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Marvel Comics: From Stan Lee to Mickey

“X-Men is what Marvel was about: being different and misunderstood and yet still striving to do good despite the world looking at you with doubt and suspicion.”

-- Bob Harras (Marvel editor in chief, 1995-2000)

Marvel Comics, the company of Stan Lee and Spider-Man, has created comic books with quirky characters and gripping storylines for more than 70 years. Disney, home of several idealistic fairytale characters, acquired Marvel at the end of 2009. This was certainly not the first time that a company had taken an interest in Marvel’s creativity and resilience, but Disney’s primary focus on entertainment, instead of publishing, makes this partnership unique. How did Marvel come to attract Disney Corporation, and what is at stake for Marvel and its devoted fans? A chronicle of Marvel’s long, strange history may lend some insight into the company’s future.

The 1940s and 1950s: The Golden Age of Comics and Upheaval

In the Golden Age of the comic book industry, a comic book cost ten cents and readership was high. Publisher Martin Goodman recognized the market potential for comic books and founded Timely Comics in 1939, which eventually became Marvel Comics. An issue of “Captain Marvel Adventures” sold a record 14 million copies in 1944, even with relatively little advertising. During World War II, Marvel comics had a patriotic slant, and superheroes often fought Nazis and other national enemies (see **Figure 1**). After the war, the popularity of superheroes faded and Marvel began to publish a variety of other genres, including romance, western, horror, and funny animal comics. The company was renamed Atlas Comics in 1951 and revived the concept of the superhero, this time to fight the Communists. In 1954, the peak of the Golden Age, the comic book industry sold an estimated one billion comics.¹

In 1954, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocents*, which decried the pervasive violence and adult

Figure 1



Source: Copyright Marvel Comics, 1942