

This is a story about innovation.

As much as readers might like to romanticize the comic book business, it's still just that: a business. Art Spiegelman, the Pulitzer prize-winning cartoonist behind *Maus*, called comics "the bastard offspring of art and commerce." And money (measured in part by sales) is still one of the most critical components in every single one of those bagged and boarded issues you've lovingly stored in your closet—if not to the talent involved, then certainly for their corporate masters in the corner offices.

And as with any business, innovation is everything. It's the key to success, and a single groundbreaking leap forward can shake up an industry, blaze new trails, and reverberate in the industry for years or even decades to come. It can literally change the world. Apple did it with the iPhone, George Lucas did it with *Star Wars*, and Taco Bell did it with its transcendent Doritos Locos Taco.

More often than not, the company with the best ideas is the one that comes out on top.

The superhero landscape today is really a product of two massive innovations: one by DC some eighty years ago and another by Marvel almost sixty. Both breakthroughs were so fresh, so game changing that the comics industry—and, ultimately, Robert Downey Jr.'s career—would never be the same again.

These innovations helped each publisher cement its identity and, at the time, gain a crucial edge on the competition. The ripples from both leaps still define the comics industry.

As difficult as it might be to imagine now, with Marvel's complete and utter stranglehold on global pop culture through its movie studio, the publisher was once a superhero also-ran.

For much of the twentieth century it was DC, then known as National, that was the undisputed leader in the spandex game, having created the genre with the 1938 publication of Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel's Superman strip. For a long time DC had the most money, the best talent, and comfortable offices inside a Midtown Manhattan skyscraper clad in gold. Its titles sold millions of copies every year, and its iconic characters were familiar to nearly everyone in America.

Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman—DC had them all. It was the industry's blue chip, the Ford to everyone else's Packard.

In the late fifties Marvel Comics was just a ragged little shop with basically one employee. Its single-room office was down the hall from a porno mag. It had been founded as Timely in the 1930s and, in an underwhelming vote of confidence regarding its brand strength, had operated under a few different names in the decades to follow.

During the 1950s and early 1960s its output consisted mostly of second-tier titles, including various war, monster, and Western anthologies as well as long-forgotten romance books, including *My Girl Pearl*.

It was being run by a middle-aged, wannabe novelist who had toiled in the comic business since he was seventeen, churning out hundreds of stories, but had somehow failed to distinguish himself. Burnt out and sensing the futility of his career, he finally resolved to do something he should have done years earlier had he any hope of earning a decent wage and a modicum of self-respect: turn off the lights, close his office door behind him, and walk away from the comics business for good. But like an aging detective in a bad cop movie, he couldn't retire until he gave it one last shot.

That wannabe novelist was Stan Lee, and that final shot was his and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* #1.

With its publication in August 1961 and the subsequent release of a wave of equally revolutionary books, upstart Marvel changed the superhero business forever and quickly established itself as the edgier, hipper alternative to stodgy old DC.

DC was blindsided by the challenge, and ever since the publisher has been playing catch-up, trying to capture some of Marvel's cool and struggling to make its fleet of aged characters relevant to contemporary readers. Sometimes it has succeeded. Other times it has stumbled.

For much of DC's life larger corporations have owned the publisher, and as such the bureaucracy, sluggishness, and other problems that stereotypically go hand in hand with corporate life have hampered it. Corporations rarely break ground. They rarely push boundaries or spark revolutions, especially when it comes to creative pursuits.

And nothing better exemplifies DC's corporate cluelessness—its bumbling pursuit of Marvel—than what happened in the mid-1960s.

By the middle of the decade DC was taking serious fire as Marvel's tiny stable of titles was showing increasing success month after month. As improbable as it seemed at the time, Marvel was gaining on mighty DC. You can imagine the executives' mouths hanging open in wonderment at the idea of this impertinent little company daring to siphon off some of its sales.

The DC brass certainly had cause for concern. Marvel still didn't come close to outselling its rival in terms of total units, but its books did have a better sell-through percentage—meaning it had a lower percentage of the number of copies that were returned to the publisher, unsold from store racks. Any title that suffered more than a 50 percent return rate was in trouble. Readers were snatching up about 70 percent of the Marvel books, while DC was hovering closer to the 50 percent break-even mark.

Up on the tenth floor of DC's Lexington Avenue headquarters—a bland, corporate spread with little adornment to remind people this was a company churning out fun, four-color superhero books—the suits were agitated. Something had to be done.

So DC did what any big company does when facing declining sales and potential ruin: it called a meeting.

At this and a series of subsequent sit-downs, Vice President Irwin Donenfeld, Editorial Director Carmine Infantino, and Superman Editor Mort Weisinger, along with a baffled staff, gathered to try to figure out the secret to Marvel's success. What did Marvel have that DC didn't? they wondered. How could this nothing publisher possibly be within sniffing distance of DC?

But they were worried.

"I recall they were at a loss to understand why they were trailing in sales," says John Romita Sr., then an artist on DC's romance titles. "We were sure DC was the benchmark of comics quality."

One of the editors grabbed a stack of Marvel's recent output, including the *Fantastic Four* and *The Avengers*, and the books were spread across a conference room table or their covers were tacked on a board alongside DC's offerings. The gathered forces studied the product and tentatively took stabs at ideas.

“At DC there was a tendency sometimes to resist learning from the competition because it was the competition,” says Mark Evanier, a screenwriter and former DC freelancer. “And when they did learn, they frankly learned the wrong things.”

One strong theory to explain Marvel’s popularity was that it must have something to do with the covers. The hypothesis certainly jibed with Donenfeld’s belief that “good, intriguing covers were about all that mattered” in the comic book business.

Perhaps it had something to do with how much red Marvel was using, someone offered. Could the kids be attracted to red?

Another staffer noticed how many word balloons were stuffed on the front of Marvel mags. Maybe that was what readers were responding to?

“They agreed that the covers were ‘garish,’ with trashy logos and word balloons,” Romita Sr. says.

Infantino, who still swore that Marvel would be out of business in a few months, just grumbled.

Finally the books were opened and the interior art quickly analyzed. The figures were not particularly handsome; the faces looked grotesque. And who’s this strange-looking being over here? And what’s with this bizarre machine?

Understandably, Marvel’s interiors repelled the brass. The art was blockier and more experimental than at DC, where the books were drawn in a safe, polished house style. DC’s editors considered Marvel’s art, especially that of Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and Dick Ayers, to be raw and child-like. And perhaps therein lay its appeal.

“They thought maybe the readers liked bad art because it’s crude, like a kid would draw,” says Jim Shooter, Marvel’s former editor-in-chief who worked at DC in the 1960s. “‘Maybe we should tell the artists to draw worse.’ That’s a quote. I heard that.”

Ultimately DC brainstormed a lot of ideas in those meetings, and the publisher tested a few half-baked modifications, including altering the coloring style in certain titles or changing panel shapes in a desperate attempt to copy Marvel.

None of it worked.

“They found all these fatuous, self-deceiving explanations,” says Roy Thomas, a writer and editor who briefly worked at DC in 1965 before jumping to Marvel.

What Infantino, Donenfeld, and the others missed in that conference room back in the 1960s was that Marvel was beating them for reasons that had nothing to do with the amount of red or the number of word balloons on its covers. It had nothing to do with coloring or panel shapes either.

According to Stan Lee, the company’s surge boiled down to one simple thing: “We were smarter than they were,” he says.

Marvel’s on-the-street intelligence was certainly better. Lee had gotten wind of the DC strategy meetings and the changes that came out of them, and he took great glee in countering his rival, move for move. When DC decided to load up its covers with more word balloons in an attempt to emulate

Marvel, Lee responded by making his covers less wordy. When DC started splashing red on its covers, Lee stopped altogether.

“It didn’t make any difference in the sales,” Lee said in 2000. “It must have driven them crazy. We played this little game for months.... They never caught on.”

Compare, for example, *Fantastic Four* #15, cover date June 1963, to issues of the series that came a few years later. The front of #15 is crowded with eighty-three words, including five verbose speech bubbles as well as the classic header, “The world’s greatest comic magazine.” By the mid-1960s the magazine’s covers had become more poster-like, with a single, stirring image and limited text. “Lo, there shall be an ending!” proclaims #43 (October 1965) over a Kirby illustration of the Four lying defeated in their destroyed headquarters.

Meanwhile, over at DC, a book such as *Wonder Woman* #159, released in late 1965, is chockablock full of captions in a misguided attempt to copy the earlier Marvel style. The illustration of the heroine occupies a small sliver on the cover’s left side, and the rest of the magazine’s front is overrun with exclamation mark–filled text boxes and booming headlines such as, “Now! At last! For the first time since the Golden Age of comics!”

As Lee had figured out, due in part to the hundreds of fan letters flooding into the company’s headquarters, covers had little to do with Marvel’s success. The real draw was that the comic book company was offering a product unlike anything else on the stands. Not that those in charge at DC would ever know it. The execs failed to do the single-most important thing you’re supposed to do with a comic book.

“The older guys wouldn’t lower themselves to read the competition,” says former DC production manager Bob Rozakis, who joined the company in 1973. Donenfeld, National’s then head and the son of its cofounder, once claimed the only comic he read was *Sugar and Spike*, a humorous, kiddie book about cartoon toddlers.

But Rozakis and so many other young people across America were devouring Marvel comics every month, loving the new take on superheroes Lee and his artists delivered.

The kids were certainly plugged in, but the execs above them were out of touch. Most were born around the time zeppelin travel was in vogue, and you might toss around the word *gentlemen* to describe them. They dressed conservatively and thought conservatively.

“[DC publisher] Carmine Infantino used to refer to us as ‘the kids,’ but we, ‘the kids,’ were actually reading the Marvel books, and we knew there was a whole different idea, a different feel to the books,” Rozakis says. “But Carmine was like, ‘Well, we don’t need to listen to the kids.’ He thought we were just fanboys who liked comic books and were only there so we could get them for free.”

“I was in several meetings with Mort [Weisinger] and a few people,” Shooter says. “They were holding up the Marvel comics and ridiculing them. There was an issue of *X-Men* with a picture of [winged hero] Angel—a full-page shot—and the caption was all about the glory of flying. And their attitude was, ‘What’s the big deal?’ Superman flies all the time.’ I’m like, ‘Don’t you get it? He flies all the time, and no one gives a damn.’ One guy held up a *Spider-Man* and said, ‘They’ve got two pages of Peter Parker talking to his aunt. The kids are going to be bored out of their minds.’ Nope.”

“Nope” is right.

Marvel’s new approach to storytelling changed not only the comic book business but also the way superheroes were handled in general—an approach that still provides the template today that has made superheroes a multibillion, multimedia cash cow.

Marvel’s ascendancy also touched off a battle with DC that has raged for decades. For more than a half century Marvel and DC have faced off across newsstands and spinner racks, rivals in the billion-dollar superhero business. The two companies basically own North American comic-book publishing and have spent the last fifty years clawing for market share and trying to kneecap each other in ways both above board and below. At stake is not just sales but cultural relevancy and the hearts of millions of fans.

The war has at times gotten ugly, playing out in the pages of the magazines, with editors trading insults in the letters columns and parodying—or blatantly borrowing—the other company’s characters. Battles have also been fought in the real world, as DC and Marvel have tried to outfox each other with price wars and creative marketing schemes.

And as in any war, you better pick a side. Comic readers are often fiercely loyal to one team, which naturally sets them in opposition to the other. Inside dusty comic stores, at conventions, and in online forums, debates have been raging for decades about the superiority of each publisher.

The debate is hardly trivial. Quite possibly the most revealing question you can ask a comic book fan is, “Marvel or DC?” The answer is as telling, as integral to his personality as which Beatle he prefers or his favorite flavor of ice cream. The two companies were shaped by different eras, have different publishing philosophies, and stand for two completely different worldviews.

DC was born in the thirties, Marvel’s major heroes not until some twenty-five years later.

If DC represented Eisenhower’s America, Marvel was like John F. Kennedy’s. The publisher was younger, cooler, and possibly sleeping with your girlfriend. The modern-day Marvel that arrived in 1961 quickly shook up the comics industry in a way that mirrored the dramatic cultural and political upheavals the entire country was experiencing.

Marvel represented change. It was counterculture, the scruffy underdog to DC’s establishment. Its covers announced adventures for “The New Breed of Comic Reader.”

“I think the Marvels are great for a very conceited reason,” an Ohio University student named Barry Jenkins wrote in a swinging 1966 *Esquire* article. “A person has to have intelligence to read them. I feel that comic book reading goes through three stages. First, the actual comic figures of talking dogs, pigs and ducks. Then, as a person gets older, he moves up to the world of ‘real’ people. (As exemplified by [DC].) Finally, if he has the capacity [*sic*], he moves into the realm [*sic*] of Marvels.”

Even forgiving Barry’s not-quite-college-level spelling, he was onto something. Marvel books were smarter and different for the time—just as Stan Lee had claimed.

Beginning with the Fantastic Four and then continuing with the Hulk, Spider-Man, the X-Men, Iron Man, and many more, writer-editor Lee and his talented cocreators, including Kirby and Steve Ditko, set out to change the way superhero stories were told. And at the time that meant doing them differently from the gold standard of capes, DC.

The storytelling approach proved popular with readers, including educated, college-age ones, a demographic that was not big comic buyers at the time. It wasn't long before Marvel did what once seemed unthinkable: it overtook mighty DC in sales. The poles in the comics world reversed, and suddenly the former underdog became the top dog. Marvel never looked back.

Now in the twenty-first century DC is also trailing Marvel in the multibillion-dollar movie world. The company is deploying a similar strategy to the one that has made Marvel so dominant at the multiplex, unleashing a long string of films featuring solo characters as well as team-ups like *The Justice League*.

DC has certainly published its share of great individual projects over the years. *Sandman*, *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Saga of the Swamp Thing* all expanded the medium's boundaries and were among the most influential graphic novels ever to see print. But as a brand DC has often lagged behind Marvel, not just in market share but also in intangible measures, such as buzz and relevance. Though it's hardly from a lack of trying. Could DC's multimedia strategy, which includes a string of successful TV series as well as the company's ambitious movie slate, finally put the company back on top?

This is the story of the fifty-year battle between the two companies—some of it driven by DC's desire to copy Marvel, some of it driven by Marvel's desire to copy DC, and some of it—the most fun stuff, let's be honest—driven by pure gamesmanship and spite. Loosen your mask, drop your cape at the dry cleaners, and let's begin.