Comics Universes as Fiction Networks

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Today I'd like to talk about persistent, interconnected, large-scale, corporate fiction systems. That's, without a doubt, a complex and abstract term, so let me ground it: *Star Wars*, a fiction over 25 years old and instantiated in multiple media, is such a system. *EverQuest*, a massively multiplayer game instantiated on shards and clients around the world, is another. These forms are significantly different from one another, but, without being too totalizing, we can identify some common characteristics: both are constituted by artifacts in aggregate, but both exceed or subsume the linear narratives or artifacts that constitute them. Both, taken at a macroscopic level, are of a shape and scale – both material and diegetic – that it is difficult to describe their boundaries on either level. Both are interacted with by markedly coherent affinity groups, fans who engage actively with the fictional spaces and, increasingly, play a participatory role in their ongoing unfolding, not in a small part because of Internet technologies that, in many cases, are necessary for the fiction to even exist. Both are produced by groups and controlled as intellectual property by private organizations but, in their dispersal and open-endedness, must negotiate the ongoing pressures of consumer response in the market, response which, thanks to Internet technologies of communication, are increasingly amplified, directed, and influential. Both reflect all these characteristics, not just on the level of paratextual communication or cultural context but *in the sphere of the fiction itself.*

I use the term *fiction network* to describe this aspect, these behaviors and characteristics shared by these diverse forms, and I posit that two of the most mature and informative examples of a fiction network are the "universes" of the major mainstream comics producers in North America: DC Comics, Inc, a Time Warner Company, and Marvel Enterprises, Inc. Over the course of decades, the serials DC and Marvel have published have become their own ecologies, composed of complex intertexts, enabled by the device of *crossover,* and received by a increasingly coherent affinity group[1]. In these universes, both the complex structure of the unfolding fiction and the ongoing process of fiction-making are simultaneously negotiated. These negotiations sometimes result in explicit discontinuities, moments where the fiction is disrupted by the inevitable gaps inherent in distributed fiction-making. In response to this inevitability, there is the ongoing practice of *continuity,* constructive retrospection that determines how the corpus of published work represents a coherent and logical fictional world. The decisions generated from this practice inform the continuing process of expanding, defining, and revising the persistent universe. Because the core characteristics of these popular fiction networks – static, marketable brands, coupled with dynamic aggregation of narrative – are fundamentally irreconcilable, this practice of continuity is always contingent, always imperfect, always subject to further management and development.

In the case of the DC Universe, crossover as an intertextual device debuted in the late 1940's, in *All-Star Comics* #3, when the Justice Society of America was created to

[1] Varnedoe locates this increasing coherence in the advent of the comic book (Varnedoe and Gopnik), while Pustz locates a further reduction and coalescence in the emergence of the direct market. (Pustz)

maximize reader interest in the stable of National Periodical characters. Over time, the "DC Universe" became an emergent structure; the initial parameters of National Periodical Publications – parallel and ongoing serial adventures, produced by a variety of writers and artists for hire – resulted in new and unpredicted behaviors, specifically intertextual connectivity and a slowly encroaching sense of narrative history and causality.

This history, located perhaps more in the minds of readers than in the still largely episodic stories of the 40s and 50s, still had an operative presence within the text, yet defied conventional narrative seriality. In 1956, DC re-presented familiar, older brands as new characters in what is now considered the beginning of the "Silver Age": the first of these redefined characters was Barry Allen, a.k.a. the Flash. Though Barry Allen's origin is largely standard fare, the presentation of his story establishes that his "origin" is not only the beginning of a new narrative but a continuation of the history of the fiction network, both as a narrative and as a history of textual production and reception.

On page 2, panel 6 of "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt," we are introduced to Barry Allen as a pair of hands reading a comic book: as an old copy of Flash Comics (an actual comic book published in the 1940s by National Periodical, DC's corporate antecedent) takes up the foreground, we read a word balloon (originating off-panel) saying, "What a character Flash was—battling crime and injustice everywhere! And what a unique weapon he had against the arsenal of crime! Speed! Supersonic speed! Undreamed-of speed!" (Kanigher, Infantino and Kubert 2). The next panel pans out, and the top of the *Flash Comics* issue shares space with Barry Allen, who says: "I wonder what it would really be like—to be the fastest man on earth? Well... I'll never

know—The Flash was just a character some writer dreamed up!" (Kanigher, Infantino and Kubert 2). The story of the Silver Age Flash is, then, at its outset a dialogue between a narrative space – the fictional world of Barry Allen – and a text, *Flash Comics*, which occurs in both that space and in the reader's reality: an emblem of the universe not as a simple continuing narrative but a serial dialogue involving both things represented and their representations. The reader is encouraged to understand, at once, both the sphere of fiction and the sphere of fiction-making that contains it, and to accommodate a degree of porosity between the two spheres. From this point, it takes all of three panels to begin breaking through the boundary separating the sphere of Barry Allen's narrative and the sphere of the network; Barry Allen is promptly transformed, and "The Flash" ascends from the status of "a character some writer dreamed up" to that of protagonist.

The ongoing story of the Flash, then, is established from the onset as a site of something like *ontological fusion* as Thomas Pavel describes it, as a liminal point between worlds of different truth-value; it presents an oscillation between the story and the informative materiality of the story (Pavel). Barry Allen not only continues the legacy of the Flash but the legacy of *Flash comic books*. This is never only the story of a superhero speedster but always also a meta-story of comic books over time, and the position of the Flash within the spheres of story and meta-story is meant to be understood by the reader as somewhat fluid. "Mystery" encourages a productive ambiguity between the world represented and the process of representing it: it not only reminds the reader of the materiality of the fiction network – its persistent openness, its potential multilinearity – but implies that Barry Allen himself – a comic book superhero who

himself reads comics, who bursts from the printed comics page to a representational sphere above it – somehow has his own degree of readerly agency.

This agency soon allowed new levels of connection; in Gardner Fox's story "Flash of Two Worlds" published in September 1961, Barry Allen actually meets the "character some writer dreamed up," as Barry Allen "crosses over" into the world of Jay Garrick, the first Flash (Fox et al.). Like "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt," "Flash of Two Worlds" establishes distinct spheres of meaning in the fiction network – a space of the present narrative, and a space of material, textual representations within it – and then blurs the boundaries within those spheres. By establishing that DC's 1940's world of heroes, perceived by both Barry Allen and us as text, is to Barry actually another dimension, an equally viable reality separated by cosmic frequency which would come to be known as "Earth-2," the DC Universe connects years of history to the network; the discontinuous serial history of DC Comics, fractured in order to successfully revivify the product line, is reunified by fantastic sleight-of-hand. Earth-2 shows that, in comics, nothing need necessarily remain "just text." Instead of relating to past superheroes through nostalgia or allusion, with a clear hierarchy of representation and reference, the superhero comic book creates a space where everything can be represented in simultaneity. It celebrates the systemic and dialogic possibilities inherent in a fantastic perspective on space and time.

Though the fantastic as a mode of fiction is often associated with childishness or crude aesthetics, it serves particularly useful textual functions in fiction networks. Realism limits narrative opportunities to a set circumscribed by the laws of physics; realism presupposes a linearity and regularity of space and time, and, beyond this, a continuity or rationality of character and context, a relative unity of topical genre, a

limited if detailed sphere of inquiry. By freeing itself from realism – or, more accurately, by deprioritizing it and situating it as one of many topical genres that can be mobilized – comics universes and other fiction networks can mitigate problems of space and time inevitable in a narrative system characterized by both consistent branded narremes and widespread, multichannel polyvocality. Most importantly to the DC Universe, a fiction network unconstrained by realism allows a realm of intertextual play disallowed by a representation of time and space as linear. A fiction network that indulges in the fantastic allows the opportunity for ongoing dialogue with itself, with its own history. "Infinite Earths" and time-travel as motifs allow writers, potentially, to place any two moments of the network's corpus into juxtaposition.

The DC Universe made the most of these principles, using "multiple earths" to accommodate everything from story experiments to intellectual property acquisitions: by the mid-1980's. there were "on the order of two dozen Earths… discovered or described" within the structure of the DC Universe, or "multiverse" as it was commonly described. Barry Allen and Jay Garrick were not the only heroes to discover one another as doppelgangers; every hero, including the most prominent – Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman – had more than one alternate iteration. It's easy to see how DC Comics in the 1980s, as a subsidiary of Warner Communications, could read this complexity as an obstacle to their business goals; multiple earths, laden with history, complicated the primary goal Eileen Meehan describes in her study, the streamlining of Batman as grim avenger, and complicated the bringing in of new and older readers, who were presumably used to less complexity, more linear fictional worlds, and, presumably, the maturity of novelistic time and causality (Meehan). DC therefore chose to

> …restructure it (the DC Universe) around a new organizing principle, specifically, the "adult ethos" Brooker mentions…, the very significant demographic shift that made the target audience of the comic book companies eighteen to twenty-four-year-old college-educated males. (Klock 21)

In order to actuate this change in the DC Universe, to make it univocal and therefore more marketable, DC Comics, Inc. launched a 12-issue, one-year serial event that would "crossover" into nearly all the serials published by the company at the time: the *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* which, according to its writer, Marv Wolfman, "existed in its pure form only to bring DC back to an easy-to-read beginning before endless continuity took over" (Wolfman et al. 6)

Crisis on Infinite Earths is a death ritual performed within the space of the fiction network. It is, remarkably enough, the most fully-realized example (as of that time) of the multivocal potential of the comics universe as a fiction network, crossing over more characters and more worlds than ever before, and with more consequence. Cowboys and space police, ancient magicians and World War 2 battalions, warriors of post-apocalyptic dystopias and talking chimpanzees all appear, and, usually, they meet and engage in dialogue with one another. This kitchen-sink mixing of genres sounds more bizarre than dramatically compelling in description, and, particularly because of its deadpan presentation, it is also so in execution. However, what *Crisis* lacks in drama it supplements in spectacle and by example: it is not literary per se, but it is immensely valuable as a map of what the DC Universe had become, and what potential it held. Like Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards*, it is an illustration of principles taken to a provocative conclusion; like the *Cent Mille Milliards*, its value lies as much in the questions it provokes as in the truth it presents. In this full-bore juxtaposition, this represented exposure of all points in the universe's multipath history, *Crisis* invites the

reader to think globally about the DC Universe as a system. Dozens of panels in *Crisis* depict not heroes or combat but upon globes; frequently, the heroes stand above multiple interconnected Earths, moons, and universes, contemplating their fate. The point of focus is on the network as a whole, on the array of global versions and their interactions. This is, indeed, the subject of the first page of the series: multiple iterations of earth and its moon, juxtaposed with the caption "A multiverse of worlds vibrating and replicating… and a multiverse that should have been one, became many." At the same time as the narrative summarizes this multivocal system, however, it erases that multivocality by fiat; the second page of *Crisis* shows an unstoppable force destroying a universe and an Earth. This force is an encroaching whiteness, a "white energy that looked a lot like the blank page taking over" (Klock 21). This white energy is not only presented to us on an impersonal, cosmic level; we are shown cities, crowds of panicking people, children being erased. As the series progresses, more and more universes are exposed to this erasure, including universes created on the spot only for the sake of erasure. By the end of *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* major characters have been killed, and others had been disavowed altogether, presented as never having existed. Though it was intended to be an entertaining and organic evolution of the system into something simpler, in execution *Crisis* becomes a grand tragedy of the system, a work that exercises the potential of the network as a massive intertextual sphere even as it methodically shuts (or attempts to shut) that potential down. It becomes, as Grant Morrison calls it in his *Animal Man*, "the ending of time and space. The death of history" (Morrison et al., Animal Man: Deus Ex Machina 23).

However, Grant Morrison's *Animal Man*, begun only a few years after *Crisis* ended, forces a critical revisiting of this grand tragedy, and the systemic truths it illuminated. In *Animal Man* #5, "The Coyote Gospel," Animal Man himself is only a marginal figure: the story's protagonist, Crafty Coyote, is the Looney Tunes character Wile E. Coyote, given bloody physicality within the "realistic" milieu of the post-*Crisis* DC Universe. Cursed to walk desert highways until he can deliver a message, trapped in an unending cycle of "terrible death and resurrection" (Morrison et al., Animal Man 131), Crafty is hunted by a truck driver, beset by tragedy, who believes him to be the devil.

When Animal Man finds Crafty in the desert, Crafty gives him a scroll, which communicates the eponymous gospel. We are presented a "funny animals" pastiche of *Looney Tunes* thus:

> No one in those days could remember a time when the world was free from strife. A time when beast was not set against beast in an endless round of *violence* and *cruelty*. (Morrison et al., Animal Man 127)

Crafty alone finds the self-knowledge to question this strife; he goes into the presence of God and, in exchange for "peace among the beasts," is sent into "the hell above… the dark hell of the *second reality*" and given "new *flesh* and new *blood*" (Morrison et al., Animal Man 129). In the "dark hell of the second reality," Crafty dreams of overthrowing the tyrant god, and of establishing a better world for his fellow animals and himself. Unfortunately, when Crafty shares the scroll, Animal Man is unable to read it, and the mute Crafty is finally killed by his hunter's silver bullet. As the story closes, the scene pans out: Crafty lies on a desert crossroads in a pose of crucifixion, while fingers and a brush from outside the panel – the artist-God, represented in the frame

but exceeding it – colors in Crafty's last pool of blood (Morrison et al., Animal Man 130-33).

While *Crisis* functioned systemically, as an unaware if effective editing of the universe through melodrama, "The Coyote Gospel" begins Morrison's thinking about the DC Universe in not only global but *critical* terms. Matthew Pustz, citing Linda Hutcheon's claim that the postmodern novel "begins by creating and entering a world… and then contesting it" argues that this thinking is typical metafiction, possibly interesting to comics fans but fairly mundane to a better-read audience familiar with practices of the postmodern novel (Pustz 129). This, I would argue, shortchanges the history and particularities of the comics universe as a form and misrepresents Morrison's goals. In *Animal Man,* Morrison does not create and enter a world and then contest it: he *inherits* a world, which he enters and then investigates and contests.

This investigation involves new explorations of a system that had already displayed – from "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt" to *Crisis*, and at many points inbetween – a high degree of comfort with metatextual play, albeit with varying degrees of self-awareness. Consider the echoes between "The Coyote Gospel" and motifs previously read in this chapter: "The Coyote Gospel" is a productive mixing of awkwardly but productively juxtaposed topical genres – funny animals, Gospels and Scripture, and post-*Crisis*, "mature" and novelistic comics. Crafty is a traveler who, through fantastic fiat, crosses textual spheres to engage in direct dialogue with a character from another textual sphere. Crucially, this dialogue is mediated through *comics*; Crafty's gospel, a moment of *mise en abyme*, is presented with a different panel border and a simpler line more appropriate to funny animal comics, and generates meaning through hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin). Finally, Crafty's tragedy lies in his

story being disavowed by the master narrative; though he tries to communicate across spheres through the medium of comics, Animal Man can read only gibberish. It can be argued that Crafty's attempt at semiosis has been rendered illegible through the "realist" revisions in the network's continuity.

These are all, rather than simple appropriations of motifs in metafictional novels; self-aware reiterations of metafictional elements present in the network for decades. Superhero comics have generated, as Jim Collins posits,

> a hyperconsciousness… a far more elaborate form of self-reflexivity than that which characterizes the meta-fictional texts of the sixties because it shifts the focus away from the agonies of personal expression, stressing instead the intertextual dimensions of both textual production and textual circulation. (Collins 177)

I would argue that *Animal Man*'s "hyperconsciousness" is even more focused on the peculiarities of textual production and reception in the DC Universe specifically as a fiction network, as a persistent system with its own states of internal dialogue or feedback, its own mechanisms for representing its history and complexity, its own potentiality for intertextual crossover, and its own physics. *Animal Man* engages directly with the network in its complexity, accepting the strangeness and awkwardness of this space in order to be able to comment upon and affect it directly.

When Buddy, at the end of Morrison's run on the series, meets and converses with Grant Morrison himself, it is the history of the universe as a structure, and its allegiances to multiple understandings of narrative space and time, that allows Morrison to converse with Buddy in the first place. Metafiction in the novel is a *departure*, a knowing violation of phenomenological rules inherent to the genre. Metafiction in the comics universe, on the other hand, is an *emergent property of the system*. Morrison's

conversation is an innovative moment, a milestone in the progress of the comics universe, but it arises organically from behaviors and meanings accumulated by the universe from the 1940s to this issue's publication date of August 1990.

Fiction networks are spaces where the constant process of production is visible to the community, where notions of brand equity and unfolding serial narrative act as fundamentally irreconcilable foundational principles of the system, and where the story exposes its own structures and artificiality regularly in discontinuities, from mixing of genres in acts of bricolage to simple contradictions in the ongoing text. Metafictional complexity and porosity between multiple space of distinct truth-values, so provocative when first introduced to the novel as a form, is the name of the game here. The value in "fiction network" as a rubric, then comes in applying these ideas of fictional complexity to concepts of virtuality in persistent world games, or to concepts of canon in a system like *Star Wars*, and letting the comics universe, the old guard of fiction networking, highlight the possibilities, and potential pitfalls, of persisting fiction in new forms and technologies.

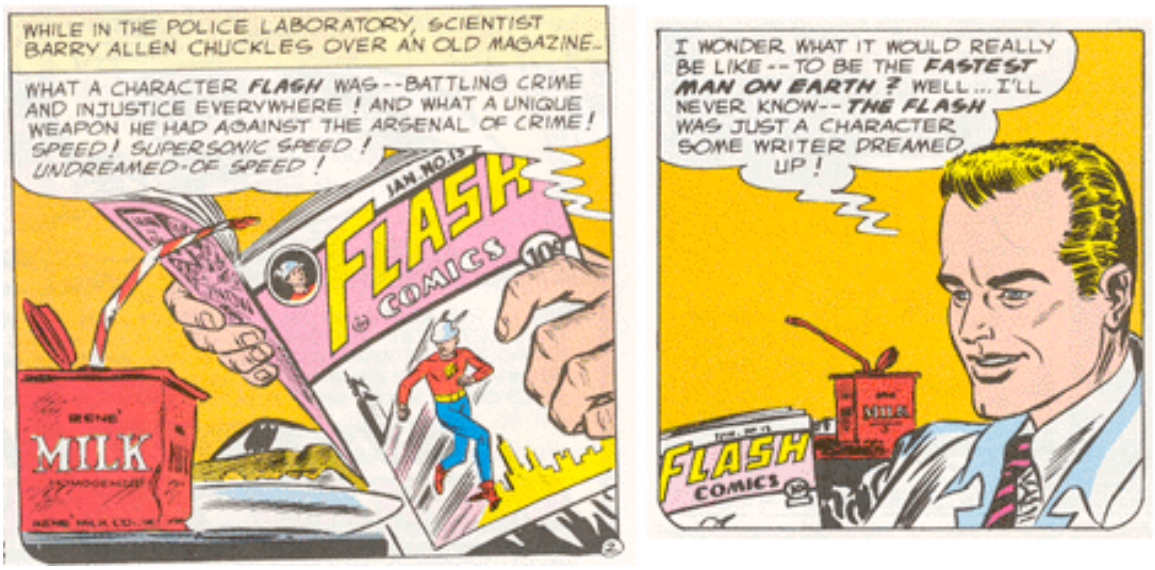

Figure 1: from "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt" (Kanigher, Infantino and Kubert)

Figure 2: Splash page, "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt" (Kanigher, Infantino and Kubert)

Figure 3. "The Coyote Gospel," page 17 (Morrison et al., Animal Man 126)

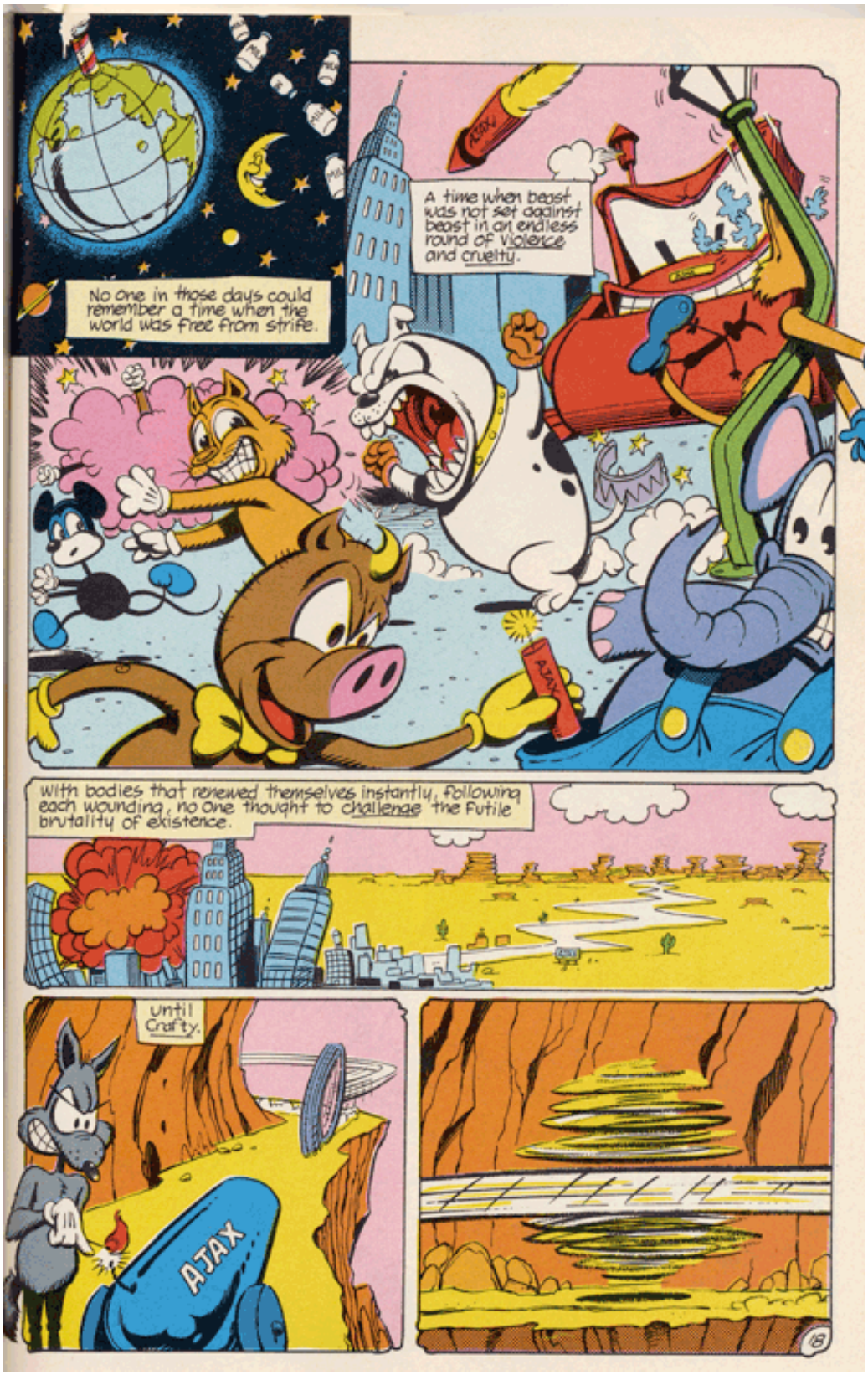

Figure 3. "The Coyote Gospel," page 18 (Morrison et al., Animal Man 127)

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