The Three Generations Of Dennis The Menace

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Figures

Figure 1 Caption: Dennis loses a tooth in The Beano #2219

Figure 1 Alt Text: Comics illustration of Dennis The Menace bending over, jumping up, and spitting out a tooth while Gnasher the dog jumps up to avoid being hit by it. Dennis says "Thanks Gnasher, it's not loose now!"

Figure 2 Caption: Dennis through the years

Figure 2 Alt Text: Series of images showing different versions of Dennis The Menace, marked "1950s-1970s", "1970s to 1990s", "2000s" and "Today". He begins as a small boy with a grey shirt with all other images of varying heights but all wearing a black and red striped jumper.

Figure 3 Caption: Dennis's parents in The Beano #1929

Figure 3 Alt Text: Two panels showing Dennis The Menace's parents. In the first Dennis's dad, with bald head and a red pinstripe suit, sits in an armchair and asks "Wonder why my feet are so cold?". In the second Dennis's Mum, with permed hair and a yellow top and red skirt, replies "I'll tell you why - you've worn out the soles of your slippers spanking Dennis!" Gnasher sits on the floor laughing, saying "Gnashee!"

Figure 4 Caption: Dennis's parents post-makeover

Figure 4 Alt Text: Dennis looks on in astonishment at his parents, standing either side of TV personality Gok Wan. His dad now wears a red and black polo shirt and has a spiky haircut while his mum wears cut-off trousers and a red top with red spiky hair. Dennis asks "Dad? Mum? What happened to you?" Gok Wan says "They needed a makeover after living with you, Dennis". Dennis's mum says "What do you think Dennis? He's taken years off us."

Figure 5 Caption: Dennis's dad's childhood

Figure 5 Alt Text: Three panels of comics story. The first shows a picture of Dennis The Menace with short trousers, red and black striped jumper and spiky hair, holding a catapult, as a voice off says "... this boy!" The second shows Dennis's dad, with spiky hair and polo shirt, looking at a cinema screen saying "That's me!" The current version of Dennis sits next to him, and says "What happened to you? You used to look awesome?" The final panel shows the earlier version of Dennis dropping a ladder onto a greenhouse, which shatters with a "SMASH!" sound effect. He says "Oops!" A voiceover says "A vote for Dennis's dad is a vote for someone who hates your greenhouse!"

Figure 6 Caption: Part of the Menace 'family tree'

Figure 6 Alt Text: Two rows of characters, all placed in circles and linked by twigs, as part of a humorous family tree. The top row shows five characters - Flor-Dence-ce Nightingale, Den-Ston Churchill, Great Grandpa Menace, Great Grandma Menace and Grandad Menace. Grandad Menace is the bald pinstripe-suit wearing character seen earlier. The second row shows Minnie the Mix, her mother Vicky, Dennis's mum, named as Sandra Menace, Dennis Menace Senior, and the current Dennis Menace.

Figure 7 Caption: Personality traits over time

Figure 7 Alt Text: a graph showing personality traits for the three generations of the character Dennis The Menace. Images are taken from the family tree labelled "1951/1961" for the first version, "1970/1980" and "1991/2000" for the second, and "2010/2020" for the third. Lines are plotted for extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness and neuroticism.

Keywords

British children's comics, Beano, retcons, empirical research, digital humanities.

This article will examine how in-storyworld explanations of updates to the appearance of the long running British comics character Dennis The Menace were expanded upon by creators to significantly retrospectively alter the character's history, developing an ingenious multi-generational explanation for historical changes to the character over time that echo similar explanations found in long-running American series. These 'retcons' are assessed by using a unified catalogue of character components to discern whether there is any evidence in the original texts to support the idea of there being different versions of the same character, before describing social and practical reasons for the results found.

Dennis The Menace is the star of the UK's longest running comic *The Beano*, which was first published by DC Thomson in 1938 and has remained a key part of British cultural life ever since (Sabin 2001). Although its current circulation of around 55,000 weekly comics is far below its peak of 2 million in the 1950s it is still one of the biggest selling comics in the country (Beano Studios 2022).

Dennis first appeared in *The Beano* in March 1951, and has been featured in almost every issue since, right up until the present day (Gifford 1984, McLaughlin 2022). In one of comics' greatest coincidences, his first appearance was in the same week - possibly even on the same day - as the American character of the same name (Parker 2016). There, however, the similarity ends . Where the American Dennis is a wholesome, inquisitive child who represents 'the irrepressible energy of a young republic', the British Dennis is a 'proto-punk-rock-hooligan' in a black and red jumper who is constantly getting into, and often causing, trouble (Parker 2016, Gordon 2016).

Dennis's storyworld has changed very little over the decades, with most of his supporting characters being introduced within the first ten years of the strip, including his parents, his dog Gnasher, and his arch enemy Walter. For the most part his adventures have taken place in what Umberto Eco refers to as an 'oneiric climate', with each week's story having little or no relationship to past or future events, so that the entire storyworld is reset at the end of each adventure (Eco 1972). For example, although Dennis lost a tooth in the story shown in Figure 1, the following week all of his teeth were back in place and the event was never referred to again.

Figure 1: Dennis loses a tooth in *The Beano* #2219 (Sutherland 1985)

However, although nothing changes from one week to the next, the storyworld does develop over time, if only very slowly. New characters, such as Dennis's little sister Bea, have been introduced and remained in the storyworld, while tonal changes have been made to suit changing societal attitudes. One clear example of this is the phasing out of corporal punishment. In the first three decades of his existence Dennis was regularly beaten by his father - for example, this form of punishment appeared in over a third of all stories during the 1970s (Thompson 2019). The final panel of Dennis being beaten by his father with a shoe was so ubiquitous that scriptwriters would simply sum it up to the artist in one word - 'Slipper' (McLaughlin 2022). However, this was gradually phased out as social attitudes changed, with such punishments being made illegal in the UK in 1986 (UK Act of Parliament 1986).

Similarly, the drawing style has developed over time. For example, Figure 2 shows the depiction of Dennis has become less 'menacing', with the angular and somewhat aggressive version from the 1960s and 1970s gradually becoming more rounded and cartoonish.

1950s-1970s   1970s-1990s   2000s   TODAY

Figure 2: Dennis through the years (Parkinson 2021)

Despite this, the core components of Dennis's character design - spiky black hair, short trousers, a red and black striped jumper and a catapult - have changed little over time since becoming established during his first year of publication, with only minor amendments such as the replacement of shoes with trainers in the twenty-first century. This is not necessarily a problem for Dennis himself, as it would not be unusual to see a young boy in a striped top and short trousers at any point in his history, but the same cannot be said for other characters, notably Dennis's parents.

The design of Dennis's mother and father solidified during the 1960s, and for the next forty years they remained substantially the same as shown in Figure 3. However, adult fashion and parenting styles in the real world continued to develop during this period, and so the two characters quite quickly began to look out of date. Dennis's dad especially, with his red pinstripe suit and tie, bald head and toothbrush moustache, certainly did not look like any parents I knew when I read *The Beano* as a child in the 1970s, and had become severely anachronistic by the turn of the twenty-first century.
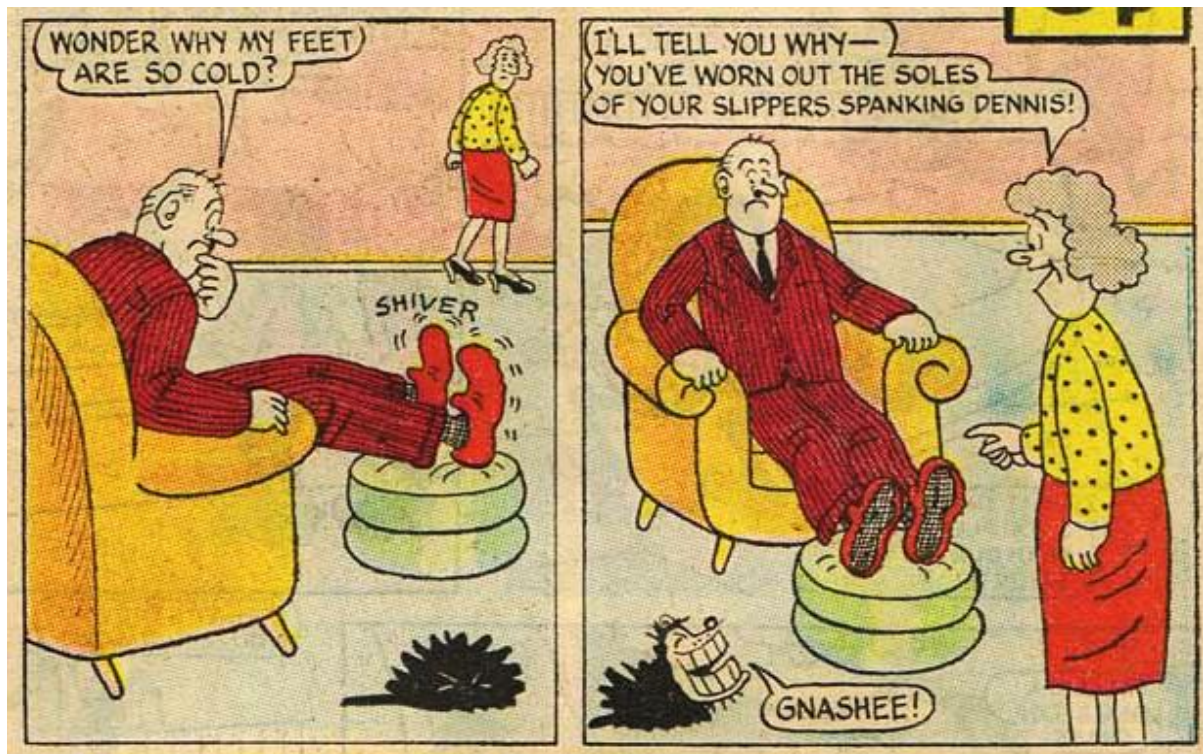
Figure 3: Dennis's parents in *The Beano* #1929 (Sutherland 1979)

Eventually, in 2012, *The Beano* decided to address this problem within the storyworld itself by giving Dennis's parents a 'makeover'. At this time *The Beano* regularly featured celebrities in its stories and on its covers as a way to draw in casual readers, and here they enlisted the help of Gok Wan, a popular television presenter who had become famous through shows such as *How To Look Good Naked, Gok's Clothes Roadshow* and appearances on various daytime magazine programmes as a proponent of self-confidence and positive body image through clothes (Wan 2024).

In August 2012 Gok Wan appeared suddenly at the end of an otherwise unremarkable story where Dennis had been 'menacing' Walter and various other residents of Beanotown, the fictional town where most Beano characters live (Auchterlounie and Parkinson 2012). Figure 4 shows the moment when he returned home and was amazed to discover his parents looking completely different. 'They needed a makeover after living with you, Dennis', Gok Wan tells him (Auchterlounie and Parkinson 2012, 5).

Figure 4: Dennis's parents post-makeover (Auchterlounie and Parkinson 2012)

This change in appearance would become permanent, but the circumstances in which it happened in the storyworld would be revised. Three years later this new look would be rewritten so that it had never been a 'makeover' of existing characters at all, but rather the design for two different characters altogether.

This change was first signalled in the May 2 2015 issue of *The Beano*, when Dennis and his dad visited the cinema to watch a film made by The Mayor of Beanotown (Rundle 2015). The Mayor is currently a recurring villain in the strip, and in this story Dennis's dad was running against him in a local election. In order to discredit his rival the Mayor had decided to show a series of clips exposing Dennis's dad's childhood misbehaviour, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Dennis's dad's childhood (Auchterlounie and Parkinson 2015)

This image, and subsequent discussion of it by characters in the strip, suggested that the current Dennis's dad had actually been an earlier a version of Dennis The Menace as a child. In addition, the previous design of Dennis's dad - with pinstripe suit and toothbrush-moustache - was shown to be the father of this earlier Dennis, and thus the grandfather of the current version of the character. The style of the flashback stories also echoed Beano strips of the 20th century which would often be printed in black and white with one additional colour, further suggesting that these are former adventures being re-shown.

Over the next few years this new reality was restated on numerous occasions, with references to the current dad's adventures as a previous version of Dennis, with the former design of his father now being shown to be the current Dennis's deceased grandfather. The previous version of 'mum' was also identified as the current version's grandmother as well, and this came to be an established aspect of the strip, used for comic effect with occasional flashbacks to the older Dennis's adventures.

This was expanded further in 2021 when, as part of the celebrations of seventy years of Dennis The Menace a 'Menace family tree' was published, in which it was explicitly stated that the current Dennis was actually the third version of the character, with his grandfather joining the line of Menaces as the original version of the character who had first appeared in 1951 (Gallant 2021).
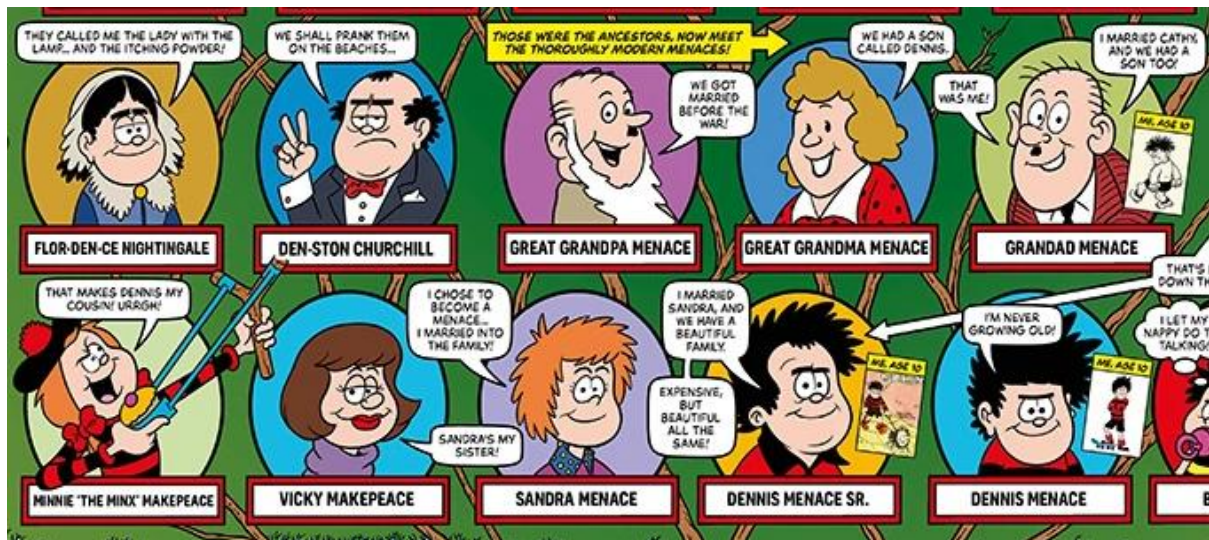
Figure 6: Part of the Menace 'family tree' (Gallant 2021)

These sorts of changes or additions to previous stories are known as 'retcons' - acts of 'retroactive continuity' where the established history of a storyworld is altered (Palmer 2022). Such retcons have a lengthy history in US superhero comics, beginning with the classic 'Flash of Two Worlds' storyline in Flash #123 (Fox and Infantino 1961). Here the 'modern' version of The Flash, introduced five years earlier in *Showcase #4* ((Kanigher and Infantino 1956) met the 'original' Golden Age version of the character, who was now revealed to be existing on a place called 'Earth-2' in a different universe. Later this was expanded to show that all of the Golden Age versions of the character were also still alive on this parallel world.

Another notable retcon was Captain America being discovered frozen in ice in *Avengers* #4 (Lee and Kirby 1963). Here he was said to have been trapped in ice, in suspended animation the end of World War Two despite his that fact that his post-war adventures had been published in *Young Men* comic well into the 1950s (Dittmer 2012). These stories were later explained away as involving a government agent employed to fill the role – something not indicated in any way at the time. Many other examples exist, with the practice especially popular in American superhero comics of the 1970s, during the so-called 'Bronze Age', when fans-turned-creators took control of storyworlds (Coogan 2006).

However, such practices have rarely been used in British children's comics, partly because they rely on short isolated stories which have little or no relation to an ongoing narrative, so that any required updates do not necessarily require explanation, and usually happen without remark. Also, British children's comics still tend to cater to an audience of children, who will be expected to 'grow out' of reading the comic regularly (MacManus 2016). By contrast, American superhero comics have for many years relied on an ageing cohort of adult fans (Sabin 2001). Thus US publishers may feel

Additionally, the long tenures of creators, especially in *The Beano*, meant that the strips' creators were often part of an earlier generation who had not grown up as fans, but rather continued to see their work in a purely professional capacity (McLaughlin 2022). This had begun to change by the twenty-first century and is shown in the family tree, where what could have been a straightforward illustration becomes something more playful, with the creators taking great care to ensure that the images of each generation of Dennis, and their respective parents, are reflective of how they appeared at the time.

Much of this work is done as a knowing nod, or 'easter egg', for long-term fans of the series, but it also raises a fascinating question. Is this just a bit of fun, or is there a case for there really being three different versions of Dennis?

To answer this, we can draw on the results of an already existing study, which sought to compare the British and American characters called 'Dennis The Menace' using a unified catalogue of transmedia character components (Hibbett 2024). Briefly, this methodology divides aspects of transmedia characters into four categories of character components - those that are specific to the character themselves apart from a narrative, the storyworld around them, their behaviour within that storyworld, and the authors who create their stories. Overall there were thirteen components spread across the categories, including aspects such as appearance, other characters, motivations and authors.

Using the catalogue involved recording the presence of these components within a sample of texts, and here the texts for the British Dennis were all taken from one book, *The Beano: The Dennis Collection* (Beano Studios 2020). This book contains several strips from each of the seven decades since Dennis first appeared, curated by the book's editors. This means that there is some bias in the selection, and so the texts may not be entirely reflective of what was actually published at the time. One clear example of this is to do with corporal punishment - as discussed, other studies have shown that Dennis was regularly beaten in his early years but, apart from a few strips where such punishment is hinted at without being shown, it does not appear at all in this book (Thompson 2019, Hagan 2023). Despite this *The Dennis Collection* remains a rich collection of over 100 strips from across the character's lifetime, and taking a sample of texts from it provide significant insight into the character's development.

Eight separate strips were randomly selected chosen, from roughly ten-year intervals, and then each was analysed in terms of the thirteen components within the unified catalogue of transmedia character components. For example, data was collected within the character-specific category by recording details of Dennis's appearance, the names he was addressed by, his physical actions, and his dialogue and ways of speaking within each strip. This was carried out for all thirteen components within the

four categories, with the data then cleaned and checked, <mark>and made available as open access on the University of the Arts London data repository (Hibbett 2023).</mark>

For the purposes of this analysis, the data was then split into three different periods, relating to the three generations of the character, who for convenience will be referred to as Dennis 1, 2 and 3. Thus the texts for 1951 and 1961, largely drawn by David Law and identified in the family tree as belonging to the first iteration of the character are grouped together as featuring Dennis 1 (the character now deemed to be the current Dennis's deceased grandfather). Those from 1970, 1980, 1991 and 2000, mostly drawn by David Sutherland, similarly belong to Dennis 2 (the current Dennis's father) and 2010 and 2020 are Dennis 3. Perhaps the easiest way to identify the characters is by their fathers, with Dennis 1's father wearing a grey suit, Dennis 2's in pin-stripe, and Dennis 3's having a beer belly and polo shirt.

Analysis of the data using these groupings showed that the character-specific and storyworld-specific components changed very little over the entire period (Hibbett 2024). However, the category of 'Behaviour', did show development over time. This category contains three components - perceived behaviour, personality traits and motivation.

'Perceived behaviour' deals with the way that Dennis's behaviour is perceived by himself and other characters, and is recorded by noting every descriptive word used in the text itself. Dennis 1 and Dennis 2 are described in entirely negative terms, including 'Atrocious', 'horrid' and 'dangerous', but Dennis 3 is referred to only as 'The world's wildest boy' which could possibly even be viewed in a positive manner.

'Personality traits' were assessed using the Big Five Inventory, a commonly used psychological tool for measuring character in terms of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness. This was developed for assessing patients, but has been shown to be useful for fictional characters as well (Flekova and Gurevych 2015). For this analysis a short 10 question version of the BFI was used (Rammstedt and John 2007). Each question is answered using a five point scale - for instance, the first question asks to what extent you agree with the statement 'I see Dennis as someone who is reserved' in that text, rated 1 for 'Disagree strongly' and 5 for 'Agree strongly'. These scores are then paired, giving 5 scores, one for each of the five aspects of the Big Five . Figure 7 shows the results.
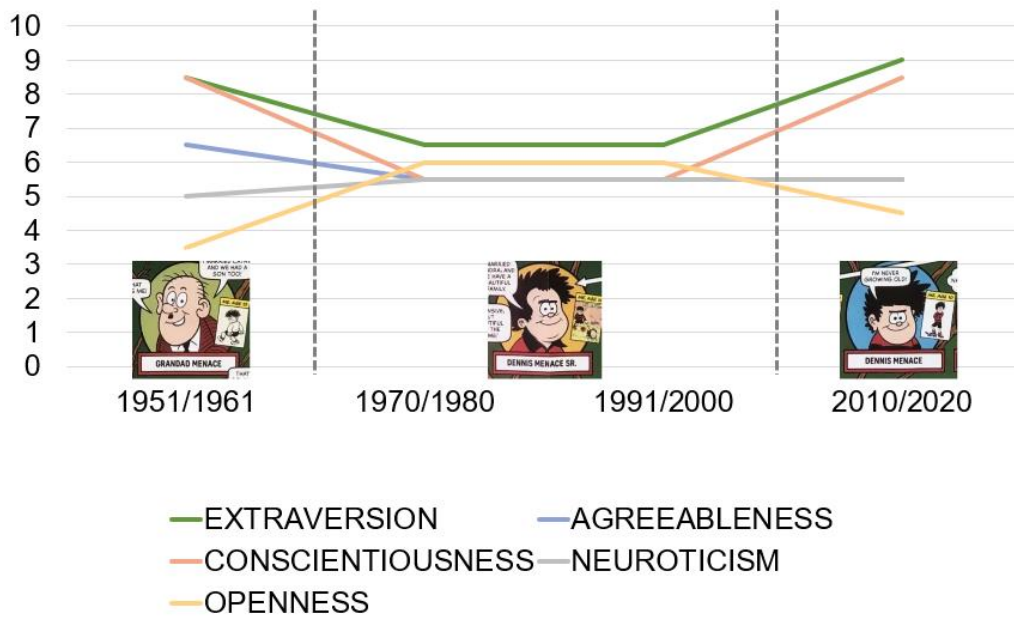
Figure 7: Personality traits over time

This graph shows that Dennis 1 and Dennis 3 are fairly similar in terms of their behaviour, scoring highly for extroversion and conscientiousness, low for openness and around the middle for agreeableness and neuroticism. Dennis 2 is different to both, however, being less extroverted, less conscientious, but more open to new experiences.

Dennis 2 could be considered to be a quieter, more thoughtful character, and this is borne out by examining the 'motivations' component. This was recorded by noting every motivation expressed in the text, either through speech, narration or thought bubbles, and then recoding the results into groups. Here all three versions of the character were motivated by the need to escape from authority figures (to avoid punishment), personal gain, or to inflict some sort of harm on other characters. However, Dennis 2 was also motivated by the need to also help other characters and to find time for himself. When reading stories from this era it was surprising to find, for example, how much time Dennis 2 spent trying to find a quiet spot to read in without interruption, whereas this was rarely a concern of the other two.

Thus analysis of the three periods shows that, despite the idea of three separate versions of Dennis the Menace being a retrospective insertion into continuity, it does appear to be an accurate reflection of different versions of the character who appeared during these three different eras. One might even see it as a story of three generations of the same character, with Dennis 1 growing up being constantly told that he was bad and so behaved accordingly and was then physically punished for these actions. When Dennis 1 becomes a father he applies the same parenting techniques to his own son, who also acts out in a similar way. However, when Dennis 2 grows up his more thoughtful nature leads him to

reject the cycle of violence and bring his own son up in a very different, much less authoritarian, style to his predecessors, leading to Dennis 3 being more confident and having a much friendlier, more 'modern' relationship with his parents. This is reflected in the way that the illustrative style of the different versions of Dennis suggests changes to the inner consciousness of the character (Mikkonen 2013). Once his core design is established Dennis 1 is drawn to be angular and aggressive, with Dennis 2 becoming visibly smaller as if withdrawing into himself, before Dennis 3 grows larger again and becomes more rounded and confident.

Of course, this longform story was not created intentionally, and it would be more realistic to say that it is instead a reflection of societal changes over several decades. However, the retcon which highlighted these differences definitely was intentional, and is part of a wider move towards a more 'fannish' type of creation at *The Beano*, where creators feel free to play with the structure of their storyworld, generating new stories from it.

For example, although this article has largely dealt with the three male characters in this lineage, there have also been changes and additions made to the story of Dennis's mother. Her name is Sandra Menace, nee Makepeace, and the family tree seen in Figure 6 shows that her sister is Vicky Makepeace, mother of Hermione Makepeace who is also known as the similarly long-running character Minnie The Minx. Thus, in current Beano continuity, Dennis and Minnie (the comic's two main characters) are cousins. More than this, however, the creators of the strip have hinted on several occasions that Sandra Menace is actually the Minnie The Minx of the 1970s. This has not been delved into quite as much as the three versions of Dennis, but for long-term readers of *The Beano* it does lead to the surprising realisation that the Dennis and Minnie they grew up with not only grew up too, but went on to get married and have children together.

As discussed, this sort of playing with the history of the storyworld is a common feature of long-running storyworlds, especially in comics. During the so-called 'Bronze Age' in the 1970s saw an influx of new creators with an in-depth knowledge of the continuity that had gone before delighted in using it to generate storylines that harked back to previous events and often twisting them into new forms (Coogan 2006). However, despite beginning publication in 1938 - the same year that *Action Comics* #1 was published in the USA, introducing Superman to the world and beginning the 'Golden Age' of US superhero comics - *The Beano* took several decades long than its American counterparts to reach this stage.

This is likely because the turnover of staff at *The Beano*, and all DC Thomson publications, was much slower than in America. Marvel Comics, for example, had 7 editors between 1962 and 1987, with five in quick succession from 1972 to 1978. By contrast, *The Beano* has only ever had seven editors in its entire 86 years of publication, with the first three (George Moonie, Harold Cramond and Euan Kerr) being in post for 68 years between them (McLaughlin 2022). Similarly, creators have tended to

remain on strips for decades at a time. In the case of Dennis The Menace, the original artists David Law worked on the strip until 1970 and was followed by David Sutherland from 1970 to 1998, with very few fill-ins from other creators (McLaughlin 2022).

This information about creators comes almost entirely from outside the texts themselves rather than the data collected for the survey, and so the category of 'authorship' within the catalogue was not particularly useful. The only authors to be mentioned within the texts themselves were Nigel Auchterlonie and Nigel Parkinson, the writer and artist in the most recent text analysed. Before that DC Thomson had a policy of not crediting its creators, as the management believed that otherwise staff could be poached by other publishers (McLaughlin 2022). This policy was common across British children's publishing for most of the 20th century, and only starting to change in 1977 when Kevin O'Neill suggested including 'Credit Cards' in *2000AD*, published by DC Thomson's main rivals IPC (MacManus 2016). This practice gradually spread, and the original fear of creators being headhunted turned out to be well founded, as the inclusion of names allowed American publishers to contact the British creators, luring them across the Atlantic for what became known as the 'British Invasion in comics of the later 1980s and early 1990s (Sabin 2001).

However, although it took a long time for *The Beano* to move into its own 'Bronze Age' there are signs that it is developing much more quickly in the twenty-first century. In recent years *The Beano* has taken positive steps towards increasing diversity, moving away from an all-male, all-white cast and removing or changing names which would be deemed offensive to modern readers (Hagan 2023). It has also continued to move through the equivalent of the US 'Ages' system by tentatively stepping into an equivalent of the so-called 'Dark Age' of comics, where 'grim and gritty' supposedly 'adult' versions of characters originally designed for children appeared in stories containing violence, sex, or both. In the case of *The Beano* this occurred with a TV adaptation of the strip 'Calamity James' which took the benign, slightly surreal story of 'the unluckiest boy in the world' and transformed it into a violent tale of an abandoned child with 'acute misfortune system' reuniting with his estranged father (Paxton 2023). Over the course of the 13 minute programme they commit a robbery, get kidnapped, are tortured, and only escape death by accidentally killing their captors - not the sort of storyline often seen in *The Beano* itself.

In conclusion, this analysis has shown that although the idea of there being three separate versions of Dennis The Menace was a 'retcon' introduced by fans-turned-creators, it can be backed up through empirical analysis. The character may have remained coherent across many decades in terms of his appearance and storyworld, but his personality has clearly changed over time.

These changes can be explained practically in two ways. Firstly, each version had a different creative team - Dennis 1 was mostly drawn by David Law, Dennis 2 by David Sutherland and Dennis 3 by

various creators including Nigel Parkinson. The first two versions were written by the editorial team, led by Harold Cramond until 1984 and then gradually replaced by writers such as Nigel Auchterlonie in later years, although the actual credits for the earlier stories are, as discussed earlier, unclear.

Secondly, British society, and particularly its attitudes toward children, has changed in the over seven decades since the character's creation. British expectations around children's behaviour are now different, not least in terms of bullying – the targeted harassment of Walter The Softy by Dennis 2 due to his effeminacy looks particularly unpleasant to modern eyes, and indeed the current version of Walter is now portrayed as a spoilt rich child actively engaged in spoiling others' fun, thus justifying Dennis's enmity towards hm (Jeffries 2013).

A third, additional, way to look at the change is to engage with it in the same way as Auchterlonie and Parkinson as a legitimate part of the strip's continuity. This turns the strip into a long-term study of a pan-generational cycle of violence, with Dennis 1 'acting out' as a violent 'menace' because adults constantly tell him that that's what he is. His father regularly beats him, and so when Dennis 1 grows up he passes this style of parenting on to his own child, interacting with him mainly through aggressive language and violence. However, Dennis 2, who we have already established as a thoughtful child interested in self-education, manages to escape this cycle. He and his wife - herself the victim of violence in countless *Minnie The Minx* strips of the same period – bring up their son Dennis 3 very differently so that he, Dennis 3, is more self-confident, and less liable to cause trouble to other people.

Whichever way the changes are explained, the fact that they exist has been demonstrated through empirical methods using the unified catalogue of transmedia character components. The data used to generate these analyses is available for others to download and re-used, and it is hoped that further datasets will be generated in a similar way (Hibbett 2023). After all, if *The Beano* continues on its current accelerated trajectory through its own version of the American 'Ages' system it will not be long before it reaches its equivalent to the time of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. With DC Thomson's huge archive of stories and characters to draw upon the prospect of a Beano Cinematic Universe promises much to discuss in future, not least the question of if and when we will see the next generation of Dennis The Menace.

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