

Good afternoon, and welcome to **ABSOLUTE HYPOTHETICALS**. Slightly more impressive than the usual run of the mill *Hypotheticals*, I feel, and I hope that everyone here will notice the new sheen of professionalism and glamour. [*Feel free to take a long, dubious look at the rest of us, Dave.*]yeah.

Everyone here has been recoloured especially for the afternoon, and I ask you to note how particularly glossy and bright they are. I would offer special features, but I mean, looking at them, they're special all in their own right, aren't they?

So, the seventh annual *Hypotheticals* panel. I'm Dave Gibbons and having worked for DC for some years, I have to tell you that the editor's decision is final on that.

So what *is Hypotheticals*? Well, for the next hour or so, we're going to take some ethical dilemmas that can occur in the comic book industry and see how a panel of pros, interested parties and, well, in *his* case [*gesture at Budgie*] 'professional hanger-on', would deal with them.

What kind of ethical dilemmas? Well, say you're a retailer and you're told by the publisher to pulp a book. Just how many do you reserve to sell on ebay? If you're an editor and you know your writer is on drugs, when *is* the right time to ask to share? And if you want charitable legal advice, should you buy swimwear first?

In previous years, we've looked at crossovers, killing off characters, how free - or otherwise - creators are with their opinions in a commercial world, comparisons between how disasters are portrayed in comics and how they play out in the real world.

Now, the usual disclaimer: everyone here is appearing in a **personal** capacity. Nothing they say should be taken as representative of their individual companies or as an indication of what they might do if the hypothetical scenarios we're going to play out really came across their desks on Monday morning. Financial advisors can go down as up, and this panel may contain nuts.

[*slowly*] "May contain nuts." ...right.

And, as always, Budgie and I ask that the answers remain within this room. Thanks.

OK - so to the panel.

Making his debut on the panel is **GEOFF JOHNS**. Calling this man prolific doesn't begin to cover it. Having written titles including **The Avengers**, **JSA**, **The Flash**, and **Teen Titans**, not to mention **Infinite Crisis** and **Green Lantern**, Geoff's also part of the **52** writer line up. That's the line up of writers working on **52**, not being one of fifty-two writers on the book. Though, I dunno...,

Also making his first appearance here is **LIAM SHARP**. Liam's work on **2000AD** attracted attention, but he made his name at Marvel with his work on **Death's Head II** before then working on a variety of well-known super-hero comics as well as more matured themed material. 2004 bought **Mam-Tor Publishing** into existence, as well as his published artbook and **Event Horizon**, once described as "punk rock on a page". I'm not sure whether that makes him Malcolm McLaren, one of **The Misfits**, or just the drummer from **Busted**.

SHELLY BOND is another newcomer to the panel. Group Editor of the Vertigo imprint for DC Comics, Shelly's latest project is editing *American Virgin*. And for all the males in the audience, this is a wo-man, ok? Yes, I know you're not used to meeting them, but it is.

Making a welcome return is **JAMIE BOARDMAN**, Graphics Novels Editor at Titan Books. After last year's panel, with his... unique... definition of 'art', we immediately asked him in the bar afterwards to return this year. To give him credit, he was so surprised, he got up to his knees...

TONY LEE is making his first appearance on the panel, and is a man who needs no introduction... so we're not giving him one. *[beat]* **Jon Brow**... oh, all right then. With his work on *The Gloom*, *Midnight Kiss*, *X-Men Unlimited* and *Amazing Fantasy*, and a *Babylon 5* novel, and a *Doctor Who* strip in this month's *Who* magazine, not to mention the eighty-three panels on which he's participating at this year's Expo, Tony's almost slumming it this afternoon.

They Walk Among Us was established by Sabina and **JON BROWNE** as a mail order company, back in 1987, so Jon actually predates Image. As opposed to the rest of the panel who predate style and taste. *They Walk Among Us* was used as the backdrop for the television series *Spaced*, back in the days when Simon Pegg was better known for Comics than for fighting Zombies, even Marvel ones.

And then there's Budgie. Yes, well... Hmm. **Lee "BUDGIE" Barnett's** written stories for *Trailer Park Of Terror* and *X-Men Unlimited* and a comedy super-hero novel entitled *You'll Never Believe A Man Can Fly*, though he retains his day job as a Financial Director. In addition, of course, Budgie devised the panel and wrote the hypotheticals. So, you blame him, not me, ok? That's the deal. He writes the gags, and he says I kill them. In reality, of course, they're dead on arrival.

Ladies and Gentlemen... our panel.

[cue applause]

And so it's welcome back again to "Earth-Dave", that strange place where things are similar but not quite the same as on the Earth you're used to: on Earth-Dave, comic books take precedence over the FA Cup Final and John Byrne gets saner with each passing year. And... *[take a long look at me, as if you're wondering whether or not to say this]* on *Earth-Dave*, Budgie doesn't remind everyone every year that "comic-book companies aren't in business to make comics, they're in business to make money": It's a strange place, I tell you.

It's such a strange place, of course, that I'm waiting for Superboy's fist to come straight through that wall and then find myself presenting an entirely different panel. *[pause, glance at watch, sigh]* No such luck, I guess...

On Earth-Dave, of course, the major comic book company is Wonder Comics, who specialise in super-hero comics.

Anyway, the year is 2006... the date May 13th. So let's start...

Tony Lee - awww, look at the look of panic on his face. *[Trust me, Dave, it'll be there.]* Don't worry, Tony, you watch me, I'll show you how to moderate a panel. Anyway, Tony, you've just been offered the writer's slot on *Tales of Flagman*, a new title spinoff from the main *Flagman* book. The premise is to show a younger version of the character, just starting out. Interested? Why?

How much would you be relying upon the original tales of the character from 50 years ago, or would you be looking to write entirely new plots?

Shelly Bond - Welcome to the panel. You're the editor who offered Tony the work. Why might you have suggested a spinoff book?

Geoff Johns - Welcome to you as well. You're the writer of the main **Flagman** title. As far as you're concerned, is this new book a good idea? Isn't there a danger that the readers - with limited budgets - would prefer Tony's version of the character to yours?

Budgie - let's get you in early this year. You're Chief Financial Officer of Wonder Comics and... hold it, last year when we left you, you'd just been made Publisher. Let's see - ah yes, Fired after agreeing the product placement of adult products. Yes, Giant-Size Man-Thing was never the same again... Ah well, you're back as CFO. What would be the justification for the new title? Would there necessarily be a creative vision, or is it just money?

Liam Sharp - You're the artist on the new spin-off book. If you're working on an established character, with established costumes, etc., how could you bring a fresh look to the characters?

Jamie Boardman - Welcome back. You're the editor of the main title, **Flagman**; how much contact would you want or expect to have with Shelly in respect of the new book and the interaction between the two?

Jon Browne - You're sitting in your shop, and you read about this new planned book. Now **Flagman**'s selling quite well, not like it used to in the good ol' days, but it's doing ok... what do you think of the idea of a spinoff book? And would it likely, or even inevitably, harm sales of the main book?

Shelly - Tony's scripts start coming in and *[express astonishment] they're incredibly good! [pause]*. Sorry, **Tony**, of course, they're incredibly good... **Shelly**, your pleasure at this is only increased when you see the artwork that Liam's producing... would you want to increase the publicity about the book? If so, how would you do that?

Geoff - on Earth-Dave, you've been on a couple of high profile books that have garnered a lot of pre-publication publicity... would you have been happy with all of it? Is all publicity good for a book? What would you think if, say, an ad was produced that you felt misled the potential purchasers of the book?

Tony - Well, Shelly tells you what she's got planned to publicise the book. Are you happy with it? Or are you going to try and hype the book yourself, perish the thought.

So what would you be doing to try and push the book, and why? To increase **your** visibility or the book's? And can the two actually be contradictory?

Jon - What sort of promotional materials would you expect Wonder Comics to supply for a major push on a book? And what materials just simply wouldn't work?

Is there a point, **Jon**, where publicity becomes mere hype?

Shelly - on the subject of pre-publication publicity, how do you judge how much information about a book to release; when would you feel that the pre-publication publicity veers into spoiler territory, releasing story details instead of the reader discovering them while, you know, reading the story?

Tony - as a writer, how would you feel if editorial released something you'd consider a spoiler?

Anyway, the book comes out and is a roaring success. Liam and Tony have petals strewn in their paths wherever they walk and... just a reminder, folks, this is on Earth-Dave, ok? And then issue #3 comes out.

And neither Tony nor Liam are very happy any more. No, they're not.

What's gone wrong? I hardly know where to start...

Yes, I do - still on the subject of advertising and promotion. In the middle of the book, smack bang in the middle of an action sequence, Wonder Comics have stuck a full page ad.

Geoff - is that necessarily a bad thing? If you knew where the ad was going to be placed, might you script the book differently?

Anyway, as far as both Tony and Liam are concerned, it hurts the story, especially since, by a nasty coincidence, the graphic and words of the ad when taken in conjunction with the final panel *before* the ad, tell the world that "In pain, Flagman turns away from the death of his companion and wearily calls out ... I love playing x-box".

You're not happy, are you, **Tony**? Why not? Seriously - aren't ads just part of comic books? Don't the readers just accept it?

Liam - how are you feeling about your superbly drawn action sequence being interrupted like this?

Shelly - you're the editor on the book. Would you have known about the ad placement before it saw print? What do you say to your upset creators?

And talking of placements... **Budgie** - you've had an approach from your marketing people; *they've* been approached by a company wanting to product place in the comic books. They have a specific brand of fizzy drink, let's call it, oh, I don't know, let's call it Boka Bola, otherwise known as Boke. Any objection in principle?

OK, *now* they're suggesting paying Wonder Comics a lot of money to place images in the comic book of cans of Boke... a lot of money. You feeling any less ill-disposed to them now?

Jamie - you're told of the acceptance of the deal and that you're going to have to instruct your creators to product place ten cans of Boke in every issue. Do you have any problem with that?

Liam - you're one of the creators told to do this, to draw into the comic book ten cans of Coke, erm, Boke, an issue. Do *you* have any problem with this? Why? (or why not?)

Geoff - Surely it's nothing more than any other restriction you have when working on a work-for-hire character. You can't change the costume without permission, you can't kill anyone off without approval, you have to lose characters to crossover storylines - well, ok, you don't have to, since you'll probably be writing it... but this is surely nothing different. Or is it?

Jon - You have more daily contact with people purchasing comic books than anyone else on this panel. Would anyone even notice product placement? Or would they just take it as part of the story, i.e. the creator's *choice*.

Tony - If the readers *did* take it as your choice to always, say, have your characters drinking Boke, does it matter?

Shelly - Is there a fundamental difference between, say, having a character drinking a named brand on the one hand, and extolling the virtues of that brand in expository speech as part of the story on the other?

Something else wrong with the book is that a page's worth of lettering has been missed out. All the words on page 21 have, unaccountably, vanished; just simply not been included in the final printing. **Shelly** - how did this happen? Or rather, how *could it happen*?

Would there not have been checks to ensure such an error? What *are* the quality control procedures that a book goes through?

Liam - you're not that upset at the lettering vanishing, are you? After all, none of that nasty lettering getting in the way and obscuring your nice lovely art? Or are you? Might you have left areas blank knowing that the word balloons would cover the blank areas?

You're definitely less happy about page 6 though, aren't you, **Liam**? Because on page 6, a minor character's visual has been changed, with the face not as you drew it.

Shelly - Why might the visual of a character change? Might it have something to do with the fact that **Liam**'s version of this character - a character that only appears for a couple of panels - bears a striking resemblance to a public figure?

Shelly - would you change it without speaking to **Liam** first? Suppose it was only noticed by someone *just* before it went to the printers?

Mind you, **Shelly**, **Liam**'s not the only one to have slipped in an in-joke. Turns out that some of the lesser characters are named after friends of the writer. **Tony**! What have you been up to? Is it something that every writer does?

Geoff - would you do that, and would you be more likely to do it in a creator-owned work, say, than in a work for hire piece?

Jamie - What's your view on that; does every creator do it sooner or later?

Jon - if it's true that every creator does it, (writers name characters after friends, artists), does it matter?

...ok moving on.

Shelly - While this is going on, you're getting a bit concerned about one of your other creators, Charles Hackwriter, the well known creator and convenient stereotype.

Now Charlie's worrying you on two grounds. The first is that his work is arriving consistently late. It's good work, and artists like working from his scripts, but they're getting later and later. What would you do to try and alleviate the situation?

Liam - you know the reason his work's appearing later every month; he's discovered the internet, hasn't he? He's been running a message board, one in which he's involved in every

discussion, every debate... You also run a message board as part of the same suite of forums... But you don't seem to have a need to be involved in every discussion.

How helpful (or how much of a hindrance) are message boards in terms of understanding an audience? And how representative can a message board audience be, given the small numbers involved?

Tony - how much of a distraction can message boards in particular, and the internet in general, be?

Jon - Are they any use in gleaning how the market is moving, and is it possible for it to assist you in guessing ordering patterns?

Geoff - You're a close friend of Charlie's... and you've been warning him that he's damaging his reputation for professionalism. You argue and you both walk away angry... And now Shelly's second concern comes to light, following other near misses: the following night, Charlie loses it online: he attacks Wonder Comics, his editor, his co-creators... and you.

Geoff- Do you respond? If so, where? At the same site or elsewhere?

Liam - As coincidence, and convenience, would have it, you're the artist on one of Charlie's books. As far as you were concerned, you had a 'respectful' though not 'friendly' relationship with him. And he's taken a pop at you, blaming your 'unprofessionalism' as the reason the sales haven't been higher, and even accusing you of swiping, copying other artists' layouts and poses. Do you agree with Geoff, or would you respond differently? Does it make a difference because he's impugning your work now?

Liam - As a sidebar, is there anything wrong with swiping?

Tony - Let's say the same accusation is levelled at you, as a writer, that you've lifted a plot from another book/movie, etc. would there be something different between the accusation of an art-swipe or a story-swipe?

OK, neither of you respond, figuring it will just blow over. However, a rumour site, which should be nameless, mainly because Rich Johnston is sitting just over there, but what the hell, let's call it "Spying In the Gutters", picks up the story about how Charlie's let rip at **Shelly** and **Jamie**, blaming the type of books you two edit and Wonder Comics as a whole for the lack of interest in comics. He's done this by email, and Spying has copies of the emails. How would you both react?

Budgie - been a while since we've heard from you. In what you laughingly refer to as your spare time, you moderate an internet message board. Would a spat between professionals on a message board just be more fun for those watching, or is it something that you'd discourage.

Before we go, that rumour website has another item, one that threatens to "split the internet in half"... something that happens, by my reckoning, about three times a week these days. The item alleges that a book has been changed, dramatically, before publication. Not only was some of the story killed, but images have been altered. Now we've seen that this can occur for all sorts of reasons, but this is alleged to be because of death threats against those involved in the production of the book.

Shelly - The story's true - nice one, Rich - at least the first part is. A death threat is made against you and the creators. How seriously would you take such a threat. Would it depend upon where it was made, how it was made, etc?

Geoff - If you were informed of this threat, would you take it seriously?

General Question - what about the rest of you?

Something else to end up on...

In a blaze of publicity, Wonder Comics announces a new imprint: WonderManga, importing successful manga creators to write and draw manga for the US market.

Shelly - you're offered the job of group editor on the imprint. Can manga make it in the US? Is there a difference between proper 'manga' and manga-style US super-hero books?

Jamie - you're given the opportunity to work with Shelly, looking at the British market for Manga. Same question to you, can manga make it in the UK?

Jon - would 'name' creators on manga style books be more likely to increase your customers' interest in manga itself?

Liam - Of course, "manga sized" reprints are not limited to Manga - several trade collections of US comic book series have appeared in book stores with the artwork reduced in size. If Wonder Comics proposes to issue a trade collection of your work, shrunk to that size, what's your reaction?

Tony - You've always had a hankering to produce manga work. So you submit two pitches to Shelly, both very far from the work for which you're known. One is a tale of urban violence and includes sexual images and violent ones at that. The other is a childrens' fantasy. Is there something about manga that lends itself to such varying styles, or is it just another form of comic book storytelling?

Shelly - you've seen Tony's pitches. Given Wonder Comics' other publications, which are you more likely to greenlight?

Well, I think that's about it - just time enough to thank **Geoff Johns, Liam Sharp, Tony Lee, Jamie Boardman, Shelly Bond, and Jon Browne** for taking part. I suppose I have to thank Budgie as well, if only because his son's sitting in the audience this year. And of course, thanks to all of *you* for attending.

Inevitably, all the best bits were ad-libs by me, and all the clunkers, yes, *all of them*, were written by Budgie.

Thank you once again for flying Earth-Dave. We now return you to your normal Earth.

Thank you and good evening.