THE ROAD TO THE MODERN AGE

the rise of the independent publisher and the birth of the direct market
INDEPENDENT ALTERNATIVES

- newave, ground level, independent, and alternative
NEWAVE COMICS/COMIX

- coined to refer to even less visible and more independent type of comics that started in the mid 70s

- quarter or half page - commonly referred to as mini-comics

- produced completely independent of publisher or editor - truly “homemade”

- medium eventually migrated online
GROUND LEVEL COMICS

- Term first coined by Star*Reach publisher Mike Friedrich in 1974:
  "...to denote overground genres being exploited with an underground sensibility"
- (Mainstream-ish) Science fiction & fantasy adventure stories
- Star*Reach offered creators:
  - total control and ownership of characters they created
  - very few editorial restrictions
INDEPENDENT COMICS

- **independent** - any new publisher that attempted to compete with established publishers by offering genre fiction comic books intended for a mainstream audience

- Independent publishers were revolutionary in that they:
  - often took risks on stories that didn’t fit into the mainstream superhero framework (eventually revolutionized the medium)
  - allowed creators to retain control of their intellectual properties
  - paid royalties to creators
ALTERNATIVE COMICS

- most often authored by a single creator (who acts as author & artist)

- presents a very personal vision - many are autobiographical or put more emphasis on author than character

- self-published or small press works that resist mainstream genre fiction and celebrate their roots in the comix tradition.

- Alternative comics were able to thrive because of changes in comic book distribution - the Direct Market
THE DIRECT MARKET

the changing face of comic distribution
Problems with new-stand/drugstore/supermarket distribution system:

- inconsistent titles shipped every month
- haphazard and inconsistent display
- unsold issues returned for reimbursement at the end of the month (and pulped)

Discouraged many readers from becoming fans because it was almost impossible to follow a particular character or shoreline from month to month
PHIL SEULING

- approached major publisher - if they would give a 50% discount, he would keep unsold issues rather than returning for reimbursement

- Formed **Sea Gate Distribution** - distribute comics to the emerging specialty comic stores

- Offered comic shops a 40% discount if they bought from him

- Shipped stores exactly what they wanted in the quantities they wanted.
Publishers embrace the direct market distribution system:

- they could take advanced orders from retailers
- print quantities that more precisely matched demand
- they didn’t have to take returns from retailers

Emergence of direct market only offerings: *Dazzler* #1 (Marvel), *Tales of the New Teen Titans* (DC), *Camelot 3000* (DC)

- Encouraged new publishers
- comic stores became centers of comic culture
DOWNSIDE TO THE DIRECT MARKET

- isolated comic books and their readers from mainstream culture

- isolated comic books from potential new readers - Saturday morning cartoons became the dominant vector for introducing comic book characters to new readers

- The health of the industry (at all levels) became inextricably linked with the direct market

- Eventually led to an out of control culture of collecting (speculation)
NOTEWORTHY DIFFERENCES

- **CONDITION** - Direct market shops were designed specifically to keep comics in good condition (vs. spinner racks) - contributes to collector culture

- **CULTURE OF KNOWLEDGE** - store owners had a far better understanding of their inventory (often being collectors themselves). Customers were far more knowledgeable (pull lists)

- **CONTENT** - direct market shops catered to a more mature audience. Comics with content that was deemed inappropriate for drug stores/grocery stores/news stands

- **PRICE** - older customers were typically willing to pay several times more than the average customer of a drug store/grocery store/news stand
ONE DISTRIBUTOR

DIAMOND

TO RULE THEM ALL
Late 1970s - regional distribution (Donahoe Brothers in the Great Lakes region, Pacific Comics Distributors in Southern California, and New Media/Irjax in the Southeast)

Early 1980s (beginning of direct market targeted comics) - emergence of better organized and more competitive distributors (Diamond Comics Distributors & Capital City Distribution)

Mid 1980s - peak in the number of distributors (20 companies nationally). Diamond and Capital City were the largest distributors - operating nationally with a distributed warehouse system.

Early 1990s - unsustainable growth (speculators market). Diamond & Capital City move from decentralized to centralized model. Era of buyouts and exclusive contracts.

Mid 1990s - Most distributors either go out of business or are purchased by Diamond. Era of Diamond monopoly
THE EVENT
WHY?
THE RISE OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL
Richard Kyle - as early as 1964 (CAPA-ALPHA #2, a newsletter published by the Comic Amateur Press Alliance), he advocated using the term “graphic story” or “graphic novel”

- 1976-1978: Several works published that explicitly used the term “graphic novel”

- 1976 - Bloodstar by Richard Corben (adapted from a story by Robert E. Howard)

- 1976 - Beyond Time and Again by George Metzger (collection of serialized underground comics that were published from 1967 to 1972)

- 1976 - Chandler: Red Tide by Jim Steranko (digest sized publication that referred to itself both as a “graphic novel” and a “visual novel”)

- 1977 - Racket Rumba by french artist/author Loro (noir-detective spoof)

- 1978 - Sabre: Slow Fade of an Endangered Species by writer Don McGregor and artist Paul Gulacy (first graphic novel sold in the direct market)
A Contract with God
1978
Will Eisner

- Not the first graphic novel - but widely considered the standard bearer for the format


- created a deeper understanding of the medium's worth and wide storytelling potential