How do readers understand the different ways that characters behave when they appear in both the text and paratext of the same comic?

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Comics characters have a long history of being used for advertising purposes, perhaps most famously in the long-running series of advertisements for Hostess fruit pies, in which superheroes thwart evildoers through judicious use of processed confectionaries. A great example of this appears in "Fury Unleashed," a strip which appeared in Marvel comics dated April 1982. In it, Captain America realizes that neither his shield nor his superhuman strength can save Nick Fury, so instead throws Hostess fruit pies at his friend's captor, distracting him long enough for the heroes to escape. However, when Cap faces a similar scenario in *Captain America #268*, published that same month, he chooses to surrender himself to save his friends rather than simply providing a dessert option for his enemies.

How are readers of *Captain America #*268 meant to understand what is going on? Are they expected to view these two versions of Captain America as different characters who just happen to look the same, or is something else going on?

Another example of this tension between text and advertisement paratext appears in *Fantastic Four #*200, a double-length issue featuring a duel to the death between Mr Fantastic and Doctor Doom, with a center-spread advertisement in which Doom implores his own fans to enter a competition run by a candy company to ensure that fans of superheroes don't win instead. The text reads as a direct address to the readers and, though Doom speaks in a slightly less formal manner than usual, the images portray him in exactly the same way as he appears in the surrounding narrative.

There is no indication that Doom has broken off from battling his nemesis to promote chocolates, so this is clearly not meant to be the same story, but neither is any explanation given for two such different versions of the character appearing in the same publication. It seems to be taken for granted by both publishers and readers that texts and paratexts can happily co-exist, even when they contradict each other, but how does that work when the same character is involved in both?

Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, in *[The Many Lives Of Batman](link)* (1991), suggest that the attributes of fictional characters can be broken down into components. For example, Captain America's components in the Twinkies advert are:

>**Attributes:** Strategic thinking, bravery, super-strength

Events: Entry into lair, use of shield and cakes.

Recurrent characters: Nick Fury, Trapster

Setting: Trapster's base

Iconography: Red, white and blue superhero costume, shield.

This one-page strip gives a limited range of information, but most of these components are also present in the concurrent issue of *Captain America*. The use of cakes is absent, but then so are Nick Fury and the Trapster, and it would be entirely reasonable for readers to accept that not all components would appear in every story. Similarly, the version of Doctor Doom in the advert has an attitude that is broadly consistent with the one in the main comic, calling superheroes "dolts" and commanding his followers to "heel", and, although he does not do so in the main text of *Fantastic Four* #200 , it would not be impossible to imagine him using a candy competition as a front for a nefarious scheme.

The individual components of these characters thus remain the same in text and paratext, however the "transmedia storyworld" that they exist in does not. This is a term introduced by Henry Jenkins in [Convergence Culture](#) (2003) to describe the setting for stories which are told across different media, with characters interacting across a shared fictional universe containing many stories, not all of which the audience experiences firsthand.

Klastrup and Tosca, in [Transmedial Worlds – Rethinking Cyberworld Design](#) (2004), defined three key features of transmedia storyworlds:

Topos: time period and geography

Mythos: backstory or history

Ethos: code of ethics telling characters how to behave

In both of our examples the topos is the same in the text and the paratext - the "Marvel Universe," a slightly tweaked version of modern-day America. It is in the mythos and ethos, however, that differences become apparent.

The mythos of the Marvel Universe is an ongoing fictional history built up over almost sixty years. Fans may not have read every single story within the mythos, but are aware of its general shape and, through this, gain an understanding of the events and actions which are possible within it. Thus, although it is theoretically possible, in the Marvel universe and our own, to solve some of life's

problems with sugary snacks, it is not something that fans would expect to see as the focus of a story because, until these rule-breaking advertisements began to appear, it had never been the focus of a story.

The fact that the promotion of chocolatey treats is not present in the mythos of the Marvel Universe indicates that it does not comply with its ethos, and thus the versions of Doom and Captain America that we see in these advertisements must exist in a similar, yet separate, storyworld with its own developing mythos that contains the promotion and strategic use of snacks, and an ethos that regards this as an acceptable activity for super-powered beings.

Superhero universes have their own way of dealing with such differences between storyworlds. The idea of a "multiverse," where different versions of the same characters exist in a parallel dimensions, originated in science fiction, and was introduced to comics in *The Flash* #123 in 1961. The practice of giving numbers to the different worlds first arose in Marvel's multiverse with the designation of its core world as Earth-616 in Marvel UK's *Captain Britain* series, and has since developed to cover every alternate universe ever seen in Marvel's stories, including the Ultimate Universe (Earth-1610), MC-2 (Earth-982), and even Hostess advertisements (Earth-51914). Some of these designations have been deemed official by Marvel, but for the most part they have been developed by fans as part of categorization projects such as Marvel Database, Comic Vine and Grand Comics Database.

These projects demonstrate that fans not only accept the existence of different versions of the same characters, but also celebrate them in their own creative endeavors. This acceptance requires an understanding that fictional universes have rules which the characters within them must abide by, and it is this implicit comprehension of transmedia storyworlds that, in answer to the question initially posed, allows readers to understand the different ways that such characters behave when they appear in both the text and paratext of the same comic.