

# The Fractured Tabula Rosa: The Continual Cycle of Reboot and Retroactive Continuity in the DC Universe.

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When discussing DC Comics continuity, we must clarify which timeline we are referring to. As of 2011, there have been three main threads of DC continuity, these are referred to as Pre-Crisis, Post-Crisis, and New 52. While these timelines have received alterations in the form of *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time* (Jurgens & Ordway.1994), and *Dark Nights: Death Metal* (Snyder & Capullo.2021), they remain the only three timelines for DC Comics. These do not include parallel timelines or “what if” stories such as *Gotham by Gaslight* (Augustyn & Mignola.1989) which takes place in a Victorian era Gotham, or *Kingdom Come* (Waid & Ross.1996) which looked at an alternate future with a growing population of violent vigilante superheroes. As Friedenthal notes in his 2019 book, *The World of DC Comics* (Friedenthal.2019), ‘although most of DC Comics’ output at any time tends to focus on the heroes of one primary universe, many of the landmark moments in the history of DC Comics involve stories that revolve around the multiverse’ (Friedenthal.2019:4).

The distinction between Pre-Crisis and Post-Crisis timelines can be made with the crossover event *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (Wolfman & Perez.1986), which both timelines derive their name. All stories told before the conclusion of *Crisis* are referred to as Pre-Crisis, while the new timeline created from *Crisis*, is referred to as Post-Crisis. This act of restarting the timeline is what is called a reboot. As Stein discusses in *Authorizing Superhero Comics* (Stein.2021), ‘superhero universe[s], [...] have morphed into multiverses and now comprise many worlds and timelines, which can become so convoluted over time that they are subjected to occasional cleansing, retcons and reboots [...]’ (Stein.2021:88). By 1985, just before the beginning of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, the DC continuity had become convoluted and consisted of multiple Earths with numerous versions of established characters. This was largely due to continuity having built up since *Action Comics #1* (Siegel & Shuster.1938) in 1938 despite introducing new version of existing characters, such as Barry Allen, the second Flash and Hal Jordan, the second Green Lantern during the silver age of comics, without an explanation.

The existence of multiple versions of heroes led to concepts such as Earth-1, Earth-S and many more. It wasn’t always clear which Earth a story was taking place on, leaving it to existing readers to figure it out. However, this was alienating to new readers. Comic scholar Julian Darius describes this era of DC Comics in his book *Classics on Infinite Earths* (Darius.2015).

DC’s system of multiple Earths could be a great narrative wonder, joyous in its complexity and permutations. But it wasn’t exactly inviting to new readers. And it could confuse even DC’s writers and editors. At some point, complexity began turning to chaos and became perceived as a mess that needed fixing.

(Darius.2015:172)

This culminated in the need to either clarify each timeline, or reboot continuity for a fresh start. Proctor defines both Reboots and Retroactive Continuity in his chapter of the same name (Proctor.2019) for *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, stating,

Both reboots and retcons function as makeover modalities, or repair, reprogramming, and regeneration; the former uses a method of beginning again with the establishment of new horizon memory while the latter endorses the revision of an already existing narrative sequence without deleting the entire story-program. Rebooting, then means to restart an entertainment universe that has already been previously established and begin with a new storyline and/or timeline that disregards the original writer's previously established history, thus making it obsolete and void.

(Proctor.2019:233)

The act of rebooting the DC universe would be done through *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, giving long time readers an in-universe explanation for the sudden change. *Crisis* acted as what Stein describes as a 'mythological mediator in the introduction of new ways for superhero stories to interact with their own fictional historical contexts and with their audience' (Stein.2021:257). The writer of *Crisis*, Marv Wolfman, would describe *Crisis* as 'erasing all the dumb stuff from DC's story archive and [...] acted as a form of corrective history' (Stein.2021:258). The end goal of *Crisis* was to provide DC Comics with a blank slate, or Tabula Rosa, in which to build a new timeline upon. Intertextually, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* pulled as much as it could from the existing DC Universe to signify to its readers just how far reaching the impact of *Crisis* would be.

The reception to the reboot was favourable in terms of sales, according to Carmine Infantino, DC's then publisher. Issues released after the reboot reportedly 'jumped like crazy' (Tucker.2017:56), this was due to new readers finding it easier to enter storylines, as well as the pre-existing readers. With readers of serial narratives, such as DC's superhero comics, there is a form of 'imaginary investment' (Stein.2021:89). With existing readers, their investment in a character now drives them to discover their new paradigm. For new readers, they now have an opportunity for easy entry to build this investment.

Some creators, however, did not agree with this removal of almost 50 years' worth of stories. Dick Giordano, the then Vice President and Executive Editor, decried that the 'twenty-four characters who had died or been expunged [during *Crisis on Infinite Earths*] including Supergirl and Barry Allen's Flash [...] should never be seen again, nor should they be referred to in story' (Dauber.2022:289). Creating an even more distinguished gap between the erased Pre-Crisis continuity, and this new timeline. However, as Friedenthal notes, 'many creators still working for DC, then and in the years to follow, bucked against this editorial decision, and worked to bring back elements of the multiverse' (Friedenthal.2019:17). We can see evidence of this in the comics, with examples such as the Psycho Pirate continually mentioning the Crisis, and how other's do not remember it in Grant Morrison's *Animal Man* (Morrison & Truog.1988-1990). Issue #24's cover highlighted this break in continuity by depicting Pre-Crisis comics at the feet of Psycho Pirate.

Outside of the story, DC also engaged in the practice of selective re-printing, something I refer to as "Retcon via Exclusion". This is part of what Méon identifies as the three forms of continuity management, 'textual and paratextual mediations of the comics themselves, practices of selective reprinting, and text-based reference publications' (Stein.2021:252). Until 1986, DC Comics would only print comics as single issues, this was until the release and success of Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* (Miller.1986) in 1986, who's success led to a collected trade paperback. A year later, Frank Miller and Dave Mazzucchelli's four issue story in *Batman* was collected in another trade paperback entitled *Batman: Year One* (Miller & Mazzucchelli.1987).

The success of *Batman: Year One* taught DC that there was value in collecting not only standalone stories, but story arcs of their main titles into trade paperbacks. This practice was continued for later stories, such as *Batman: The Many Deaths of Batman* (Byrne, Aparo & Decarlo.1992) and *Batman: Ten Nights of the Beast* (Starlin & Aparo.1994). However, DC was clearly selective in what they wanted to reprint and keep in the public eye. While *Batman: Year One* had been reprinted five times before the year 2000, material prior to 1986 did not see trade paperback collections until the mid-2000s. It's clear that DC wanted to only keep Post-Crisis content available for the public. However, even with Post-Crisis content, if DC does not want to acknowledge a story, they will still restrict the availability of a storyline. A prime example here would be *Batman: The Cult* (Starlin & Wrightson. 1988) by Jim Starlin and Bernie Wrightson. Given the controversial and overly violent nature of the story, DC have limited the amount of times it has been printed, despite being written and published between *Year One* and *A Death in the Family* (Starlin & Aparo.1988), two heavily re-printed stories.

This act of selective re-printing is reflected in how DC uses intertextuality in their stories. Derived from Julia Kristeva's 1966 essay *Words, Dialogue and Novel* (Kristeva.1980), intertextuality describes the 'initiated [proposal of a] text as a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are [focuses] of analysis instead of static structures and products' (Friedman.1991:147). The use of intertextuality can be defined by three key categories, obligatory, optional, and accidental (Miola. 2004). Obligatory intertextuality acts as a deliberate reference that actively invokes knowledge of the original text in order to understand the full meaning. Optional intertextuality refers to intertextual references that are non-essential to the story and are instead used as a homage to reward the reader for recognising the reference. Finally, accidental intertextuality involves the unconscious referencing of texts (Fitzsimmons.2013) (Ivanic.1998). Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* (Barthes.1977) is often paired with discussion of intertextuality due to Barthes discussion of whether an author's opinion or intention should be considered when reading their work. When recontextualising a work through intertextual references, you are now forcing the reader to look at a text with another creator's vision in mind. Superhero comics are innately intertextual by nature as a long form serial narrative.

Outside of Post-Crisis reprints, the rare Pre-Crisis story referenced was restricted to just the first few years of a character, and some 1970s Batman work by Neal Adams. In the *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time* (Jurgens & Ordway.1994) tie-in comic, *Superman: The Man of Steel #37* (Simonson & Bogdanove. 1994), Superman meets three alternate universe Batmen, all taking inspiration from previous incarnations of Batman. The graphical rendering of all three Batman figures are direct obligatory references to previous Batman eras, notably, *Dark Knight Returns*, a then relatively recent Batman story with a popular trade paperback collection, and two eras of Pre Crisis that DC are willing to reprint, namely the Golden age Batman and the works of Neal Adams.

The choice to use these three specific versions of Batman reflects DC's own stance on what could be in the public's accessible frame of reference. The irony of *Superman: The Man of Steel #37* is that DC is asking the reader to reflect on their past stories, but only within what they have authorized the reader to look back on. The act of selectively choosing what to republish and keep in the readers active memory is in itself a passive form of retconning. Removing their Pre-Crisis self from attainable memory, in essence, retconning via exclusion.

However, the advent of easy internet access creates the easy exchange of ideas and communication between fans and collectors. As Henry Jenkins notes in his chapter 'Archival, Ephemeral, and Residual' (Jenkins.2015) for *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels*, 'new media platforms, such as eBay and YouTube, make the exchange of old media and old artifacts more central to our lived experience' (Jenkins.2015:302). The ability for fans to both sell older issues and share scanned

copies of comics online allowed fans who did not have the ability to access Pre-Crisis comics, a chance to experience them, either passively through online scans, or by purchasing back-issues.

By the mid-2000s, DC began collecting their Pre-Crisis material in the Showcase format. These typically collected around 500 pages of black and white reprints surrounding specific characters. The first of these was 2005's *Showcase Presents: Green Lantern Vol. 1* (Broome & Infantino.2005). The positive of releasing these collections was the ability to finally buy and read material from the Golden and Silver age of comics, as well as being able to read many issues in a single volume. The downside, however, is that these were printed in black and white and on cheap paper. While the comics were now easily accessible to the public, readers were not getting the same experience as the original printings.

The mid-2000s reprinting of Pre-Crisis material may seem to contradict the practice of Retcon via Exclusion, 2005 also saw the beginning of the *Infinite Crisis* (Johns & Jimenez.2006) event by Geoff Johns and Phil Jimenez. *Infinite Crisis* was designed as a sequel to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, focusing on the return of four characters who had vanished at the end of *Crisis*. These characters were Superman and Lois Lane from Earth-2, Superboy from Earth Prime, and Alexander Luthor Jr. from Earth-3. The re-introduction of these characters acknowledge the existence of the previous continuity, as well as proving to the readers that the current incarnations of characters such as Superman and Batman, were not aware of the previous continuity.

The plot of *Infinite Crisis* involved the previously mentioned four characters watching the new timeline and feeling frustrated with their replacements because of just how dark the universe had become. Of note is the fact that at this point in continuity, the Justice League were doubtful of each other due to the events of *Identity Crisis* (Meltzer & Morales.2004). The specific instigators of *Infinite Crisis*'s plot are Superboy-Prime and Alexander Luthor, both hailing from parallel universes, with Superboy-Prime in particular wishing for the return of the universes that were destroyed in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. The reality of the *Crisis* meant that the previous timelines were completely destroyed and replaced with a single combined timeline, much like the publishing practice of DC.

During the first issue of *Infinite Crisis*, and the tie-in *Infinite Crisis Secret Files* (Wolfman & Jurgens. 2006), Superboy-Prime and Alexander Luthor view the existing timeline through a wall of cracked glass, with various elements of the timeline projected onto it. In *Infinite Crisis Secret Files*, Superboy-Prime begins to shatter the glass reflection of reality, as he does, elements of the Pre-Crisis reality begin to reflect within the shattered pieces. This can primarily be seen with images of both Wonder Girl, Donna Troy, and Hawkman, Carter Hall, both of which feature intertextual references to Post-Crisis and Pre-Crisis incarnations. This is explained in caption with 'the original *Crisis* took all the remaining Earths and merged them together again, but there were glitches... paradoxes... and the universe demanded that its flaws be fixed. With each strike, he's sorting his way through the conflicting permutations. Resolving all the possible realities' (Wolfman & Jurgens.2006:27-28).

Intertextuality plays a strong role in the first half of *Infinite Crisis*, especially as Earth-2 Superman, Alexander Luthor and Superboy-Prime explain the situation to Power Girl. During their explanation, imagery from both Pre-Crisis continuity and *Crisis on Infinite Earths* are used. The choice to use these references signals to the audience that the once outdated material of Pre-Crisis DC Comics is now relevant, and coincidentally, is being reprinted in the *Showcase* paperbacks. To existing fans who remember the Pre-Crisis continuity, it also creates an emotional connection due to the imaginary investment discussed by Stein. The universe they once cared about, and had previously thought lost, is now relevant and brought back to light. *Infinite Crisis* culminates in a realignment of the DC

Universe to now include elements of both Pre and Post Crisis continuity, an act which is signified by the increased use of intertextuality.

By analysing DC's reboot attempts, as well as their publication methods, it's clear that there is a correlation between what DC is willing to acknowledge in their books, and what they are willing to mass produce. The absence of easy to access Pre-Crisis material at the point of the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* reboot possibly helped in its fan reception. The imagined investment was there, however there was a lack of material to sustain the universe they had become attached to, forcing the acceptance of this new Post-Crisis universe. The opposite side of this can also be seen with 2011's New 52 reboot, in which DC decided to reboot their universe, releasing a brand-new wave of #1 issues, each with brand new backstories and little connection to their former selves. However, due to the increase in trade paperback productions in the mid-2000s, and DC's own willingness to reprint Post-Crisis material, a direct comparison could more easily be made, forcing consumers and fans to face the New 52 with a far more critical eye.

In the modern age of computer archival software, digital comics, and oversized collected editions, it becomes harder for DC Comics to truly create a blank slate for themselves to start over. The ease of access to older material will always bring about a comparison, creating separation between long standing fans of a past continuity and new fans brought in by the reboot. It's clear that regardless of how pristine the blank slate may appear to be, the fractures will always show through.

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