired by my anecdote to join in the reminiscence: “It’s that he’s untrusting, right? Like the whole deal going on in *The OMAC Project*.” Continuing to reflect, Joe recounted events from this recent miniseries, highlighting the revelation that Batman built a satellite to spy on the DC heroes.

Knowing that we had all been keeping up with *The OMAC Project*, Joe dwelling on memories of that miniseries was an invitation for Al and me to do the same. As he spoke, I thought back to panels from the miniseries that encapsulated the personality traits Joe was connecting to my *Kingdom Come* memories. It was the haze of artificial light emitting off the Batcave’s grid of monitors that anchored my mental-image display. In my memory, Batman was seated in front of these monitors, surrounded by darkness trailing off at the diffuse edges of the glow, strategizing how to undo his mistake. The mental-image Joe’s suggestion called forth encapsulated what I was trying to voice during my own reminiscence: the distrust, the loner mentality, stubbornness, ego. Thought of in quick succession, these two memories collide in my image consciousness to affirm my understanding of Batman as a character. Unlike my initial reminiscence, this understanding has been substantiated by my partner in reminiscence. Through that conference of shared memories, our aligned perspectives confirm beliefs about a central figure in the DC Universe. Group reminiscence aids universe-building in this way, creating an opportunity for the participation of multiple fans to mutually confirm and stabilize their conception of the fiction.

Besides reenforcing pre-existing memories, listening to other’s reminiscence can be an opportunity for altering one’s understanding or even a gateway into the acquisition of new memories. “Reminiscing. . .need not be narrative in format,” Casey reminds us, getting at not
only the non-linearity with which memories are regularly recounted, but also the segues and
tangents of group reminiscence that led to unexpected subjects (*Remembering* 106). On this
night, Dennis and Kevin intersecting with our bout of reminiscence ferried us to a completely
different topic and a separate superhero universe. As Dennis restocked the shelves and Kevin
trailed behind, Al, Joe, and I progressed to the S tab of the back issue bins, musing aloud about
various Spider-Man back issues. The cover of one issue featuring Kraven the Hunter – a big
game enthusiast who views Spider-Man as attractive prey – elicited a comment from Al, “You
know, I’ve never read that famous Kraven storyline. What’s it called?” I offhandedly
responded, “‘Kraven’s Last Hunt.’ Yeah, me neither.” Midway through reaching up to deposit a
handful of new issues on the wall, Dennis tilted his head back, “None of you have read that?”
“You should, it’s like the best Spider-Man story,” Kevin piped in without looking up from his
laptop. And with those comments, our reminiscence took a new turn.

By this point, Dennis and Kevin knew the three of us well, but that did not stop a twinge
of anxiety hitting me anytime we all interacted. The two of them were ten years our seniors,
burgeoning comic creators, and basically royalty within the store’s hierarchy. As a nerdy,
insecure high schooler, I thought of them both as role models. Just revisiting this night, the
nervous pressure I felt trying to impress them wells up in my bodily memory. Only in their late
twenties at the time, Dennis and Kevin were still immature, themselves, quick to put us
foolhardy teenagers in our place with biting sarcasm. To counter my nerves and inferiority
complex, I would try to project a false overconfidence that usually led me to blurt out my words
or fumble for a counterargument. But this insecurity also caused me to cognitively entrench
myself. In the heat of these (sometimes combative) reminiscences, I would push myself to delve
through my subconsciousness for memories or information relevant to the discussion. Fear of
being ridiculed meant that I had to be certain of the details or significations associated with the mental-images. Concentrating on the details in turn reinforced their eidetic particularities, likely a reason I can recall certain panels with clarity today.

Simultaneously eager and skittish to respond to Dennis and Kevin, I feigned composure by leaning my elbows on the slick laminate coding of the bins, peering between the action figures, boardgames, and statues lining its surface to face them on the other side. When my “reading resume” was questioned, I tried to distract from the omission by bringing up something I had read. I managed to squeak out, “He’s in the black costume in that one, right? Like he is in Straczynski’s “Back in Black” storyline,” before Kevin cut me off, “You haven’t read that many Spider-Man comics at all, have you?” My bluff called, Kevin and Dennis began bandying about details from “Kraven’s Last Hunt” as they came to mind, engaged in a sub-group-reminiscence that we were privy to.

Without having read the issues being described, my mind was rapidly imaging each beat being tossed off – “Spider-Man gets buried alive…” “Then Kraven commits suicide…” “But not before he puts on Spider-Man’s costume!” Envisioning the teardrop white eyes and zig-zag legged spider emblem of the black costume protruding from a patch of dirt was easy, since I had ample memories of it and Venom from other media to work off. But rectifying my mental-image of a suicidal Kraven with the goofy leopard print tights wearing, lion’s head vested joke from the cover of that Spider-Man back issue was more of a challenge. After Dennis returned to stocking the shelves and the three of us resumed our back issue reminiscence, I flipped through the bins with a purpose. Over that night and the coming weeks, I was able to scrounge together the six issues comprising the “Kraven’s Last Hunt” storyline.76

76 These include Web of Spider-Man #31-32, The Amazing Spider-Man #293-294, and Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-Man #131-132.
Devouring them in one sitting, I poured over the aesthetic-images I had tried to imagine as Kevin and Dennis reminisced. Where those imaginary mental-images lacked the eidetic consistency of an artist’s signature style, causing them to fade in clarity with each re-imagining, there was a perverse maturity to what I was perceiving on the page that was immanently memorable. A sequence of panels showing Kraven submerging himself in a pile of spiders, only to eat his way out became a guiding memory for this interpretation of the character. The art team of Mike Zeck (of Secret War fame) and Bob McLeod rendered him in the nude, with sunken eyes and a furrowed brow, elements now emblazoned in my memory. These grim visuals expanded into other memories of Spider-Man and Kraven within my image consciousness, their sharp contrast to the lighter, jovial colors and characters of those mental-images drastically noticeable (see Fig. 25). The archly villainous jet black goatee that had registered Kraven as a stereotypically Machiavellian foe in my memory had now been twisted into a menacing visage. These contrasting memories sharing in the same, yet repurposed chevronic elements interlinked them in my mind to form a fleshier understanding of the character. Now I shared in Dennis and Kevin’s perspective. Pulp Fiction’s archive of back issues – each a potential reminiscientia – and existence as a sphere for fannish reminiscence worked in conjunction that night. By partaking in this session of group reminiscence, I was led to new cognitive connections that brought different eras of Spider-Man continuity together to flesh out his corner of the Marvel Universe.

**Conclusion – How This Component Builds the Universe**

Like Pulp Fiction was for my friends and me, since their inception LCSs have become public spheres for fans to gather and re-enter the universes they fondly remember. As an archive of current and back issues, reminiscientia are plentiful, available to lead participants in meandering spells of tangential group reminiscence. Possessing some of the same cognitive
Figure 25 Opposed versions of Kraven the Hunter brought up through reminiscence
benefits as auto-reminiscence, the joint reminisential acts contribute to universe-building in additional ways:

1. Necessitating a recall of saved mental-images, reminiscence stabilizes their eidetic details through re-imaging.

2. The shared perspectives offered through group reminiscence can reassert and clarify a participant’s understanding of a narrative universe.

3. Differing perspectives can likewise induce participants to create new memories and connect them in unfamiliar ways.

Along with Colliding Chevrons, Hero Tableaus, Exquisite Corpse Creation, Sedimented Timelines, and Retconning Inconsistencies, Reminiscence is how the industry builds their universes using the resources of superhero comics. Each of these universe components utilize the aesthetic-images of comics to engage the reader’s cognition in ways that store and combine those evocative visuals as mental-images. It is through those connected eidetic images that readers experience these superhero universes as vast, richly complex, and dauntingly incomprehensible.

**CHAPTER 3: HOW TO FEEL A UNIVERSE USING SUPERHERO COMICS**

Superhero universes have reached vast narrative status because their components build continuity through connectivity on the page, which is then replicated in readers’ minds. Colliding Chevrons and Hero Tableaus forcefully connect characters at the level of individual aesthetic-images, Exquisite Corpse Creation and Sedimented Timelines pull together narrative events distanced by creative control or publication dates, disruptions to connectivity are patched by Retconning Inconsistencies, and Reminiscence reasserts cognitive connections or offers new ones. Once that extensive web of connections has built the universe, it can be felt as a whole.
I refer to the activity whereby readers are made to experience that feeling as the “deep dive,” because that phrase has become a shorthand for someone investing in thorough, digressive research on a subject. Since the formation of the Direct Market and the later arrival of the Internet, the industry has constructed its narrative universes in anticipation of fans deep diving through them. Not only are these universes built on a seemingly bottomless well of continuity, but also connections that are assembled to propel readers through that continuity. Industrially, those connections intend to sell product by inciting research that stimulates consumerism. Though the industry’s creative efforts have yielded those connections, publishers leave room for readers to choose how they navigate these linkages. The first section of this chapter sees that connectivity and user autonomy as recreating the cross-referentiality of early encyclopedias, while anticipating the Internet’s networked web of hyperlinks.

While autonomy entails the choice of which links to follow, which to ignore, and when to conclude a deep dive session, now more than ever readers likewise have control over which archive they use to conduct their research. Where the Direct Market made the deep dive a possibility by becoming the first localized archive for superhero comics, the Internet has brought that archive into readers’ homes in a more comprehensive way. Nowadays, readers are likely to use a combination of these two methodologies, but each differently affect how research time is experienced by the body conducting the deep dive. Issue hunting at the local comic book store (LCS) requires an investment of travel time and bodily effort to sift through the store’s backstock; the immediate accessibility of the Internet compounds the availability of information to dive through, often causing the researcher to lose track of time altogether.

My approach to the deep dive throughout the rest of the chapter understands it both as the hyperlinked design of the industry and the researcher’s bodily experience of that design in terms
of time committed and efforts taken. Like the previous chapter, a thick description of the deep dive from a phenomenological perspective will serve as the case study. This will be divided into three sections centered around how the deep dive gets readers to feel these universes. Feeling takes on a triple meaning, in this case. First, bodily feelings of effort as readers use comics stores and online resources to conduct the deep dive – here in relation to references appended to explicit notation (or vocative links). Second, the reader feeling their way through an overabundance of hyperlinks to forge unique mental-image connections – here exemplified by references without notation or a specific destination (taxonomic links). Third, how the ontologies of the interlinked mental-images resulting from the deep dive are what makes readers feel the “universeness” of superhero comics.

To initiate my deep dive case studies, I have chosen a respected, but standard monthly series released by DC Comics from May 1987 to June 1992 called Suicide Squad.77 Written by John Ostrander (joined by his wife, Kim Yale, with issue twenty-three) and illustrated by various artists, Suicide Squad typifies superhero comics produced after the establishment of the Direct Market, encouraging readers to deep dive.78 As Tegan O’Neil gushes in an article for The A.V. Club, “The fun of a book like Suicide Squad was seeing all the ways a knowledgeable creator like Ostrander could incorporate so many disparate elements of DC history,” a formula that prioritized character cameos, crossovers, and other links to continuity. About a unit of imprisoned supervillains, their superpowered handlers, and the government agents overseeing operations, the conceit of Suicide Squad delved into the DC history O’Neil mentions by sending

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77 Introduced in 1959’s The Brave and the Bold #25, the original Suicide Squad (aka Task Force X) was assembled from a ragtag group of military professionals who had survived near-death experiences. This original version of the team was created by writer Robert Kanigher (a veteran of DC comics) and artist Ross Andru, but featured no superpowered members.

78 John Ostrander co-wrote the team’s first appearance with Len Wein in the third issue of a crossover event called Legends. Suicide Squad #1 would follow in March of 1987 with Ostrander handling sole writing duties and Luke McDonnell providing pencils (later to be replaced by Geof Isherwood).
the team on potentially deadly covert missions in return for time off their prison sentences.

Deployed to all corners of the DC Universe, characters would unexpectedly die or leave the team, allowing Ostrander to dig into DC’s dusty back catalog of IPs to replace them. Even though the series ran for sixty-six issues, I will be sticking primarily to issue five and twenty-four. Because the deep dive inherently implies exploration beyond a starting point, *Suicide Squad* will lead me to a handful of other DC series, including *DC Comics Presents*, *Justice League of America*, *Captain Atom*, *Manhunter*, and *Harley Quinn*.

**How Hyperlinking Happens**

Though the deep dive is used to great effect in superhero comics, the practice did not originate with the medium. As Alexander Halavais points out, “There is... a relationship between the traditional uses of citation and the development of the hyperlink” that the design of superhero comics straddles (40). Michael Zimmer charts the earliest form of the hyperlink back to the “*renvois*, a system of cross-references featured prominently in the *Encyclopédie*,” which “was published by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert in France, beginning in 1751, with the final volumes released in 1772” (96 & 102). The *renvois* – intended as a means of taking back control of information and education from the church – was a cross-referencing

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79 This practice is not uncommon in superhero comics, with certain team books comprised entirely or primarily of C- or D-list characters. This gimmick has proven fruitful, *Suicide Squad* included, for a few reasons. On the industry side, providing lesser-known IP an opportunity to be fleshed out increases the potential for them to acquire or regain popularity among the fanbase. In that situation, publishers do not have to pay for a creator to invent a new property (which may necessitate contract negotiations about rights and residuals), but instead reap newfound rewards from an IP they already own. Renewed relevance can, in turn, generate interest in the character’s past appearances and their viability as selling points in future series. These types of IP are often interesting to creators, as well, since they come with less continuity baggage, providing them a chance to exert their voice in an industry that relies on established properties. On the reader side, the gimmick of a title that stars lesser known or previously uninteresting characters can be appealing, too. One, there is a sort of “sideshow” spectacle to the mismatched mélange of characters whose designs were too unusual to be memorable in the first place. Two, by having the spotlight placed solely on them, characters who had previously been overshadowed or underutilized can develop new facets. For fans who crave the experience of learning information that enriches their understanding of the universe, these C-lister team books are often introductions to an ensemble of IP they were unfamiliar with.
system that connected one concept within the *Encyclopédie* to another elsewhere in the volume. Zimmer stresses that Diderot and d’Alembert’s purpose for devising the *renvois* cross-referencing system was so that readers could “organize and navigate information following their own intuitive means, based not on imposed hierarchies or alphabetization but on their own habits of thinking: *following leads, making connections, building trails of thought*” (107; emphasis added). The self-motivated progression reflects what superhero publishers have equally embraced over time, simultaneously directing readers towards related paratexts while ultimately letting them choose which references they investigate.

During the Golden Age, any complex continuity and narrative serialization was downplayed with an eye to the design of the distribution system. The newsstand model’s reliance on returnability – precluding the maintenance of a dedicated backstock – as well as its split investment in comics and other periodical publications shaped how superhero and non-superhero stories were told. Creators had to anticipate that their readership may not be able to find the next issue (or, even if they did find it, may not have had the allowance to afford it), which caused them to tell stories that were relatively self-contained outside of the occasional cliffhanger. Additionally, these comics were written with adolescent readers in mind, necessitating that plots remain uncomplicated while still indulging in a childishly fantastic logic. After the cultural backlash that laid comics low during the post-war years, the industry was forced to take a new approach to reclaim and expand a portion of their audience. Resources that had already been at the industry’s disposal were marshalled differently and combined with newly available resources to increase the interconnectivity of titles being published. The saving grace was doing the opposite of what had worked during the Golden Age.

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80 That is not to say that comics prior to the Silver Age avoided narrative or diegetic linkages altogether. When the popularity of superhero comics lapsed during this period, romance, Western, crime, and horror comics rushed in to
Rather than perpetuate the Golden Age norm of restraining narrative information to a comic book’s limited page count, the industry leaned into an expansion of continuity across a catalog of titles. Instead of being a deterrent to that expansion, the condensed material dimensions of a comic became an excuse and resource for dispersing narrative across numerous paratexts. Publishers intentionally started urging readers to seek out other texts to gain a fuller understanding of the universal narrative. To do so, Marvel and DC repurposed the *renvois* model of the *Encyclopédie* through the deployment of editor’s notes (explicit redirection to other titles), crossovers, team-ups, cameos, dialogic references to aspects of continuity, and the offloading of expository information to paratexts. These hyperlink equivalents comprise a web-like set of pathways for readers to traverse when deep diving; imagine multiple strands of yarn spilling out of each issue, tethered to even more issues, out of which spill further strands *ad infinitum*. What were once individual texts restricted by spatial limitations now become an interconnected narrative network that guided readers to other paratexts while still letting them determine when and where they wish to move beyond the boundaries of a single text.

Where this kind of cross-referencing typifies encyclopedic works, it is in many ways directly counter to the forward progression of narrative. The serialized storytelling that has become the norm in superhero comics privileges the next installment, panel, or page, while these links are frequently diverting readers elsewhere. Working at a cross-purpose, the forward momentum of serialized storytelling becomes simultaneously directed backwards, sideways, and diagonally. Once again, this discordance of narrative objectives gets turned to the industry’s take their place. Some of these other comics genres and series, such as the various Archie Comics titles (*Archie’s Pal Jughead*, *Archie’s Girls Betty & Veronica*, *Katy Keene*, *Archie’s Rival Reggie*, etc.), participated in their own shared storyworlds, with various IPs crossing over into each other’s series. Like previous superhero comics, such as *All Star Comics*, that brought together characters introduced in separate, solo titles, these non-superhero storyworlds remained relatively episodic, barely referencing or establishing any canon beyond the broad strokes. As such, the appearance of Reggie in *Archie’s Pal Jughead* could point back to the former’s solo title, but outside of that general synergy there was rarely any intricate narrative continuity between titles.
favor. In addition to being concerned about “what will happen next,” the prevalence of hyperlinks now trains fans to seek knowledge about what happened in the past, at the same time, or in a far off corner of the universe. Following tangential narrative threads is now the way that readers stay apprised of the universal narrative as well as gain a sense of its “universeness.” While that multitasking mentality is commonplace in an era of online hyperlinks ping-ponging users to-and-fro between webpages, it was a far more unique narrative approach when superhero comics began incorporating it in print.

Of course, if the industry bracketed this interlinked network off, like the volumed format of the Encyclopédie does, with enough time readers would be able to follow up on all the cross-references. For this reason, publishers must make sure the branching design never ceases. The weekly-monthly release model of the industry has been turned to that purpose, keeping the forward serialization of these narratives going so that additional links perpetually extend the web further. Much like what the Internet has become, that continual expansion makes for a constant cycle of new information – either in the form of additions to continuity or retconning of older material – linking up with pre-existing information. Where most narrative media avoid confusing audiences by gesturing beyond the text, superhero comics have learned to indulge in that kind of confusing referentially to keep the reader diving further and further into the recesses of the narrative universe. Continuing to follow these interlinking strands will deposit the reader onto a branching path with no defined ending or beginning, only an entry point.

That perpetual branching might resemble the structure of the Internet, but the print citation inevitably lacks qualities inherent to its online equivalent. Writing for The Atlantic

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81 Though publishers promote certain issues or series as “jumping-on points,” which are less continuity heavy and suitable for new readers, these are only ever entry points with less baggage. The companies want to make it easy for readers to get into the universe or else the deep dive can never begin.
during the twilight months of World War II, Vannevar Bush foreshadowed what the digital hyperlink would become. Bush proposed that technology was advancing to a stage where information could be organized and navigated more efficiently. Though he did not use the term hyperlink, Bush captures what the coding process was eventually able to accomplish: “associative indexing, the basic idea of which is a provision whereby any item may be caused at will to select immediately and automatically another” (Bush). Bush’s comments illustrate how the cross-referential methods of the *renvois* would eventually graduate to the immediate interconnectivity of the digital hyperlink. While Bush stresses that the intention behind such a technology should be to recreate human cognition, he recognizes the near impossible challenge in matching the brain’s ability to process information: “With one item in its grasp, [the mind] snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain.” While the brain has the potential to access memories faster than any server’s processing power can muster, “trails that are not frequently followed are prone to fade,” resulting in, at least, a “brain fart” and, at most, the memory being completely lost (Bush). In this regard, hyperlinks are superior. Dead links and link rot exist, as webpages are shuttered or altered, but when a hyperlink is operational it is largely infallible, consistently and efficiently able to redirect a user from one page to another.

Though the interconnective design of superhero comics now shares in these qualities by having archives move online, the print version cannot replicate certain features of the online hyperlink. To start with, Alexander Halavais notes that “because electronic documents are more easily updated, it is possible to have two documents with hyperlinks pointing to each other, something that generally does not occur in printed literature” (42). Comics can link back-and-forth between one another (usually dependent upon how concurrent their publication is), but
most often new issues point backwards to older ones. Because the older issue was sometimes printed decades before the referential issue, they are not able to point back and complete the loop. Occasionally, retconning does retroactively allow an event, character, or piece of dialog in a back issue to point the reader forward to a recent issue or series, but the kind of bi- or multidirectional capability available to hyperlinks and cognition eludes the materiality of print superhero comics.

Likewise, “hyperlinks allow for the instant ‘jump’ to other texts,” an immediacy possessed by the mind’s associative cognition, but not available to superhero comics (Halavais 42). Comics publishers depend upon the lack of an immediate “jump,” expecting that the research time needed to track a link to its opposite end will introduce readers to a slew of other information about the universe. In doing so, the impression of a vast construct will be imparted to the reader along with an abundance of other avenues for them to dive into. Functioning ideally, the strategy intends that readers never “hit bottom,” always being redirected to another text. With the increase of digital comics, the potential for DC and Marvel to overcome both restrictions by directly incorporating actual hyperlinks into current and back issue now exists. Neither publisher has attempted such a tactic just yet, potentially because the “jump” is antithetical to the time investment and research central to the deep dive.82

82 The obvious compatibility of hyperlinks and digital comics seems so apparent that some speculation on why no publisher has attempted it is worthwhile. Since there can be no doubt that both DC and Marvel have considered the potential for incorporating hyperlinks into their online catalogs, the logical question is “Why haven’t they?” Potentially, the time and effort needed to code in the hyperlinks so that they overlay neatly onto text and editor’s notes would not be cost effective. However, these companies are already dedicating ample budgetary resources to scanning and digitizing their sizable libraries, so why not program in hyperlinks in the process? Therefore, the most reasonable answer seems to be the publishers wanting to leave some of the work to the reader. By omission, these companies seem to be acknowledging that an investment in research on the part of the reader is necessary for them to encounter other hyperlinks along the way. Online catalogs may diminish the physical effort needed to follow-up on a connection, but they do not eliminate the time needed to shift through thousands of back issues that a dedicated hyperlink would erase.
The network of superhero comics hyperlinks may not identically recreate those populating the world wide web, but that is because they have formed from their own unique set of resources. A gradual evolution from the medium’s simultaneously restrictive and beneficial format as well as a necessary rebound after a cultural decline, superhero comics began prioritizing a strategy of cross-referencing. Resembling and building upon early encyclopedic indexing like the *renvois*, the hyperlinking network of references that facilitate the deep dive in superhero comics preview the design of the Internet. Whereas the digital hyperlink is experienced as an instantaneous, perpetually replicable pathway, the required research time of superhero comics has been intended by the comics industry’s strategy. The path will be chosen by the reader, but the branching connections lead to further discoveries.

**Feeling the Body as it Dives**

Conducting a deep dive requires an investment of bodily effort and time. It is through those expenditures that readers both gain a sense of these universes’ scope and encounter tangential hyperlinks. In this section, I will provide a phenomenological account of how effort and research time differ across the Direct Market and online archives. The former requires a greater bodily investment to travel and locate the end of a single link. The latter makes tracking down a link nearly effortless, but offers an abundance of hyperlinks to explore, which sends the research deeper and deeper as time flies by. Regardless of the archive, the deep dive prioritizes wandering research over terminal learning. In this section and the next, I will borrow from Steven J. DeRose’s article “Expanding the Notion of Links” to help characterize hyperlink equivalents in comics. My deep dive for this chapter begins with what DeRose calls a “vocative link” in the form of an editor’s note from *Suicide Squad #5*. 
Upfront I want to establish that the local comics store (LCS) no longer serves as the foremost research destination for the deep diving fan. Once the culmination of the industry’s universe-oriented resources, the Direct Market of the Eighties and Nineties existed as the most accessible archive of current and back issue comics, overseen by stewards of comics knowledge. Whether a fan had access to a store or the financial and scheduling autonomy to follow-up on a hyperlink or not, the potential existed. Any reference had an actualizable weight to it because the referenced issue(s) could be tracked down at a LCS. In the Internet era, however, that ease of accessibility has moved online to countless databases, wikis, and other resources that fans can utilize from anywhere in a fraction of the time. Even if someone desires to have a physical copy of a back issue (many completionists still do), the likelihood that they will first conduct online research about the referenced issue(s) before traveling to a store has increased. Longtime fans, traditionalists, small business supporters, and physical media loving fans (like me) still favor making the pilgrimage to stores, because of the rewarding sense of accomplishment, discovery, and exploration. When choosing to pursue the hyperlink from *Suicide Squad #5*, my first inclination was still to turn to comics stores in my area.

In *Suicide Squad #5*, the team is in Russia to extricate a defector and political prisoner so the American government can use her for propagandistic purposes. Arriving at the gulag where the prisoner is being kept, the mystical powers of team member The Enchantress become pivotal to their plan. The Enchantress is supposed to transform into the political prisoner’s doppelgänger, replace the real prisoner while the team escapes with her, then transport out of

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83 Confusingly, both the Marvel and DC Universes contain characters called The Enchantress. The Enchantress I will be referencing throughout this chapter is *not* the same character described in the Colliding Chevrons component.
Russia once they are safe. Always looking to conquer her teammates, The Enchantress begins those halcyon days when we fought as enemies. Because I haven’t!!!” (Ostrander 154) (see Fig. 26). After the word “enemies,” editor Robert Greenberger has affixed an asterisk leading to an editor’s note in the bottom right corner of the panel which reads “See DC Comics Presents #77-78. – Back-Issue Bob.”

Coming upon this note, the attraction of the deep dive grips me. Immediately, I search my memory: “Has the history between these characters been mentioned before?” Even in searching through my twenty-plus years of knowledge about the DC Universe, I come up empty handed or, rather, headed. These are not characters I am particularly familiar with in the first place. As such, my inclination is to Re-View the previous issues. I flip through my trade paperback collection to see if Enchantress and Flag have mentioned their history before. As the pages pass by, I scan panels for their chevronic elements and quickly realize that even though The Enchantress has appeared previously, she and Flag have not interacted.
I relate to this note differently than I would other cross-references within superhero comics. Not only does it allude to a history, it tells me where to find it. It suggests this continuity exists in a documented form that can be found, read, and stored in memory. Out of DeRose’s taxonomy of hyperlinks, one particularly describes that degree of explicitness. DeRose proposes the vocative link, which “invoke[s] a particular document element by name” (254). While DeRose offers links to specific chapters or figures within a text or document as examples, the editor’s note in superhero comics equally qualifies under his heading. More closely resembling the design of an online hyperlink, this vocative note directly connects Suicide Squad #5 to DC Comics Presents #77 and #78. A vocative editor’s note is indicative of an era of superhero comics where starting the deep dive was difficult; the reader was able to search through back issues at a LCS, but had no database for learning which issues to look for. These notes are not only a necessary outgrowth of that period in the publication history, but a means of invoking the universe’s narrative history.

Of course, to say all a vocative link does is invoke would be inadequate; it evokes the eidetic, as well. From the Latin root vocare, for “to call,” the vocative link found in Suicide Squad #5 calls forth an image for the two referenced issues. Having never seen the covers to either DC Comics Presents #77 or #78, my imagination generates a placeholder, providing me an imaged association that can guide my research. As Edward S. Casey describes, in this moment “The perceptual and imaginative components of the aesthetic experience shade into each other,” with Luke McDonnell’s artwork inspiring the content of my mental-image (Imagining 141). Without a specific memory to recall, I cobble together an amalgam of McDonnell’s renditions of Enchantress and Flag with memories of the logo for a later volume of Presents. This floating combination of images becomes my lamplight, the image I will scan for in my LCS’s back issue
bins. Obviously, the actual cover will not resemble this mental-image, but it will likely contain some assortment of these elements.

From there, I resolve to locate the two *Presents* issues at a LCS, then see where their own hyperlinks point me. Even though a LCS is inherently “local,” they are still a destination. My schedule must open up so that I can rededicate time meant for work or personal obligations to research time; I literally trade time I could be productive for a superficial pursuit. Which, of course, alters my experience of that time. Though writing about the production of fan-made materials, Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis capture the type of effort required by the deep dive, a “pleasurable labor [that] often does not register as labor at all,” (par 3.2). The labor required of the deep dive is in service of a hobby that I am passionate about, so the time and effort spent engaging in the activity does not progress slowly or taxingly.\(^{84}\) Rather, on the drive to the first store, I am not concerned with the gas I am expending or the work I could be getting done, but instead eager that I will actualize the mental-image placeholders.\(^ {85}\) Even though my body anticipates finding the issues, I logically understand the chance of that – out of the millions of superhero comics that exist – is slim; realistically, my search will continue beyond this trip.

That realization speaks to the amorphous nature of research time. Always indeterminately long, research time ebbs and flows when the researcher can invest effort towards it. Though he refers to it as study time rather than research, Tyson E. Lewis’ description of how studying differs from learning accurately captures the indefinite quality of research time during

\(^{84}\) Writing this dissertation in 2020 meant I also had to contend with the Covid-19 pandemic raging across the United States and, specifically, Atlanta, Georgia where I was located. As such, there were additional efforts required, including the donning of a mask, carrying hand sanitizer, traveling to the stores at off-times before too many customers arrived, and being ever mindful of how close I was to any employee (especially given that at one store, they were not wearing masks). As I searched the back issue bins, my body was on alert for anyone approaching me, often requiring me to vacate or avoid a bin I needed to search until I had enough space to do so.

\(^{85}\) The two stores I went to while conducting this exercise were Oxford Comics and Games in Atlanta, GA and Great Escape Comics and Games in Marietta, GA.
the deep dive. Whereas Lewis categorizes learning time as being regimented around an end goal – “as ‘making progress toward $x$,”’ wherein $x$ is acquired knowledge or a skill – study and deep dive research are about luxuriating, taking detours, and being open to unexpected information (“Study” 231). Whereas with Suicide Squad #5, I may be following a particular vocative link backwards to its opposite end – making progress toward an answer – the Presents issues will only send me off in other directions, not to mention what may pique my curiosity on the path to those issues. As Lewis states, “study is immanent to learning,” but that does not preclude the process from avoiding or expanding upon that goal, creating “the sense of *being lost in the potentiality of anything at all appearing*” (“Study” 239). The acquisition of answers is not mutually exclusive when studying or researching, but also not what the act is directed towards. Rather, it is about meandering, about passing hours without awareness, and being redirected down separate paths in the middle of, after, or parallel to tracking back a link.

When I arrive at the comic store, the potential breadth of archived knowledge, of current and back issues as well as collected editions, envelops me. Comic stores are regularly overstuffed with merchandise: boxes line walkways, shelves are packed tight with bound volumes, toys hang from hooks, merchandise reaches from floor to ceiling. Operating on tight profitability margins, a successful LCS must keep up with the thousands of issues that come out within a month, while also maintaining a respectable archive of comics history (either as issues or collections) all without the benefit of blanketed returnability. This predicament leaves many stores cluttered and disorganized, as all that content gets crammed into the usually minimal storefront space the owners can afford. I orient my body in relation to this disarray as the potential to get lost in research time exists at every turn, each product a detour to a separate corner of this or another universe. These piles, shelves, and bins full of product are the immense
scope of these universes made manifest. Hyperlinks, like the one I am currently tracking, exist to guide me through such vastness, but they also intend to guide me to it. Accepting and enjoying that experience contributes to why I am at the LCS in the first place.

To reach the back recesses of the store, I pass by a couple employees standing behind the cashier counter. In any other kind of store with this much product to search through, I might be inclined to ask for assistance, but I rarely do at a LCS and I definitely do not on this day. Part of me knows that the question, “do you have DC Comics Presents #77 and #78 in stock?” would be a futile one, because the abundance and variety of back issues at most stores makes keeping a running inventory useless. To answer that question, the employee would just have to go to the bins and dig through them like I plan to do anyway. But I want to do that! That is exactly why I am here, because it lets me put my fingers directly onto and into these universes. I want to exert the effort so that the (potential) reward of finding these exact comics becomes the result of my labor. If my effort is what uncovers those artifacts of Flag and Enchantress’ history, then they do not feel trivial. Instead, they become a discovery, a piece of difficult to locate history.

My body’s trajectory is oriented towards that history, housed in a particular physical object: the back issue bin. Back issue bins are vertically organized, long rows of issues jammed together, usually not given a prominent placement within the storefront. As I make my way through the clutter of the store, my head swivels, scanning for that familiar fixture. Coming upon the bins, another form of orientation sets in. I need to locate where the issues I am searching for are stored within the archive.

No two shops organize their back issues the same way so my body must reacclimate to each store. At the same time, I am contending with the remnants of previous customers’ searches. These traces further confound an already inconsistent ordering system, requiring a
greater investment on my part to work through. Initially, I always find myself shuffling around the bins in a back-and-forth pattern to find my bearings. I hesitantly approach a row, glimpse at a visible divider (“Okay, Metal Men is over here. . .”), then circle around to a bin further away and do the same (“. . .and Uncanny X-Men is on this side”), then double check (“Oh, wait, New Mutants is next to the other X-Men titles instead of being with the Ns”). At this point, my body begins to internally match my own physical orientation and positionality in relation to the bins with the orientation and organization of the issues. The fidgeting ends. Now I have constructed a mental blueprint of the bins out of the short-term memories I have just acquired which allows me to confidently navigate towards my particular interest.

With purpose I wander over to the Ds. I lock-in. My posture changes. Searching through back issues cannot be accomplished from a completely erect standing position. The researcher must hunch slightly, head tilted downward, eyes trained on the top lip of each issue as it juts up from behind the one in front. Digging through comics is never graceful. The sheer amount of material to sift through wars with the researcher; to reach the back of a bin, I have to lean over it, causing the edge to cut into my midsection; crouching on my haunches for minutes as I flip through lower bins strains my leg and ankle muscles. The back issues never bend to the body, the body always bends to them.

My fingers set into a rhythmic motion. A bicycle-kick rotation between my index and middle finger pulls the top of an issue forward, spreads out the space between it and the one behind, then repeats until my eyes land on something that matches the mental placeholder in my memory. Bins are regularly tightly packed – especially with bags and boards adding extra thickness to each issue – requiring force to pry the issues apart. Not wanting to bend or damage these flimsy thin booklets, my body regulates how much force I exert; only enough to break the
adhesion of one mylar bag from another. All that effort is located within my hands and fingers, an instance where I am touching the archive, the continuity, the history of the universe; my fingers dive down between the cracks and gaps of the issues’ makeshift chronology. Laborious though research time can be, to return to Stanfill and Condis’ assertion, it is the labor of a fan, just enough effort to make the reward of coming across a sought after “find” worth it.

Unfortunately, as my fingers flick through the row of D comics, my mental image for *DC Comics Presents* does not find its physical counterpart. After the effort exerted to travel to the store, orient myself, and dive in, my body deflates. Pulling away from the bins, I stand for a second wondering what to do next. As much as an editor’s note hyperlink is about alerting the reader to a wider catalog of comics, it intends to start that deep dive rather than finish it. Investing in unstructured research time allows for “getting lost in the eddies of thought where detours become pure means detached from reaching ends beyond themselves” (“Study” 240). Surrounded by a store’s worth of potential detours, I linger. Unlike other retail shops, I came to this LCS for a discovery, a return on the work I put in. But not today.

Failing to discover the *DC Comics Presents* issues during the LCS stage of my dive, I turn to the Internet. The effort needed to locate these issues online exists differently in comparison to the travel time, rummaging, and scheduling involved with a LCS. Opening my browser, the expansivity of possibility immediately presents options to me as a researcher. Like my body oriented itself to the clutter and layout of my LCS, it now needs to orient itself in relation to cyberspace. In searching the Internet, my body remains largely stationary, but like back issue bins the locus of bodily effort exists at my fingers and hands. I navigate a virtual pathway through minuscule gestures. Do I type the series title into a search engine, scour a comics wiki, or purchase a digital copy through ComiXology? Using any of these methods I
would likely find the information I am looking for in a matter of minutes, if not seconds.

Ultimately, I turn to the familiar by going to the DC Universe Infinite platform, anticipating that its sizable digital comics catalog will contain the issues I am looking for.\textsuperscript{86}

Supplanting the travel time and effort required to find a LCS, my navigation to the DC Universe Infinite website is practically instantaneous; I “jump” to the website’s login page through a single click of my bookmarked hyperlink. On the top right of the homepage, a search bar allows me to type in the exact issue name and number I am looking for, bringing up a suggested search for “DC Comics Presents (1978-),” which I click on. In clicking on a link, I am making a connection with it, not only activating a connection. I am using a MacBook Air – with a trackpad – to conduct the search, so my actions are directed through swiping, typing, and the minimal pressure exertion of the click. These gestures become a means to “touch” the link – my finger extending into the realm of digital data in an incorporeal way. The use of a mouse or a touchscreen on a smartphone or tablet would come with their own phenomenological nuances, but they all involve, and even prioritize, the hand’s affection of digital data through a mediating technology. That said, only a modicum of bodily effort is required to connect with and activate the hyperlink, to the point of near imperceptibility and effortlessness. The passive sensation of the hyperlink encourages the user to keep clicking, to flow freely from webpage to webpage in an endless glut of information.

Combing through back issue bins, my fingers meet with resistance. Bins are regularly packed tightly, accommodating the excess of comics history that has accrued through the years. Often, I will have to pry at the slippery mylar bags surrounding the issues to glimpse each cover, all of which slows down my progress. Other times, I flip rapidly, even skipping entire chunks of

\textsuperscript{86} After writing this chapter, the DC Universe platform was rebranded as DC Universe Infinite and dedicated exclusively to housing their digital comics library on a subscription model.
issues because the art style and cover design do not match the publication era I am scanning for. In each case, there is a direct connection between the nuanced gestural difference of my fingers and the length of time invested in my search. Scrolling through content online lacks that immediate resistance at the fingertips. Instead, my index and middle fingers swipe the trackpad gingerly, lightly brushing over the laptop’s surface; the keys on my keyboard compress with the slightest pressure from my fingertips. On my screen, the visual information – thumbnails of issue covers, text on a wiki, search results – floats by just as airily. My gestures here appear to come with a shorter trace-of-time-expended because the effort invested pales in comparison to digging through bins.

However, the minimal gestures of online searching reflect an amorphous, unbracketed trace of time. Unbound by store hours, competing customers, and the limits of backstock, the online search can lose all sense of time. Writing about touchscreen mapping applications, Nanna Verhoeff and Heidi Rae Cooley suggest that “Gesture opens onto a haptics that unfolds in time at the interface,” implying that a trace of time only exists at the level of the gesture when using digital technology (115). Yet, the gestures I enact are so swift and thoughtless, they barely register to me consciously, making it far easier to forget the time each of these gestures is an index for. When searching through bins, my body registers the buildup of resistance; my fingers stiffen the longer they are used, my legs and back develop subtle aches from bending, the surface of the skin on my hands retains some of the coding off the mylar bags, giving it an oily texture. As these haptic sensations become increasingly noticeable, they simultaneously become a means of tracking the time I have committed to digging. The lack of noticeable resistance online allows me to search unaware of the time passing. Eventually, my eyes might begin to water from
staring at a screen for so long or my lower back might begin to tingle from sitting poorly on my couch, but, by that point, I could have been thoughtlessly searching for hours.

The time spent researching during the online dive passes as one fluid blur. Because of the immediacy with which I can “jump” between pages, I perceive all of them as a singular, merged whole. That unerring connection of a hyperlink registers as a singular path, a totalizing “here-to-there.” I do not experience a sliding or tugging or opening of one page onto another, but a replacement; in one moment the present webpage exists before me, in the next it has vanished, superseded by a new one. Even though I nor the visual contents on my laptop move in space (the data of the webpage remains fixed within the frame of my screen, even as one page is erased and replaced by another), the progression strikes me as if I was moving through depth, like I am progressing further into or out of these pathways. Here is where the diving of the online deep dive coalesces. As one dives through three-dimensional space, the incremental demarcations of elevation (inch-by-inch, foot-by-foot, a sensation of height rapidly diminishing as the body descends towards a surface) are not felt; the motion is only one linear trajectory.

A few clicks have led me to the other end of Suicide Squad #5’s vocative link. In DC Comics Presents #77, I discover that Flag was a member of The Forgotten Heroes who battle a trio of villains that includes The Enchantress. My response to finding this issue on DC Universe Infinite is proportionate to the amount of time and effort I have invested. I only opened my browser a few moments ago and already I have found what I was looking for with a couple swipes and clicks. There was no need to speculate whether it would be available as I did while driving to the comics store; the breadth of the DC Universe Infinite catalog creates the sense that whatever someone is looking for will be there. What replaces the satisfying release that comes at the end of the LCS hunt is an unstructured freedom to dive. Where all my effort was previously
dedicated to one, two, or a few issues, now my effort can be reallocated to scouring through hundreds of readily available digital comics over an intensified period. Though my path to issue seventy-seven has been relatively short, it tantalized me with a universe’s worth of new paths that are just as easy to access.

A vocative link in the form of an editor’s note points to a specific destination, but the luxuriating research time of the deep dive turns it into an excuse for wandering. At a LCS, the body invests effort in research time by orienting itself to the store’s archive, as the hands and fingers dig into the tangible history of these universes. Online, fans can “touch” that history effortlessly through the “jump” of a click. However, the minimal gestures of online research leave a nearly unnoticeable trace of time that leads to extended exploration.

Feeling a Way Through

Because the narrative universes of superhero comics are bound together by a crisscrossing of hyperlinked references, reaching the end of one link only tempts the reader to dive deeper. The issue(s) that a reader is led to – like the Presents issues at the other end of Suicide Squad #5’s vocative link – will contain pathways to even more issues. Not all fans will choose to pursue pathways from that issue, but regardless of whether they are conducting research at an LCS or online their hunt will bring them into contact with other facets of the universe that could lure them in. In a store these are back issues and other product, but online the abundant availability of digital comics makes nearly any link accessible with a few clicks. With so many links in reach, part of a reader’s deep dive involves feeling their way through that network of connections. This section will pick up from the last stage of my deep dive as I explore various pathways branching off from the endpoint of the previous vocative link, including information about Earth-Three and two minor villains called Punch and Jewelee.
These two hyperlink pathways stem from what DeRose considers a taxonomic link which, unlike a vocative link, does not point in one explicit direction. I further divide these into dialogic and visual taxonomic links, which are unique to superhero comics. The industry laid the path, but my choices determine which aspects of continuity are saved to memory.

Before reaching *DC Comics Presents #77*, DC Universe Infinite required me to scroll through thumbnails of covers for the seventy-six preceding issues in the series. Each was a tempting detour away from the direct link I was searching for. Given that the series’ premise involves Superman teaming up with different DC characters each issue, the breadth of IP on display encompassed the vastness of the universe, itself. As I swiped downward, seeing Aquaman, Green Arrow, Amethyst, the Freedom Fighters, Etrigan the Demon, the Blackhawks, the Joker, my eye “wanders throughout the library” as Tyson Lewis describes, catching on their chevrons like fabric on a protruding nail (“The Fundamental” 174). Though the online archive of superhero comics may decrease the amount of time required to reach a desired point, it exponentially increases the possibility to luxuriate in research time through the ready availability of so much content. At the time I resisted clicking, but each issue was a potential branching pathway to explore during a future deep dive.

Once I arrived at *DC Comics Presents #77*, more branches appeared. Mostly vocative links, there are no less than six different connections back to other series. Editor’s notes suggest seeing *Showcase #7, Sea Devils #2, World’s Finest Comics #101, Rip Hunter #28, Superman Family #204*, and *Strange Adventures #124* for contextual continuity about who certain characters are, where they were last seen, or a past relationship. For instance, in the first few pages, I was directed to *Sea Devils #2* and *Showcase #7* for information about one of the issue’s villains (Mr. Poseidon) and a colossal robot called Ultivac, respectively. Each of these issues
could be quickly found on DC Universe Infinite, using the same search method that led me to *Presents #77*. Beset by the ability to follow up so many links at once, I feel “Stupefied, lost in the archive, wandering among references that spread out before” me on DC Universe Infinite (“The Fundamental” 167). Before the Internet, I may have balked at the months or years it would take to search through each of these links, but now that time is condensed into a haze of intensely focused hours. That abundance must be balanced with selectivity on my part.

Having reached a satisfying answer to the questions raised by *Suicide Squad #5*, I am free to choose which hyperlink I follow next or even *if* I follow another one at all. I do not feel the need to venture further back in the timelines of Flag and Enchantress. Not all links will be followed by every reader, but that does not mean they do not contribute to a sense of “universeness.” Even if the reader chooses not to pursue any of the provided links, the inclusion of the link implies that further continuity exists to be explored. My reaction to reading the editor’s note in *Suicide Squad #5* was to imagine the issues being referenced. Those imaginary mental-images are not as eidetic as a memorized aesthetic-image, but their origination from an editor’s note is often enough for me to feel the vastness of the universe. Once a reader realizes these references lead somewhere, that they link to “recorded history” for the universe, their inclusion alone can be evocative enough. I understand these characters have further continuity, so I can always return and go deeper if I feel inclined. For the same reason, I do not follow up on any other vocative links in the issue or track back to the previous issues of *Presents* I scrolled through. For now, my attention is redirected elsewhere, ready to get lost amidst the web of connections.

Continuing to *DC Comics Presents #78*, I discover an intriguing reference with no relevance to the issue’s narrative. On the final page of the issue, there is an unexpected tie-in to the
forthcoming crossover event, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. Two characters (The Monitor and Harbinger) who will play integral parts in that event, but have not appeared previously in this story, are introduced on the issue’s final page. Though their appearance and a text box touting how “The Monitor’s scheme. . .begins in “Crisis on Infinite Earths,” points readers towards that (at the time) forthcoming event, I become interested in a reference to Earth-Three included in The Monitor’s final word balloon (see Fig. 27). While I was familiar with some of this alternate Earth’s continuity, its inclusion here intends not only to preview a forthcoming event but pique the curiosity of unfamiliar readers. Since the issue provides no further context for what or where Earth-Three is, the reader must search out other paratexts to find answers.
DeRose would refer to this kind of link as “taxonomic,” writing that it “leads to multiple target locations, but does not impose an order on them” (253). Rather than name a particular issue by number or even series title, taxonomic links primarily exist as generalized references to a character, location, event, encounter, power, or aspect of continuity. By mentioning Earth-Three without further context this link points the reader to any and all instances of Earth-Three continuity in the DC Universe. The deep dive resulting from such a link attains an even greater deal of autonomy on the reader’s part, because as DeRose points out the order in which the reader works through the opposite ends of this link is entirely up to them. Adding onto DeRose’s terminology, I suggest that taxonomic links in superhero comics can come in different forms. I consider this Earth-Three reference to be a dialogic taxonomic link since it comes from the text in a character’s word balloon.

While taxonomic links existed in superhero comics before the Direct Market and the arrival of the Internet, the research challenge they posed to readers limited their use. One fan could ask another fan, “What is Earth-Three?” and potentially be recommended or gifted comics about the alternate Earth, but few other research options existed. With the rise of computing technologies, a taxonomic link suffices since readers have easy access to Internet search engines and databases. Now a reader only needs a search term, not an historical footnote. As such, the ratio of vocative to taxonomic links has shifted in favor of the latter over the years as these capabilities have become commonplace. Anymore there is a benefit in DC and Marvel refraining from the explicitness of a vocative link, as the vagueness of the reference creates the potential for readers to “get lost” from the start, drifting into other interesting topics during their online search. In either case, the goal of the publisher is never that the reader will follow every link backwards. Instead, all Marvel or DC need is for the reader to deep dive into one of these links. That alone is enough to lead them to countless other paratexts.
Though the Earth-Three taxonomic link from *DC Comics Presents #78* was originally published during the Direct Market heyday, reading it on DC Universe Infinite allows me to open another tab and immediately search for it. In 0.52 seconds, Google returns over a million and a half results for my query on “Earth-Three.” A single taxonomic link has deposited me into a staggering number of digital hyperlinks, emphasizing the daunting possibilities available for deep diving readers to pursue. Individual choices are essential to shaping the information encountered and saved to memory. Had I, for instance, decided to look up the vocative link to *Sea Devils #2* from *DC Comics Presents #77* instead of reading further, I would have been linked to drastically different vector of DC Universe continuity. It is both the need for and process of feeling my way through these pathways that imparts a sense of vastness. Each time a fan dives in, they will encounter information distinct from another fan’s dive as well as from their own previous dives. Their choices determine the mental-images contributing to their conception of these fictional universes. Regardless of that difference, the abundance of information to be imaged remains the same. The deeper any fan dives, the more universally overwhelming these fictional constructs become.

Confronted with these Google links, I must choose how I navigate my way through that overwhelming amount of information. Having read a handful of contemporary stories about Earth-Three, I know the basics: it is an alternate reality where the DC superheroes are evil (including an inversion of the Justice League called the Crime Syndicate of America) and their archenemies (like Lex Luthor) are good. Since the taxonomic link I am following came from a comic long before the ones I read about Earth-Three, it makes me curious about the alternate Earth’s earlier continuity. Running down the left side of the webpage, ten links point in separate directions. A couple are overview pages about Earth-Three on Wikipedia, Fandom.com, and
ComicVine.com, while others are dedicated to associated characters or groups, like Alexander Luthor, Jr. and the Crime Syndicate of America. I click on the top Wikipedia link and begin scrolling through its blocks of text. Links for Mr. Mxyzptlk, Duela Dent, the *Trinity War* crossover event, and many others are potential pathways, but the first paragraph mentions Earth-Three first appeared in 1964’s *Justice League of America* #29 by Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky. Remembering that there was a Google link about that issue, I swipe back to my search results and redirect my dive again.

This Comic Vine webpage presents DC continuity in a form I have not encountered to this point in my deep dive. So far, the *Suicide Squad* TPB, digital issues on DC Universe Infinite, and even the Wikipedia article are comprised of or associated with aesthetic-images. Here, there is only a full text synopsis of the plot beats from *Justice League of America* #29. The issue’s cover has been included but does not depict any Earth-Three characters. Likewise, there are no screenshots or scans from the issue’s interior. The synopsis describes how the JLA and Crime Syndicate pair off to fight, then the Crime Syndicate uses the activation phrase “Volthoom” to transport the JLA to Earth-Three. As I read about these events, imaginary displays apprehend for me. These mental-images repurpose my memories of these characters from comics I read in my past, the art style from those comics comingling into the building blocks for each display. Those same memories of other Earth-Three/Crime Syndicate comics connect with these mental-images of their origin story, building out my sedimented timeline for these IPs. When I discuss the last aspect of *feeling* in the next section, these connections between memories and imaginations will contribute to my sense of DC’s “universeness.”
My dive does not end here, however. Returning to the Wikipedia entry, I start clicking on any character name I know little to nothing about. A link for Duela Dent sends me to a short bio that lists her potential parents, including two villains named Punch and Jewelee. Seeing these names, I am reminded of their appearance in *Suicide Squad* #24 – a hyperlink I meant to investigate but put aside when first reading the issue. The first time Punch and Jewelee appear in the issue is also their introduction to the series. Their first panel comes to mind, as it was what

Figure 28 Punch and Jewelee appearance as a visual taxonomic link in *Suicide Squad* #24 bio that lists her potential parents, including two villains named Punch and Jewelee. Seeing these names, I am reminded of their appearance in *Suicide Squad* #24 – a hyperlink I meant to investigate but put aside when first reading the issue. The first time Punch and Jewelee appear in the issue is also their introduction to the series. Their first panel comes to mind, as it was what

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87 Created by Steve Ditko and David Kaler for the *Captain Atom* series published by Charlton Comics in the Sixties, the rights to Punch and Jewelee transferred over to DC when they purchased Charlton Comics outright in 1983. Six years later, John Ostrander (possibly urged to do so by editors and executives who wanted to see these acquisitions utilized) enlisted the duo into the Squad, keeping them around until issue thirty-nine. Their addition onto the team was one of many instances where Ostrander used the series’ premise as a way of reviving forgotten IP, using Exquisite Corpse Creation to generate hyperlinks back to their previous appearances. Because *Suicide Squad* was a team book and could easily add or drop characters as needed, Ostrander’s use of Punch and Jewelee carried a minimal risk to the series’ success. Since they were obscure beforehand, their inclusion on *Suicide Squad* could only gain them popularity among readers. In this case the tactic failed to do so, but it remains a frequently used method in the industry. Incorporating less popular IP into a team book will increase their profile through association with other beloved characters.
piqued my curiosity about them in the first place (see Fig. 28). I consider this panel to be a visual taxonomic link, because the uncontextualized appearance by a character – either as a brief cameo or a newly incorporated part of a title’s cast – uses the aesthetic-image itself to initiate a deep dive into the IP’s previous continuity. Like its dialogic counterpart, a visual taxonomic link redirects readers to an IP’s previous appearances without placing any strict order on them, leaving the reader free to decide which, if any, they research.

In this case, artist Luke McDonnell has visually singled these characters out to draw the reader’s attention. He composes them in the center of the panel, but also shortens their stature in comparison to the Squad members flanking them, making them the visual focus. By this point in the series, these group briefing panels had become a trope and a means for the creators to introduce new team members without exposition. So, when I first laid eyes on the panel, the inclusion of new characters in a line-up I was used to made their costumes stand out even more. Since their color schemes contain contrasting primary colors (red and green for Punch, yellow and red for Jewelee), they were also visually differentiated from the muted or complementary color schemes of the surrounding characters both on the page and now in my memory. Those aesthetic choices forced me to notice and commit them to memory, but because they had not appeared in the series to this point I also wanted to know who these laughable new recruits were. Without any editor’s note or citation about where to read about their previous continuity, I filed the memory away, planning to dive into their history later. Reminded by their mention on the Earth-Three Wikipedia page, I decide to pursue this visual taxonomic link as the culmination of my current deep dive session.

Since taxonomic links point back to an IP’s entire history without providing any direction, I turn to Fandom.com for a list of their main appearances, including the first one in
Circling back to DC Universe Infinite for that issue, I learn that artist, writer, and creator Steve Ditko introduces them as a romantic couple, but never explicitly states that they are married. Following that, I jump over to *Manhunter #20.* As the titular Manhunter apprehends them in an early sequence, Jewelee pleads that they are only stealing to support their baby. My last stop is *Harley Quinn #3* where only Jewelee shows up as a guest at an all-women supervillain party thrown by Harley. In a drunken ramble, Jewelee calls Punch her “hubby,” confirming that they are married by this point in continuity. By following up this taxonomic hyperlink, the timeline for these minor characters begins to sediment within my cognition: unmarried in *Captain Atom #85* to married and imprisoned in *Suicide Squad* to married in *Harley Quinn #3* to fending for their new child in *Manhunter #20.*

These appearances come out in three different decades (1967 for *Captain Atom #85*; 1989 for *Suicide Squad #24*; 2001 and 2006 for *Harley Quinn #3* and *Manhunter #20*, respectively), are overseen by four creative teams, and exemplify the collaborative authorship of Exquisite Corpse Creation, as each team after Ditko is adding continuity to the IPs he created. Nonetheless, each of these Punch and Jewelee appearances are visual taxonomic links, pointing back to all the others (and more that I have yet to read). In that way, they are connected despite a span of nearly forty years between them. However, that network of linkages is not automatically available to the reader, as they lack vocative specifications. These moments from the characters’ continuity required my research to bring them into a proximate relationship. Even though this villainous duo is a minor one in the span of the DC Universe, there are plenty of other appearances that could have been discovered, but my choices led me to these four. Another fan may have acquired other memories and ended up with a differently sedimented timeline for

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88 Written by Marc Andreyko and drawn by Javier Pina, Fernando Blanco, and Steve Buccellato.
89 Written by Karl Kesel along with the art team of Terry Dodson, Rachel Dodson, and Alex Sinclair.
Punch and Jewelee. This is what the autonomy of the reader’s deep dive can accomplish versus what is available on the page. Each deep diving session is a process of the reader feeling their way through a pre-existing network to construct their own cognitive connections about the universe’s continuity.

While Punch and Jewelee’s timeline was the conclusion, the entire scope of my deep dive has unified even more disparately separated corners of the DC Universe. I set out to discover the confrontational history between The Enchantress and Rick Flag, only to end up going down rabbit holes about Earth-Three as well as a pair of minor villains. The disorder of that trajectory reflects the reader/researcher’s control over the deep dive process. While working through these interlinked pathways, the industry’s design offered a wealth of other hyperlinks to follow, including *DC Comics Presents* issues, Earth-Three adjacent continuity, and other Punch and Jewelee appearances. Admittedly, that plethora of pathways is partially due to the multidirectional nature of the dialogic and visual taxonomic links that I came across. In the end, my decisions when navigating the industry’s hyperlinked design are what determines the cognitive outcome. These universes are built on connectivity, but the deep dive gives fans the freedom to feel their way through those connections as they please.

**Feeling “Universeness”**

Having undergone the physical effort and time investment of navigating my way through a series of hyperlinked comics, I am left with mental-images acquired throughout that deep dive. As I have established, the “universeness” of these superhero comics is felt cognitively by connecting those mental-images into an overwhelming “nexus of relations.” However, the mental-images saved to my image consciousness throughout the dive exist in different eidetic forms. I now have memories of the panels and pages from *Suicide Squad #5*, two issues of *DC*
Comics Presents, and a handful of issues featuring Punch and Jewelee that I can recall.

Likewise, I have imaginary mental-images that were formed from the Justice League of America #29 ComicVine.com summary. Though the ontologies of memory and imagination are distinct, they share in an absence of the sense data that characterizes memories of lived perception.

Those same sense data are inaccessible to us when conceiving of our universe, which helps relate the mental-images from the deep dive to that process. The encyclopedic cross-referential design of superhero comics likewise associates their research to factual documentation. Ultimately, it is the overwhelming connection of these mental-images that the deep dive models, which facilitates the full feeling of “universeness” in superhero comics.

The mental-images enabling a feeling of “universeness” are dislike my memories of lived perception. Available to my image consciousness are memories of my visit to the comic book stores at the beginning of my deep dive and the hours of online research conducted at home.

When I recall pushing open the wooden crossbar door handle of Oxford Comics, for instance, I can envision the outlines of posters and flyers tapped to that door as well as the residual dirt and muck on the glass, left from years of handprints, weathering, and sunlight. However, these visual details carry other sensory remnants that do not apprehend with my recall of aesthetic-images. When I remember opening the door or walking down the long corridor of bookshelves to reach the back issue bins, I am simultaneously remembering the sensation of movement through the store’s depth. Likewise, bodily memory supplies me residual haptic sensations from the bumpy wood grain of the crossbar as I gripped it with my palm, the rigidity of the bins’ plywood frame cutting into my gut, or the springy pressure of pressing down the plastic keys of my laptop as I searched online.
In these memories, it is this residue of depth and sensuousness that I am remembering more than the minutia of the location or activity. The posters on the front door, covers of comics on the wall-mounted racks, and spines of the collected editions crammed into bookshelves lining the walkway are just a blur of inconsistent colors. I can imagine my laptop and apartment vividly, but only because I am perceiving them in this moment and have done so repeatedly for five years. When I do so, I am not actually recalling my memory of the day when I searched for Earth-Three on Google. That memory was so banal and alike the countless others spent in my apartment that its exact details have been forgotten entirely. As I try to reimagine it, I am only supplanting the actual details with my present perception. While these memories are evocative in terms of movement and sensation, they are not visually eidetic in the same way as my memories of comics artwork.

When I remember the panel where The Enchantress confronts Rick Flag from Suicide Squad #5, what I am recalling are exclusively the aesthetic minutia, separated from any other sense data. I can fixate on nuances like the crease at the tip of Enchantress’ hat or its emerald shade of green in contrast to her inky black hair. The compositions of these images are as unwavering as the quality of the linework. Even as I need to reimagine the panel to hold it in my image consciousness, the way Enchantress and Flag are arranged – her head tilted upward on the left as the slightly taller Flag stares down at her from the right – remains consistent across each reimagining. Similarly, this memory retains the tight, vertical rectangular aspect ratio of the original panel, rather than being “reformatted” into a boundaryless display that fades out at the edges. Unlike my lived perception memories, the strict borders of these panels apprehend without what Casey refers to as a “memory-frame,” or a “setting within which specific content is presented” (Remembering 68). Without any hint of the time, place, or surrounding environment
where I first perceived these panels, they are simply free-floating recreations of the original panels, separated from any of the surrounding page layout that appeared besides them in the comic. Likewise, this means these mental-images lack the remembered movement or sensation of depth, instead remaining as they did on the page, static and still. The exercise of recalling this *Suicide Squad #5* panel replicates an experience I have described repeatedly throughout the dissertation: instances where the minimalistic linework and coloration of comics artwork along with the iconicity of the superhero-as-chevron affix their mnemonic details as eidetic memories.

To focus exclusively on memory would leave out the imaginary mental-images produced during the deep dive. Summaries on websites like ComicVine.com and other wikis largely omitted any visual content, leaving only text descriptions to evoke the continuity being recounted. Without a direct reference to emulate, my imagination must assemble these objects whole cloth, so to speak. In particular, the summary of *Justice League of America #29* spurred me to image a few different events, among them a battle between the Silver Age Justice League and the Crime Syndicate of America. Like my memories of the Enchantress and Flag panel, I can reimagine this fight whenever I wish. These, too, apprehend free of a memory-frame or any of the sense data associated with my perceptual memories. However, unlike my memories of comics panels these imaged objects are not nearly as stable. The broad content of the display stays the same when I reimagine them, but the nuanced details either fluctuate with each reimagining or appear with diminishing perspicuity.

When I think back to what the Comic Vine webpage described, I envision the Crime Syndicate and the JLA squaring off across from each other on a rocky plain (I always seem to default to rocks). Not having originated from the perception of an aesthetic-image, the display is devoid of rigid borders, but approximates a two page spread. With no concrete referent, the
display wavers as I attempt to hold it in my mind, almost like trying to fix swirls of paint in place; any pressure applied to the “surface” smears the liquid. As such, when I fixate on an individual aspect during a reimagining, those I am not concerned with blur further, almost like racking a camera lens to soft focus. What remains relatively similar is the composition, where the Crime Syndicate are arranged like chess pieces on the left and the JLA on the right, both groups posed as if they are surging forward towards their opponents. Possibly because I first imagined this scene when researching Earth-Three and the Crime Syndicate, they are the characters with the most definition in the display. The JLA exist almost not as colors, shapes, or figures, but more a suggestion. If I focus, I can zoom-in on the chevronic nuances of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and so on, since I have seen their costumes enough in my lifetime, but at the outset they are periphery and murky.

That is not to say nothing attains any clarity within the imaginary display. In particular, the Crime Syndicate analog for Batman, known as Owl-Man, apprehends lucidly and consistently. I keep him positioned near the front-middle of his team, hunched forward in a sprint, with his left arm outstretched in a fist. Two of his chevronic elements are what remain steadfast with each reimagining. I can focus in on the curvature of his beak-like mask, swooping up from his nose and over the round dome of his silver helmet. Most of all, the semblance of his cape is unwavering. I can study the diamond-shaped metallic ridges that comprise his cape, each successive layer slipping out from under the previous one like snake scales. But these Owl-Man details are the exception within my imaginary mental-images. Where the rest of the reimagined display fluctuates, his chevronic qualities hold because vivid aesthetic-image memories are influencing his imaginary display. Having read multiple comics where he plays a role, the inventive graphic design of his cape and mask makes its minutia readily available to my
imagination. In this way, any stability within my imaginary display of the synopses read during my deep dive come from the same evocative artistry that makes my aesthetic-image memories so potent.

Though the stability and clarity of the mental-images produced by the deep dive differ, neither resemble my memories of lived perception. In short, they lack the associated sensations of depth and movement that tie those memories to perceived reality. Ultimately, it is that unreality which relates these mental-images to those that help me conceive of our universe and its history. Unable to directly perceive either, humans only know of our universe and its history because of the representations provided by science, astronomy, archaeology, and historiography. My understanding of these imperceivable spaces and periods, then, comes from an interlinking web of photographs, artistic renderings, films, recorded footage, as well as oral and written accounts that fit together in a prescribed chronology. Photographic representations carry a signification of actuality that is absent from my mental-images of superhero universes, but they are ultimately two-dimensional representations, as well. I would never mistake a memory of Punch being knocked out by Manhunter as a real event like I would a memory of the photograph showing Muhammad Ali looming above a prone Sonny Liston. However, their shared ontology as static mental-images devoid of lived, perceptual sense memories make them similar in the scope of my image consciousness. Therefore, my conception of the DC or Marvel Universes can never be the exact same as my conception of the universe as a whole but can achieve a “universeness.”

While shared ontological characteristics relate mental-images of the real and unreal in cognition, that alone is not enough to make superhero universe feel like the universe. This is where the deep dive design and the experience it engenders for readers finalizes the sense of
“universeness.” Representations of periods before my birth or the interstellar reaches that I cannot travel to only become known to me through reading, listening, or watching. In short, through research. The cross-referential hyperlinking of superhero universes, as an outgrowth of the *renvois*, carries the aura of a tradition built on cataloging actual history. When I conduct a deep dive through these links, I am replicating the same process I do when studying real subjects.

Though I likely encountered these types of footnotes in comics first (since my fandom started at a young age), an editor’s note promises the officiality of a scholarly citation. Sharply delineated from the color of the panel, the starkness of the text box bleeds into the panel grid, gaining a stability from it. Likewise, the “signature” from an editor infuses the note with an air of officialism. Though taxonomic links are devoid of a vocative link’s explicitness, they still imbue something of scholarship into these fictions. What they promise as much as a vocative link is the ability to locate documented evidence of an event. Not all fictional storyworlds have expanded to a point where so much narrative information has been depicted in such a tangible way. Where the type of transmedia storytelling that coaxes audiences to consume every paratext has become the norm, superhero comics were exploiting this model long beforehand. After the Golden Age, Marvel and DC Comics chose to make their narratives encyclopedic, knowing they had the vast continuity to back-up that degree of citation. While that decision was made in favor of profitability, it nonetheless actualized a “universeness” for these fictions through the connection of their documented histories.

By participating in the deep dive, readers are not only perceiving those connections on the page, but also being prompted to replicate them through cognition. In this way, the hyperlinking of superhero comics extrapolates the systematic closure that Scott McCloud and Thierry Groensteen associate with the medium. By their account, readers are already engaged in
an interplay where they complete the gaps between panels, pages, and issues through cognitive investment. The ontological differences between memories and imaginations that I touched on earlier do not preclude them from being linked together within a reader’s image consciousness. Instead, comics depend upon the interrelation of memory and imagination. Imaged versions of previously perceived aesthetic-images are combined and the reader’s imagination completes unseen actions implied by the gutter’s blank space. In the previous component case studies, I described a variety of instances where individual panels or sequences of panels elicited various forms of connection. The deep dive extends those processes beyond a single text by fabricating a situation where readers are cognitively bridging gaps across the publication history and shared authorship of the narrative universe.

Just across the deep dive session I have recounted in this chapter, my navigation through a series of hyperlinks bracketed together eras, characters, and portions of the DC Universe that where not related directly through narrative. Objectively, *Suicide Squad, DC Comics Presents, Justice League of America*, and the three series featuring Punch and Jewelee are all separate serialized narratives. While DC asserts that these series are part of the same canon, the fans can only actualize those claims by *feeling* that shared history through the dive. Where that could be left entirely up to the reader, the industry’s decision to replicate a system of cross-referencing similar to factual documentation implies there was a connective whole there already – the citations simply chart a course through it. The reader is, then, discovering that whole by following the hyperlinks. By doing so, the process makes the reader apply the systematic closure foundational to comics as an act of imagining-that. Since superhero comics push the reader to repeat the process, they are constantly being made to conceive of these narrative universes as individual texts that comprise a “nexus of relations.”
For that experience to finally match the conception of our universe, however, the act of imagining—that must be patently impossible to manage. As I navigated from *Suicide Squad* #5 to *DC Comics Presents* #77-78 to *Justice League of America* #29 back to *Suicide Squad* #24 and then to *Captain Atom* #85, *Manhunter* #20, and *Harley Quinn* #3, those connections were being saved in my memory. Going forward, when prompted to think of Punch and Jewelee or Enchantress and Rick Flag, my cognitive search will no doubt recreate the connections made during this dive (as they are now part of my sedimented timelines for those characters). Other links—like the Flag and Enchantress of *DC Comics Presents* and the Crime Syndicate of *Justice League of America* #29—are less directly connected by shared IP, but will perpetuate in my memory because this dive interrelated them. For instance, when I read a comic with Owl-Man in the future, I am more likely to recall Rick Flag or Jewelee, too. Alone those connections are manageable within a single act of imagining-that.

However, a deep dive never stops at connecting the corners of the universe hyperlinked during the meanderings of research time, it also slots those connections into information already saved in memory. As I perceived each of the issues throughout this dive, they would regularly act as reminiscentia. Like examples from throughout the previous chapter, these aesthetic-images triggered acts of memorial expansion. In each of those instances, my image consciousness would cascade through a succession of loosely or specifically related memories from throughout my DC Comics reading past. The crook and color of Enchantress’ hat in *Suicide Squad* #5 expanded into memories of the same chevronic element, but rendered differently in *Justice League Dark* and *Shadowpact*; my imaginary display for the snake-skin layering of Owl-Man’s cape triggered Frank Quitely’s lumpier version from the *JLA: Earth-2* graphic novel, which then made me think about the Grant Morrison *JLA* series that got me into
comics; in *Manhunter #20*, Punch and Jewelee are stopped with the help of another hero named Obsidian, whose wispy black cloak recalls his appearances in the early 2000s *JSA* I loved as a kid; Catwoman arriving at Harley’s party in *Harley Quinn #3* wearing her all-grey bodysuit costume reminded me of a similar outfit from *Catwoman: When in Rome*. These and too many other acts of expansion to name occurred over the course of the deep dive, but the cognitive connectivity elicited by the hyperlinked design trains me to bring them all together (see Fig. 29). Just like when I endeavor to think of our universe as a whole, the act eventually reaches a point where the goal becomes unachievable. At that point, I am feeling the “universeness” of DC Comics.

Ontologically, the eidetic content that remains after deep dive research lacks characteristics associated with memories of perceived lived experiences. However, these combinations of memory and imagination related to fictional universes are identical to how history and the universe beyond our planet are conceived of. That eidetic similarity, paired with the amount of linked continuity available to be researched, provides these fictional universes a “universeness.” As memories are accumulated through deep diving, an interrelationship forms between the formal hyperlinks on the page and those within the reader’s mind.

**Conclusion**

Superhero comics are connected through a series of hyperlinks that replicate the self-directed research of early *renvois* cross-references, while anticipating digital hyperlinks. By choosing to link their publications in this way, the comics industry urges readers to deep dive into the vast recesses of their narrative continuity. Two specific ways the industry accomplishes this are the vocative link – which directs readers to an exact location – and the dialogic and visual taxonomic link – which points to multiple, inexact locations without stressing an order.
Figure 29 Diagram depicting the mental-images that were triggered throughout my deep dive experience
Originally, the Direct Market was the sole method for readers to follow these hyperlinks back to their destination, but the Internet has since become another available archive for research.

Once a fan undertakes a deep dive into the vast connections that structure the Marvel and DC Universes, the comics they encounter enable them to feel its daunting totality in three ways.

1. The fan’s body feels the expansivity of these industrially built constructs through the effort expended during wandering periods of research time. Research conducted through the Direct Market expresses itself through travel time, orientation to, and the act of digging through the archive. Online research is nearly effortless, with the fluid “jump” of webpages and miniscule gestures of the click and swipe leaving an unnoticeable trace of time that lengthens research.

While the industry intends for their hyperlinks to promote purchasing by leading fans to unfamiliar comics, their relation to the renvois ultimately leaves readers to determine which pathways they follow:

2. A reader feeling their way through a superhero universe’s hyperlinked design – choosing which links to pursue, which to ignore, and when to stop their dive – decides which aspects of continuity they retain as memories.

After a deep dive has concluded (or, at least, lulled) the fan is left with new mental-images, both mnemonic and imaginary. Each type has a different ontology, but they both lack the sensorial data of past lived perceptions.

3. The conception of our universe involves an unachievable cognitive interconnection of mental-image representations for its imperceivable aspects. By resembling the citation of factual documents and applying the medium’s systematic closure to its hyperlinked
design, the deep dive makes fans cognitively interconnect an overwhelming amount of mental-images that generate a similar feeling of “universeness.”

**CONCLUSION: DOES THE INTERNET FEEL LIKE A SUPERHERO UNIVERSE?**

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that there is a “universeness” to superhero comics. They attain that “universeness” because of a similarity to how we conceive of our universe. As most of the universe and its history are unable to be perceived directly, we must rely on mentally imaged memories and imaginary recreations of these imperceivable aspects. This act of imagining—that intends to generate a “nexus of relations” between these mental-images encompassing the entire universe. Of course, its infinite vastness makes that impossible. Instead, the act leaves the person straining at the magnitude of the task, associating the conception of the universe with a feeling of the unachievable.

As fictional creations, the narrative universes of Marvel and DC Comics are likewise unavailable for direct perception. Rather, they are comprised of aesthetic-images whose chevronic iconography, static-kinetic tension, and tendency to be Re-Viewed by the reader help them fight against memory’s ephemerality. Over its history, the comics industry has emphasized universe-oriented storytelling which prompts readers to connect their memories of these aesthetic-images in their image consciousness. Because the continuity of these narrative universes has expanded to such an extensive degree, any imagining—that attempt results in a similar impossibility to the conception of our own universe, providing them a “universeness.”

DC and Marvel reached that point in stages that I have outlined across the three body chapters of this dissertation. First, the foundational resources available to comic books contributed to and were marshalled towards each publisher’s ability and decision to become vast narratives. The medium’s resources both made universe-building possible and necessitated that
readers participate in the imagining-that process to conceive of their narrative scope. Second, the resources were funneled into six components that built out these universes by connecting elements of continuity as well as spurring readers to recreate those connections cognitively. Finally, these individual connections at the level of the page and panel are likewise linked together across a publisher’s entire catalog and history. I have called this matrix of interrelations the deep dive, encompassing both the extensive research that these links prompt readers to conduct as well as the daunting cognitive connection it causes in the reader. It is that combination of resources into components into the deep dive that ultimately resembles the feeling of our universe.

When writing about the industry’s reliance on retroactive continuity in *Retcon Game*, Andrew J. Friedenthal makes a larger point about how “the editable hyperlink, rather than the stable footnote, has become the de facto source of information in America today,” in part because “it reached its present form as a result of the complicated workings of superhero comic book continuity” (8-9). Echoing what I have mentioned repeatedly throughout this dissertation, Friedenthal foreshadows the comparable trajectories of comics and the Internet that I will use this Concluding chapter to discuss. In the previous chapter I established that the deep dive design of superhero comics anticipates the hyperlinking of the world wide web. Here I want to narrow that assertion, looking specifically at how the same kind of branching pathways that incite users to research have been repurposed as a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and propaganda online. Living in an era of the Dark Web, QAnon, “The Big Lie,” anti-vaxxers, school shooting deniers, and claims of “Fake News,” to name only a few examples, it is undeniable that the parties behind these viewpoints have contorted the Internet’s hyperlinking capabilities to circulate sources of (dis)information. I suggest that the comics industry’s route to
“universeness” can help us understand the Internet’s similar progression to spreading conspiratorial misinformation. By summarizing the three claims from my body chapters in relation to their equivalent stages in the evolution of misinformation dispersal online, I will gesture at how superhero comics’ design can be educative beyond the parameters of its industry.

**Repurposing Resources**

Both superhero publishers and the architects of the Internet tailored resources inherent to their respective media – comics and computing – to specific forms of information dissemination. The material characteristics, superheroes-as-chevrons, corporate and creative influences, audience interactivity, and the Direct Market of comic books develop into and support storytelling that favors brevity, seriality, and collaborative authorship told through striking, static-kinetic imagery. The hyperlinked design of the Internet favors successive clicking that leads users to further information. In each case, these resources’ basic affordances were redirected away from their initial intentions. Where superhero comics were marshalled towards the creation of interconnected narrative universes, the digital hyperlink’s incitement to click was repurposed by algorithmic coding, directing users towards information reflective of their previous history. The latter of which laid groundwork that bad actors exploit to spread conspiratorial misinformation.

In Chapter One, I claimed that the resources of comic books were repurposed towards a sensation of “universeness” during the Silver Age. Namely, the interconnection of aesthetic-images that influence readers’ cognitive conception of these narrative universes as unachievably vast. First are material characteristics determined by the industry’s print forebearers. The basis for static-kinetic aesthetic-images that resist memory’s ephemerality as well as the need for narrative serialization across titles originates from the comparatively restrictive size, shape, and
page count of comic books as well as numbering and pricing that favors creative risk-taking and continuation. That materiality helped form the superhero genre and the chevronic figures at its center. Minimalistic yet vibrant costumes became a defining feature, turning the superhero into a symbolic figure that bestrides dream-like repetition and serially accrued signification, urging readers to re-imagine and relate their variations through memory. By retaining copyright ownership of these superhero IP, Marvel and DC have been able to increasingly interrelate them over time. That interrelation was accomplished by the work-for-hire creators who collaboratively stewarded these IP from storyworlds into continuity-dependent universes during the Silver Age. Industry efforts to replicate fanzines’ communal discourse about continuity and nostalgia, like letters pages and fan clubs, eventually produced a pipeline for fans to become creators and directly shape these universes going forward.

The universe-oriented storytelling that resulted from these resources was catered to once a Direct Market of comic book retailers began to form in the Seventies. Initiated by Phil Seuling, who had already inaugurated comic book conventions, the LCS became a multi-purpose gathering space for fans (both customers and employees) to reminisce about continuity and conduct research using an archive of current and back issues as well as TPB collections. As a type of public sphere, the LCS externalized fans’ private engagements with the DC and Marvel Universes as a culmination of what the industry had been building towards. Once the resources of the Internet became available, the archival and gathering potential of the Direct Market became available online, replacing physical collecting with information acquisition. The availability of information increased exponentially, further conveying the vast “universeness” of these narratives.
Where the latter resources of comic books influenced the superhero genres’ embrace of narrative universes, the affordances of the Internet have been warped into our contemporary rash of disinformation. In an article on “The Algorithmization of the Hyperlink,” Anne Helmond paraphrases various Internet scholars to assert that “The hyperlink is considered...the fabric of the web.” Initially, the purpose of the hyperlink was a neutral one: a tether between one piece of information and another. These tethers comprised the fabric Helmond references, a progressively intertwined chain of pathways between informational data in the form of webpages. Ingrained in that chaining is the implication that users can keep progressing – an incitement to click from one link to another ad nauseum. The ability for instantaneous connection between two data points which encouraged perpetual exploration was an impartial resource at first, forsaking any natural hierarchy. However, much like DC and Marvel would turn the industry’s resources to universe-building, the hyperlink’s basic characteristics became an asset for the owners and managers of webpages and platforms, eventually leading to a state that nurtures the spread of disinformation.

Helmond’s article describes the history that foreshadowed this shift. The initial neutrality of hyperlinks was easily manipulated into the kinds of hierarchies the technology resisted. Search engines, in particular Google, instead “created an economy of links” (Helmond). In this economy, the hyperlink was valuable in two distinct ways. One, the effortless operation of a hyperlink that I described in the previous chapter means there is little barrier to users activating a link and traveling to a new webpage. Corporations, platforms, and other parties have advantageously paired the hyperlink’s ease with appealing content to entangle users in a succession of clicks. Looking at mobile devices and their apps, Ethan Tussey has referred to this dynamic as “the procrastination economy,” wherein media industries and online platforms utilize
Helmond’s link economy to “monetize users’ in-between moments” (E-book). In these mutual economies, hyperlinks lure users into repeatedly giving over their downtime in return for “culture, information, entertainment, or games to help them navigate a variety of social situations and enhance their mobile conversations” (Tussey). In this instance, the objective tethering potential and effortless activation of hyperlinks are resources that have been turned to the purpose of keeping users clicking.

In that environment of compulsive clicking, the second value of the link economy becomes the data that can be gleaned from these clicks. The links that users click on can be used to determine what they are likely to click on next. The focus of John Cohn’s The Burden of Choice involves such an accrual and re-purposing of data for “digital recommendation systems, which. . .lead people toward certain objects and away from others” (5). When these algorithmic programs Cohn describes are utilized, users are not only enticed by the foundational effortlessness of the hyperlink, but also the associated content made to appeal to that specific user’s tastes. All too often nowadays, a user can set out to view a single food vlog or ASMR video on YouTube, only for the platform’s algorithm to tempt them with twenty other videos about similar subject matter. Inevitably, the user clicks and ends up watching videos for hours. While that system may innocuously generate ad revenue for the platform, those resources have gone on to benefit the dissemination of false information.

The basic resources of comic books afford storytelling that is brief, serialized, and reliant upon the collaborative creation of static-kinetic visuals. To regain a dwindling audience, in the late Fifties and early Sixties DC and Marvel pursued an unconventional utilization of these resources: universe-oriented storytelling. While the Direct Market has helped to naturalize this approach, this form of complexly interconnected narrativization was not the original benefit of
the industry’s resources. Similarly, the hyperlink’s fundamental ability to effortlessly connect two webpages became a resource to incite successive clicking during a user’s free time. Additionally, those clicks helped coders program algorithms that use data to direct users towards like-content. With the fabric of the Internet being used in this way, the groundwork was laid for these resources to advantage the spread of disinformation.

Building Connections

Superhero comics and platforms catering to disinformation online repurposed their media’s respective resources to develop connections between continuity/information. In the case of Marvel and DC Comics, these connections occurred at the level of the page and panel. In service of building cohesion between their IP and publishing output, these forms of connectivity are organizable into six components of universe-building. Regarding conspiracies and misinformation online, similar efforts to connect analogous worldviews result from the Internet’s hyperlinking and algorithmic resources, specifically domain cross-linking and the appeal of false information on social media. Where superhero comics use their connectivity to build the sense of a narrative universe in the minds of readers, the linking of disinformation online can lead users into “information silos” where interactions with oppositional perspectives are limited.

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I outlined six ways that superhero publishers use the resources of comic books to enable connections between IP, separate titles, eras of publication, and different creator’s work, all spurring readers to recreate those same connections cognitively. These connections represent the six components that enable DC and Marvel to build an understanding of their narrative universes in readers’ minds. The first two forms of connection are components that interrelate different superheroes-as-chevrons. Colliding two or more chevronic IP together in static-kinetic combat motivates readers to recall memories of each
character, causing previously separated mental-images to crash into one another. Increasing the number of chevrons in collision, the amassing of IP in a Hero Tableau spurs an interconnected expansion of memories about each character to provide the broadest glimpse of the universe as a whole. Reliant upon the collaboration between writers and artists across decades and titles, Exquisite Corpse Creation is a component that encourages readers to overlook gaps in time and authorship to make connections between continuity recognized-in separate creator’s work. Sedimented Timelines are likewise generated in reader cognition as the sliding timelines of superhero characters influence how readers compress narrative events together for a “fleshier” sense of the character’s history. When cognitive dissonances disrupt any of the connections implied by these components, creators utilize readers’ acclimatization to mentally filling-in non-visualized information to Retcon Inconsistencies. Finally, auto- and group Reminiscence reasserts and clarifies previously established cognitive connections or supplies new ones.

Where the comics industry’s connective tactics form vast narrative universes, corporate and partisan entities online have manipulated hyperlink resources to make connections that benefit their agenda. A study conducted in April 2021 on “Mutual Hyperlinking Among Misinformation Peddlers” found that the method of “Domain cross-linking...adds to the spread of lies and conspiracies” (Sehgal et al 7). In these situations, one party owns multiple – sometimes hundreds – of website domains that traffic in the same ideologies and false information. The owners of these sites then link them all together, playing on the hyperlink’s foundational incitement to click to keep users within a chain of self-supporting beliefs.

As Jean Seaton has pointed out in “The New Architecture of Communications,” in the era of information abundance that these cross-linking domains are a part of claims that are “reliable and important. . .[are] not easy to distinguish from the insignificant or deliberately misleading”
The result of this ambiguity and these ensnaring systems of cross-linking is what Seaton refers to as “narrow ‘silos’ of information” where users click their way into an ideological echo chamber (808). The hyperlink connections that facilitate these silos are not unlike the universe-building components of superhero comics, but here they are formulating a skewed worldview rather than the notion of a fictional universe. While a sensation of “universeness” attains for readers as they cognitively connect continuity, IP, and individual series, the interconnection of misinformation websites validates their claims for the user, making the silo feel like the only legitimate viewpoint.

Silos of misinformation are not only constructed by cross-linked domains. Social media platforms, like Twitter, Facebook, Parler, and similar networking websites have contributed to the validation of misinformation through connectivity. In a 2018 study on “The Spread of True and False News Online,” researchers using data from Twitter discovered that “false news spreads more pervasively than the truth,” largely because users were inclined to share non-factual information more (Vosoughi et al, 5). That user inclination creates a dangerous cycle because it benefits the platforms on which this information is being shared. Where the comics industry has settled on a cross-referential model to lead readers to new texts and draw them further into the universe’s continuity, the industries behind these platforms have developed “recommendation algorithms [that] favor the outrageous and conspiratorial because it increases engagement and profit” (Sehgal et al 10). Therefore, the algorithm will tailor a user’s feed to reflect any provocative posts they have shared or engaged with, which creates another form of information silo. This outcome generates a distorted sense of the world by eliminating any contradictory information, leaving the user with only misinformation posts to make connections between. In its way, this situation is not unlike the sedimentation of a character’s timeline: context outside of
what the algorithm is feeding back to the user is ignored, leaving them to compress together misinformation that creates a false sense of how things are. As the owners of social media platforms acquire and merge with similar websites, these conspiratorially inclined algorithms become ubiquitous.

Where DC and Marvel have used comics resources to ease narrative connectivity as a means of building universes, social media industries utilize Internet resources to manipulate how information is hyperlinked online. Some domain owners have intentionally cross-linked their websites knowing that these connections will coax users to visit all of them. Likewise, the programmers for social media platforms, like Twitter, have developed algorithms that favor provocative over factual content. Each instance increases the potential for users to be drawn into information silos that leave them with a misrepresented conception of reality.

Feeling the Conspiracy

Having used the resources of their respective media to generate connections between information, both superhero comics and those disseminating misinformation online ultimately push their audiences to dig into their subject matter. In the previous chapter, I described the research experience in superhero comics as the deep dive. During this process, the bodily effort and time taken to feel one’s way through these branching pathways results in the unachievable feeling of “universeness.” Seaton describes a similar deep dive arising from “Our capacity to roam over the prairies of the internet and then burrow down into topics and interests,” which I argue can likewise alter users’ feelings about their country’s political universe (813). As I have proposed in the previous section, this is largely due to the autonomy of feeling one’s way through hyperlinks being hampered by entities and algorithms actively leading users into information silos. The recent QAnon conspiracy exemplifies this potential.
The deep dive in superhero comics begins from Marvel and DC extrapolating the connective components that build their universes across their entire publishing histories, generating a system of interrelations that synthesizes encyclopedic cross-referencing and online hyperlinking. Originally, the Direct Market existed as the only archive of superhero comics for fans to dive into, until the arrival of digital sellers and subscription platforms online provided a secondary research method for fans. Each form of research necessitates an investment of time and effort, with the Direct Market forcing the body to orient itself to the physical abundance of back issues and product at a LCS and the plentiful availability of content online allowing fans to sift through links in a haze of hours. Regardless of which archival form fans choose to utilize, the industry intentionally leaves the trajectory of the dive at the researcher’s discretion. The way that fans navigate through the vocative and taxonomic links of superhero comics contributes to how these connections are reproduced in their image consciousness. It is the memorial and imaginary mental-images that fans are left with after the deep dive which resemble the imperceptible ontologies of our universe and its history. As the comics instigate further deep diving, the ever-expanding “nexus of relations” produced by it reaches the unachievable feeling of our own universe.

Over the past five years, similar methods to those used by superhero publishers have been wielded by entities spreading conspiratorial disinformation online. Using the basic hyperlinking resources of the Internet to goad users into conducting research and making connections between misinformation sources, these conspiracy deep dives likewise ensure that participants come away with a unified feeling about their distorted ideologies. Because these deep dives are being conducted online, users are as likely to lose track of time dedicating long periods to tracing the connections placed in front of them. In an op-ed for *The Washington Post*, Alyssa Rosenberg
suggested this potential to dedicate time to online research only increased during the lockdowns and quarantines of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, “provid[ing] a way to fill empty hours with what feels like productive, empowering work.” Where deep diving into superhero universes can provide an equal illusion of accomplishment, the real world implications that coincide with conspiratorial deep diving are far more disconcerting.

Nowhere has the threat of misinformation research become more apparent than the QAnon movement which has bound together the Dark Web, Fake News, and the Trump presidency. Gestating from 2017 posts on anonymous online forums, such as 4Chan, by a user designated Q, the conspiracy espouses a massive governmental sex-trafficking ring being supported and covered up by political and economic elites. To disrupt this illusionary threat, followers of QAnon are persuaded to “educate” themselves through the kind of empowering research Rosenberg alludes to. Like superhero comics, the conspiratorial deep diving elicited by QAnon depends upon connectivity. Viewing QAnon as a key signifier of an “information dark age,” Matthew Hannah contends that “the innovative aspect of QAnon is that Internet users are invited to build the map through research, effectively leveraging networked infrastructures of anonymous information technology.” Not as innovative as Hannah believes, these users are effectively feeling their way through an increasingly wider net(work) of “evidence” in the same way superhero fans dive through comic book hyperlinks. In these situations, QAnon followers believe themselves to have the kind of navigational autonomy exerted by superhero fans. As Hannah points out “Q insists on the connectedness of all events in time, no matter how random,” which gives participants leeway to make connections between the glut of social media posts, Fake News, and public statements from similarly-minded political agents.
As with superhero comics, however, the linked pathways are already being laid out by the purveyors of the conspiracy. Each post by Q points users in directions favorable to their argument, offering what have been dubbed “breadcrumbs” (Hannah). Akin to how DC and Marvel’s creators and editorial staff choose which issues or series to connect with a vocative or taxonomic link, these “breadcrumbs” skew towards topics, destinations, and theories aligned with the conspiracy. This tactic takes advantage of the cross-networking and algorithmization mentioned in the previous section, knowing that once users begin to conduct their conspiratorial deep dive they will be artificially led into silos of misinformation. As Hannah points out, Q’s initial use of anonymous forum threads exploited their ability to “organize and contextualize a conversation in small, digestible chunks, linking to other threads, conversations, and content” that could then redirect followers outside of those forums to be sucked into the conspiracy-favoring algorithms of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other platforms. What amplifies these silos is the participation of other organizations – like the executive branch of the United States government – supplying “evidence” followers can use to make further confirmatory connections.

As Helmund reminds us, “While links establish technical connections between websites they are also considered to organize various types of social and political relations,” which directly impact how users conceive of those socio-political issues. Where a fan comes away from a deep dive overwhelmed by the expansive “universeness” of superhero comics, the conspiratorial deep diver has been given a sense of our world from a siloed perspective. The “universeness” of superhero comics has little to no impact on the fan’s reality, but distortion caused by the conspiratorial deep dive has caused damaging real world ramifications. In particular, the QAnon conspiracy combining with Trump’s false claims of voter fraud provoked an attempted insurrection at the United States Capitol building on January 6th, as Congress was
recording the electoral college results of the 2020 presidential election. These seditious actions were unquestionably an outgrowth of beliefs nurtured through the deep diving process. As reported by Lois Beckett and Vivian Ho of The Guardian, Ashli Babbitt – who was shot to death attempting to break into the House Chamber – “had tweeted regularly about the conspiracy theory since February 2020” marking her as one of many participants, including the self-dubbed “QAnon Shaman,” who suggest their conception of reality had been dangerously perverted by misinformation they encountered online.

The hyperlinked design of superhero comics has been settled upon to cohere Marvel and DC’s universes and potentially sell product by intriguing readers to search out unknown titles. That model leads to a deep dive experience where readers feel their way through successive links, a process which registers the unimaginable scope of the universe through research time, bodily effort, and the initiation of unachievable acts of imagining-that. An understanding of the comic book deep dive design and experience helps to elucidate equivalent methods in the dissemination and researching of misinformation online. The QAnon conspiracy is a glaring example of how a semblance of productive research paired with a litany of connectable “breadcrumbs” can yield a distorted view of our reality. However, the deep dive design of superhero comics could be applied to further instances of information dissemination online. Too often the contemporary United States feels like a superhero comic. In one respect, the idea of a sitting President stoking citizens deluded by online conspiratorial propaganda to the point of sedition seems like a plot Dr. Doom or Lex Luthor would contrive. In another respect, though, the Internet has organized its glut of historical, political, and cultural information into such an elaborately intertwined web that it feels like the curated continuity of DC and Marvel Comics. In the end, there is a sort of irony in superhero comics being so relevant to modern American
culture. Originally, they were fictional universes whose design replicated the experience of the real universe. Now they have become an instructive mirror to the universe they emulated. Who would have ever imagined that?
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