

Bill Jemas Interview

By Tom Pine, for Rutgers Alumni Magazine

Rutgers University and Marvel Comics—not two organizations one would normally place in the same sentence, right? Not necessarily. The common denominator in this particular instance is Bill Jemas, Corporate Operating Officer of Marvel Enterprises.

Bill—not William (Middle Initial) Jemas, or W. (Middle Name) Jemas—but Bill. How someone represents his or her name says something about that person. What it says to me about Bill Jemas is that he's a roll-up-the-sleeves kind of executive, who seeks to cut through the layers of red tape and get to the core of issues. The following interview will attest to that. Like the characters in the comics Marvel produces, Bill seems to want his actions to speak louder than his words.

I started this interview with Bill via the Internet and ended it face to face in Marvel's Manhattan offices. I mean, how could a guy who read Spider-Man in his youth pass up a visit to Marvel Headquarters—Superhero Central? Marvel's Manhattan offices are on 10 W. 40th St., on the 9th floor. When I stepped off the elevator I was greeted by artwork in primary colors—ah, I'm in the right place. Unlike many corporate offices, which seek to impress the visitor with a glossy façade, Marvel's offices reflect an aura of “organized clutter.” The main reception area is an unprepossessing place with a two-person padded bench flanked by two chairs. Just past this small space is a perpendicular hallway leading into the offices. I was invited to view the full-sized standup displays of many of the Marvel superheroes. As I went down the row, I spotted a small area with a Spider-Man ride (one you would find at a supermarket). Beyond that was a typical office conference room with its long table rows of chairs. What told me this was Marvel's conference room was the Captain America shield on the wall at the far end.

In a short time Bill's assistant Jenny appeared to let me know Bill was running a late. I settled in with my notes and a magazine, expecting a moderate to long wait. After all, I was visiting the COO of Marvel. But, in a relatively short time (about 15 minutes), Bill appeared with his prior visitor and said his good-byes in the reception area. If one expects a suit-and-tie man, Bill disabused that mental image by wearing a golf shirt and slacks. He stuck out his hand, said, “Tom? I'm Bill. Come on,” and led me to his office. He asked if I wanted anything to drink and asked if it would be okay if one of his people worked on his computer (a laptop) while we talked. We then sat at his large, round conference table and we began our interview. One of the first things he did was to ask *me* a question.

In answering a diverse range of questions, Bill revealed much about what gets his motor running. He's sharp, articulate, and makes an interviewer's job easy by providing thoughtful (and thought-provoking) answers. He (and indeed, all of Marvel's offices) projects an air of informality. I got the impression that getting the job-at-hand done takes precedence over (unnecessary) formality and protocol. To be sure, this fact seems to be a protocol of its own. It takes about a minute to understand that Bill's passionate about what he's doing at Marvel Enterprises. Though he talks quietly and considers his words, I noticed the intensity behind them. Make no mistake. Informality aside, Bill Jemas is dead serious about his role in making Marvel *the* top company in its field—something he's well in his way to doing.

Let's visit with Bill for a while and see what he has to say about his Alma Mater, his family and his job.

Rutgers Alumni Magazine: *Your press release says you received your Bachelor of Arts from Rutgers. Looking back, what did you take away from your Rutgers experience that you feel helped you in your business experience?*

Bill Jemas: I was a History major and that was a great department. I was very lucky to have Lloyd Gardner supervise my Henry Rutgers thesis. Professor Gardner, a brilliant historian, took the time to teach me the research and writing skills that I've used every day since then.

Then there was the Rutgers Institution—big, sprawling, bureaucratic, disorganized—the opposite of the private college. Private colleges shield their students from the real world; for a Rutgers Student, the real world starts the first day Freshman Year. You had to learn to surf the system or you would drown in it. Most of you reading this are Rutgers alumni (survivors) and know what I'm talking about. Rutgers University didn't hire hand holders or do any mollicoddling. We all learned to fend for ourselves with help from our friends—classmates, upperclassmen and faculty. We all learned lessons in real life that stood us in good stead for the business world.

RAM: *From Rutgers, you went on to Harvard Law School to obtain your JD, and then to Corporate and Tax Practice at Simpson, Thatcher & Bartlett. Why is that?*

BJ: When I was 21, I still didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew the rest of the way up. But I did apply to a handful of very good law schools on the theory (which turned out to be true) that a decent legal education from a reputable law school would afford me the flexibility to move to a good job in another field if I didn't like the legal profession.

RAM: *How did you go from law to Sports and Entertainment?*

BJ: All roads led *from* Rutgers. I was in my third year of practice for Simpson, Thatcher. I good friend from Rutgers was working as a legal assistant in the General Counsel's office at the National Basketball Association, and called me about an opening for a Staff Attorney job. David Stern, another Rutgers alum had just been named Commissioner and was staffing up the league office. David liked the Rutgers part (and didn't mind the Harvard thing), so he gave me my first break in sports. I worked two years as a lawyer and then six years as David Stern's (the NBA Commissioner's) "outbox." Basically, whatever was broken...

RAM: *Your press release also says you worked in the sports field with MSG Sports. Sports and comics—some would say that's a dream combination of jobs. How do you feel about it? Were these totally planned choices or did things just work out that way?*

BJ: I always loved basketball and learned to love comics. I am very happy about the way things turned out and pretty lucky that it all fell into place without any serious career planning on my part.

RAM: *I also read you live near your Alma Mater right here in New Jersey. I don't wish to get too personal, but could you tell us a little about your family?*

BJ: [In my] freshman year, 1976, I fell head over heels for a Rutgers Freshman named Jane Milrod, and started trying to talk her into going out with me. I'll skip over the details, but Jane finally broke down and said yes when we were seniors. Then, (skipping over a few more details) Jane and I got married in 1987 and now have two sons in grade school.

RAM: *Are you planning on sending your kids to Rutgers when the time comes?*

BJ: I would be proud to see my sons go to Rutgers.

RAM: *When did you come to Marvel? What was the date?*

BJ: January 2000.

RAM: *Bear with me here for a moment until I get to my point. When I was a kid, I, as most boys did, read comics—everything from Walt Disney to Superman. That fell away as I got older but I remember, as a high school student, getting interested in a certain Marvel superhero—Spider-Man. I remember surreptitiously picking up the book along with other magazines and a newspaper. I was supposed to be a cool high school senior, you see, not reading comic books. I don't know exactly when that fell away, but my nephew got me interested in comics again around 1992 with an independent, 'mature readers' title. By then, I really didn't care what people thought about a middle-aged man reading comics. So, I got to experience, from the consumer side, the turmoil in the industry. Now, to my point. I can't count the times I heard people say Marvel was "selling out," dropping out of comics and focusing on merchandising and movies. This was all prior to when the first movie came out mind you. I realize it's a bit after the fact but what do you have to say to those people from your unique perspective?*

BJ: Bear with *me* while I hit on a couple of the points you raised on your way to the final question. So far as I know, Marvel never planned on "dropping comics" and certainly has no intention of doing that today. What we do want to do is reach as many people as possible. Listen, Marvel creators have been writing and drawing 50-60 books every month for the past 50-60 years. In a real way, we aspire to be America's storytellers, and that means working through every form of media from books, to TV, to Movies.

RAM: *Okay, you're standing in your new office on your first day. Marvel was ailing and sorely needed a revamp. What did you think at that moment?*

BJ: Make better comic books. We were doing 60 comic [titles] a month and there wasn't a single book that I enjoyed reading. Put the product first and come up with the slogans later.

Then, we needed to physically put them into the hands of consumers. So, right away we needed a better sales and distribution system and then we had to help create a demand, create some appetite for this. In the long run I knew that, if we had very good content, we could package it a hundred different ways that would physically get [it] out into the hands of consumers. The really difficult part though was finding comic book writers who knew how to write to normal consumers... We didn't have points of entry. So, one of the goals was to retrain our writers so that they would write [shorter] story arcs.

We also signed up the best kids' shoe company, Buster Brown Shoes. Part of the deal when they started to produce *Spider-Man* shoes was that they had to hand out millions of samples of all these *Spider-Man* comic books—they actually stuck them inside the [shoe]boxes. [We also did] promotions with Payless Shoes for about a half-a-million units each.

RAM: *From what I've read, you impress me as being a bit of an iconoclast. You seem to like to ask, "Why not?" and burst a few preconceived bubbles along the way—the latest flap over the "black" Captain America, being one instance (which I think is a great idea, by the way). Is this an accurate perception?*

BJ: You're on to me—iconoclast (icon smasher) is a great word to describe me and my approach to bringing Marvel into the 21st Century. And Captain America illustrates the point. In the 1940s, he was one of a hundred comic book characters created to fight Nazis. Cap was the one who rose to the top of the pop fiction heap. Carrying a *shield*, not a sword and clad in Red-White and Blue from head to heel, he captured the popular spirit of American in the mid-1900s.

But, as our nation changed, grew and diversified, Captain American didn't keep up. In the Vietnam era, for example, patriotism had as much to do with pacifism as it did with militarism. The doves were red white and blue through and through, but didn't wrap themselves in the flag, and could not relate to good old Cap. By 1990, Captain America wasn't much more than an *icon*. As legitimate political views diversified, this one character could not possibly represent the spirit of American patriotism. But there was Marvel, publishing books about the same old iconic character year after year and watching monthly readership fall from over 500,000 to fewer than 50,000.

In 2002, Marvel broke the icon and found the spirit of the character. Captain America began to interact with, and/or represent, a diverse range of political viewpoints. Right now, Marvel publishes three separate iterations of the character in three different books. First, Captain America still plays the lead a book targeted toward long-standing (adult) fans. He's in the Mid-East fighting terrorism abroad, and facing the challenge of sorting out allies from enemies. Second, he plays a secondary role in a new book targeted to teens. We see the character through the eyes of year-2001 teenagers. Cap stands for what kids consider "old school." He's teamed up with a bunch of hyper-modern super-punks who call themselves the Ultimates, and his red white and blue view is just one of a dozen diverse opinions. And third, in the controversial new book, *The Truth, Red White and Black*, he doesn't show up at all. This story turns the Captain America legend on its head, and asks a series of Rutgers History Major questions. Suppose the Army really did have a dangerous, experimental, super-soldier serum in 1940, would they have tested it on black troopers? Suppose the Serum worked and a black superhero started winning battles, would the army want a black soldier to be the most prominent American war hero? Wouldn't it fry your noodle if the Captain America you've known for 60 years started his career like Pat Boone—as a cover artist for black talent?

The problem is that, people who have been reading Captain America... they get very upset. They feel that they've invested in Marvel, they've invested in the character, and they forget it's make-believe. And they really feel that we're undermining their hobby, their "career." You kind of look at them and say, "You're not wrong—there's no evil intent here. We're trying to encourage people to read comics; we're trying to bring this genre back from the grave."

The phenomenon, that had persisted since 1940, where you got your first comic books from your older brother, your older sister, your older friends... we lost a whole generation of older brothers and sisters. So we have to things that are way, way off the charts to get the momentum started.

RAM: *What [lost] generation would that be? What timeframe?*

BJ: I would say 1995 to 1999. Comic books just disappeared. It went from, “everybody has them, to *nobody* has them.”

RAM: *Why do you feel that happened? No “older brothers” to pass them on?*

BJ: Bad, bad, bad books. The people who had collected comic books their whole lives, who were into the tradition of collecting comic books, just kind of stopped cold. We had an explosion of the business. It expanded faster that it should have. Let me give you a sense of this. In 1995, a typical Marvel *X-Men* book was selling a million copies a month... We could have afforded to hire just about any writer in the world—from John Irving to Scott Turow—but the editors hired each other, and they hired their friends. The industry didn’t try to “get great” at the time... they just bulked out a lot of books... [So] there’s just no content from that era that we could re-package and sell to the bookstores. It was just horrible.

RAM: *I really like [the title] Alias... Of course, it’s “adult” but it doesn’t mess with the whole [Marvel] ethos...*

BJ: Written by one of those “indie” guys, who couldn’t get arrested. When we were hot, no one was hiring the really good writers because there was a shortage of artists. It didn’t matter how badly the books were written. So, people like Brian Bendis, who were doing a wonderful job on their own, couldn’t get work here. We called him and—it was very funny, for we were dying for a writer for *Ultimate Spider-Man*—he said, “I’ve been trying to work for you since I was a kid... [We said,] “Well, hey. You’re on. Start.”

One of the keys to the turnaround here was, we became... we had a million *X-Men* fans; we got sown to a hundred thousand a month and whenever we made any change in what the *X-Men* were doing, we’d get e-mails from the hundred thousand left. We’d never hear from [the nearly] one million who stopped buying. As much as you have to listen to your current fans, you have to listen beyond.

RAM: *Having had your hand in writing plot lines (such as the Wolverine “Origin” books) and considering the roster of folks you’ve brought into Marvel to work with you—Joe Quesada, for instance—you definitely seem to have your finger on the pulse of the business. Do you consider yourself a “comics” person? Do you still read them?*

BJ: Marvel is a big company and my time gets spread among all of our business units—from electronic games and Marvel.com to toys and T-shirts, to soft drink and fast food promotions. But comics are job one, and I read as many of Marvel books and competitive books as I can.

RAM: *How did you end up picking Joe Quesada as your Editor-In-Chief?*

BJ: He was here doing books under the *Marvel Knights* imprint. ...He was sort of a sub-contractor at Marvel. Joe was making the best books of all the editors, so he was the only guy I really thought about for the editor[-in-chief]'s job.

RAM: *How did you get into the writing end of the business?*

BJ: Actually, at Marvel, it was necessity. We couldn't find a writer who would do a ground-up approach to *Spider-Man*... write a book for a reader that had never read a comic book before. We had tried to find the current group of comic book writers who could handle that and the stuff was coming out horribly. So, I did some pretty extensive plot [work]... there was nobody else who could "get the take." And, now that we have [much better] writers involved, I hardly ever pick up a pencil.

RAM: *What's your favorite title, or character?*

BJ: Favorite character is easy—Spider-Man (Wolverine is a close second). Favorite title is harder, because we have a dozen great titles that are so diverse, it is hard to find one on any one scale to measure them. I can say that there is one book that I would recommend to a new reader, and that is Ultimate Spider-Man.

RAM: *Let's get philosophical for a moment. I read that you're keenly aware of the influence of comics on both children and adults. What do you feel comics have to say to us besides being merely entertainment?*

BJ: "Judge people by what they do, not by what they say." That's what I learned from my mother and father; that is what I teach my children, and that's the heart of a great comic book. Comic books storytelling is about unrelenting action. You establish your characters through their deeds, not with their thought balloons. You can write a great novel where the protagonist's decision-making process is as important as his deeds. Comics don't work that way, you don't type a page of text about your hero's inner thoughts, you show him facing a hundred decisions and making a hundred decisive actions. The reader distills the essence of the hero from the mosaic of his life's work. That's what "funny books" are all about.

RAM: *That's a very "male" answer, which isn't surprising. Do you feel that what you described above is one of the reasons most women never really get interested in comics?*

BJ: Let me give you a two-part answer. First, here's a clarification. When I say "action," I don't necessarily mean big superhero action. I mean, if it's romance, you judge your heroine by the sacrifices she makes for love, not by her love letters. It's really not so much about what the characters are thinking but what they're physically doing. Second, I think it's just a function of the kind of books that we produce, because in other parts of the world—and even in the United States in other demographics—women do read graphic novels and photographic story telling. I just don't think that our content—the crime-fighting superhero and the sci-fi stuff—is at all "girl friendly" and, worst of all, it's very, very difficult for females to walk into most comic book shops. Every head turns. "There's a girl here!" It's a disconnect. I think it's more cultural.

It's very funny that the *X-men*, of all the comic book franchises, is the only one which had a long-term, sustained "girl" following... We don't know until we do it in earnest but our hope is, over the next year, we are going to do a half-dozen titles that are modeled after the Japanese manga. The top-selling comic books in the United States bookstore right now are Japanese Manga influenced. And, according to the bookstores, the audience is primarily 13-14 year-old [females]. We're going to take the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* stories that are the least superhero oriented and we'll convert them down to Manga size and ship them to the bookstores.

RAM: *I also read that you broke with the Comics Code and now put out the "Max" line of mature reader books. I've been following Alias myself, and I like the concept—true to the original characters but more adult. Yet, you also indicate the importance of working for the social good. Some would say that the Max line works in the opposite direction. How would you speak to that? Why drop "the Code" at a time when some want more control of so-called "adult" content?*

BJ: The Comic's Code Authority is last vestige of McCarthyism in American media. And it is a more than a little ironic that the good people at AOL allow their "creative" subsidiary, *DC Comics*, to play a lead role in this anachronistic, and arguably illegal, institution. Essentially the goal of the Comics Code Authority (they really call themselves that) is to ban the distribution "non-Code" comic books from Newsstands and bookstores. Historically, if the members of the Code cartel decide that a book is not suitable for children, the book would not be available to the general public in places where they shop.

Marvel dropped "the Code" in favor of a ratings system modeled on those used in Movies, TV shows, Electronic Games and Music. We want to publish a diverse range of stories for the widest range of target audiences and understand that this makes us responsible for administering a ratings system to help parents decide for themselves which books their children should read.

RAM: *In the past, comics have always had simple, straightforward, good-versus-evil story lines. What with all the "socially conscious" talk going around these days, do you feel comics may be moving beyond the little kid out there who just wants a good, exciting read-with-pictures?*

BJ: There are two trends here—one negative, one positive. The negative is that very few books are written for kids. To counteract that trend, Marvel launched our "Ultimate" imprint, which is targeted to younger readers. The positive trend is toward diversification and hitting as many adult target audiences as possible. Listen, around the world—graphic storytelling finds every demographic. [Graphic] "Novella's" are incredibly popular with adult Latin American women; "Manga" is the top selling adult literature of any kind in Japan. The more we diversify, the more we will grow.

RAM: *Let's talk a bit about the "collectibles" facet of the comics biz. When folks realized those old books were worth something, the publishers produced a glut of "collectible" books which, of course, insured they would be too numerous to be of any real value. I read where Marvel is consciously eliminating overprints. Now, I realize it's a way to keep operating and merchandising costs down. But could it also be an attempt to keep the "collectible" value up—or isn't that a factor at all?*

BJ: I don't want to drag my fellow alumni too deep into the comic biz minutia. So here's a top-line answer. Historically, comic shops made a significant portion of their monthly revenue by buying and selling "back issues." At the end of each month, stores would put their unsold copies into inventory, mark up the price and make a nice profit selling them to collectors.

A couple of years ago, Marvel started re-printing sold-out books and dumping them on the market in a shortsighted attempt to grab every nickel every month. The obvious thing happened, the comic shops' inventory of unsold books lost its collector value and many retailers had to drop the prices all the way down to 25 cents. So, yes, all Marvel's monthly books are "limited editions" and "collectible." Retailers really appreciate this move. Since we've instituted that policy, Marvel's market share has risen steadily from 24% to 47%.

RAM: *Judging from the success of The X-men and Spider-Man movies, and looking forward to The Hulk and Daredevil movies, do you see these kinds of movies as being a natural extension of the comic book concept? Further, do you feel comics were a means to combine pictures with words in fantastic scenarios before the film industry was able to catch up in the special effects department—or were they (and are they) a completely separate medium that will endure?*

BJ: Marvel's movie and comic businesses have been growing hand in hand. So, it's "so far so good" and there is no reason for this trend to end. The movies are exposing the next generation of kids to Marvel characters and those kids are finding their way into comic shops to buy and read comics and they are finding our graphic novels in every major bookstore chain in America.

RAM: *What's your vision for Marvel, now that we're into the 21st Century?*

BJ: Barely 10 years ago, Marvel's circulation topped 150 million copies a year, and we ranked among the nation's top five publishers. My goal is to get all of those readers back and to get the next generation of kids hooked on graphic storytelling.

RAM: *One last "fantasy" question. You're sitting in your office one afternoon, on a day when you actually have ten minutes to yourself. Your mind wanders into the realm of a new comic story line centering on life at Rutgers. How would you develop that and who would your superhero be?*

BJ: Let's see, Iron (stomach) Man could survive daily doses of Brower Common's food. The Incredible (shrinking) Hulk and two friends could squeeze into one of those three-person freshman dorm rooms. Nick Fury and Captain American could mobilize the national security and intelligence agencies to find a parking space. Hey, you need a whole superhero team to take on the State University of New Jersey!