Marvel Tells / Sells Its Own History: Figureheads, Promotion, Curation, and Application, 1982-1987.

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Acknowledgements
This paper was originally supported via travel funds from SUNY Geneseo and by the collections located at the University of Wyoming’s American Heritage Center and San Diego State University’s Special Comic Arts Collection.
**Abstract**

This research explores Marvel Comics Group’s (MCG) efforts to actively construct and sell its own history during the early-to-mid 1980s. This active historicization was achieved through persistent promotion by company figurehead Stan Lee and fans-turned-professionals actively curating the history in an official capacity. The historical reference products focused on the growing direct market-based older fan types of cultists, enthusiasts, and petty producers and younger, newer consumers and fans attracted to the authority of both history and official releases. These reference materials included encyclopedias (*Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe*), a promotional arm (*Marvel Age*), an official history (*The Marvel Saga*), commemorative ceremony (1986’s 25th Anniversary), and New Universe that in contrast reaffirmed the specialness of the original Marvel Universe. MCG’s efforts from 1982-1987 provide a rare instance to watch history actively be constructed, curated, sold, and applied and to illustrate to us the power inherent within such actions.

*01/12/2022*

**Keywords:** comic book historicization, Marvel 25th anniversary, comic book history, Marvel Saga, Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe
Introduction


This advertisement is a microcosm for the focus of this research paper. This paper draws on both the power inherent within historicization, and fan typologies from fan studies, to show how Marvel uniquely utilized a combination of a persistent figurehead and promoter; actively created, curated, and controlled the historical narrative both within and beyond the comic book pages; and actively applied their history as a way to both reward long-time enthusiasts and cultists and attract new readers and fans.

In the 1960s, Stan Lee (1922-2018) helped to build a diegetic universe and promote an extra-diegetic universe. The combination created a strong loyalty from his readers. This initial, persistent 1960s promotion and engagement with his public combined with the 1980s
ossification of this engagement, now wrapped in the dual authority of both history and officialness, makes the MCG efforts from this time an important case study for understanding the power of creating, promoting, and selling a history within popular culture.

Theory: The Power of Historicization and Fan Typologies

Creating history is more than the recording of facts. The act of writing a historical narrative imbues that person, event, or object with a greater significance. The power of historicization is augmented through the use of anniversaries (the annual recurrence of a date marking a notable event) and commemorations (a ceremony or celebration in which a person or event is remembered). Histories or historical products take different forms including narratives, numerical and qualitative lists, indices, handbooks, and miscellaneous reference materials. So, to historicize is neither to just create an index, nor just to tell a good tale; rather it encompasses a little of both.

Next, histories require audiences that want to learn these stories and facts. So, while my focus is on historicization efforts, it is also necessary to utilize fan theory. Fan studies literature is replete with narratives of fan discovery and self-awareness that “reveal the moment interest becomes passion.” Such stories of transformation from first-time consumer to eager fan helps to establish one’s fan credentials. Inclusion into, and the acquisition of knowledge about, these fandoms include encyclopedic media, suggested canon, and fan gatherings.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) provide an often-cited and useful fan typology that understands fans as a continuum that includes consumers (relatively generalized and unfocused), fans (heavy users with potential for strong attachment), cultists (concentrated specialist
attachment), enthusiasts (intensively consume, produce, and share), and petty producers (semi-
professional and professional forms of cultural production). For my analysis of Marvel Comics in the early-to-mid 1980s, we see some cultists, enthusiasts, and petty producers transform from fan-to-professional in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s whose now professional work helps to curate and teach this history – now with the added significance of an “Official” label – to younger fans and consumers in the 1980s.

More experienced and knowledgeable fans, either individually or collectively, act as curators who “organize their expertise” \(^5\) which helps convert new consumers into fans. A basic component of curation is the suggestion of canon, or in the example of potential fans of Marvel, which texts are the best entry point for them to jump into. While inside Marvel itself, former petty producers now created canon through their creation and publication of Official encyclopedic and historical releases.

Of course, fans-turned-professionals predated Jack Kirby (1917-1994) and Lee’s revolution. For example, Spider-Man co-creator, Steve Ditko (1927-2018), was one of the earliest comic book fans (1930s and 1940s) to turn professional artist (1950s). Other early prominent examples include E. Nelson Bridwell starting at DC (Dec. 1963) \(^6\) and Roy Thomas joining Marvel (July 1965) as Stan’s protégé. Future Marvel Editor-in-Chief (EIC) Jim Shooter famously began as a comics writing prodigy, whose first work for DC appeared in issues cover-dated July-August 1966.
Yet, by the 1970s, fans who grew up on DC’s 1950s superhero revival and Marvel’s 1960s revolution began producing in fan circles and quickly began joining the professional ranks. DC’s official fan magazine *The Amazing World of DC Comics* (AWODCC) featured young fans-turned-DC staffers including Allan Asherman, Bob Razakis, and Michael Uslan. At the same time over at Marvel, the careers of Scott Edelman, Tony Isabella, Doug Moench, Don McGregor, Marv Wolfman, and Len Wein among others, began, as they worked on FOOM, the official 1970s Marvel fan magazine. The two fans-turned-professional, however, who are the most significant for this current research in regard to their work on the *Handbook* and *Marvel Saga*, are Mark Gruenwald (1953-1996) and Peter Sanderson (1952-).

As a petty producer in the 1970s, Mark Gruenwald provided work on DC’s Mars and Martian Manhunter and continuity in AWODCC #13 and his The Justice League of America Reader to issue #14. As a fan, Gruenwald loved both organizing and categorizing information and Marvel’s shared universe. As his friend and colleague Peter Sanderson wrote, “He also wanted to draw from the past and bring it to the present. To reward readers who had been into the books for years and give them a sense of nostalgia as well as attracting new readers simply with a great story. He didn’t believe in ignoring the Marvel Universe history and its rich past.” Another fan-turned-professional colleague, Jim Salicrup, described Gruenwald’s perspective as “Mark had only imagined the Bullpen that Stan had written about, when in reality it was a few guys in a dingy room, not the creative sandbox Mark imagined. He tried to turn his fantasy of Stan’s energetic Bullpen accounts into reality when he joined Marvel.” On one hand, this impulse is not surprising since Gruenwald was a creative professional working alongside other creative professionals producing works of fiction. A workplace defined by play and imagination could be
expected. However, more importantly for my current argument, it shows the power of Lee’s mythologizing. Exemplar petty-producers turned pros such as Gruenwald not just learned, but created and shared, both the fictions on the page and those surrounding it as well.

Younger and newer 1980s consumers and fans not yet at the more advanced fan stages, or perhaps not wishing to be, were satiated by learning the “correct” or official history from Gruenwald and Sanderson that provides them extra value beyond their readership. Older fans returning to readership in the 1980s had their original fandom validated through such official (important) releases. While older fans who never strayed from reading are rewarded with new historical tools to help buttress their cultural and social capital as knowers of Marvel history as they circulate within fan networks.

My study focuses on MCG’s historical products created and published from 1982 to 1987. When necessary, products created prior to and after this period are also covered in order to provide proper context. Those historical products include the following: the fifteen issue *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe* that provided details, history, and representative images for each major Marvel character; Marvel’s in-house promotional comic book for Marvel’s other products and culture, *Marvel Age*; and the twenty-five issue *The Marvel Saga: the Official History of the Marvel Universe*, an attempt to write a linear, interwoven, singular narrative of Marvel’s major stories from 1961-1966. Also, in 1986, MCG commemorated the 25th Anniversary of the cover-dated publication of *Fantastic Four* #1, seen as the issue marking the beginning of artist Jack Kirby and writer Stan Lee’s 1960s superhero success. To begin, I discuss
Lee’s other significant success; his work at consistently promoting his creations through high fan engagement.

**Use of a Persistent Figurehead, Symbol, or Promoter**

Stan Lee always promoted Marvel and himself through high levels of engagement with his readers. This interactivity is demonstrated through creations including the Bullpen Bulletin, Stan’s Soapbox, The Fantastic Four Fan Page (the first instance of the modern Marvel Comics letters pages), the Merry Marvel Marching society,¹¹ and eventually the college lecture circuit, press coverage, and TV appearances. The messaging within this interactivity came with a “hip” and “maverick” posture filled with self-deprecating humor, in-universe cross-references, and running in-jokes.¹² Lee used his letters columns to appeal to a wider and older audience of readers¹³ and, in opposition to DC Comics, displayed inclusive language such as “we” or “us” when directly addressing Marvel’s fans.¹⁴ Marvel historian Sean Howe summarizes Lee’s approach as feeling like a “Marvel pep rally.”¹⁵ Lee putting himself out there as a preacher spreading the gospel of their creation was key.

There was a dual outcome from Lee’s self-centered promotion of his collaborative work. Fans began to not only love the fictional stories and their expanding universe but they also loved the fictional Bullpen Lee created. Lee as editor not only made sure each issue included full credits (writers, artists, letterer, and editor) but also gave many of them memorable accolades and nicknames (e.g. “the enchanted pencil” of Jack Kirby or “Jazzy” John Romita) that helped make readers feel a connection to Marvel beyond just the stories. Original 1960s Marvel fans wanted to not only know whether The Vulture would show up again in the pages of Spider-Man but they fantasized about the goings-on at the dream-factory they thought the Marvel offices were. It
resulted in a fandom not just for The Marvel Universe but the Universe around Marvel that supposedly Lee was the merry bandleader of.

Lee desperately wanted to tackle projects outside of comics, often set his gaze to the future, and constantly promoted new projects. A consistent theme to his career prior to his 1960s success, and somewhat after, was a level of embarrassment regarding his profession. The reason he used the pen-name Stan Lee to begin with, was to preserve his surname (Lieber) for more “respectable” writing jobs. Attempts outside of comic books included the following. After his honorable discharge from the Army he flirted with starting his own educational textbook company. In 1947, he self-published a book titled *Secrets Behind the Comics*. He would write longer prose pieces for Martin Goodman’s magazines. In the mid-to-late 1950s, Lee attempted to jump to the then more respectable comic *strip* newspaper business. Even after his 1960s comic book success, and after leaving his Editor-in-Chief position, he published a *People* magazine knockoff titled *Celebrity* and the magazines *Nostalgia Illustrated* and *Film International* while also becoming a television pitchman for razors and men’s apparel.

Yet, since many of those new projects (beginning in 1966) were film and television adaptations of Kirby and Lee’s, or Ditko and Lee’s, 1960s creations, he in a sense ended up promoting his own past consistently. Lee’s 1974 *Origins of Marvel Comics* for Simon & Shuster’s imprint Fireside Books was one of the more successful symbols of his ongoing desire to become a serious author and achieve a certain respectability in his own mind and from the type of Long Island neighbors he raised his family around. This book and its sequels may have simply reprinted the best of Lee’s 1960s work, but Lee could provide new contextual introductions to
explain his process as an author. More importantly, it was released by the publisher of respectable novels such as *Catch-22* (1961) and other best-sellers and could be found in legitimate bookstores rather than the spinner racks at a newsstand or grocery store.

It also serves to support this paper’s focus on studying Marvel’s process of historicization. Its prologue is replete with Lee’s expected grandiosity but nonetheless speaks to how important such promotion was for Marvel. Lee characterizes Marvel Comics as “Not so much a name as a special state of mind…a mood, a movement, a mild and momentary madness” that is needed in “a world that has lost its heroes.” This mythologizing of not just the stories Kirby, Lee, and Ditko created, but the supposed company culture Lee promoted, and the total effect it had on their audience of readers continues in 1975’s *Son of Origins* when Lee dedicates the book to one of his most successful creations, “the Bullpen.” So, by including this dedication in his Fireside Books sequel about the origins of these 1960s stories, he is placing the Bullpen on equal footing with the diegetic universe as something significant for fans to commit to their collective memories. Lee’s mythologizing of both his comic book stories and the creative teams surrounding them ultimately helps to build up Lee’s own legend.

By the 1980s, Lee would narrate the animated program, *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* (1981-1983), cementing his status as Marvel figurehead for young fans. His continued press interviews, name appearing in every Marvel comic, and as I’ll discuss, deployment during the 25th Anniversary, all combined to connect in readers’ minds “Stan Lee is Marvel.” He sold his readers on magical stories both in and beyond the pages, and was successful doing so. When he
f elt he needed to, he retold and resold this increasingly mythologized history in the 1970s and by
the 1980s, his adherents began doing it for him.

**Active Creation, Curation, and Control of Their History**

The practical reasons why Marvel chose to organize their history in the early-to-mid 1980s
include the fact that their narrative universe became unwieldy and they needed a reference for
writers/artists. This reorganization and subsequent canonization would help simplify the universe
allowing new readers an entry point. Also, throughout the 1970s, Baby Boomers interested in
science-fiction, fantasy, and comic book fandoms also continued to mature and coalesce thanks
to more publications, television shows, and films produced. In addition, the increase in
convention activity, mailing lists, and fan publications thanks in part to rudimentary desktop
publishing helped to support these growing fan cultures. So, the rise of the direct market helped
to meet the needs of this customer base increasingly interested in specialty and/or historical
products. What this readership lacked in breadth was made up for in higher disposable income.
Marvel and DC began to create more niche, more expensive products (e.g. graphic novels and
hardbound collections) to cater to this older fan base.\(^{20}\) Such official hardcover products and
limited-series reference materials enhanced the petty producers, cultists, and enthusiasts’
curatorial consumption, and added to their cultural and social capital in fan circles. The
organized knowledge or canon provided utility for fans’ wanting to know more and to show what
they knew (increased status). While the format and presentation as official reference or “library
quality” materials added an air of legitimacy, authority, and a bit of sophistication to their
fandom.

The main focus in Marvel’s active creation, curation, and control of their history are two publications. These are the limited series, fifteen-issue *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe* (1982-1984) that provided details, history, and representative images for each major Marvel character, and *Marvel Age* (1983-1994), MCG’s official comic book-sized promotional magazine. These two efforts are significant on their own but take on greater importance intertextually since together they paved the way for MCG’s application of their history during their 1986 25th anniversary promotion.

Writing in *Marvel Age* in April 1983, fan-turned-professional historian Peter Sanderson promoted the Marvel Universe and its history as “the most extensive literary mythos of the twentieth century.”

It was felt some type of encyclopedia or handbook would be useful to both fan and professional alike. Sanderson described the *Official Handbook’s* purpose as being both useful to new readers (consumers and fans) needing to learn about the characters and longtime readers (cultists, enthusiasts, and petty producers) gaining new details about their favorites.

The *Handbook* was assigned to fan-turned-professional, Editor Mark Gruenwald and Assistant Editor Mike Carlin where it expanded into its final encyclopedic form. *The Official Handbook* as reference product incorporated summarized narrative text, images, statistics, and specifications to organize, codify, and situate characters within the Marvel Universe. Whereas Olshevsky’s indices provided issue summaries, the *Handbook* acted as a character encyclopedia. While each had a different focus, both provided similar utility in and outside Marvel. In an interview for this research, a former Marvel licensing employee admitted *The Official Handbook* became a useful
reference for the licensing department when choosing appropriate secondary characters and storylines for certain licensed properties (e.g. video games). Eventually, *The Official Handbook* also began appearing within licensing contracts as a shorthand reference and legal definition for the properties contained within the Marvel Universe. The utility associated with increasing fan engagement, satisfaction, and status as a knowledgeable fan, was consistently bolstered by MCG’s promotional arm, *Marvel Age*.

*Marvel Age* #1 (Apr. 1983) explained the title’s purpose, defining the “The Marvel Age” for readers as beginning with Kirby and Lee’s Fantastic Four. The most interesting point in the article is their concession that previous fanzines have existed and even Marvel had tried this before (1970s FOOM). Their only unique selling point (USP) for *Marvel Age* beyond its cost (only 25 cents compared to the then standard cover price of 60 cents) is that this promotional fanzine is official. Using an artful and disarming tongue-in-cheek prose style inspired by Stan Lee’s 1960s pep-rally prose style, they admit openly to their promotional goals. In a way, *Marvel Age* of the 1980s is an expanded continuation of Lee’s 1960s *Soapbox* column. The introduction concludes by answering its own rhetorical question – *Marvel Age* is a “direct line to the fans. You let us know what you want, and we’ll do the best we can to give it to you.”\(^{22}\) Such tone and fan engagement were augmented through the following year’s (April, 1984) *The Marvel Fumetti Book*. A single photo-filled issue gave a tongue-in-cheek inside look at Marvel’s office. It too acting as a photographic realization of Lee’s 1960s mythology, the Marvel Bullpen. Even here the *Official Handbook* is promoted with a one-page gag starring Mark Gruenwald explaining how much research goes into it, and his use of the Marvel library and Mike Carlin in producing it. In this one-page Marvel shows the creation of its history, by promoting it here, also its
curation for how it is presented, which for a time provides them control over how both their diegetic and extra-diegetic history is constructed.

*Marvel Age* continued this type of hyper-fan engagement championed by Stan Lee but with a 1980s corporate twist. The quintessential example is also from issue number one when they provide a breakdown of which editor is currently in-charge of which title(s), or issue number eight (Nov. 1983) that included a joint interview with then current and former Editor-in-Chiefs Jim Shooter and Stan Lee. Future comic book writer Peter David conducted the interview, and Shooter described Lee as still Marvel’s “creative director” even though by that point Lee was based in Los Angeles and focused on adapting MCG properties for animation and live action projects. Bringing Lee to the forefront via a cover illustration, feature interview, and focus as creative director brought MCG’s past to the forefront as an unbroken and rich history consistently embodied by their persistent figurehead.

Historian Sean Howe provides a useful turn of phrase when he describes this new focus when he writes "The cosmology of the Marvel Universe itself became a selling point," and I’d add this appeal extended to the extra-diegetic elements, or Bullpen, as well. This became even more evident when Peter Sanderson in 1986 wrote a cohesive, linear, narrative history of everything Kirby, Lee, Ditko (and others) created back in the 1960s. The next section covers Sanderson’s *The Marvel Saga: the Official History of the Marvel Universe* (1985-1987) and 1986’s 25th Anniversary and its associated New Universe as examples of the active application of their history in order to attract new fans and consumers and reward long-time cultists, enthusiasts, and petty-producers.
Active Application of Their History to Attract New Fans and Readers


Danny Fingeroth, editor of *The Marvel Saga*, stated during an interview for this work “That *Marvel Saga* was published more or less to coincide with the twenty-fifth anniversary was pretty much a coincidence. I think Jim [Shooter] and/or Mark [Gruenwald] (or someone) had had the idea for a while, and it happened that Peter [Sanderson] and I were available to work on it just then.” In an undated memo from Marvel Editor Ralph Macchio and Peter Sanderson to Jim Shooter, they pitch the subject of a “Marvel History Project” potentially titled *Marvel Chronicles* as a thirty-two page monthly book in a more prestige format with no advertisements, printed on heavier stock with wraparound covers possibly penciled by then-superstar artist John Byrne. So *Saga* was less a 25th anniversary coordinated effort and more born from the same passionate fan-turned-professional engagement that birthed Gruenwald’s *Official Handbook*. The final project, different from Macchio’s pitch, nonetheless provided for younger readers in 1985 a quick-study guide to the 1960s foundational stories of Marvel’s narrative history and long-time readers a condensed, linear, historical text about the foundational texts that by doing so, redoubled their significance.

As stated in the theory section, there were young passionate fans who were interested in not just the knowledge of older fans, but also “official” releases that increased their own knowledge and added to their engagement and satisfaction. These fans are rewarded with Fingeroth’s introductory copy in *Saga* #1 that states, “You will embark on a journey through the wondrous history of the Marvel Universe in a way that no one ever has before.” In a sense situating MCG itself as the only one who can provide such a story or perspective. You’re almost surprised
Fingeroth didn’t end his introduction with “A wondrous history that is a primer for our soon-to-be new fans, and a kind of reward for all those ‘True Believers’ who’ve been Merrily Marching along since the beginning.” The “officialness” of this history continues when Fingeroth, writing in the quintessential hyperbolic style of Stan Lee, calls Sanderson, “comics’ foremost historian.” Also, issue number one’s use of bold, and bold in all CAPS, of proper names and concepts reaffirms its purpose as a historical primer for new fans and a side-table reference for long-time hardcore fans.

Comics’ letters pages are admittedly, at best, self-serving. Nonetheless, letters to *The Marvel Saga* reveal the intended effects of teaching the history and strengthening fan engagement. The letters can crudely be divided between “old fans (cultists, enthusiasts, and petty producers) who have returned” and “new consumers and fans looking to learn.” Issue eleven of *Saga* features the first fan letter written to Fingeroth and Sanderson. The enthusiastic fan calls *Saga* “nothing short of a dream come true for Marvel fans of all ages.” Again, as begun by Lee in the 1960s, Marvel fandom held a dual pleasure of learning both the diegetic and extra-diegetic narrative details. As such, historicizing both in the form of *Saga* fulfills this promise. Issue seventeen featured old fan Jeff Herring who had not been reading Marvel since 1976, but has now returned, enjoying *Saga* due to its “stylishly” chronicling “stories from Marvel’s heroic infancy” of which the reader is so fond. While in issue twelve, a reader known only as “The Avitareader” from Braintree, Massachusetts calls it “an exciting way for newcomers to the Marvel Universe to catch up on the history of their favorite characters.” In the thirteenth issue’s letters column, Fingeroth replies that “most SAGA readers were not reading Marvel comics over twenty years ago (or were even born yet).” While self-serving, Fingeroth’s remark nonetheless confirms the goal of hooking new fans
by presenting MCG’s previous stories as worthy of historical archivization and that learning it all will increase the fans’ satisfaction. A letter from David Morsles, Jersey City from issue eighteen says the Saga is “very important to new collectors like myself” for its ability to answer questions. While issue twenty’s letters generally reiterate the theme that the series “is great for new readers.” Sanderson, as a fan-turned-professional, created Saga, who with former petty-producer Gruenwald also produced the Handbook, see their efforts at codifying the Marvel Universe pay off. As evidenced in these letters, both returning cultists and enthusiasts and newer consumers and fans learn what is important to know with the added authority of it not just coming from an older fan but as the Official History of the Marvel Universe.

These stories were presented within Saga, the official Marvel historical series, where readers learned the “proper” narrative sequence of the 1960s stories. When read in conjunction with The Official Handbook’s statistics and Marvel Age’s active community boosterism, this intertextuality imbues the 1960s creators’ work with a specialness if not an outright importance – the details of which are to be studied and learned. 1986’s 25th Anniversary created the appropriate commemorative framework for these “sacred” texts. Shooter’s New Universe, by simply existing contra to the original universe, helped define it as the first, the best, and most importantly, one worth remembering.

25th Anniversary (1986) and Shooter’s New Universe

There were two perspectives within the comic book industry in 1986. One perspective looked backward, including efforts by enthusiastic fan-turned-professionals like Gruenwald and Sanderson to celebrate Marvel’s 25th Anniversary. The other view looked ahead to new narrative takes. This included Shooter’s perpetual preoccupation with “blowing things up” via some sort
of “Big Bang” at Marvel, while its competitors gained critical literary praise with the release of newer works including *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, DC Comics), *Watchmen* (Moore, DC Comics), and *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (Spiegelman, Pantheon Books). In fact, the effect of DC’s new successful direction led a *Variety* journalist to opine that the industry as a whole cared little for long-time fan loyalty.25

Yet, even in the midst of these new directions, Marvel was thinking about commemorating their own history again in 1986. According to Shooter’s narrative regarding the 1986 commemoration, MCG President Jim Galton sought a similar strategy as 1981’s 20th Anniversary. Galton wanted to move product and do so through projects such as a coffee table book and convention promotions. To make 1986 different and special, Shooter instead proposed his “Big Bang” idea, an idea he seemed to be thinking about in one form or another since mid-1980.

The Marvel Universe (MU1) would end in May 1986, then restart (MU2) in June 1986.26 The MU2 wouldn’t rigidly follow the original universe, but instead “draw upon the vast pool of creative ideas expressed in the first 25 years.”27 The Big Bang idea was dismissed by the assembled management group, in particular from the circulation people who enjoyed high sales numbers, and they instead endorsed Shooter’s second idea of celebrating the birth of the Marvel Universe by birthing an entirely new narrative universe.28

For readers buying Marvel issues in 1986, they would have noticed an aesthetic change marking the commemoration. Issues cover dated April 1986 through March 1987 featured a special Marvel 25th Anniversary corner box logo.29 In addition, twenty-nine November 1986 issues also
displayed a specially-drawn portrait of the book’s major character. This portrait was surrounded by a special border by artists John Romita and Al Williamson featuring contemporary representations of Marvel’s roster of heroic characters. The sum effect was to wave a tasteful flag in the faces of potential new readers and old fans browsing in the direct market shops that something special and important was occurring and perhaps they should begin a dialogue about it.

Marvel also mounted a promotional campaign to celebrate the 25th anniversary that reached the established comics’ fan community and occasionally beyond it. Fantastic Four #296, titled “Homecoming!” was a double-sized 64-page special issue marking the anniversary of the team’s first appearance and was plotted by Shooter, scripted by a returning Stan Lee, and featuring not one, but seven, artists. Marvel’s in-house promotional magazine, Marvel Age, devoted issues 37 through 48 to carrying the anniversary cover corner logo; while inside, certain issues would provide histories of Marvel for certain years [e.g. issue #44 was 1972 and issue #47 was 1973].

Later in Marvel Age #41 (Aug. 1986) readers saw the return of Stan’s Soapbox. Lee explains to readers in his trademark tongue-in-cheek style that “thousands of years ago” he was “Editor-in-Chief; sort of like a pre-historic Jim Shooter.” The effect is to teach readers who is significant in Marvel’s history and to build a bridge between that past and present through the occupational role of Editor-in-Chief. In the same issue, one could also read a bio of Stan titled “The Stan Lee Story.” In it, future comics writer Kurt Busiek says, “Well, in a very real way, the Stan Lee story is the story of Marvel Comics” and that “In fact, the whole Marvel Universe dates its origin from the first issue of THE FANTASTIC FOUR.”
The total effect of *Marvel Age* #41 is to add multiple layers of Lee’s presence as a persistent figurehead. First is one of Lee’s primary tools for engagement with fans back in the 1960s, his *Stan’s Soapbox* column. The second is the occupational role of EIC that links both Lee to Shooter but also Lee to authority. The last layer is Busiek’s story that links Lee’s life with the life of the Marvel Universe. Lee is living, active, and supposedly still engaged to some degree with the work. As such, the history is still alive, is important, and is the fan’s responsibility to learn in order to increase the value of their consumption and status as a fan.

Stan Lee, who by this time was relocated to Los Angeles to guide and consult on Marvel’s animation and live action television and film efforts, was mobilized to appear with Jim Shooter at a few larger comic-cons. Lee, in his cover-dated February 1987 *Stan’s Soapbox* column, explains these included Chicago Comic-Con, Atlanta Fantasy Fair, and San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) to discuss “the growth and glory of Marvel’s first twenty-five years.” In a way, 1986 was the last, most concentrated, and effective version of utilizing Lee as a living legend and figurehead until Disney’s use of him years later in the MCU.

Yet, somewhat oddly, the 1986 SDCC program cover page was a Marvel pin-up of popular characters drawn by John Romita in their contemporary, not classic, costumes, while his son John Romita Jr. provided the program’s back cover with a full-page ad for Marvel Comics’ New Universe. Separately, both Lee and Jack Kirby were in attendance at SDCC that year. In addition to Lee and Shooter, Marvel also had fan-favorites and fans-turned-professionals Tom DeFalco, Archie Goodwin, John Romita, Bill Sienkiewicz, and Peter David, among others, participate in
the anniversary promotions during these conventions. Merchandise included posters, buttons, badges, and the second *Marvel Age* Annual. Some of the outreach beyond hardcore fans included a fifteen-minute package on ABC’s weekly news program *20/20* on July 24, 1986 about the anniversary and company’s history.33

One of the more disappointing elements for fans of Marvel’s 25th Anniversary was the battle between Marvel Universe co-founder (plotter, artist, and designer) Jack Kirby and MCG over ownership of Kirby’s original artwork. It is a delicate balance for a company to monetize its back catalog through historicization direct-market projects that lionize creators such as Kirby,34 while simultaneously, presenting written agreements to Kirby to coerce him from attempting to assert any legal rights to the characters he created as a work-for-hire artist. It required Marvel to play the public relations game. Jim Shooter became the tough face of Marvel’s battles with Jack Kirby. Jim Shooter addressed this in part in a Bullpen Bulletins column expressing he and Stan Lee’s appreciation to ABC for their segment on their program *20/20* but also their disappointment towards the producers’ decision to cut every mention Shooter and Lee made regarding the contributions of both Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko. Beyond its obvious public relations functions, such columns promote the news coverage, hopefully placate the older fan community, and reaffirm to newer readers the importance of such an anniversary since a major TV network covered it.

This battle highlights the one-sidedness of such historicization efforts. Born of the “fly-by-night” origins of the comic book business, Kirby and other creators’ work-for-hire contracts ensured their creativity was compensated once but fed the companies’ bottom line for decades. The
narrative history reliant on, and replete with, artists’ now iconography is one they have no agency in framing. There can be no history of the Marvel Universe without Kirby, yet since he was never quite a “company man” the way lifer Lee was, Kirby’s participation is limited. Yes, fans did, and can, push back against the official record and attempt to rectify it. We even saw this during Kirby’s 1986 battle to reclaim his artwork. Yet, while more accurate knowledge does circulate within fan communities and their publications, younger and newer consumers and fans may first learn the history through official sources rather than from older fan petty-producers. As such, this is one way the power of Marvel attempting to control and apply their own history is important to understand.

Back in 1986, the effective use of the anniversary resulted in newer fans, drawn-in by the perceived authority and significance of the commemoration, hoping to carry on and learn the intricacies of the universe’s rich history. By also simultaneously launching Shooter’s “New Universe,” regardless of whether it was a failure, nonetheless in contrast, reaffirmed the specialness of the original 1960s Marvel Universe, thus increasing its value through significant historical framing.

The New Universe concept was an imprint of the Marvel Comics line featuring a separate set of characters divorced from the main Marvel Universe continuity. These characters inhabited more of a real world and certain powers and fantastical elements were toned down. Also narrative time was meant to mirror real-time so as monthly issues were released, a month in narrative time would also have passed. Not surprisingly, Marvel’s promotional magazine *Marvel Age* helped to promote both Marvel’s history and the new imprint. For example, issue #49 had red and black
boxes indicating to readers which titles on the release schedule were a part of the New Universe. Yet, #49 also summarizes what was happening in the narrative of Marvel comics back in 1974. As is the way of comic book publishing, issue #49 has a cover date of April 1987 yet was actually released closer to the start of 1987. As such, the issue’s back cover calendar is January 1987 and marks Thursday, Jan. 1, 1987 as “Happy New Universe Day!” While there isn’t room in this present article to adequately cover the subject matter, suffice it to say, there is great power in teaching a history when one also creates and controls the calendar.

When interviewed in 1986 for *Speakeasy* magazine, then Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter, actually denied any sort of strategic plan involving *Handbook, Marvel Age, Saga*, the anniversary, or the New Universe in regard to selling Marvel’s history. The magazine interviewer asks directly, “At present there seems to be a lot of thought going into presenting a more defined and coherent picture of the Marvel Universe. Is that part of the lead-in to the twenty-fifth anniversary?” Shooter responded “Those things don’t come about through any master plan. [Handbook of the Marvel Universe] wasn’t done to codify the universe.” Shooter continues by discussing *Marvel Saga*, noting as a kid he “would have given my left arm” for such a book, and “It just happened to come at a time of our twenty-fifth anniversary, so it looks like it was designed that way.”

This statement lines up with Shooter’s perspective and position. He began as a child-prodigy comics writer and became Marvel’s Editor-in-Chief during a time of great success. There was no strategic plan from upper-management beyond increasing sales numbers and generating new licensing deals. Nor did Shooter specifically order a *Handbook* or *Saga* with the 25th in mind. Yet, feeling at the time he was a smart middle-manager who could successfully negotiate and
balance both the creative and upper-management sides, Shooter never quite reveals the entire truth during this interview. Which, in paraphrase, would convey a meaning similar to, “As a company we’re searching for profit and the anniversary and reference products such as the *Handbook*, help to achieve these goals more efficiently by officially organizing the narrative universe and its history, which itself is a desirable product to our older niche culturist and enthusiast fans.” So, while Marvel’s historicization efforts may have begun as pure fans-turned-professionals’ desire to educate and organize the narrative universe they loved so well, MCG’s Shooter quickly understood how profitable such historical efforts could be due to an aging direct-market fan base and a new generation of readers eager to learn about such an expansive, deep, and engaging set of characters both within and beyond the pages.

**Conclusion**

In the latter part of the anniversary year, on November 21, 1986, *The Los Angeles Times* reported that Cadence (corporate parent to MCG) was selling their Marvel Entertainment Group to New World Pictures (1970-1997) for an estimated $40-$50 million.³⁶ It was the end of an era for a few reasons. First, Cadence had owned Marvel since 1968. Second, Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter was let go in April 1987. Third, the transition from a comic book publishing business to a licensing business (begun by Jim Galton) was furthered cemented by the New World purchase.

But the era that really ended was a Marvel that harnessed the passion of fans-turned-professionals to codify their history and begin to teach that history through officially sanctioned reference materials. These efforts had an audience in other older cultists, enthusiasts, and petty producers who were now using their disposable income to purchase these materials in the direct
market. Though, not all fans were appreciative of Marvel’s efforts. Mini-comics creator Matt Feazell (*Cynicalman*) in a September 1983 fan letter published in the *Comics Journal*, critiqued Marvel’s choice to engage in “the traditional function of fanzines: the cataloguing and discussion of their own work.”

Yet, by this paper’s argument, more importantly, these materials did matter and were appreciated by younger, newer consumers and fans who were drawn in by the authority of history itself, the officialness of it all, and specialness of the extra-diegetic universe Lee created and consistently promoted in the 1960s and fans-turned-professionals like Gruenwald realized in the early 1980s. Marvel showed how a popular culture company could effectively use a figurehead (Lee) to promote, then actively curate and control (*Handbook, Marvel Age*), and then apply their chosen history (*Saga*, the 25th Anniversary, and the New Universe) to engage new fans by increasing the value of their older product through the process of historicization.

**Notes**

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid. 108.
9 Schuller, *Gru*, 38.
10 Ibid. 47.
11 Jozwiak, *Template*, 313.
14 Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 167.
16 Riesman, *True Believer*, 78.
17 Ibid. 65.
18 Ibid. 85.
19 Ibid. 192, 198.
22 Kalish and David, *What is*, 1.
23 Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 252.
24 D. Fingeroth, email message to author, August 21, 2017.
25 *Variety*, *Teenage Mutant*, 81.
26 Johnson, *Sparks In*, 21.
27 Ibid. 23.
33 Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 293.
34 In *Marvel Age* #37 Fred Hembeck illustrated Kirby’s character contributions (pp. 16-17) beginning with the description “The one artist whose contributions helped define the scope and grandeur of this thing called the Marvel Universe more than any other.”
35 Sacks, *Jim Shooter*, 84.
36 Keppel, *Cadence*, para. 10.

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Teenage mutant ninja turtles just one of wonders wowing country’s top comics confab. (1986, Sept. 17). *Variety, 324*(8), 81, 100.

