Part IV: Periodization, Canonization, Digitization

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Periodizing 'The Marvel Age' Using the Production of Culture Approach

Introduction

Periodization is the process of defining temporal divisions which can then be used to categorize events within a certain period. Many attempts have been made to periodize American superhero comics, both in fandom and academia, mostly using the so-called 'Ages' system, but there has rarely been any agreement on how this should be done (Coogan). Furthermore, most attempts to define these 'Ages' have been based on personal interpretation of the contents, with vague ideas of start and end dates which are unsuitable for quantitative analyses. This chapter will demonstrate a way to avoid such issues by using an approach which concentrates on the way that texts are actually produced, rather than value judgements placed upon their contents, in order to define 'The Marvel Age' with specific dates which can be empirically justified.

The 'Ages' system for periodizing superhero comics was introduced in the 1960s when fanzines such as Roy Thomas's *Alter Ego* borrowed the term 'Golden Age' from Science Fiction fandom (Pustz; Bould, Butler and Roberts; Lent; Gordon). This has since become generally accepted and used to refer to the period covering the first wave of American superhero comics, which began in 1938 with the introduction of Superman in *Action Comics #1* (Reynolds; Saunders).

The idea of a 'Silver Age' to describe the second wave of superhero comics was first suggested in a letter in *Justice League of America* #42 and quickly gained popularity amongst the growing fan community, especially when it started to be used by back issue dealers as a way to categorize and price stock (Hamerlink; Yockey; Smith). This 'Silver Age' is generally agreed to begin with the debut of the second version of The Flash in *Showcase #4* in 1956 (Sabin).

Most schemes follow this with the 'Bronze Age,' but there is no single agreed starting point. Proposed beginnings rely on the idea that comics in the 'Bronze Age' became more 'relevant' with something to say about the 'real world,' such as the discussion of race in *Green Lantern and Green Arrow #76* (1970), the halving of Superman's powers in *Superman* #233

(1971) and the death of Gwen Stacy in *Amazing Spider-man* #121 (1973), amongst many others (DK; Sabin; Coogan, Superheo).

As to what comes next, there are almost as many definitions as there are fans and academics attempting to define it, with Iron, Dark, Renaissance, Heroic, Modern, Independent, Revisionary Superhero Narrative and Zinc Ages all being suggested along the way. These attempted definitions tend to suffer from the same problems, in that they are based on personal judgements and cannot be empirically verified. As Benjamin Woo (2008) states, "the Ages schema has demonstrated its usefulness as a means for fans to organize trivia and for the comic book industry to segment the market for its back catalogue, but it is singularly unsuited to the needs of contemporary scholarship" (269).

I had personal experience of this unsuitability for academic purposes during research for my PhD, which required the definition of a corpus of texts featuring the Marvel comics character Doctor Doom. My thesis sought to examine Doom as an early example of a transmedia character, and the intent was to do this by analyzing his appearances during the 'Silver' and 'Bronze' ages of comics. The initial corpus for this analysis was to be generated by querying a comics database, which required definite start and end dates. However, there was no consensus on what these dates should be, and all of the existing proposals were based purely on personal opinion, rather than any empirical methodology. Eventually I realized that a different periodization was required that could be defined in a clear, empirical manner, with reference to the Marvel comics that Doctor Doom appeared in during the 1960s to 1980s. Ideally this would be a periodization that had already been described, possibly with a name related to my subject matter, which I could then define.

This paper will therefore seek to explain how such a periodization was developed using an approach based on the cultural production of texts in order to examine a corpus of comics, cartoons, books and other media featuring the character Doctor Doom, and propose that it could be used in future as an empirically justified replacement for existing versions of the 'Ages' system which are, at best, vaguely defined. The term chosen for this periodization was 'The Marvel Age,' for reasons explained in the following section.

The Marvel Age

The phrase 'The Marvel Age' first appeared on the front cover of *Journey Into Mystery* #94 in 1963 and has been repeated on Marvel covers and within their comics ever since. It has been used similarly in biographies, fan discussions and popular texts, as well as journal articles and academic volumes, but has never been formally defined.

The single aspect of 'The Marvel Age' that is generally agreed upon is that it began with the publication of *The Fantastic Four* #1 in 1961. As the oft-repeated story has it, when Marvel's publisher Martin Goodman told Stan Lee to create a new superhero team book to cash in on the success of *Justice League Of America*, his wife Joan suggested that, as he was considering leaving the comics industry anyway, he should write the kind of story he'd always wanted to write, with more complexity of character than standard superhero stories. Lee teamed up with Jack Kirby to create the series and together they combined their previous work in romance, monster and superhero comics to create a new kind of story that had more in-depth characterization, dynamic art and a more 'hip' sense of humor that was happy to mock itself (Pustz). They created a template for a 'Marvel style' that would set a dynamic, melodramatic and humorous tone for superhero comics for decades to come, eventually expanding beyond comics into the hugely successful Marvel Cinematic Universe (Yockey).

This new kind of superhero comic was immediately successful, both creatively and financially (Wright). Marvel became the dominant force in superhero comics for the next two decades, as its creators built a universe of super-powered characters who existed in a recognizably 'real' world where cosmic forces combined with everyday issues (Reynolds). Thus the publication of *Fantastic Four* #1 and the subsequent development of a cohesive universe, developed by a small team including Lee, Kirby and other notable creators like Steve Ditko, letterers, colorists, and in-house staff like Flo Steinberg and Sol Brodsky, marked the start of what came to be known as 'The Marvel Age.'

However, despite the term being used so regularly, there is no agreed upon definition of when 'The Marvel Age' actually ends. Indeed, in all my research I could only find three suggested end dates, all from comics writers. Mark Waid suggests that 'The Marvel Age' ended in 1992, with the 'The Death Of Superman' storyline in DC comics, which completed a move from "larger-than-life" to more "real life" heroes (Hoyle 15). Steve Englehart places the end as happening somewhere during his own run

as writer on *The Fantastic Four* from 1987 to 1989, when he states that there was a "deliberate decision to end creativity" (Schwent). Finally Roy Thomas has it ending either in 1978 in his book *The Marvel Age of Comics 1961–1978* or, in the larger *75 Years Of Marvel Comics*, in 1985 (Thomas; Thomas and Baker). However, unlike Waid and Englehart, Thomas does not say why these dates were chosen, making them even less useful for periodization.

Elsewhere the end of 'The Marvel Age' tends to be placed at some vague point in the mid- to late 1980s , when DC came to be seen as the home of innovative superhero storytelling with series such as *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. There are, however, two problems with using this definition of 'The Marvel Age.' Firstly, it is far too ill-defined to be used for a data-driven approach – a database query cannot use the phrase 'sometime around the mid- to late 1980s' as a search criterion. Secondly, much of the definition of an endpoint relies on texts produced by another company – DC comics, rather than Marvel themselves. This is counter-intuitive for a period with Marvel in its name, and so an alternative method is required to find a specific comic, or set of comics, published by Marvel which can be used to mark the definitive end of this period. The method used for this project was the production of culture approach.

The Production of Culture Approach

Mass-produced comics have never been the work of a single creator yet, as Casey Brienza and Paddy Johnston argue in the introduction to *Cultures of Comics Work*, "there exists a tendency to canonize the writer and to advance a narrow, auterist vision of production when analyzing and studying comics" (Brienza and Johnston 1). Even when fans and scholars are aware of other credited individuals, such as pencillers, inkers, letterers and colorists, they are likely oblivious to the involvement of professionals such as designers, publicists, typesetters, distributors or retailers.

In order to solve this problem Brienza suggests that Comics Studies adopt the production of culture approach, which views all artistic work as "the product of collective, often routinized, human activity" and states that "to fully understand any artistic work, one must also study the larger social and organizational context of its production and dissemination" (Brienza 105).This seems an eminently sensible suggestion for the study of comics which, unlike more traditional literary fields, has always been

rooted in collaboration, with a team of writers, artists, editors and other creators usually working together to create texts, rather than a single individual (Kidman).

This is especially the case for Marvel during this period, when 'The Marvel Method' was heavily used. This process involved the writer and penciller discussing a plot which the artist would then draw, the inker would embellish, and then the writer would dialogue, before the letterer would add speech balloons, and the colorist would color in (Yockey). The finished comic would then be printed, distributed, promoted and sold - this last part of the chain, crucially, would in later years take place in specialist comic stores which had their own input into the iterative creative process by feeding back to the publishers about what was selling (Pustz). Taking this approach has the potential to include all contributors to the final text, not just the writer and artists, thus including groups which have traditionally been absent from the study of comics from this period - for example, the common exclusion of colorists from the analysis would mean ignoring a profession that was vital to the creation of such stories and was almost entirely occupied by women (Century).

Brienza proposes the use of Richard Peterson's *Five Constraints on the Production of Culture* as a tool for comics research (Peterson). This offers an accessible, rigorous approach to comics research with concrete definitions based on practical evidence, independent of value judgements about the contents of text, which can then be used for analyses and corpus creation that requires specific dates (Brienza 108).

Peterson's five factors which constrain or facilitate the production of culture are organizational structure, occupational careers, laws, markets and technology. By analyzing these five factors, and their interactions with each other, he argues that one can develop a sociological, detail-oriented picture of an area of research. In comics terms Peterson's five factors can be understood as follows: 1) **Organizational Structure** – the corporate structure, size, and owners of the publisher, how it organizes its staff, and the way in which it is linked to other organizations; 2) **Occupational Careers** – the various individuals responsible for devising and producing the comics, and how they were organized to work within the industry. 3) **Laws** – the legal framework within which the comics are produced; 4) **Markets** – how the comics are purchased or consumed, which would include locations such as newsstands and comic stores, and details of sales figures; 5) **Technology** – developments in printing processes, coloring technology, and the delivery of product to stores. The next section will

show how this approach can be used to periodize 'The Marvel Age' by examining the history of Marvel comics through the lens of Peterson's five factors.

Using the Production of Culture Approach to Periodize 'The Marvel Age'

The early organizational structure of the company we now know as Marvel Comics can be glimpsed within the actual text of *Fantastic Four #1*. This comic was issued in August 1961, although the date on the cover was November 1961, following the procedure of the time for cover dates to be roughly three months ahead of the on-sale date, in theory to encourage retailers to leave it on the shelf longer (Adams; Levitz). Also on the cover was a small box labelled MC, referring to Marvel Comics, but the indicia - the text inside the magazine giving official publication information - stated that it was published by Canam Publishers Sales Corporation. This was one of several different company names used by Martin Goodman, supposedly in order to make it difficult for creditors to track him down if his business got into trouble (Simon loc 1279). This had happened several times previously, notably in 1956 when his own distribution company Atlas got into heavy debt and he signed up with American News Company instead, who promptly went bust a year later (Tucker). Goodman was then forced to sign another new distribution deal with Independent Distribution, owned by his competitors National Comics, who offered him a restrictive deal whereby he could only publish eight titles a month. This required huge cutbacks for Goodman, and he was forced to fire his entire staff, with the sole exception of Stan Lee.

The effect of this for occupational careers at Marvel was that Stan Lee became the editor and main – sometimes only – writer for the sixteen bi-monthly titles that he and Goodman decided to publish in their eight monthly slots, with a small group of artists, letterers and colorists responsible for the entire line with little or no guidance from Goodman. This meant that the 'Marvel Universe' storyworld was able to emerge across different titles which were all being generated by the same compact team of creators and, although Stan Lee's notoriously poor memory meant that some errors still crept in, this form of cohesive, serialized, storytelling became a major selling point for Marvel over its competitors (Lee and Mair; Hills).

In terms of laws, the legal framework for American comics in the twentieth century was set by The Comics Code Authority, a self-regulatory body set up by comics publishers in 1954 as an alternative to government regulation in the wake of public concern resulting from the publication of Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (Costello). The code was a way for the industry to avoid government regulation by providing a voluntary standard of 'decency,' enabling distributors and retailers to be sure that the items they were offering to customers were free from controversial content which might land them in legal difficulty. (Palmer, 2016). It imposed guidelines such as government officials not being portrayed in an unflattering light, good always triumphing over evil, and no depictions of "sex perversion," "baser emotions" or "Vampires, werewolves, ghouls and zombies" (Weiner 246). Though not legislation in the strictest sense of Peterson's definition, compliance with the code was required by most distributors, especially in Marvel's early years, and changes to the way that the code was applied would resonate throughout 'The Marvel Age.'

Marvel gently pushed against the limitations of the Comics Code, reaching a climax in 1971 when Stan Lee was contacted by the Department of Health Education with a request that he write a Spider-Man story "warning kids about the dangerous effects of drug addiction" (Daniels 152). Lee agreed, but when the first instalment of the story in *Amazing Spider-Man #96* was submitted to the Comics Code Authority it was rejected (Lee and Mair). Rather than change the storyline, issues #96 to #98 of the series were published without the Comics Code stamp. No mention was made of this in the comics themselves, with issue #99 returning to code approval, and there were no detectable consequences for the publishers. The code itself, however, was amended later that year to allow for more leeway in story content (Lopes).

The more 'realistic' storylines presented by Marvel were seen by fans as a definite selling point, especially when compared to the output of DC (Reynolds). Marvel's share of the comics market rose throughout the 1960s, although precise sales figures are unavailable due to the historical reluctance of comics companies to disclose such information (Tucker). Marvel became so profitable for Independent Distribution that in 1967 Martin Goodman was able to negotiate an increase in the number of titles which he could publish, leading to popular heroes such as Captain America and Iron Man finally getting their own titles (Howe).

The following year Goodman sold Marvel to Cadence for around $15 million, although he remained as publisher. As well as being profitable

personally for Goodman this worked in Marvel's favor as Cadence owned its own distributor, Curtis Circulation. Marvel began to use them in 1969, removing any restrictions on the number of titles they could publish. By 1972 they would be publishing 270 comic titles a year, an expansion of 281% in ten years, and their sales figures finally surpassed DC's, an occasion which Marvel celebrated with a commemorative badge (Thomas and Baker)

Throughout this early period Marvel and DC, along with most comics companies in the USA, used the same printing company, based in Illinois, and so were subject to the same issues with print technology and the costs involved. Thus, when one company raised their prices, the others tended to follow suit. However, the way they managed these changes differed. In 1972, for instance, DC increased their cover prices from 15 to 25 cents, a huge rise which was matched with a rise in page count from 32 to 48 pages, with the extra taken up by reprints. Marvel did the same three months later, but only for one month, dropping their page count to the usual 32 pages again but the cover price to 20 cents, thus managing to raise their own profits while simultaneously appearing cheaper than their competitors.

This was one of Martin Goodman's final moves as publisher of Marvel comics. He retired in 1972 with Stan Lee taking over, leaving his post as editor-in-chief and thus beginning the process of gradually removing himself from the day to day running of comics, eventually moving to the West Coast to pursue movie and other media projects for the company. Lee's departure completed the exodus of the most well-known drivers of Marvel's early creative success, with Lee's main collaborators, Ditko and Kirby, having left in 1966 and 1970 respectively and signaled an end to this first period of 'The Marvel Age,' which saw the creation of the Marvel storyworld which is still in existence today.

What followed was a much more chaotic period, in which Marvel had five different editors-in-chief in six years. This was partly due to changes in the organizational structure, with Cadence's CEO Sheldon Feinberg hiring Al Landau as Marvel's new president, replacing Martin Goodman's son Chip. Landau had no experience in comics publishing and often clashed with staff, notably getting into a fist fight with Len Wein in 1975 after informing the editor that he hadn't been consulted about a change to the penciller on *Amazing Spider-man*, Marvel's top-selling title because "it was none of your fucking business" (Howe 166). A fight broke out, with Wein's friend Marv Wolfman, having to separate the two men.

By this time Sheldon Feinberg was becoming suspicious of Landau's sales reports, so appointed Jim Galton, an accountant from Curtis Circulation and former executive at CBS, as Vice President. Galton discovered that Landau was basing his reports on sales estimates rather than actual quantity of titles shipped, leading to print runs constantly increasing to meet entirely fictional levels of demand, and more and more returns piling up in warehouses. He sacked Landau and took over as President himself. After discovering that Marvel was losing $2 million dollars a year, he decided to cancel titles, fire staff, and generally pare down the company.

The first editor to come into conflict with Landau was Stan Lee's successor as editor-in-chief, Roy Thomas, who tried and failed to persuade him to grant creators royalties or to return art once published (Tucker). When Thomas took over as editor-in-chief he found it difficult to give orders to the older generation of staff members he had inherited, who according to John Romita "felt like he was a kid who shouldn't be in charge" (Howe 149). He actively pursued new talent from the world of fandom where he himself had begun his comics career, bringing in a new wave of creators, including such names as Marv Wolfman, Len Wein, Steve Englehart, Steve Gerber, Tony Isabella and Jim Salicrup (Sacks, Hoffman and Grace; Gabilliet).

Thomas resigned in 1974 when he discovered an agreement between Stan Lee and DC's editor-in-chief Carmine Infantino to share information about pay rates in order to stop freelancers playing them off against each other. His replacement Len Wein only lasted for a year, resigning rather than undertake the sackings required by Sheldon Feinberg's attempts to "stop the bleeding" after Landau's dismissal (Howe 205). Marv Wolfman took over in April 1975 and tried to bring Marvel back into profitability by taking steps to reduce the missed deadlines that were causing more and more comics to be issued full of reprint material, leading to reader dissatisfaction and falling sales. This included employing a young DC writer called Jim Shooter as an associate editor, tasked with proofing plots before they went to artists to avoid errors before they got too far in the production process. Shooter would take this job very seriously, causing consternation amongst the editor/writers who, until that point, had been in complete control of their own output (Tucker).

Despite these efforts Wolfman, like Wein before him, found the job exhausting, especially in the face of demands from Cadence Industries to cut costs, and in 1976 he too stepped down, with Roy Thomas initially

ear-marked to return. Thomas got as far as discussing his new pay deal before his friend Gerry Conway asked why he wanted to return to a job he'd left on such angry terms. Thomas agreed, removing himself from the running and recommending Conway for the job instead (Howe).

Conway encountered the same problems as all of his predecessors since Stan Lee, caused in part by the Marvel's increase in output. He was the youngest editor-in-chief yet at only 23 years old, and so the embedded staff felt able to resist his attempts to change the working culture. His attempts to change staffing procedures, combined with Shooter's ongoing efforts to properly edit material, led to further rebellions, and an exhausted Conway resigned, having been in post for just three months.

The final editor-in-chief during this period was Archie Goodwin, an experienced and much-liked figure within the comics community who, at 38, had the benefit of seniority over many of the younger writers and artists (Sacks, Hoffman and Grace). Like his predecessors, he attempted to introduce profit sharing, health insurance and the return of artwork as incentives to retain creators, but his requests were turned down by executives who didn't see why "people we hire for piecework" should receive such benefits (Howe 191). Eventually Cadence Industries agreed to pay royalty rates for reprints, which DC had done months earlier, but no more (Tucker).

The increase in comics coming onto market as a result of Marvel's new distribution deal led to increasing competition for sales during this period (Costello). Alongside this the cost of paper rose, bringing increases to cover prices, while the growth of television programming for younger viewers and the emergence of the video game industry led to increasing competition for the disposable income of comics' traditional adolescent audiences (Tucker; Palmer). At the same time, the traditional sales outlets for comics such as newsstands and 'mom and pop' corner stores were closing, being replaced by shopping centers and supermarkets which preferred to stock more profitable periodicals (Palmer). Put together all these factors caused a drop in overall comics sales throughout the 1970s (Howe).

During this time the relaxation of the Comics Code Authority meant that a wider range of story-types were available, and there was a brief boom in the monster and horror genres, with titles such as *Werewolf By Night* and *Tomb of Dracula* being published. Although still small in comparison, in 1974 the monster/horror genre was second only in popularity to superheroes (Lopes). This in turn influenced the content of superhero comics, notably by giving creators the encouragement to introduce

'darker' themes and to feature characters like The Punisher and Doctor Doom in lead roles, going unpunished and sometimes even celebrated for acts which might elsewhere have been deemed 'horrific.' These sorts of storylines appealed to the changing demographic of comics buyers during this period, as teenage fans who would have normally moved on to other interests stayed within the community (Palmer), Their increase in number relative to other audiences accentuated their influence over the industry – as the traditional pre-teen audience declined these older fans began to demand more 'mature' storylines, with an increased interest in continuity (Pustz).

However, the biggest change to markets during 'The Marvel Age' began in 1973, when Phil Seuling approached both Marvel and DC with a proposition that would lead to the creation of the direct market (Howe). He proposed that the companies sell comics to him at the same level of discount as the major chains, but with the agreement that he would keep all copies bought, rather than returning them. With pre-orders months in advance the comics companies could print only as many copies as required, whilst direct market retailers like Seuling, and others who followed, got a discount, and could sell off unsold comics over time in the growing back-issue market.

In 1974, the first year of the direct market, Marvel made $300,000 through this route. By 1976 this had risen to $1,500,000 and by 1979 it was earning the company over $3,500,000 (Reynolds). The direct market began to change the economics of the comics industry, making it easier for series to return a profit with much lower print runs, giving the possibility, if not necessarily the actuality, of more diverse output (Palmer).

Jim Shooter had remained in place as Archie Goodwin's assistant, a position which some believed he saw as an audition for the top job (Howe). Stan Lee certainly came to regard it as just that. He saw that Archie Goodwin was unwilling to take the administrative and staffing decisions which he felt were necessary for the company's future, particularly firing people, and decided to replace him with Shooter, who appeared much more willing to do so (Sacks, Hoffman and Grace). This brought an end to some of the chaos that Marvel had been going through, and led to a period of consolidation during which Shooter attempted to strengthen the company and its storyworld.

Shooter set about bringing a more disciplined, DC-style, organizational structure to Marvel, installing a traffic manager and production expert to assist editors, overseeing the production of books more rigorously, and

cancelling several titles that were underperforming (Tucker). One of his key appointments was Carol Kalish as Direct Sales Manager, who began the process of professionalizing this part of the industry, forging greater links between Marvel and the new comics shops, listening to retailers' needs and suggestions, and instigating sales of trade paperback editions to conventional bookshops (Howe; Hibbs; David) .

In 1983 Marvel came to the attention of corporate raider Mario Gabelli, who attempted a hostile takeover of the company (Howe). Jim Galton order Jim Shooter to bring in more revenues quickly in order to fight Gabelli, leading to a series of one-offs such as *The Marvel No-Prize Book* and *The Marvel Fumetti Book* and an increase in reprints (Sacks, Hoffman and Grace). Gabelli was eventually bought off, and Marvel was sold three years later to the film company New World Pictures. Shooter's attempts to enforce his own theories of story structure and professionalism on established creators led to many of them moving to DC and thus many DC books taking on Marvel's style, notably *Teen Titans* by Marv Wolfman and George Perez, and John Byrne's reboot of Superman in *Man O Steel* (Hatfield). The change in styles, with each company becoming more like the other, was evident at the time, with editor Al Milgrom remarking that "DC is Marvel and Marvel is DC" (Tucker 154).

Despite this discontent, overall sales rose, partly due to Marvel's series featuring licensed characters such as *Rom*, based on a Parker Brothers toy, Mego's *Micronauts* and Mattel's *Shogun Warriors* (Howe). These series were so successful that Marvel and Mattel decided to pair up to produce their own line of action figures starring the company's most popular heroes and villains, with its own tie-in series *Secret Wars*, which Shooter wrote taking inspiration from the constant requests from fans for one big story featuring all of the company's characters (Sacks, Hoffman and Grace).

The series was sold in huge numbers, selling an average of 800,000 copies for each of its twelve issues (Reynolds; Wright). Marvel's owners were delighted, demanding a sequel immediately (Sacks, Hoffman and Grace). When Carol Kalish addressed a meeting of comic shop owners she summed up the feelings of many when she said "Let's be honest, Secret Wars was crap, right? But did it sell?" (Howe 279). The gathered retailers reportedly cheered, and then cheered even more when she announced that a second series was on the way.

The success of *Secret Wars* and the continued professionalization of the sales operation contributed to Marvel's continued success in the Direct Market, which by 1982 had grown to make up 50% of the company's

sales, and 70% of its profits (Tucker). By 1984 Marvel's combined circulation was double that of DC's, but Shooter's strict guidance on formulaic superhero storytelling allowed DC to begin to find a new market for itself by tapping into the growing older audience of comics buyers (Morrison). Thus while DC produced acclaimed series such as *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* Marvel came to be seen as predictable and conservative, even amongst the narrow confines of superhero comics and their fans (Pustz).

The acceptance of comics as a 'mature' art form was at least partly due to changes in available printing technology during this time (Sabin). The fact that direct market retailers ordered comics in advance meant that Marvel were able to drastically reduce wastage in their printing processes, so that by 1980 they could afford to switch from cheap letterpress printing to the slightly more expensive offset method. DC and other comics publishers followed suit, and thus comics became less cheap-looking, and more acceptable to 'outsiders' as a product that could be kept rather than thrown away, more in line with the supposed sophistication and higher production values of the European *bandes dessinées* which were filtering through to comic stores in the USA at this time (Tucker).

One of the few events that curtailed Marvel during this time was a law suit from First Comics in 1983, claiming that they had deliberately flooded the market with new titles in order to push out smaller rivals (Howe). The suit would eventually be settled in 1988, but while it was ongoing it made Marvel nervous of over-expansion, notably preventing it from agreeing a deal with Warner Bros. to take over the publishing of several of DC's main superhero series (Sacks, Hoffman and Grace). It also demonstrated the growing influence of the comics fanzines, who were notably supportive of First's claims and critical of Marvel. For the first time, the comics companies were being 'watched' by a more organized fan community, and found themselves taking their concerns more seriously.

Thus, during Shooter's tenure the longstanding battle between Marvel and DC had seen the two exchange roles, with Marvel the conservative sales-leader unwilling to experiment and DC the creative underdog where exiting new content was being created (Tucker). Despite this commercial success, however, it was Shooter's ongoing battles with creators that would lead to his dismissal. Marvel's owners New World attempted to use Hollywood methods to solve human resources issues, sending fruit baskets to staff and upgrading job titles, but this had little effect (Howe). Matters reached a peak in April 1987, when the recently departed star

creator John Byrne held a party at his house during which an effigy of Jim Shooter, stuffed with unsold copies of his *New Universe* line of titles, was burned by other former and present Marvel staffers (Sacks, Hoffman and Grace). A video of these proceedings reached New World who, seeing that Shooter's authority was well and truly undermined, fired him two weeks later in April 1987 (Howe). Jim Shooter's name was replaced by Tom DeFalco's as editor-in-chief in the credits of Marvel comics with cover dates of November 1987, meaning that comics dated October 1987 mark the end of Shooter's term as editor-in-chief.

After this Marvel, and the entire comics industry, entered a period of commercial turmoil which almost led to its destruction. New World sold Marvel to investor Ronald Perelman in 1989, and he placed the company's focus firmly on cash flow, selling licensing rights and publishing as many titles as possible (Howe). Editors were put on royalty plans to encourage this, and advances in printing technology meant that all sorts of variant covers, using holograms, glow in the dark ink, foil and various other gimmicks, were able to be issued as a way to extract as much money out of existing customers as possible by persuading them to buy the same comics multiple times (Sabin). Supposedly 'rare' variants attracted speculators and, once stories of such comics rising in value began to appear in the media, an idea took shape that comics were a good investment, leading to further increased sales (Tucker).

In terms of occupational careers, Tom DeFalco did much to repair relations with former employees and make improvement to creator rights over his seven years in charge (Howe). Notably he brought in a policy of returning artwork to artists, which meant that they were now able to make money selling original art to fans (Dean). This arguably led to an increase in splash pages and a reduction in story coherence, as pages with a single striking image could be sold for a lot more than multi-panel pages which simply advanced the story (Howe).

The company briefly experimented with the so-called 'Marvelution' in 1994, replacing DeFalco with five separate editors-in-chief, each in charge of their own 'family of titles,' but this only lasted for a year, with Bob Harass being instated as lone editor-in-chief in 1995. Harass would be in charge during a very difficult time for Marvel, as Perelman used the company to leverage debt on other investments, such as the purchase of companies like Toybox, Heroes World and Malibu (Tucker).

Around this time speculators realized that comics were not the great investment they had thought, and the sales bubble burst (Raviv). With

many existing fans alienated by the drop in quality and new fans excluded by the over-reliance on continuity, the sudden departure of speculators led to a drastic drop in sales (Rogers). Comic stores across America went out of business, with the numbers dropping to 6,000 in 1995, 5,000 in 1996, and falling to 2,300 by 2002 (Pustz; Rogers). With the market in such massive decline Marvel's profits collapsed and Perelman was no longer able to service his debts, forcing the company into bankruptcy in December 1996 with debts totaling $1.6 billion (Tucker; Raviv). Marvel comics was nearly destroyed during this time, but gradually fought its way back to profitability under Harass and then Joe Quesada from 2000 to 2011 (Howe). Quesada's time as editor-in-chief covered the beginnings of the Marvel Cinematic Universe with the release of *Iron Man* in 2008 and the sale of Marvel to Disney in 2009.

Thus it can be argued that the departure of Jim Shooter as editor-in-chief in 1987 marked the end of 'The Marvel Age' as a distinct period in superhero comics history which had begun with *Fantastic Four* #1 in 1961. This periodization of 'The Marvel Age' saw the small, quick-footed structure of Marvel's early years allowing it to experiment and develop in exciting new ways that its much bigger rival DC was unable to compete with. The commercial success this engendered led to the company's sale to Cadence and then further sales success in the following decade which, in turn, led to internal chaos as Marvel's output and staffing grew quicker than its organizational structure could adapt to deal with. This would necessitate the organizational reforms of the 1980s which professionalized the running of Marvel, and allowed it to develop deals with other companies, licensing out its own characters in other media and taking on the licensing of other companies' characters for comics adaptation. However, this professionalization reduced its ability to experiment and develop and, ironically, allowed its now smaller rival DC to take on the creative underdog role that had been the source of Marvel's initial success. What came next was a period of turmoil, with huge sums of money being made and lost by people and corporations who had little or nothing to do with what had gone before.

Ending 'The Marvel Age' with Shooter's firing in 1987 also fits with the often-expressed idea that it finished at some point in the mid- to late 1980s, notably with Steve Englehart's suggestion that it happened during his run as writer on *Fantastic Four* from 1987 to 1989 (Schwent). It also feels appropriate that the cover date of October 1987 – the last month

when Shooter was credited in all Marvel comics as editor-in-chief – was the cover date for the final issue of *Watchmen*.

Conclusion

Using cover dates to define 'The Marvel Age' as including comics dated from November 1961 to October 1987 gives a precise definition which can be used in the selection of a corpus of texts for other analyses. Furthermore, cover dates combined with the position of editor-in-chief can be used to define three sub-periods within 'The Marvel Age.'

The first is the 'creation' period contained within Stan Lee's time in charge, with comics dated November 1961 to August 1972, when the Marvel Universe as we know it today was largely created. This is followed by the 'chaos' period from September 1972 to April 1978, when Marvel had a rapid turnover of editors-in-chief, and finally Jim Shooter's time in charge from May 1978 to October 1987 which I have named the 'consolidation' period. These sub-periods can be used to select texts for analysis within 'The Marvel Age' and to show how the storyworld developed over time (Hibbett).

	Cover dates
Creation	Nov 1961 Aug 1972
Chaos	Sep 1972 - Apr 1978
Consolidation	May 1978 - Oct 1987
The Marvel Age	Nov 1961 - Oct 1987

Table 1: Cover dates for 'The Marvel Age' and its sub-periods

Using the production of culture approach to define 'The Marvel Age' and its sub-periods in this way ignores the actual content of the texts, thus removing value judgements about the storylines or artistic styles from the periodization (Palmer). This means that, once the periodization is complete, it can be used as a way to reliably examine exactly those creative trends, understanding the creative changes within Marvel through an examination of the broader social and organizational context of the time. For example, it shows the way that gradual changes to distribution mech-

anisms had a colossal commercial and creative impact on Marvel's output, something which would be missed in a purely content-based review.

Seen this way, the development of the storyworld that came to be known as 'The Marvel Universe' is not some unexplainable wonder of creativity, but rather the product of the working conditions of the company. In a highly collaborative industry with low cultural capital, a small group of people working across a range of series were able to connect their stories together in a way that would not have been possible with separate creators working individually, or in an environment where their work was valued enough to be appraised by executives.

Additionally, periodizing 'The Marvel Age' in this precise manner means it can be used by other research projects to define their own corpuses, and then for the datasets derived to be reliably cross-analyzed, safe in the knowledge that they are examining exactly the same period. This in turn opens the door to the possibility for greater collaboration and the uncovering of information which would not be possible for individual researchers working alone.

As an example, this periodization was originally developed in order to define a corpus of texts to be examined for my PhD thesis, and the data generated from this is now available to be downloaded online (Hibbett). This data concerns Doctor Doom, but if another researcher wished to carry out another such analysis on a different character, they would have an empirically defined periodization with which to generate their own corpus which did not depend on any biases inherent in the original study. The character Mr Fantastic, for example, has appearances that pre-date the first text featuring Doctor Doom, but these would still be included under the periodization of 'The Marvel Age.' Defining the period independently of specific characters, individual creators or value judgements on content means that researchers can use it reliably to produce independent datasets about topics such as character development, authorships, corporate competition, fan studies or multiple other aspects of Comics Studies which can then be shared, as mine is, and hopefully re-used.

In short, taking a production of culture approach to periodizing 'The Marvel Age' is not only a way of closely examining a time of creative collaboration, but also a way of encouraging further creative collaboration in the field of Comics Studies itself.

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