Face Off: Marvel vs. DC comics

Marvel characters believable | DC creates brave, bold heroes

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The Clackamas Print

"Excelsior!"

It's a Latin word meaning "ever upward." Alternatively, it's a printing term for three-point type: "a size smaller than brilliant." But perhaps most culturally notable is that it's the rallying cry for all "True Believers" of Marvel Comics.

The term embodies the characters of the Marvel Universe: Always just shy of brilliance, reaching ever upward in their struggles through life. Marvel heroes connect with readers because life for these characters is not as swimmingly perfect as those of the D.C. Universe.

DC makes icons: Shining Olympian gods to be put on a pedestal and worshipped. This isn't to say their stories aren't interesting to read, but they're harder to connect to.

Think of DC heroes as the high-profile politicians and activist celebrities of the super-hero genre. Yes, they do a lot. And, yes, we are interested – perhaps too much so – in what's going on in their lives.

But Marvel heroes? They're the firefighters. They're the cops on the street. The soldiers in Iraq. They're the everyday heroes with everyday problems that we, as readers, can connect with. They are us.

Marvel led the way when it came to humanizing comic books. The Golden Age of comic books – an age of two-dimensional characters and amusing, but predictable, storytelling – ended when Fantastic Four #1 hit the stands.

Here, finally, was a comic series not about an invincible man from Krypton or a beautiful bondage queen from the Mediterranean – not about the fastest man on earth, nor the world's greatest detective.

It was about a family, and a dysfunctional family, at that. Sure, there were still some of those reader-alienating perfections – but it was a new deal for comics.

Marvel's ultimate success would come later, with the likes of Spider-Man, the X-Men, The Hulk, and more. The geeks, the outcasts, the emotionally repressed and the just-plain-not-perfect would parade across the illustrated page – not as the villains, not as the upstart co-workers or the supporting cast … but as heroes.

Truly, any reader can find more inspiration in the dreams of someone like them, with the same kind of problems, accomplishing something big – as opposed to glimmering gods and goddesses, perfect from birth, saving the day again and again.

Take the rival companies' two greatest icons: Superman and Spider-Man. They both put on the tights for the same reason, though it was Marvel's Spider-Man that put it in the most memorable terms: "With great power comes great responsibility."

Superman is arguably the most powerful being on DC's Earth. Thus, he feels obligated to protect it. But what does Superman risk, going out to save the day? Are run-ins with a red sun really that common? Is there a radioactive green rock just waiting to mug him every day?

Spider-Man isn't bullet-proof. He doesn't get the hero-worship Superman does. When the spotlight points at him, it means he's about to get a pounding or he's being declared a public menace. But he fights anyway. He risks dying every day because it's right. It's something all of us can do.

Sure, most of us have put on a Superman cape and jumped off of something stupid. But that's when we realize that we aren't invincible. We aren't gods. We're people, average schmucks who – like Spidey – have no choice but to get up and try again, because there's no magical deus ex machina to save us.

We connect with Marvel heroes because we, too, are a size smaller than brilliant. We, too, are reaching ever upward.

Excelsior.

Dustin Ragsdale

The Clackamas Print

Both Marvel and DC comics are fantastic companies, each worth exploration – but while Marvel has a history of heroes, DC creates legends.

The most popular Marvel characters tend to be reluctant heroes and underdogs. These are characters designed to be easily identified with.

Marvel uses a good approach to writing feasible characters, but we are discussing a world of *super*heroes.

DC has always been at the head of the pack when it comes to creating icons – godlike entities that explode from the very pages on which they are rendered.

From the beginning of comics in America, DC created the only characters to survive for more than half a century.

Superman and Batman remain the two most recognizable characters from Marvel or DC worldwide and throughout superhero history. They are easily compared with Zeus, Hercules, Apollo, Hades, Odysseus, Jason, Beowulf, King Arthur, Lancelot and other heroes of legend who outlive the civilizations that envisioned them.

DC sat at the forefront of comics' evolution even when the genre of superheroes demanded reevaluation. Beginning with the near-tandem publishing of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and then *Watchmen* in 1986, DC Comics initiated the destruction of iconic fantasy and the foundation of their characters' godhood.

DC allowed now-legendary writers like Steve Miller and Allen Moore to breathe new life into superhero legend by designing the gods' very downfall. By displaying flawed humanity and the horrors of "heroics" when placed in a dynamic world of savage decisions, in the face of brutal consequences, the gods were made *real*.

V for Vendetta completed the evolution of comic icons by introducing the first standalone superhero tragedy.

V is a superhuman more than a superhero, a mythic figure built on the shoulders of a destroyed civilization and doomed man. He is not the champion of his people, or "your friendly neighborhood V," but rather the very will of his peoples' hearts.

He's a monster defining himself through elegance, eloquence and brutal satire in the face of ultimate suppression and tyranny. He does not identify with those he "saves," for he does not even seek to save them. He inspires them to rise up, dethrone and destroy their oppressors, and thus save themselves.

Beginning with *Batman the Animated Series*, DC forced animation to evolve beyond its former lackluster appeal and break into the world of young adult audiences. Mature characters, real emotions and powerful undertones put the dark wings beneath the wings of what became one of the greatest animated works to date. With subsequent titles like *Superman, Batman Beyond* and *Teen Titans*, DC continued to break ground through legendary characters by exploring ideology, science fiction, emotion, and even anime concepts in their cartoons.
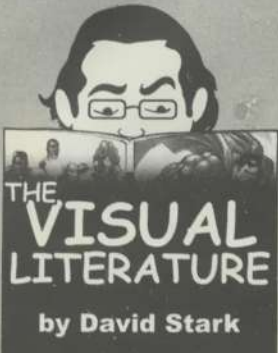
Lastly, the silver screen is the latest battleground for the titans of comics. Even in cinema, concepts introduced by DC continue to push the envelope of the industry. The same titles to elevate comics two decades past now shock and inspire world audiences like never before. *Batman Begins, V for Vendetta*, and in 2008, *Watchmen* are all based on stories first published in the '80s – stories that still hold enough relevance that they inspire discussion, and even controversy.

DC Comics has always and will continue to explore new venues and ideas at the forefront of superhero comics.

More importantly, DC continues to portray the most super of superhero characters, stories and ideas.

Illustration by Adam J. Manley & Matt Olson *Clackamas Print*
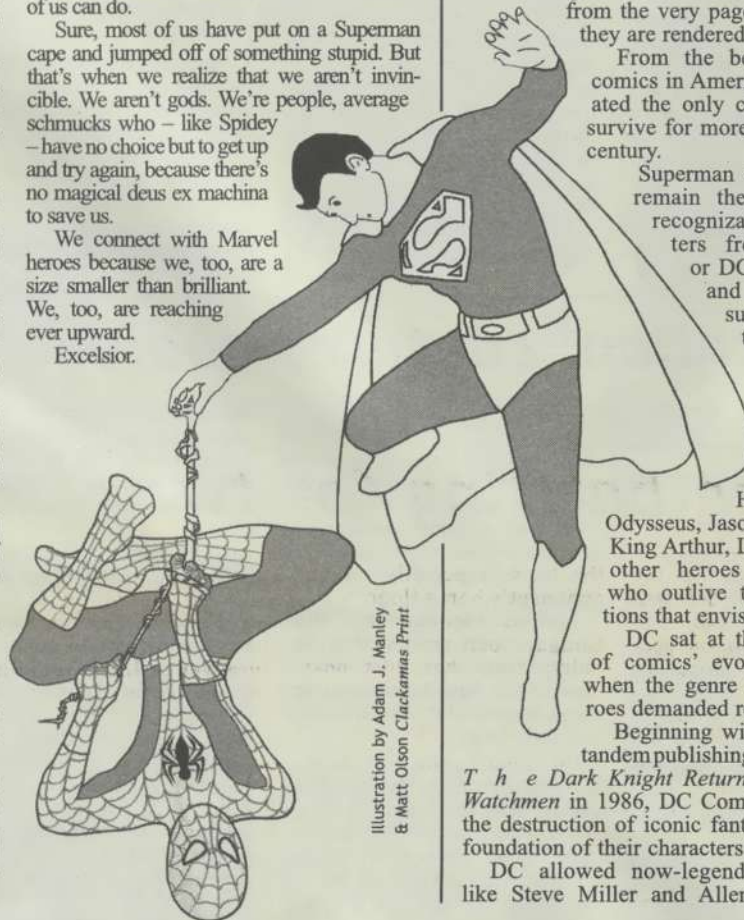
'80s cultural phenomena more than meets the eye

THE VISUAL LITERATURE
by David Stark

What premiered in 1984, had a total of 98 episodes and one movie, was beloved by children and is a major cultural icon?

If your guess was *The Transformers*, you're right.

For those of you who don't know, *The Transformers* was the story of two alien factions whose war spilled over onto Earth. The first group was called Decepticons and was led by Megatron, a megalomaniacal general with the bad tendency to retreat when things turned against him. The second group was the Autobots, led by Optimus Prime, a creature whose compassion drove him to do what he believed was right.

The show was an allegory for the Cold War and covered topics ranging from the arms race to terrorism. Throughout it all, we watched as the characters grew and learned from their experiences.

Since a fight between giant robots could be seen as too foreign for young viewers to relate to, there was the token human boy, Spike Witwicky, whose innocence and dedication to do what's right often drove the heroic Autobots to do what they had to do in order to save planet Earth.

Transformers remained at the head of the game by doing what had never been done before; they killed someone. In 1986, *Transformers: The Movie* came out in theaters and introduced new characters and killed some of the old ones.

The Movie saw the death of fan-favorite, and icon to children everywhere, Optimus Prime. Prime's death has remained one of the most controversial in history, and many parents took their children out of the theater when he died.

But the public would not allow for their hero to stay dead – and the company bowed to the pressure, and in a two-part episode brought back Prime.

But three episodes later, the show ended and brought an end to an era.

Many were saddened and many upset, but sadly, the fact is that many parents no longer allowed their children to watch a show about people who were in a violent war.

And though it comes nearly 20 years late, I say fare thee well, Optimus Prime. You were a great leader, a hero to millions, and I salute you.