Reboots and Retroactive Continuity

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Introduction

In February 2016, DC Comics posted a cryptic image on Twitter. Consisting of a pair of blue theatre curtains with the word 'Rebirth' at the centre, the image sparked a series of debates across the Internet as fans recoiled at the possibility that DC would reboot their universe only five years after 'The New 52'. To assuage fan anxieties, DC executives Dan Didio and Geoff Johns posted a second image on social media that explained: 'It's not a reboot and it never was.'

Before its publication in June, Geoff Johns appeared on *The Late Show with Seth Meyers* to talk about *Rebirth*. The host asked Johns to "explain real quick what you're doing with the DC Comics Universe [DCU] because it does seem like these days there's often a sense of starting over. Is that what this is?" Johns responds:

> No. Thank god. DC Comics, like in the DNA, is all about hope and inspiration, so we needed to get back to that. So, the comic books, they're not rebooting…which is a dirty word, it's a swear word in the comic book world because that means everything that you ever read and bought doesn't exist anymore. But the re-launch is just approaching it with a new light and bringing every character that hasn't been around back.

Here, as with the second Twitter image, Johns is keen to reassure a vocal (and often hostile) readership that *Rebirth* is definitely not a reboot. At the same time, however, there is certainly an element of revision involved in "bringing back every character that hasn't been around back," even if this doesn't lead to a wholesale razing of the DCU (where "everything you ever read and bought doesn't exist anymore"). Instead, what DC Rebirth evokes is the technique of retroactive continuity (usually shortened to 'retcon'), that is to say, "when an author alters established facts in earlier works in order to make them consistent with later ones" (Wolf, 2014: 380).

To be sure, there are similarities between these concepts: historically, both originate from the medium of superhero comics; both are "makeover modalities" (Hills, 2014) that revise pre-established 'facts' about an imaginary world, but do so in different ways, to different degrees, and for different reasons. Given that there has been a broad and inexact use of these terms in popular and academic circles, it is necessary to historicise their origins and then move on from there, for, as Roberta Pearson rightly states, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to misunderstand the present" (2014: xii). I shall take each of the concepts in turn beginning with the most misunderstood of these 'strategies of regeneration' (Proctor, 2017), that of the reboot.

Crisis, Etymology and History

Etymologically, a reboot is a computer term that refers to the process of shutting down a computer system and then restarting it, often to "recover a system from failure" (Tucker, 2004: 644). As a metaphor for resetting and restarting narrative universes, however, the term was first used on the DC UseNet message board to describe the new adventures of *The Legion of Superheroes* (McKean, 1994). Effectively, this means that the pre-established continuity no longer existed and is deleted from the storyworld's data banks (at least in theory) and that new narrative information reprograms the imaginary world's memory and is disconnected from the earlier iteration ("everything you ever read and bought doesn't exist anymore"). A reboot aims to purge the system and begin again with a *tabula rasa* (a 'blank slate'), onto which a brave new world can be etched.

As a metaphor, rebooting is rather apposite in the context of new media and the practices of contemporary, networked culture. As Stenport and Traylor argue, this "encompasses the significance of computerized conceptualisations" (2015: 77) and is arguably the principal reason for the term's "remediation" (Bolter and Gruisin) in recent years across a range of platforms, such as film, television and so on. As with a computer reboot, then, the process is often used following a malfunction of some sort which "suggests not only a restarting, but also that something was no viable or had gone wrong enough to require such an extreme measure" (Wolf, 2014: 380).

Consider DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, a 12-issue maxi-series that (ostensibly) concluded with a system-wide reboot of the entire DCU. As an imaginary world that, at the time, had a complex continuity spanning almost half a century, a number of system errors had amassed. To begin with, such a convoluted and labyrinthine narrative history was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain and the system was riven with 'continuity snarls,' inconsistencies in the imaginary world's memory banks. Given the size of the storyworld that, alongside *bête noire* Marvel, "constitute the two largest and arguably longest-running examples of worldbuilding in any media" (Bainbridge, 2009: 64), it is hardly surprising that the continuity system started to buckle beneath the weight of hundreds and thousands of texts created over such a lengthy time span by an inordinate number of creative programmers (writers, artists, editors, etc.). The early DC Comics were "not conceived with an eye to internal coherence" and editors were "comparatively mild about relating one issue to another or one series to another" (Duncan and Smith, 2009: 191; see also Jenkins, 2009: 20) – comics were thought to be 'kid's stuff' with a limited life-span during the period -- yet, over time, writers started to make explicit links between issues to build a shared universe populated by a pantheon of characters, many of which will be recognizable to the contemporary audience (such as the DC Trinity of Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman,). After a decade or so of popularity and prominence, the end of World War II coincided with a widespread industrial slump, and many titles were cancelled.

In 1956, DC editor Julius Schwartz kicked off a superhero renaissance with a project that many believe saved the faltering industry (Carter, 2011). Beginning with *The Flash*, which "had died [in 1948] with the demise of other superhero titles" (Schwartz, 2000: 87), the editor devised a way to resurrect the character, not as a continuation, but by beginning again "from the ground up, keeping only the name and the superspeed powers" (Morrison, 2011: 82). In many ways, the new Flash was a 'proto-reboot' but, eventually, t the original incarnation was brought back into the imaginary world with the seminal storyline, 'Flash of Two Worlds' (*The Flash* #123, 1961) which introduced the concept of parallel worlds into the DCU. From this point on, the DCU was transformed into a multiverse "in which an infinite number of alternate Earths…each with its own history and superheroes" (Morrison, 2011: 111) existed side-by-side with one another. Henceforth, the original Flash came from Earth-2 while the new iteration of 'the scarlet speedster' belonged to Earth-1. Soon after, the DCU was replete with adventures featuring parallel versions of staple characters crossing over into multiple titles. For example, Earth-3 was conceived as a 'mirror universe' where the roles and characteristics of popular characters were reversed -- heroes as villains and vice versa --, and which preceded the classic *Star Trek* episode, 'Mirror, Mirror' (1967) by three years; or Earth-X, a universe where World War II was won by Nazi Germany. The DCU continued to expand exponentially as more alterative worlds were added to the continuity, and, as a result, the "hyperdiegesis" (Hills, 2002) became "rickety at best" (Britton, 2011: 22).

By the 1980s, DC was struggling economically: sales were down across the board, the readership was rapidly declining and Marvel comics ruled the roost. By the same token, the sheer size and scope of the imaginary world became off-putting for new readers. As Sachs explains, the DCU had grown into "an alphabet soup of letters and concepts that required readers to keep an encyclopaedic amount of information in their head" (2013: 129). Indeed, as Wolk puts it, comic book fans are often "'super-readers", that is, "readers familiar enough with enormous numbers of old comics that they'll understand what's really been discussed in the story" (2007: 26). One such super-reader wrote to Marv Wolfman, writer of *Crisis*, 'asking about a mixup in DC continuity' (2001: 1):

> In my reply I said, 'one day we (meaning the DC editorial we) will probably straighten out what is in the DC Universe…and what is outside.' At this point in its history DC Comics had Earth-One, Earth-Two, Earth-Three, Earth-B, etc. There were superheroes on each Earth and though old-time readers had no problem understanding DC continuity, it proved off-putting to new readers who suddenly discovered there was not one but three Supermans, Wonder Womans, Batmans, etc (2001: 1).

On the one hand, fans "expect adherence to established tenets, characterisations and narrative 'back stories'…" (Hills, 2002: 28), but given that the DCU is "of an order of complexity beyond anything the television audience has become accustomed to" (Reynolds, 1992: 38) and "comparable in scale to that of the mythologies of the Ancient Classical European world" (Kaveney, 2005: 5) then rebooting is one of the ways that an imaginary world's continuity can be reprogrammed to deal with a growing number of glitches in narrative memory.

On the other hand, such reprogramming also signals to potential new readers that a functional entry-point has been opened, a direct invitation to those who might have been put off by the improbability of catching up with fifty years of continuity. This illustrates the double-logic of rebooting, one that aims to address the maelstrom of contradictions to appease the fannish demand for cohesion and consistency, while also operating as way to entice new readers with the promise of a blank slate. From this position, then, the DC comic book reboot is both a narrative technique and an economic/ industrial strategy designed to stimulate the cash nexus.

What is fascinating about *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is that the DCU is deleted from the continuity program *as a part of the story itself*, a technique that has since been used repeatedly to revise and recalibrate superhero comic universes such as, for example, DC's *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time* (1994), *Infinite Crisis* (2006) and *Flashpoint*/ 'The New 52' (2011), and also in the J.J Abrams' *Star Trek* reboot (the latter of which operates as a reboot and a continuation). As Harvey explains, narrative devices, such as time travel and parallel worlds, afford creators the opportunity to "correct solecisms in the storyworld" (2015: 71). The primary rationale for demolishing the imaginary world as part of the narrative is arguably to provide sufficient canonical reasoning for the core fan base. Indeed, as Johns points out above, reboots are a "dirty, swear word in the comic book world" because of the investment that fans make in terms of reading and buying large amounts of comics. To be told that the stories many have been reading for years *no longer count* as imaginary world "fact," but are thrown into the dustbin of history as irrelevant and apocryphal, signals disrespect from producers to fans. This demonstrates that

continuity and canon are often sacrosanct principles for super-readers "which production teams *revise at their peril,* disrupting the trust which is placed on the continuity of a detailed narrative world" (Hills, 2002).

For the uninitiated, reading *Crisis* might well be an insurmountable task but, in a nutshell, the story revolves around series' big bad, the Anti-Monitor, who orchestrates the destruction of DC's nexus of parallel worlds while an army of superheroes from across the multiverse battle to stop him. By the end of the series, the Anti-Monitor is defeated; Supergirl and The Flash are dead; while the multiverse is purged from continuity and contracts into a single, hybrid world. By the final pages of *Crisis*, fifty years of narrative continuity is washed away and replaced with a blank slate. The imaginary world isn't simply destroyed: put simply, it "never existed in the first place" (Klock, 2002: 21). From this point on, the DCU (theoretically) splintered into separate Pre- and Post-*Crisis* universes.

So, the reboot process begins with the collapse of the imaginary system, as in *Crisis*, and followed by a program of recreation and reorganisation. In superhero comics, the reboot process begins with a system purge but the 'actual' reboots are what is sketched onto the blank slate, texts such as John Byrne's seminal *Man of Steel* (1986) and George Perez's *Wonder Woman* (1987) which respectively rebooted Superman and the Amazonian Princess from the beginning again (as if for the first time). It is necessary to understand, however, that the DC comic book reboot is a process and that both the demolition and rebuilding of an imaginary world is part and parcel of this process, something which film and TV franchises are reluctant to do. Vast narrative event-series, such as *Crisis*, are undoubtedly for super-readers while the reboots themselves are invitations to new readers.

Of course, the notion of wiping away decades of canonical history, of an imaginary world's biographical memory, is nigh on impossible. A reboot might well *aim* to delete previously established programming, but this can never be achieved cleanly or without complication and contradiction. Here, Colin Harvey's model of storyworld memory is a valuable way of understanding the ways in which narrative continuity functions and the paradoxes set in motion by intertextual 'remembering.' By viewing the parameters of the imaginary world across the two axes of 'horizontal' and 'vertical' memory, we are faced with the aporia of multiplicity and, consequently, anomaly. Firstly, episodes, instalments, chapters, sequels, prequels, and so forth, are metaphorical bridges that establish sequential connections along the horizontal axis and form the storyworld. In short, each "micro-narrative" (Ryan) should ideally 'remember' other entries in the system. Secondly, and contradictorily, the vertical axis 'remembers' *every text in the DCU* regardless of the intentions of creators and producers, but it also, 'remembers' the infinite spiral of intertextuality. From this perspective, then, a reboot's principal objective is to 'forget,' or 'non-remember,' the contents of vertical memory but -- and here's the contradiction -- can never truly forget the horizontal. As Brooker acknowledges, "a text cannot fail to brush up against thousands of dialogic threads" (Brooker, 2012).

What complicates this matter even further is that imaginary worlds are often comprised of multiple versions and variations, continuities and canons, so much so that the concept of an imaginary *world* might be better reconfigured as an imaginary *system*. Within such a system, we can view individual co-systems as a *story-program*. To illustrate, the DC character Batman belongs to an imaginary system consisting of innumerable story-programs that are "hermetically sealed off" (Jenkins) from one another so that there is no such thing as a singular Batman, or for that matter a united *Batman* storyworld, but a plurality of *Batmen* co-existing in parallel with each

iteration and incarnation as part of an imaginary system, not world. Such programming means that Comic Book Batman, Tim Burton's Batman, Christopher Nolan's Batman, Animated Batman, Videogame Batman and 1960s TV series Batman, all belong to different story-programs. To this end, each variation on the Batman theme is in possession of individual mnemonic circuits, of memory and continuity. This is of vital importance when analysing reboots, as one must ask: *what is being rebooted*? Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*, for instance, reboots the Batman film series, the cinematic program, and not the contents of the comic book system. In the contemporary "age of multiplicity," as Jenkins describes the current historical moment, "readers may consume multiple versions of the same franchise" (2009a: 20) but, at the same time, "*are expected to know which interpretative frame should be applied to nay given title*" (2009b: 303, my italics).

In recent years, the reboot concept has been transposed from comics and adapted across media. This has led to the term becoming a fashionable 'buzzword' in popular and academic circles and a tendency to misinterpret the concept. The next section addresses and unpacks this conceptual hodgepodge.

Reboots, Revivals/ Re-Launches & Retcons

Following the commercial and critical failure of Joel Schumacher's *Batman and Robin* (1997), "by most viewers' account an atrociously bad film, too bad to even be camp" (Gray, 2010: 131), Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* "successfully resurrected the Batman brand from the cinematic graveyard" (Proctor, 2012). In essence, the reboot responds and reacts to *Batman and Robin* as a 'program error,' and supplants the series by resetting the horizontal memory to degree zero and beginning again. *Batman Begins* was the first film to be described as a reboot, most notably by co-writer, David S. Goyer:

> After *Batman and Robin* it was necessary to do what we call in comic book terms "a reboot"… Say you've had 187 issues of *The Incredible Hulk* and you decide you're going to introduce a new Issue 1. You pretend like those first 187 issues never happened, and you start the story from the beginning and the slate is wiped clean, and no one blinks…So we did the cinematic equivalent of a reboot, and by doing that, setting it at the beginning, you're instantly distancing yourself from anything that's come before (Goyer, quoted in Greenberg, 2005: 13 – 14).

The triumph of *Batman Begins* has since led towards the reboot term becoming used frequently as part of the popular and academic lexicon. Other films, such as the Bond reboot *Casino Royale* (2009), J.J Abrams' *Star Trek* and Marc Webb's *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) have been accurately defined as reboots, but other texts have been described as such in contradictory ways.

One of the most common ways that the concept has been evoked incorrectly is by viewing reboots as "the current operative moniker for American or Hollywood-to-Hollywood remakes" (Stenport and Traylor, 2015: 77). To be sure, there are conceptual commonalities and considerable overlap between rebooting and remaking, but the principle differential is that a reboot is a serial paradigm as opposed to the archetypal remake which can be understood as the translation of a textual "nomad," a solitary unit (Deleuze quoted in Ndalianis, 2004: 79). As Steven Gil rightly states, "[w]hat may be said to immediately identify a reboot is the fact that it initiates *a*

series of texts," rather than a single narrative unit (2014: 25 – 26, my italics). Essentially, one cannot reboot a self-contained film.

Another way that rebooting has been misused is in relation to *revivals*, those series that have spent sometime hibernating in the cultural wilderness but are reawakened in the present. Texts such as *The X-Files* (2016), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) and *Doctor Who* (2005 -), for example, have been described as reboots in mainstream media, but this is contradictory and problematic. All of these examples – and there are many more besides – 'remember' the contents of horizontal memory and, as a result, can be understood as revivals or re-launches. Here is Stephen Shimpach describing the 2005 revival of *Doctor Who* as

> not a reboot or a remake of the earlier series, nor another set of stories simply set in the same fictional universe, but instead an updated continuation of the previous program featuring the familiar box-shaped TARDIS, familiar antagonists (animated mannequin Autons – last seen in 1971, later Daleks, Cybermen, Sontarans, the Master, etc.), and young, female companions from early twenty-first century Earth...especially London. This program was the same program – same histories, same memories – but with a new form and new traits. Doctor Who had regenerated' (2010: 155).

Likewise, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is not a reboot, as fan Amanda Ward points out (with indignation, I might add):

> *Star Wars* journalism is kicking into high gear right now, and so is my extreme annoyance with loose semantics. *Star Wars* has never been rebooted…it seems obvious to me none of these films are reboots, reimaginings or remakes of any other *Star Wars* film, but apparently it is not that clear for others. *Star Wars* is now one big nine part saga, at least when talking about *The Skywalker Saga'* (2013).

Again, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and, by extension, other 'new' episodes in the continuity (*Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, *Star Wars: Rebels*) 'remember' earlier serial utterances, such as The Original and Prequel trilogies or *The Clone Wars* TV series (see Proctor and Freeman, 2016). Such remembering, of course, might eventually be corrupted by faulty programming, such as with *Doctor Who's* canonical conflicts (see Britton, Hills, Harvey, Parkins). But the point remains: reboots delete established memory in order to begin again with a new horizontal memory, whereas revivals/ re-launches provide a "substantive bridge" (Hills, 2002) between past and present. Briefly, reboots forget and disconnect; revivals/ re-launches remember and attach (for further analysis see Proctor, 2017).

One such instance of rebooting that also establishes connections

This brings us to the concept of retroactive continuity to which I shall now turn.

Retcon

In many ways, reboots and retcons are part of the same family: the former deletes the entire contents of a horizontal story-program whereas the latter engages in partial revision or, to continue the metaphor, piecemeal reprogramming. In other words, a reboot can be understood as an extreme retcon, and a retcon as a moderate reboot.

Like the reboot, retconning

A reboot 'restarts 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' (Willits, 2009: n.p).