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ARTICLE

What Is Spider-Man's Real Name? Marvel Comics as Fictional Journalism

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Abstract

We develop and defend a novel interpretation of mainstream Marvel Comics—an interpretation we call the Fictional Journalism Interpretation. We then show how this interpretation of Marvel comics (i) challenges standard accounts of the manner in which fictional truths are generated by fictions and (ii) provides us with novel, interesting, and in some cases simpler explanations of, and understandings of, phenomena within these comics that are hard to deal with adequately on more traditional accounts, including both contradictions in the fiction and various metafictional storytelling strategies. We conclude by defending the view from a number of objections.

Keywords: comics; principles of generation; metafiction; primary content; secondary content; interpretation; contradiction

1. Introduction

We will begin with a simple question: Why should we be interested in Marvel Comics? In particular, are there lessons about comics, sequential narrative, and fiction generally that can only be, or are best, understood by focusing on this particular, and particularly popular, work? There are two reasons why the answer to this question is unequivocally "yes".

The first, and simplest, is the fact that the main continuity Marvel Comics universe is, arguably, the largest single, unified fictional narrative in existence. At the time of writing, this work consists of over 500,000 pages of comics.[1] At a single minute per page (a relatively rapid pace if one is reading the comics in "critical" mode, rather than merely enjoying the narrative), consuming the entire Marvel Comics fiction would amount to a bit more than four years of full-time (40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year) work. This puts it well beyond other massive collaborative serialized fictions (or MCSFs)[2] such as Star Wars or the main continuity DC comics universe, which have both been rebooted (multiple times in the case of DC), or the Buffyverse or Star Trek, which, while dauntingly large, are nevertheless not nearly as massive as the Marvel Comics narrative.[3] In fact, there is likely

[1]These numbers are taken from Wolk (2021). See that work for details on how canon-inclusion was determined, and his methods for ensuring that he had consumed the entire work.

[2]The terminology "massive collaborative serialized fictions" was introduced in Cook (2013).

[3]It is worth noting that there is another category of fiction that contains unbroken narratives comparable in length to the science fiction and fantasy works that are typically the focus in this sort of discussion: daytime soap operas. Guiding Light, the longest continuously running soap opera, which appeared on both radio (1937–1956) and television (1952–2009) consists of a total of 18,262 episodes. Guiding Light aired as 15, 30, and 60 minute episodes during its run, and a rough estimate of its total runtime puts it at of 4.5 to 5 years of full-time viewing (not counting commercials and credits), just edging out mainstream continuity Marvel Comics. The situation is complicated, however, by the fact that, in the case of early television programs and

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only one person on Earth who has read the entire Marvel Comics main continuity fiction: Douglas Wolk. To be fair, Wolk began with a distinct advantage, having been a comics critic and theorist for two decades, and a rabid Marvel Comics fan before that, when he took on the two-year process of filling in the gaps prior to writing *All of the Marvels* (Wolk, 2021).[4]

Thus, the uniqueness of Marvel Comics, as the largest fiction in existence, already provides significant motivation for close study—after all, it seems likely that various phenomena that are connected to MCSFs will be most apparent, and hence most easily understood, in the most massive, most collaborative, most order-theoretically complicated serialized fiction ever produced. However, this is not the only reason that the story told in Marvel Comics should be of particular interest to comics studies scholars and philosophers of comics.

Marvel Comics are unique in another sense. In the philosophy of fiction, a good deal of ink has been spilled examining the role that *principles of generation* play in determining which propositions are true within a fiction.[5] Simply put, a principle of generation is a rule that determines how we "flesh out" the facts that (fictionally) hold when we are consuming a fiction. Before looking at principles of generation, however, we first need to recognize that fictional truths, within a particular fiction, are given to us in different ways. The following taxonomy (adapted from Wildman & Folde, 2017 and Kim, 2021, see also Walton 1990) provides a nice overview of the primary ways that propositions can be "made true" within a fiction:[6]

1. *Primary content*: Any proposition Φ such that we have an explicit instruction to imagine that Φ when competently engaging with fiction *F*.
2. *Secondary content*: Any proposition Φ such that competent engagement with fiction *F* requires that we imagine Φ (or would if the question of whether Φ or not-Φ arose), but where there is no explicit instruction to imagine Φ within fiction *F*.
   a. *Imported secondary content*: Any proposition Φ such that proper engagement with fiction *F* requires that we imagine that Φ either (i) because Φ holds in the actual world, or (ii) because Φ was believed to hold in the actual world at the time fiction *F* was created, or (iii) because Φ holding of fiction *F* is required by genre conventions, or (iv) because…, etc.
   b. *Entailed secondary content*: Any proposition Φ such that proper engagement with fiction *F* requires that we imagine that Φ because Φ is logically entailed by a combination of primary content, imported secondary content, and interpretationally prior entailed secondary content in fiction *F*.

Principles of generation are thus the rules (which need not be explicit) that govern how, exactly, we determine what is to count as the primary content, imported secondary content, and entailed secondary content of fiction.

Most of the discussion of principles of generation have concentrated on either imported secondary content or entailed secondary content. With regard to imported secondary content, there is a large literature that focuses on two competing principles of generation. The first—the

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radio shows such as Guiding Light, many of the episodes are no longer extant, either because the tapes were recorded over later, or the early episodes were not taped in the first place. Metaphysical questions about how actual existence and the destruction of artefacts affect the "size", nature, and interpretation of fictions loom large here (see Rossberg 2013 for relevant discussion).

[4] *All of the Marvels* is highly recommended for anyone – either fan or scholar – interested in the nuts and bolts of the Marvel Universe, and it provides a marvelous introduction to some of the more interesting and esoteric parts of the massive Marvel narrative.

[5] Contemporary debates about principles of generation trace back to Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-believe* (Walton 1990).

[6] Kim (2021) argued that we need to extend this taxonomy, adding an additional category: Content generated by the *style* in which the fiction is presented to us. Kim's arguments are fascinating and convincing, and are no doubt particularly important for comics, given the rather substantial role that artistic style plays in how comics communicate their content. Unfortunately, space constraints dictate that addressing this fascinating complication must wait for another time.

Reality Principle—states that when filling in the fiction beyond its primary content, we should assume that the world is as much like the actual world as possible. In short, we get something like[7]:

> **RP:** If (i) $\Psi_1,\ldots\ \Psi_n$ are fictionally true in fiction *F* and (ii) were $\Psi_1,\ldots\ \Psi_n$ actually true, then Φ would be actually true, and (iii) if Φ does not contradict any interpretationally prior fictional truths in fiction *F*, then Φ is true in fiction *F*.

The primary competing principle is the *Mutual Belief Principle*, which is motivated by the thought that, when filling in the fiction beyond its primary content, we should assume the world is as much like the author and their audience would have assumed the actual world to be at the time the fiction was created. Thus, we obtain something like:

> **MBP:** If (i) $\Psi_1,\ldots\ \Psi_n$ are fictionally true in fiction *F*, and (ii) if it would be widely accepted at the time that fiction *F* was created that, were $\Psi_1,\ldots\ \Psi_n$ actually true, then Φ would be actually true, and (iii) if Φ does not contradict any interpretationally prior fictional truths in fiction *F*, then Φ is true in fiction *F*.

Both the **RP** and the **MBP** are mainly concerned with the generation of imported secondary content.[8]

Entailed secondary content has also been the subject of philosophical discussion. One of the central concerns here is the "logic of fiction"—that is, determining which logic (or logics) govern the logical inferences we make regarding what is fictionally true. At first glance, we might think entailed secondary content should be relatively simple. We could just adopt a principle—which we might call the *Entailment Principle*—along something like the following lines:

> **EP**: If (i) $\Psi_1,\ldots\ \Psi_n$ are fictionally true in fiction *F* and (ii) if $\Psi_1,\ldots\ \Psi_n$ logically entail Φ, then Φ is true in fiction *F*.

The problem arises when we ask which logic we are to use when deciding whether Φ logically follows from $\Psi_1,\ldots\ \Psi_n$. Recent work (e.g., Wildman & Folde, 2017; Wildman, 2019) has demonstrated that defaulting to classical logic is insufficient when dealing with intentionally inconsistent but non-trivial fictions such as Graham Priest's "Sylvan's Box" (1997), as well as with more esoteric fictions such as *empty fictions* (fictions where *no* proposition is fictionally true) and *universal fictions* (fictions where *every* proposition is fictionally true).

Although debates about the right logic for this-or-that fiction obviously directly impact which propositions will be entailed secondary content, such debates also have consequences for imported secondary content, at least if the right way to understand the relevant notion of importation involves counterfactual reasoning in the way that both the **RP** and the **MBP** do. If the logic and semantics of a particular fiction are nonclassical, then presumably this nonclassicality will have consequences for the correct account of counterfactual reasoning (i.e., the relevant counterfactual conditionals will presumably be non-classical in some sense as well). Thus, the debates surrounding the logic of

[7]The versions of both the *Reality Principle* and the *Mutual Belief Principle* given here are (very loosely) adapted from Friend (2017). That essay also contains a much more extensive discussion of both principles, and a defense of a distinct, but related principle called the *Reality Assumption*.

[8]One contingent reason for this is that, despite the best efforts of many philosophers of logic (including myself), our basic, widely accepted (informal) beliefs about entailment have changed very little in comparison to the extent to which our beliefs about the material world have changed over time. Hence there is little difference between filling in the entailed secondary content of a fiction in terms of what *actually* follows from what (the entailment analogue of the **RP**) and filling in the entailed secondary content of a fiction in terms of what *was widely taken to* follow from what at the time of the creation of the fiction (the entailment analogue of the **MBP**).

fiction have deep consequences not only for entailed secondary content but also for imported secondary content.

What has received less attention in the literature on principles of generation, however, are the principles that govern how we turn the words, images, and sounds on a page or on a screen or emanating from speakers into primary fictional content. The assumption seems to be that, for the most part, primary fictional content is straightforward. And, in many of the examples explicitly discussed in the literature, which tend to be relatively straightforward realistic prose fictions, this assumption might be right: in such works, a proposition Φ is primary content in fiction F if and only if Φ is stated as fact within fiction F. Furthermore, discussions of exceptions to this simplistic approach tend to treat exceptional cases as outliers, which can presumably be dealt with after a general account of the standard cases has been formulated adequately. For example, in their discussion of primary content, imported secondary content, and entailed secondary content, Wildman and Folde address this issue, but only in passing in a footnote:[9]

> There is much more to be said about, for example, accommodating rhetorical and narratological phenomena, but this rough characterization suffices for present purposes. (2017, p. 80, note 4).

What I hope to show in the examination of Marvel Comics below is that cases where nonstandard principles of generation for primary content are at work are neither outliers, nor rare, nor relegated to experimental or post-modern or otherwise esoteric works primarily of interest to the literature scholar. On the contrary, the principles of generation that govern what is primarily fictionally true in Marvel Comics (on one interpretation of this work, at least) are both extremely nonstandard and dauntingly complex.[10]

The interpretation I have in mind is not, however, apparent on a superficial reading of a handful of randomly selected issues of Marvel Comics. On the contrary, we will need to delve rather deeply into the history of Marvel Comics to develop the interpretation in question, which I shall call the *Fictional Journalism Interpretation*. One of the keys to develop this interpretation is to note another important fact: One of the things that sets Marvel Comics apart from many of the other MCSFs mentioned above is the fact that Marvel Comics are both (primarily) set in New York City, and are (actually) produced in New York City. This opens up interesting metafictional possibilities involving commentary on, and clever manipulation of, the role of the author, the topic to which we now turn.

2. Metafiction

Metafiction is fiction that intentionally draws attention to itself as a created, fictional work. In her influential monograph *Metafiction*, Patricia Waugh describes reflexive fiction of this sort as follows:

> Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings […] examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction (1984, p. 2).

[9]This is not meant to be a criticism of Wildman and Folde's essay, since their primary target is principles of generation for entailed secondary content. Nevertheless, the footnote is representative of the more general attitude towards (and relative lack of interest in) principles of generation for primary content.

[10]It is worth noting that Kim (2021), which explores how the style of a work can generate fictional truths, is a striking exception to the complaint sketched in this paragraph, since if style generates fictional truths, then presumably those fictional truths are primary, not imported or entailed.

A few things are worth noting about this definition. First, although Waugh is herself interested in metafictional prose and hence concentrates on writing, there is no reason why we cannot extend this concept to other kinds of narratives, such as comics, which involve storytelling modes that are not, strictly speaking, written, or which we take to be "written" in an extended, somewhat metaphorical sense. Second, metafiction need not explicitly "critique" the "methods of construction." While metafiction necessarily involves drawing attention to the structure or the process of creation of the narrative, it can (and in popular culture often does) function merely as a playful manipulation of the medium rather than as a theoretically more substantial critique. Third, although the texts that we are looking at here are fictional, meta-effects can be mobilized in all sorts of texts, including nonfiction.

Given these points, we will introduce the term "metacomic," where we understand a metacomic to be a comic that is about comics in one sense or another, and where this "meta" aspect of the narrative is intended not only to further the narrative but also to comment on (but not necessarily critique) the nature of this narrative, or of narrative itself.

The next question, of course, is how metacomics achieve this effect—that is, how metacomics comment on themselves. The following taxonomy of metafictional effects (where this list is intended to be neither exclusive nor exhaustive) is helpful:[11]

- *Narrative metacomic*: A comic whose plot involves the production, consumption, or collecting practices surrounding comics (or any other aspect of the comics subculture and its trappings).
- *Cameo metacomics*: A comic whose plot involves interaction with characters, locales, or other elements that are not in the same continuity, or whose plot involves parodying or spoofing other comics.
- *Intertextual metacomic*: A comic whose content interacts, in some manner, with the content of some other (typically noncomic) text or artwork.
- *Self-aware metacomic*: A comic whose protagonist (or perhaps some other character) is aware that they are a character in a comic.
- *Formal metacomic*: A comic whose plot involves manipulation of the formal conventions of the comics medium.
- *Authorial metacomic*: A comic whose plot involves the appearance of the writer, artist, or other creator as a character in the comic.
- *Multimodal metacomic*: A comic where some element activates two separate modes of communication.

A few examples: Any autobiographical comic that touches on the comics-creating part of the author's life is a narrative metacomic, but perhaps more interesting are examples such as *The Sensational She-Hulk* #4 where the She-Hulk explains that her already skimpy clothing never gets damaged in an inappropriately exposing manner because each garment has the Comics Code Authority Seal sewn on it. Examples of cameo metacomics abound, including homage covers that reference the style and content of earlier influential comics, and interior-page examples such as Terry Austin's contribution to *The Sensational She-Hulk* #50, which is drawn in the style of E.C. Segar's Thimble Theater (Popeye) comic strip (see Figure 1). Intertextual metacomics can involve subtle references to traditional works of art or literature, or can be more overt, such as John Byrne's cover art for *The Sensational She-Hulk* #34, which is a parody of Demi Moore's controversial pregnant-and-nude cover of the August 1991 issue of *Vanity Fair* magazine (see Figure 2). The most common form of self-aware metacomics (or self-aware metafiction generally) is a character breaking the fourth wall and addressing the audience directly, but other self-aware effects are possible, such as in *The Sensational She-Hulk* #3, where the She-Hulk deduces how long she has been unconscious based on the fact that her fancy guest star (Spider-man) has already appeared. Formal metacomics often involve explicitly breaking a conventional rule or taking advantage of

[11]This taxonomy is adapted from Cook (2016b).



Figure 1. The Sensational She-Hulk #50



Figure 2. The Sensational She-Hulk #34

some aspect of the formal structure or media of comics, such as in *The Sensational She-Hulk* #5, where the She-Hulk travels from one dimension to another by tearing holes in the comic book page (see Figure 3), commenting on the page art as she crosses over it, and at one point admonishing her companions:

> Don't ask questions! We're heavily into the **Zen** of comics books here. It only **works** if you don't **think** about it! (Byrne, 1989: n.p., bold in original).

Authorial comics can involve merely a cameo by the artist in an otherwise straightforward narrative, or can involve more substantial creator-created interactions, such as when John Byrne inserts both himself and his editor, Renée Witterstaetter, throughout his run on *The Sensational She-Hulk* so that Byrne, Witterstaetter, and the She-Hulk can argue about silly storylines, B-list villains, overly skimpy outfits, and the tone of the comic generally. Finally, multimodal metafiction involves a single visual element activating two (or more) different conventions or rules (i.e., principles of generation), such as when the She-Hulk is depicted pushing narration boxes out of the way when Byrne and Witterstaetter get into a heated discussion, cluttering the page and crowding the She-Hulk out of the image in *The Sensational She-Hulk* #39.

For the most part, we will be concerned with authorial metafiction in what follows, but we will return to self-aware metafiction and formal metafiction in §5 below.

3. The Trial of Galactus and Fictional Journalism

In developing our novel interpretation of the entirety of the Marvel Comics corpus, our central exhibit will be *The Fantastic Four* #262, written and drawn by (once again) John Byrne.

Before moving on, it is worth saying a bit about why we are focusing on this story, rather than on the rich body of metafictional content found throughout John Byrne's run on *The Sensational She-Hulk* (some highlights of which were discussed in the previous section). After all, the idea that John Byrne is a character in the Marvel Comics universe, is also the author of a comic book that details the She-Hulk's exploits, and is already solidly established in Byrne's run on *The Sensational She-Hulk*.

There are two reasons for focusing on this particular issue of *The Fantastic Four*. First, and most importantly, while the idea that Byrne is writing and drawing the very comic we are reading, and is also a character in that comic, is a central narrative conceit within *The Sensational She-Hulk*, the idea that this comic is, within the world of the fiction, not only nonfictional but also *journalism* is much more clearly established in *The Fantastic Four* #262.

Second, many Marvel Comics fans who dislike Byrne's humorous, "weird" metafictional stories in *The Sensational She-Hulk* have argued that, or pleaded for verification that, these comics are not *canon*—that is, they are somehow "imaginary" (relative to the "real" story found in other Marvel Comics publications) and thus do not count as part of the official Marvel Comics main continuity narrative.[12] For example, Tue Sorensen, a reader from Copenhagen, wrote the following which appeared on the letters page of *The Sensational She-Hulk* #10:

> Dear Marvel,
>
> I do not mind if the character occasionally speaks to the reader or to the author in a panel of an issue once in a while, but to build an entire book on it, that is in my opinion a lousy thing to

[12]One cannot merely write off the opinions of fans regarding what is and is not canon, arguing that it is only the producers of fictions that have the power to decide where exactly the canon/noncanon distinction lies. Or, at the very least, I cannot, since I have argued that determining what is canonical is in important ways negotiable and participatory – see, e.g., Cook (2013) and Cook & Kellen (2015).

It is also perhaps worth noting that some segments of the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom had similarly disapproving reactions to the extremely metafictional season finale of the 2022 *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* television series.



Figure 3. The Sensational She-Hulk #5

> do. Especially when it's a Marvel book (and one I cannot help buying, being a great admirer of John Byrne's art). Villains like Dr. Bong and several other dubious appearances in this book thus far, simply do not belong in the Marvel Universe, and I think you should know that I do not find them funny. The only way you can satisfy me is by declaring that these stories are not part of the Marvel Universe, but you probably will not do that. Which means that you greatly diminish my faith in you.
>
> Tue Sorensen (Gerber & Hitch December, 1989, n.p.)

Further, Marvel Comics has itself wavered on the canonical status of the metafictional aspects of Byrne's stories in *The Sensational She-Hulk*. The following appears in *The Official Marvel Handbook* entry reprinted in *The Thing: Freakshow* (which reprints *Thing & She-Hulk: The Long Night* one-shot):

> At one point the She-Hulk and Mason shared the belief that they and those around them were characters in a comic book, but this delusion rarely detracted from the She-Hulk's fighting ability, and she no longer seems to suffer from it. (Johns & Kolins, 2005, n.p.)

A mere three years later, however, these metafictional elements once more became canon, according to the *Official Handbook* entry included in *Marvel Encyclopedia: The Avengers*:

> She … seems to have the ability to sense extradimensional viewers observing her, a power similar to her cousin's ability to see astral forms. Jen tends to downplay this last trait, as speaking to an unseen audience tends to unsettle those around her (Marvel Comics, 2008, n.p.)

For a particular comic to have implications for the larger Marvel Comics narrative, it must be canonical (this is much of the point of the canon/noncanon divide). The instability of the canonicity status had by these issues of *The Sensational She-Hulk* thus puts their ability to affect the larger Marvel narrative into doubt.[13] *The Fantastic Four* #262, however, is a comic that is extremely unlikely to be singled out for noncanonical status, despite its odd framing story (see below). On the contrary, I spent a number of hours trying to find a "top ten" or "top twenty" list of the best Fantastic Four stories of all time that failed to include the storyline that includes this issue and could not.[14] The story arc within which *The Fantastic Four* #262 is contained is not merely canonical—it is a particularly central, influential, important, and beloved story.

This issue, titled "The Trial of Reed Richards", begins not with the Fantastic Four, but instead with John Byrne, talking on the phone to his editor and explaining why he has not yet turned in the current issue of *The Fantastic Four* (see Figure 4). During the conversation, Byrne says[15]:

> Tell 'em I'm sorry, but I'm not about to risk **making up** a story. You know how the FF hate it when we do that… especially the **Thing!** (Byrne, January, 1984: n.p., bold in original).

After this conversation, Byrne tries once more to reach the Fantastic Four by telephone, but is only able to reach their robotic receptionist, who has no idea where they are (see Figure 5). Suddenly, the Watcher appears and takes Byrne on a journey through space so that he may witness the trial of Reed Richards (see Figure 6). During the journey, the Watcher informs Byrne that he has been chosen for this trip:

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[13]For more extensive discussion of the canon status of Byrne's issues of *The Sensational She-Hulk*, and how they affect our understanding of the She-Hulk in particular, and the nature of superheroes within the Marvel fiction more generally, see Cook (2012a) and Cook (2016a).

[14]The storyline in question, which is referred to by fandom somewhat misleadingly as "The Trial of Galactus", ran through issues #242–244 and #257–262 of *The Fantastic Four*.

[15]It is important to note that, as was the case with his run on *The Sensational She-Hulk*, Byrne both wrote and drew the relevant issues of *The Fantastic Four*, which provided him with significant creative control over the narrative.

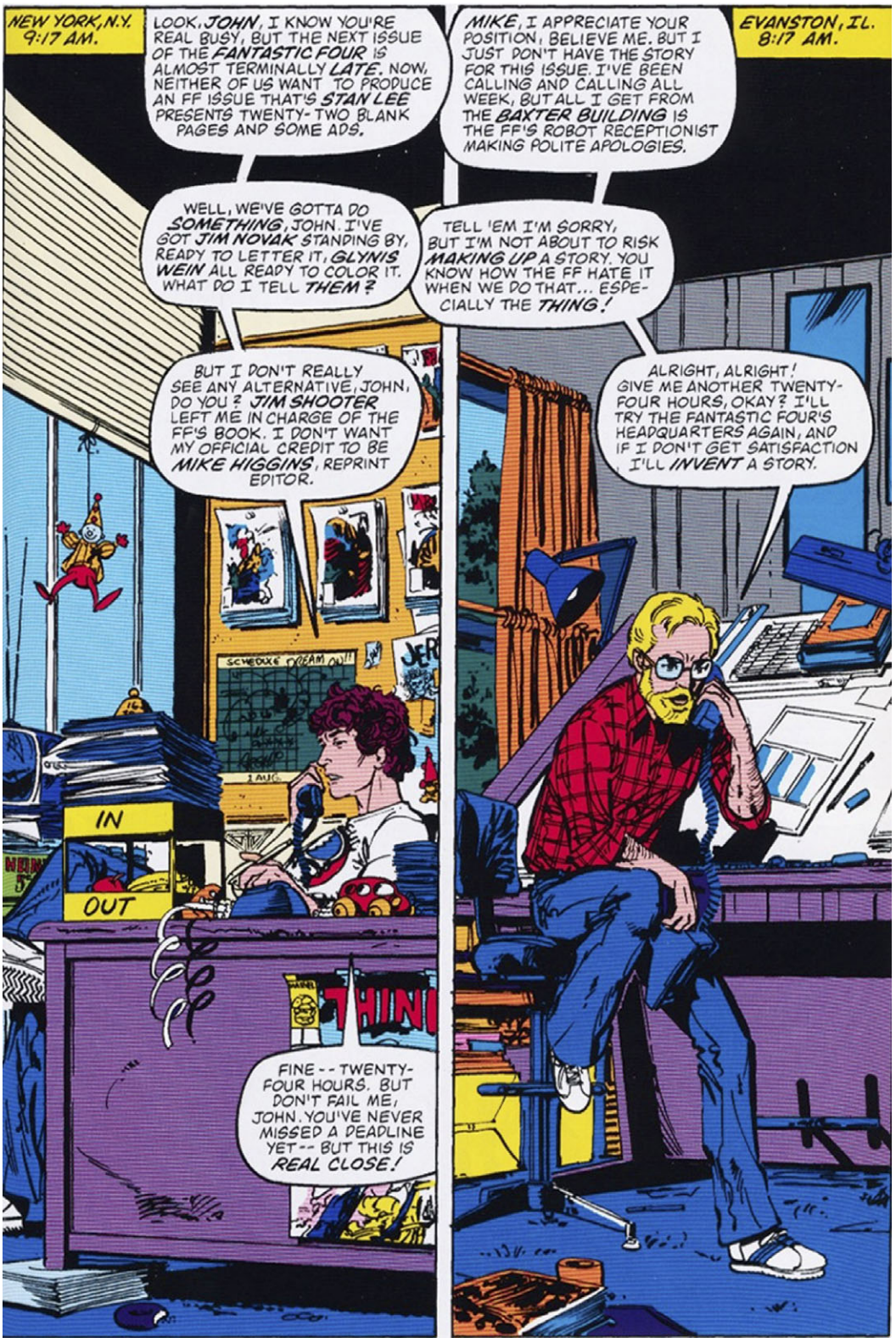


Figure 4. The Fantastic Four #262

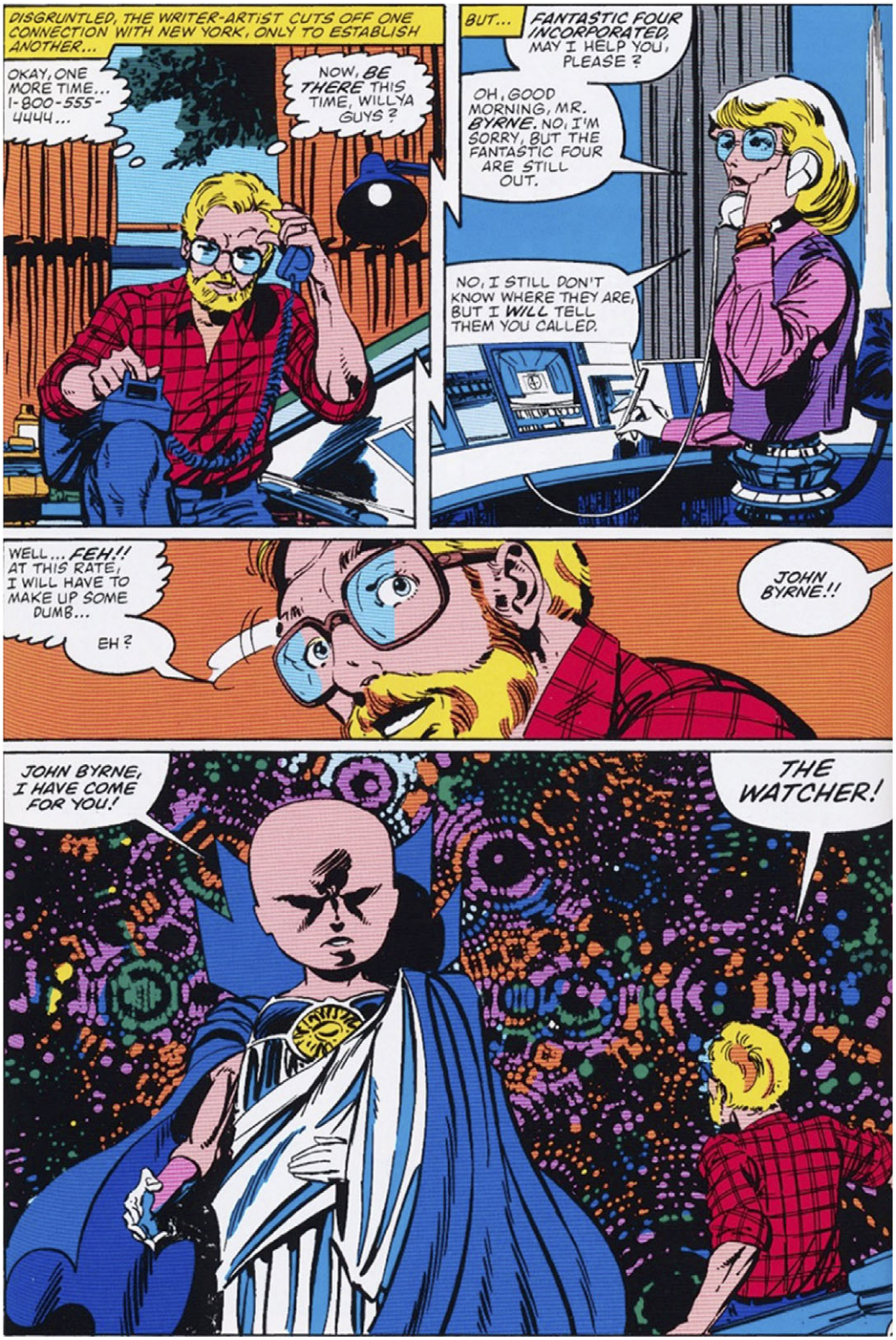


Figure 5. The Fantastic Four #262

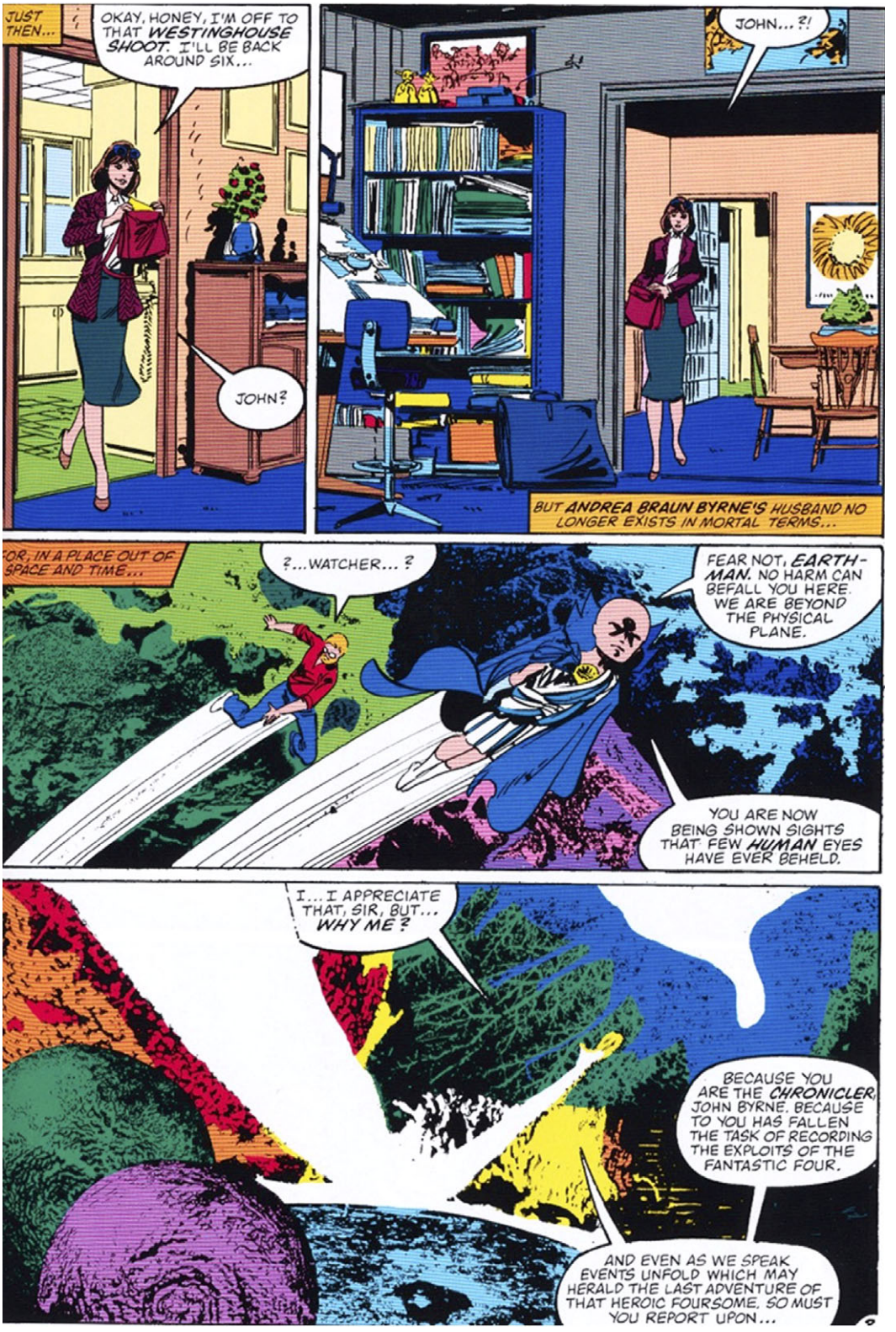


Figure 6. The Fantastic Four #262

> Because you are the **chronicler**, John Byrne. To you has fallen the task of recording the exploits of the Fantastic Four (ibid., n.p., bold in original).

Byrne arrives at the trial, the details of which need not concern us. After the main plot is resolved, the Watcher transports Byrne back to his studio, so that he can complete his comic (see Figure 7). The Watcher instructs Byrne:

> Craft well your tale, John Byrne. But do so quickly. Already the full majesty of the **cosmic truth** is fading, for no mortal mind can long contain such knowledge. (ibid., n.p., bold in original).

Byrne does as instructed and creates a comic depicting the events he just witnessed. The clear implication is that the comic that Byrne creates at the end of this comic is, in some sense, *the very same comic* as the comic we are reading when we learn about the adventures that led to Byrne creating that comic.

What could be meant by the phrase "the very same comic" in the previous paragraph? We can make this idea more precise as follows:

- Within the Marvel Comics narrative, Marvel Comics exists and is a journalism company (in particular, they produce journalistic comics detailing the exploits of superheroes).
- The (fictionally nonfiction) journalistic comics that are produced by the (fictional) Marvel Comics journalism company within the narrative, and which can presumably be purchased at newsstands and other outlets within that fictional world, appears, to characters within the fiction, exactly as the actual (fictional) comic we are reading appears to us.

These two claims, and the consequences that follow from them with respect to our interpretation of the entire corpus of Marvel Comics, are what we will call the *Fictional Journalism Interpretation* of the main continuity of Marvel Comics.

The crucial question is now this: What is fictionally true in the Marvel Comics universe as a result of Byrne's authorial metafiction—that is, what is fictionally true in these stories on the Fictional Journalism Interpretation? Let us work carefully toward the answer.

It should be clear from the discussion of principles of generation above that we are assuming (roughly following Walton, 1990) that fictions are (among other things) instructions to imagine.[16] Thus, fictions prescribe that we imagine certain things to be true, and proposition Φ is true in fiction F if and only if fiction F prescribes that we imagine that proposition Φ is true (either explicitly, in the form of primary content, or indirectly, according to some appropriate principle of generation leading to secondary content). The important things to note, however, are (i) different fictions prescribe us to imagine things in different ways and (ii) different fictions involve different mechanisms (principles of generation) for transforming the information explicitly on the page, on the screen, or in audio into primary fictional truths.

Some examples will help us to flesh out a more detailed version of the Fictional Journalism Interpretation. For our first example, assume that are given the following prose passage, perhaps in a novel about superheroes:

> In the first official statement since the disappearance, the Vision attempted to calm growing fears that the abduction is, in fact, a prelude to an alien invasion.

Here, the prescription in question is something along the following (rough) lines. We are to imagine that:[17]

[16] See also Currie (1990) and Stock (2011).

[17] In these examples, we will restrict our attention to the specific prescriptions directly given by the bit of fiction in question, leaving the formulation of general principles of generation for primary content in fictions of these different kinds to the ambitious reader.

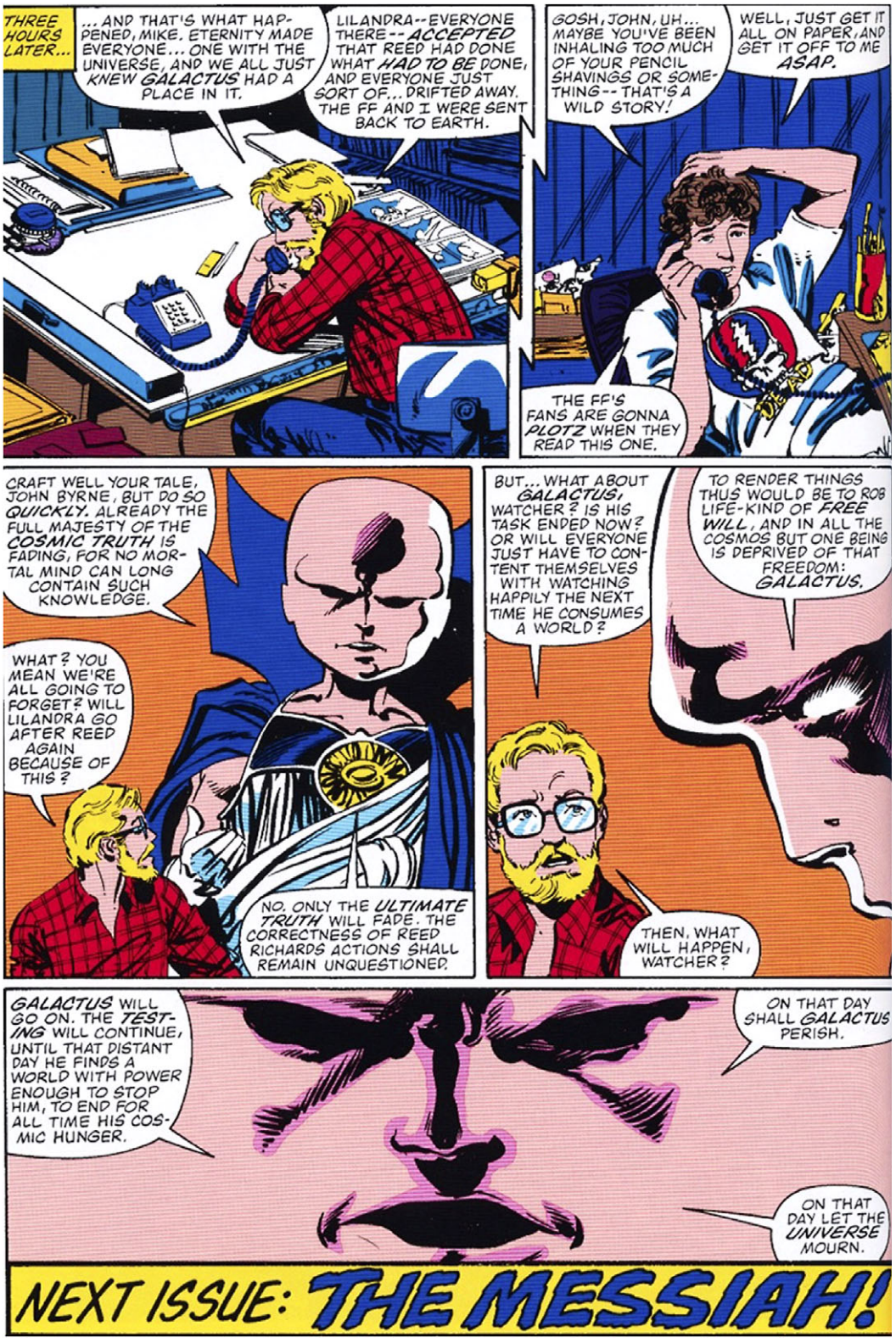


Figure 7. The Fantastic Four #262

- The Vision attempted to calm growing fears that the abduction is, in fact, a prelude to an alien invasion.

Thus, the primary content in this case is obtained relatively straightforwardly from the propositions written on the page.

So far, so good. But, despite the prominent role of prose fiction in discussions of fictional truth, we should not make the mistake of thinking that the prescriptions governing primary content in all narratives (and, especially, pictorial narratives like comics) are this straightforward. Imagine, instead, that we are given a comics panel depicting the Vision and the Scarlet Witch, where the Scarlet Witch asks (in a speech balloon):

> Do you think it's an alien invasion?

And the Vision replies (again, in a speech balloon):

> No. I don't think the abduction could be a prelude to an alien invasion. Really.

Setting aside the complications introduced by Byrne's metafictional story for the moment, the prescriptions here are already more complex. In this case (again, roughly), we are meant to imagine that:

- The Vision attempted to calm growing fears that the abduction is, in fact, a prelude to an alien invasion.
- The Vision does so by speaking the words depicted in the relevant speech balloon (and thus, we are meant to imagine hearing him speak these words).
- His doing so appears to us, when we imaginatively see it, as it appears to us in the image in the panel.

In this example, the primary content of the fiction is relatively straightforwardly given by the pictorial and textual content of the page. We will call this way of understanding the content of the panels (and other narrative elements that make up comic narratives) the *Standard Interpretation*. The Standard Interpretation is (at least roughly) the correct way to interpret most non-Marvel comics and is also (again, at least roughly) the manner in which most readers interpret the individual publications produced by Marvel.

For our next example, consider a comics panel that depicts the image in Figure 8, which is a promotional image for the 1984 twelve-issue limited series *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars*.[18] Here, we are meant to imagine that:[19]

- We are seeing a newspaper report claiming that the Vision attempted to calm growing fears that the abduction is a prelude to an alien invasion.
- The newspaper in question was published and distributed within the fictional world of Marvel Comics.

[18]In addition to this image, which appeared in a number of comics, Marvel published actual promotional newspapers detailing the disappearance of a large number of superheroes and supervillains which led to the events detailed in *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars*. Additionally, a number of comics published in the months leading up to this event contained images of these newspapers within the panel art. How this incorporation of fictional journalism into the Marvel Comics universe affects the Fictional Journalism Interpretation deserves attention of its own which, unfortunately, will have to wait for another time.

[19]Note that we did not add that the newspaper in question appears to characters within the fiction exactly as it appears to us. The presence of the stylized but nevertheless fictionally photographic image of the Vision complicates the relevant prescription here. We will set aside this complication for the moment (but see discussion of the *Panel Transparency Principle* in Cook (2015) and Gavaler (2022) and the discussion of photographs in comics in Cook (2012b)).

SUNDAY EDITION

DAILY BUGLE

Weather
Cloudy, Sunny Periods
Details on page 75

Vol.69 no.196 New York, May 5th, 1984 Price 30¢

HEROES VANISH!

VISION SPEAKS OUT – NEW LEADER FOR THE AVENGERS



In the first official statement since the disappearances, the Vision attempted to calm growing fears that the abduction is in fact a prelude to an alien invasion. The synthezoid took great pains to stress that despite the loss of his fellow Avengers – Captain America, the Wasp, Hawkeye, Captain Marvel, Thor and the She-Hulk – the team would continue to function as "Earth's mightiest peace-keeping force."

The Vision made no comment about former Avenger, Iron Man, who is also missing, but he did confirm rumours that he would be taking over Chairmanship of the group in the Wasp's absence. The Vision went on to deny reports of another alien invasion occurring in West Virginia.

– Full story on Page 10.

THE EX-X-MEN?

Those misunderstood – and in some quarters, mistrusted – superheroes known collectively as the X-Men, were witnessed vanishing into that mysterious structure in Central Park yesterday afternoon. And, with anti-mutant feeling at an all time high in this country at the moment, they may well be better off wherever they are.

With the introduction of Senator Robert Kelly's Mutant Affairs Control Act before the 98th Congress taking place in only a few days time, the outlook for mutants looks bleak. Will we really allow the bill – that suggests measures that wouldn't have been out of place in Germany in 1944 – to become law? For all our sakes, not just mutants, this reporter hopes earnestly we do not!

– Political comment Page 14.



MYSTERIOUS STRUCTURE ABDUCTS HEROES

The normally tranquil heart of Central Park known as Sheep's Meadow was today the scene of much bustle and activity. Police and scientists competed for space within the cordoned-off area where yesterday a bizarre, futuristic Stonehenge-like structure had stood.

According to eyewitness reports, the huge structure appeared in the meadow amidst a burst of blinding light. Many of New York's self-styled superheroes arrived at intervals to investigate the phenomenon. Eyewitnesses have further confirmed that the Fantastic Four and members of the Avengers were seen entering the structure. Once within the strange construct they apparently vanished without a trace. Once it had seemingly drunk its fill of our heroes, the structure itself disappeared.

A spokesman for the Police Department stated that…

– Continued on Page 2.

RYKER'S RUNAWAYS

That most escaped-from of escape-proof prisons, Ryker's Island Maximum Security, has once again been the scene of a mass breakout by super-powered criminals.

The authorities are at a loss to explain exactly how it happened. According to a source within the prison, Carl "Crusher" Creel – better known as The Absorbing Man, Dirk Garthwaite (The Wrecker), and Henry Camp (Bulldozer), were taking exercise in the prison yard when they disappeared in a blinding flash of light.

Attempts to link these disappearances to the structure in Central Park that spirited…

– Continued on Page 7.

My Fear For My Husband, Brother and Friend

Interview with Susan Storm Richards

Oh, we've faced danger many times over, situations where it looked like our luck had finally run out. But during those times we faced the threat together, as the Fantastic Four. This is Different.

My husband, Reed (Mister Fantastic), my brother Johnny (the Human Torch) and my dear friend, Ben (The Thing), have been snatched by some force, perhaps alien, and I would give anything to have gone with them.

With my second child due in a matter of weeks, I cannot get over an incredible sense of dread.

– Continued on Page 12.

SPIDER-MAN CRIME RATE LINK

By Ben Urich



Photo by Peter Parker

It looks as though the familiar red and blue figure of the costumed adventurer, Spider-Man, may also be absent from New York's skyline. Although no one actually witnessed him entering the structure, his absence and corresponding escalation in street crime seem to indicate he too has become one of he heroes snatched by the structure in Central Park.

Although in the past this particular crime-fighter has been mauled and maligned in the media – to a great extent in these pages – there is no doubt that he is a considerable deterrent to the myriad forms of street crime.

Already the police are finding themselves stretched to their limits by the extra criminal activity. Members of the underworld, firmly believing that without the usual plethora…

– Continued on Page 2.

READ J. JONAH JAMESON'S OBJECTIVE EDITORIAL REVEALING THE MENACE OF SPIDER-MAN ON PAGE 45.

Figure 8. Promotional Image for Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars

- The newspaper in question appears to us as, when we imaginatively see it, as it appears in the image.
- The photograph included in the story appears to us, when we imaginatively see it, as it appears in the image.

Note that none of this immediately implies that we are to imagine that the Vision *in fact did* calm growing fears that the abduction is, in fact, a prelude to an alien invasion, or that the Vision *actually resembles* (within the fiction) the photograph we are to imagine seeing. All that we are directly instructed to imagine by such an image—that is, the only primary content provided by such an image—is that the newspaper depicted exists within the world of Marvel Comics and looks to us the way it appears in the image.

Of course, in this case, we likely *will* imagine that the Vision calmed growing fears (or at least attempted to), and that he resembles the photograph depicted in the image (due, in part, to his resembling that fictional photograph in other, non-journalistic images within the comics), in addition to the four things immediately prescribed by the image itself. However, it is important to note that these are *additional* fictional truths that are only accepted, if accepted at all, as a result of *inferences* that take into consideration not only the images and text but also depend on the level of authority and trustworthiness we ascribe (fictionally) to the newspaper in question. In short, on the taxonomy given in §1, these additional claims are imported secondary content.[20] Thus, the path from image and text on the page to *primary* and *secondary content* within the fiction is more convoluted here.

Given all of this, we can now provide a sketch of the prescriptions given on the Fictional Journalism Interpretation. Imagine the standard panel depicting the Vision and the Scarlet Witch described above. The story told in *The Fantastic Four* #262, and the implications it has for our understanding of Marvel Comics implies that we are to imagine:

- That the fiction being read (i.e., the comic in one's hands) is, within the fiction, a genuine journalistic report, in comic book form, claiming that the Vision attempted to calm growing fears that the abduction is, in fact, a prelude to an alien invasion.
- That the (fictionally nonfictional) journalistic comic that exists within the fiction is qualitatively identical to the (non-fiction) comic that we are reading.[21]

One immediate consequence of this interpretation of Marvel Comics is immediately evident: On this reading the comics in question tell us very little *directly* about the superheroes and other characters that are, presumably, the fictional people we care about. Instead, we are given information regarding the manner in which Marvel Comics journalists within the fictional world in question (e.g., the fictional version of John Byrne) report on those superheroes and other characters, and, in addition, we are given extremely reliable information about the appearance of certain artefacts (the journalistic comics themselves) that can be found on newsstands and elsewhere throughout the fictional world. Any claims we make about what did or did not happen to the superheroes must be inferred from this indirect evidence. In short, Marvel Comics, on the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, involves a unique form of unreliable narrator.

[20]The fact that the newspaper in this image is the *Daily Bugle*, which is, within the Marvel Comics narrative, notorious for publishing false or misleading stories about Spiderman and other superheroes, is worth keeping in mind here!

[21]There are complications to this reading that are worthy of attention, but which cannot be addressed here. Chief amongst these is whether we should include nonnarrative material, such as advertisements, letters pages, and other supplementary content, as appearing in the fictional, journalistic comic that exists within the fiction. For example, should we assume that Hostess fruit pies exist within the fictional world of Marvel Comics, and that, within that world, superheroes regularly appear in the silly advertisements for these snacks that appear in these comics? We will leave answering this important question for another time.

4. Developing and Defending the Fictional Journalism Interpretation

To fully understand the impact that Fictional Journalism Interpretation of Marvel Comics has on the epistemology of reading (these comics), it is worth considering the following thought experiment: Imagine that we discover a giant concrete dome in a far-off place. The dome contains a single one-way slot: we cannot see through the slot, and although objects can be passed through the slot from the inside of the dome to the outside, the opposite direction is impossible. At the end of each day, that day's newspapers and other print journalism are fed to us through the slot (we will not worry about how, in this thought experiment, we know that these publications are journalism—we will just assume that we do—but see the discussion of reflective equilibrium in §6 below). No other information whatsoever passes from the interior of the dome to the exterior.

What can we know about what actually happens within the dome? Quite a lot, actually. However (if we are being epistemologically responsible), this information is not obtained merely by taking, as fact, whatever is reported in the various publications that are provided to us. On the contrary, we should not blindly trust the texts that are fed to us through the slot any more than we should blindly trust journalists in the real world, who exaggerate, get things wrong, change details both for narrative effect and to protect those they are reporting on, and sometimes outright (and knowingly) distort the facts to either titillate or mislead readers. Instead of taking these texts to be reports of fact, we should instead treat them the way responsible epistemic agents should consume any other journalism—by comparing and contrasting various versions of the story, and deducing what is, and is not, *likely* to be true given *which* stories the journalists within the dome have decided to report on, and *how* they have decided to report on those stories. In short, all of the information we would be able to discern regarding what happens within the dome—other than the existence and appearance of the works of journalism that are directly fed to us—is inferential in a broad sense. Any conclusions that we draw regarding what life within the dome is like must be deduced indirectly, based on the potentially unreliable information provided to us by the newspapers and other journalistic texts we are provided.

The situation with Marvel Comics, on the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, is similar. These comics, on the reading pressed on us by *The Fantastic Four* #262, entail that any conclusions we draw about what happens within the Marvel Comics narrative (other than conclusions about the appearance of the non-fictional publications produced by the Marvel Comics journalism company within that narrative) are inferred. The relationship between the comics we read and what is true within the fictional world of Marvel Comics is analogous to the relationship that holds between the journalism being sent through the slot, and actual conditions within the concrete dome in our thought experiment. The only difference is that the fictional journalism we are being given in Marvel Comics is in comic form. However, even this should not give us pause, since many, if not most, serious comics readers are already familiar with actual comics journalism, such as the works of Joe Sacco (e.g., 2001, 2009) and Peter Bagge, as well as other kinds of non-fictional comics (e.g., instructional comics, biographical comics, etc.), and hence *should be* competent at carrying out the appropriate inferential interpretational practices.[22]

At this point, a fan, critic, or theorist might object that we are allowing a *single* comic by John Byrne (plus, perhaps, his run on *The Sensational She-Hulk*) to force a complete overhaul with respect to how we should understand the fictional world of Marvel Comics (although see the comments about interpretational pluralism below). Is it really reasonable to give a single comic —even one as beloved as this one—that much interpretational weight? Wouldn't the simpler strategy be to write off the metafictional framing story in *The Fantastic Four* #262 as a fun narrative conceit, but in the end non-canonical (and hence not forcing the Fictional Journalism Interpretation onto the whole of Marvel Comics) while retaining the idea that the remaining

[22]Much of Bagge's comics journalism appeared in *Details* magazine and on suck.com.

interior pages of this issue (other than perhaps the appearance of Byrne himself in a number of the panels) is canonical?[23]

The reason for not writing off the metafictional aspects of *The Fantastic Four* #262 in this way is simple: Byrne did not create this comics-as-journalism conceit from whole cloth. Instead, he was riffing on ideas that had already been inserted into the Marvel Comics narrative much earlier, by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.[24]

The first instance of Marvel Comics (the company) appearing within Marvel Comics (the fiction) is in *The Fantastic Four* #4, where Johnny Storm (AKA the Human Torch) is reading an unidentified World War II era *Sub-Mariner* comic published by Timely Comics (Marvel Comics' predecessor).[25] Two pages later an amnesiac, disheveled Namor the Sub-Mariner shows up, and Johnny can able to identify him based on his appearance in the comic (despite his beard and scraggly appearance). In the very next issue of *The Fantastic Four*, Johnny once again seen reading a comic—this time, *The Incredible Hulk* #1. The Hulk later appears in *The Fantastic Four* #12, implying that Johnny Storm read a presumably non-fiction comic about the Hulk before actually meeting him. In *The Fantastic Four* #10, Doctor Doom holds the Marvel Comics staff (including Stan Lee and Jack Kirby) hostage until they convince the Fantastic Four to come to the Marvel offices and fall into Doom's (ultimately unsuccessful) trap. Finally, on the first page of *The Fantastic Four* #11, the Fantastic Four are seen standing in line to purchase copies of the comic (again, the very same comic!), with the following dialogue (see Figure 9):

> Reed Richards: Hmm. Looks as though we'll have to wait our turn to get the latest issue!
> Sue Storm: Oh, let us just come back later Reed!
> Johnny Storm: I **told** you we should have gotten here earlier!
> Ben Grimm: What's the big deal? We **know** how the stories end!
>
> (Lee & Kirby February 1963: 1, emphasis in original)

Thus, the idea that Marvel Comics exists within the fictional world depicted in the Marvel Comics we read, and that this (fictional) company publishes journalism in comics form detailing the adventures of superheroes, was already explored (although not in the same depth) by Marvel Comics visionaries Stan Lee and Jack Kirby at the very beginning of Marvel Comics as we know it today.

Before moving on, it is worth noting that, throughout this discussion, I have referred to the interpretation of the Marvel Comics corpus based on *The Fantastic Four* #262 (as well as Byrne's run on *The Sensational She-Hulk*) as the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, but I have nowhere argued that this is the singular, *correct* interpretation of this narrative. This was intentional, since (although I am not going to argue for this here) I am a strong believer in interpretational pluralism: there need be no singular correct interpretation of a fictional narrative, and in particular, various resistant interpretations that contradict the intentions of the author can nevertheless be legitimate

[23]These worries are made even more pressing given that *The Fantastic Four* #262 appeared during "Assistant Editors Month". In September 1983, the editors of Marvel Comics attended the San Diego Comic Con. The comics that came out that month (despite most of them actually being edited by the normal editors, despite their field trip to California) had the warning "Beware: It's Assistant Editor Month! Don't Say We Didn't Warn You!" on the cover. The promotion/joke being that the assistant editors were in charge, and hence these comics would be weird, or not the normal Marvel fare. Thus, if *The Fantastic Four* #262 were the only evidence of the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, then it could perhaps be easily written off as merely a part of Assistant Editors month, and hence the framing story could be taken to be noncanonical.

[24]In addition to the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby stories discussed here, this idea is also explored in *The Fantastic Four* #176, where the Impossible Man holds the Marvel Comics staff hostage until they (disingenuously) promise to create a comic book depicting his exploits.

[25]Although the particular issue of *Sub-Mariner* is not clearly identified within *The Fantastic Four* #4, the cover art most closely resembles the art found on *Sub-Mariner* #37.



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Figure 9. The Fantastic Four #11

ways to consume a fiction.[26] This is important, since the vast majority of the comics that make up the main continuity Marvel Comics oeuvre were not written or drawn by Byrne (or by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby). It seems unlikely that many of these creators had Byrne's metafictional strategy in mind, or intended their comics to be read as fictional journalism in the manner sketched above when creating their installments of the massive Marvel Comics tale. In short, when reading Marvel Comics, we must *choose* which principles of generation for primary content we wish to mobilize, from amongst at least two types (the Standard Interpretation, and the Fictional Journalism Interpretation), with vastly different consequences for what counts as primary (and of course, as secondary) content in the fiction. While we have already seen some of these in the discussion above, in the next section we'll explore some rather more specific differences between what is primarily fictionally true on the Standard Interpretation and what is primarily fictionally true on the Fictional Journalism Interpretation.

5. Consequences

As argued in the previous section, on the Fictional Journalism Interpretation of Marvel Comics (as opposed to the Standard Interpretation), we are given very little direct information about what actually happens in the fictional world of Marvel Comics. All that we are given directly—that is, the only primary content we are provided—is information about the appearance of non-fictional journalistic publications produced by the fictional Marvel Comics company within the story.

We should not be fooled by this, however, into thinking that the difference between these two ways of interpreting the Marvel Comics narrative amounts to the Fictional Journalism Interpretation merely giving us *less* information. In addition, the two interpretations differ immensely in terms of the secondary content—both imported and entailed—that fleshes out the story. We will look at four specific examples.

First, consider the issue raised in the title of this essay: Spider-man's real name. On the Standard Interpretation, we know that Spider-man's real name is "Peter Parker"—after all, it's right there on the cover of one-hundred-thirty-three issues of *Peter Parker: The Spectacular Spider-man.*

On the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, however, this cannot be right. After all, for most of the sixty-plus years of Marvel Comics, Spider-man's civilian identity was a highly prized secret—one that he protected vigorously from villains who would use that information to harm him or his loved ones. Thus, his actual name could not be the name that, within the fiction, is featured on the cover of a work of journalism describing his superheroic exploits, and which appeared on the newsstand monthly. The solution here is simple: Spider-man's name is not "Peter Parker" at all. Within the fiction his name is something completely different, but, just as happens relatively frequently within real-world journalism, his name (and home address, and the names of his loved ones, etc.) has been changed to protect the innocent.[27]

Second, the Fictional Journalism Interpretation forces us to understand narration boxes (at least, third-person narration) somewhat differently than we do on the Standard Interpretation. On the Standard Interpretation, we understand such narration, typically contained in small boxes near the edges of panels, along lines similar to how we understand narration in other media, such as prose literature: a narrator (who is not necessarily the author) is describing what happened, how these events looked, and so forth to us. On the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, however, we must read narration as the (fictional) journalist's commentary on the events depicted in the comic, providing

[26]See Brooker (2001) for a good overview of alternative and resistant interpretations of comics, and in particular for insightful analysis of the importance of such resistant readings (especially of Batman comics) to queer comics consumers.

[27]It is worth noting that this interpretation also allows us to make sense of the strange fact that many superheroes have bizarrely alliterative names, or names which oddly allude to their costumed personas, or both, such as Peter Parker, Bruce Banner, Otto Octavious, Steven Strange, Victor Von Doom, etc.



Figure 10. X-Men #96

further descriptive information about what they are reporting on, while collapsing the author/narrator distinction.[28]

What is interesting, however, is that the Fictional Journalism Interpretation does not just impose a *different* understanding of (third-person) narration than the understanding given by the Standard Interpretation. Sometimes the Fictional Journalism Interpretation provides us with a simpler, more straightforward (and perhaps more interesting) account of the narration contained within panels. For example, at the beginning of *X-Men* #96, Cyclops is seen expressing his anger over the death of fellow X-Man Thunderbird at the end of the previous issue.[29] A four-panel tier provides us with the following exchange (see Figure 10):

Narration: You and the **X-men** had saved the **world** from **nuclear holocaust** — but you'd **lost a man** to do it…
Narration: … And **try** as you might, you cannot **balance** those scales in your mind **or** in your **heart**…
Narration: … **Can** you Cyclops?
Cyclops: (small text) No.
Narration: **Can you?**
Cyclops: **(normal text) No!**
Narration: **Can you?!**
Cyclops (starburst balloon) **No!!**

[28]Thierry Groensteen (2013) argued that the work of the narrator in prose is divided between two distinct narrative voices in comics: the *reciter*, who describes the story in linguistic terms, and the *monstrator*, who is "responsible" for the visual form of the story. Our discussion of narration boxes applies to Groensteen's reciter, but similar observations could be made regarding the narrative role of monstrator. Fleshing out the details and consequences of this aspect of the Fictional Journalism Interpretation is left to the ambitious reader.

[29]Unfortunately, the Byrne-centric tone of this essay is broken slightly by the fact that Byrne did not begin his celebrated collaboration with Claremont on *X-Men* until issue #108.

(Claremont, Mantlo, & Cockrum, December, 1975, n.p., emphasis in original)

On the Standard Interpretation, it is hard to know how to make sense of this exchange other than writing it off as a bit of interesting but odd metafictional weirdness. However, on the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, we have a more interesting option. On the reading developed here, we are just reading a report of an exchange between the fictional version of Chris Claremont (a comics journalist within the fictional world of Marvel Comics) and Cyclops. Claremont is, for whatever reason, prodding an already angry and grieving Cyclops, engaging in a Gonzo-journalism-style insertion of himself into the story, and attempting (for whatever reason) to provoke Cyclops. And he succeeds: In his anger, Cyclops lets off a random optic blast that releases two demons from their captivity—demons who then become the primary antagonists for the remainder of the issue. In short, the fictional version of Claremont is, in this issue, not only present in the role of journalist but in addition is at least partially responsible for the events that unfold over the subsequent pages of *X-Men* #96.

Third, consider what we will call *simple serial contradictions* in fiction—that is, cases where one (canonical) installment of a (serial) fiction F instructs us to imagine some proposition Φ as being true in F, where another (canonical) installment of F instructs us to imagine that not-Φ is true in F.[30] On the Standard Interpretation, we are left with a quandary: unless we are to accept that the world of the fiction is genuinely contradictory (i.e., is relevantly like Priest's "Sylvan's Box"), we need to figure out some way to resolve this inconsistency. Of course, comics and other serial fictions have a well-known strategy for dealing with such contradictions, one not available in nonserialized fiction: the *retcon.* A retcon (short for *retroactive continuity*) is a third installment, later in the publication order than both the Φ-endorsing installment and the not-Φ-endorsing installment, that introduces a new interpretation of the events of the earlier installments that re-iterates the prescription to imagine that Φ is true in F, and explains away the apparent prescription to imagine that not-Φ is true in F (or vice versa).

On the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, however, there *is* no genuine contradiction. Instead, the initial installments merely ask us to imagine that one work of journalism within the world of the fiction reports that Φ is true, and another work of journalism within the fiction reports that not-Φ is true. This state of affairs is not logically contradictory—after all, conflicting journalistic reports occur in the actual world all the time. Furthermore, any later retconning installment is not providing a new *interpretation* of the facts within the story, explaining away an apparent logical inconsistency. Instead, on the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, the retconning installment is merely a third piece of fictional journalism—an attempt to get at the "real facts" (within the fiction) underlying the incompatible (and presumably unreliable) fictional reporting provided by earlier publications.

Fourth, and finally, the Fictional Journalism Interpretation implies that we understand self-aware metafiction generally, and breaking the fourth wall in particular, somewhat differently from the way that these metafictional strategies are typically understood on the Standard Interpretation. It is difficult to determine exactly how we *should* understand cases where characters are aware of the reader, and address the reader, on the Standard Interpretation, since such passages seem, at best, to be in serious tension with the idea that images and text in a comic provide us with "one-way" access to the facts that hold within the relevant fictional world (see the entry on the She-Hulk in the 2008 version of *The Official Marvel Handbook*, discussed above, for evidence that interpreting self-aware metafictional superpowers into an otherwise "realistic" narrative can be awkward at best).

On the Fictional Journalism Interpretation of Marvel Comics, however, there is a simple and straightforward interpretation of these (superficially odd) self-aware incidents. When the She-Hulk

[30]Of course, if the prescription to imagine Φ and the prescription to imagine not-Φ occur in the same installment, on in separate installments by the same author, then another option is just to chalk this up to the (fictional) journalist in question being less than competent (although later retcons could still be read as journalist attempts, within the fictional world, to "set the record straight").

appears to speak to the "audience" in the comic, she is not, in fact, addressing the *actual world readers* (i.e., you or me). Rather, she means to be speaking to the (fictional) readers of this comic within the world of Marvel Comics, who will purchase the comic and consume it as journalism in comics form. And there is nothing at all strange or confusing about John Byrne (the fictional journalist who appears in the comics) reporting not only on the She-Hulk's superheroic exploits but also on her comments about how she is being depicted and described within Byrne's journalistic work. On the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, fourth-wall-breaking and other self-aware metafictional effects are no more puzzling than cases where someone in the actual world is interviewed and, in addition to answering the questions posed by the interviewer, also comments on the tone of the interview process or the personality of the interviewer (and where the interviewer includes these comments in the final journalistic product).

There are a number of other aspects of comic book storytelling that are significantly affected by the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, including (but certainly not limited to) first-person narration and thought balloons. We will set aside careful consideration of those for another time, however, and instead move on to some complications that arise on the Fictional Journalism Interpretation.

6. Loose Ends

Like any significant account of how to interpret a fiction (or a type of fiction), the Fictional Journalism Interpretation brings with it certain disadvantages (or at least puzzles) that come along with the advantages and interesting features. We will conclude this essay by considering two such puzzles.

First, we need to consider what we will call *interpretational incoherences.* An interpretational incoherence is an aspect of a story that is perfectly straightforward on the Standard Interpretation but is in tension with or outright contradicts the Fictional Journalism Interpretation. A clear example of an interpretational incoherence is Namor the Sub-mariner's amnesia in *The Fantastic Four* #4, discussed above. There is nothing puzzling about this on the Standard Interpretation. On the Fictional Journalism Interpretation, however, his amnesia presents an interpretational challenge. After all, couldn't Namor just pick up an issue of *The Sub-mariner*—which presumably would be widely accessible on newsstands, in bookstores, and elsewhere, since Johnny Storm had no problem locating a copy—and re-learn about his World War II era exploits? Wouldn't this likely cause him to realize who he is and remember what he has done in the past? Similar, and arguably even more difficult, puzzles arise when time is reversed, or there is wide-spread memory wiping, where the effects of such events would be undone by the presence of journalism detailing the time-reversal or memory-erasure.

The solution to this puzzle is just to accept it. On the Standard Interpretation, Marvel Comics suffers from a plethora of simple serial contradictions. The Fictional Journalism Interpretation provides a simple way to deal with such (now only apparent) contradictions, but it introduces a new kind of incoherence which is equally difficult. So we have two interpretations, each with its own kind of logical puzzle. In choosing between the Standard Interpretation and the Fictional Journalism Interpretation (and recalling our discussion of these being equally legitimate), whether or not we prefer our fictions to contain simple serial contradictions or interpretational incoherences is just one among many of the factors that we can take into consideration.[31]

The second puzzle concerns the manner in which we argued for the Fictional Journalism Interpretation in the first place. Recall that we began by applying something like to Standard

[31]It is worth noting, however, that much metafictional content can (and likely should) be understood as, among other things, introducing interpretational incoherences into the Standard Interpretation. Therefore, interpretational incoherences are not unique to the Fictional Journalism Interpretation.

Interpretation to the framing story involving John Byrne and the Watcher in *The Fantastic Four* #262, noting that these pages implied various things about the role played by John Byrne and his employer, Marvel Comics, within the world of the fiction in question—that is, we used these pages, interpreted via the Standard Interpretation, to argue for the Fictional Journalism Interpretation. We then noted, however, that the Fictional Journalism Interpretation entails that the comics in question provide us with very little direct information regarding what happens within the fictional universe of Marvel Comics, other than information about the appearance of journalism-in-comics-form publications that appear within that world. This observation applies to the framing story of *The Fantastic Four* #262 as much as it does to any other pages in the massive Marvel Comics corpus, however. But then the crucial question arises: Doesn't the Fictional Journalism Interpretation of Marvel Comics undermine the reliability of the evidence we used to argue for it (even if we only argued for it as *a* legitimate, and not necessarily the *only* legitimate, interpretation of this work)? In short, the Fictional Journalism Interpretation appears to be self-undermining.

The correct response is to accept that this worry is correct, but to recognize that this is not sufficient to undermine the Fictional Journalism Interpretation as a legitimate interpretation. We have two choices. The first is to run through the argument just given and conclude that this potentially unstable circularity in our justification for, and development of, the Fictional Journalistic Interpretation is worrisome enough for us to reject this interpretation, and retreat back to the more traditional Standard Interpretation (presumably de-legitimizing the framing story in *The Fantastic Four* #262 as nothing more than non-canonical metafictional weirdness in the process). However, the other option is to accept the Fictional Journalism Interpretation and, further, to accept that at least some of the fictional journalism we are given as primary content on this interpretation is, in fact, reliable, providing us with accurate information regarding what events occur, how those events appear, and so on, in the fictional world of Marvel Comics. In particular, on such a reading we could accept that the framing story of *The Fantastic Four* #262 is reliable in this way. Thus, the worry about the Fictional Journalism Interpretation being self-undermining shows that there is no way to argue that this interpretation is *forced* on us, but it fails to show that this is not a not a legitimate, coherent interpretation. On the contrary, with the right interpretational choices we can reach a point of reflective equilibrium, where each piece of the interpretational puzzle supports every other piece. And this is all that is required for the Fictional Journalism Interpretation to be a legitimate reading of main continuity Marvel Comics.

No doubt this essay has only begun the process of exploring and evaluating the Fictional Journalism Interpretation of Marvel Comics. However, it has demonstrated that this interpretation of the Marvel Comics narrative (i) is coherent, (ii) is strongly (if defeasible) suggested by a number of important comics within the Marvel Comics oeuvre, and (iii) has interesting consequences both for how we understand the stories told about these beloved characters, and for how we understand the manner in which fictional truths are generated within massive collaborative serialized fictions. Nuff said![32]

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