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Decoder Ring — Digital Comics: Ownership vs. Access

Column Editor: **Jerry Spiller** (Art Institute of Charleston) <yeri.spiller@gmail.com>

Welcome to the first installment of **Decoder Ring**, focusing on the intersection of libraries and newer digital narrative forms. Here we'll explore such digital disruptions as interactive fiction, nonlinear narratives, webcomics, and **Kickstarter** as a publishing platform. We'll consider how libraries can approach these areas and offer their patrons background, access and discovery of forms that don't necessarily have a physical document in the library space, or have fragmented distributions with more limited print runs as part of a variety of formats.

We'll begin by looking at digital comics, and how they compare to their eBook cousins. Any librarian who has had to make sense of digital content formats, distributors, and reader technologies in recent years has done more than a little head scratching. Considering the complexity of both the markets and platforms involved, electronic lending models and the exact functionality they confer have been slow to arrive. They do, however, eventually arrive. **Amazon** came to offer lending on the Kindle platform and smoothed out issues with **Overdrive**. Academic database lending is beginning to coalesce as **EBSCO** and **ProQuest** buy up libraries and technologies (van Arnhem & Callicott, 2013).

The world of comics has been as affected by the disruption of digital as much as any area of publishing. Both digital versions of comics from larger and smaller publishers (**Marvel** and **DC** are forever termed "the Big Two") as well as a groundswell of webcomics from independent creators have left readers and creators with the delightful problem of dealing with abundance. Looking at the relative ease of self-publishing comics in print or digital forms today compared with many years ago, ignoring areas like marketing and distribution of hard copies, it is natural that there has been a rising Creator-Owned movement gaining momentum.

In libraries, we know that lending, like reading, isn't one monolithic activity. Both refer to a variety of behaviors. Often, to find the best way to serve patrons, we must pick a spot in a continuum, weighing one constraint against another and trying to meet needs as best we can. As readers and as librarians, one continuum we navigate is that of outright ownership of a small number of titles versus access to a larger catalog.

Ownership of content in the digital realm means ownership of the files themselves, without DRM or proprietary readers. For digital

comics, the most common and most accessible format for collection would be a simple DRM-free PDF, although some readers prefer the CBR (Comic Book Reader) format and its variants, for which there are numerous free readers including CBR Reader and Simple Comics.

On the "wider access but less control" side of the continuum, **Comixology** is the first distributor of digital comics content that many will think of, with their popular reader available in apps on iOS and Android, as well as through the Web interface. Contender **iVerse** may have beaten **Comixology** to the punch with regard to library lending by reaching out to libraries with a lending-enabled version of its **Comics Plus** app. **iVerse** is a distributor of digital content, largely through **Comics Plus**. Founded in 2008, the company was an early entrant into the iOS market and now boasts of powering over five million product downloads from **Apple's** App Store ("Comics plus: About,"). **Comics Plus** is available as an app for iOS, Android, and via the **Comics Plus** Website in HTML5.

Comics Plus: Library Edition launched this summer at ALA after more than a year of anticipation. Account Director **Josh Elder** (also the director of the comics-based advocacy group Reading with Pictures) explained that there will be no upfront cost to libraries, only per-checkout fees of generally ten cents per individual title or 50 cents per collected graphic novel or trade (Alverson, 2012; Hadro & Enis, 2013). **Comics Plus** does not stop multiple patrons at an institution from accessing the same title. Since a large part of the target audience will be K-12 patrons, **Comics Plus: Library Edition** will allow libraries to block content for the whole institution or on an individual patron basis. **iVerse** intends to offer suggested age ratings for content as well. Academic libraries looking to bolster their collections for research in both pop culture and new media may simply appreciate the number of titles.

On the other side of the spectrum, **Mark Waid** is one comics creator who thinks a significant number of readers want to own the files for the comics they publish. He is ready to cater to those readers. Embracing the Creator-Owned movement, writer **Waid** moved from **DC** and **Marvel** to the more creator-friendly small publisher **Boom! Studios**

in 2007, though he continued to do freelance work for the Big Two. It's hard to be more credentialed than **Waid**, who created the industry-shaking *Kingdom Come* with superstar artist **Alex Ross** and has numerous Superman and Flash stories under his belt (a note for academic libraries: many **Waid** titles are available from **YBP**). He won an Eisner in 2012 for his work that year on **Marvel's Daredevil** as well as his own titles with **Boom!**, *Incorruptible* and *Irredeemable*.

Waid served as Editor-in-Chief and then Chief Creative Officer at **Boom! Studios** until December 2010. Eventually, though **Boom!** gave **Waid** the rights as creator that he wanted and was quick to distribute digitally through apps like **Comics Plus** and **Comixology**, he wanted more room to experiment and control his own distribution.

Waid left **Boom! Studios** in 2010, though he continues to work with them and the Big Two on projects. On his departure, he told **Laura Hudson** at **Comics Alliance** that he wanted to experiment with free comics and **Creative Commons** licensing. "I can't do something for **Boom!** and then announce to the world that they're free to download it all they want. As a corporate entity, they understandably cannot sanction that" (Hudson, 2010). **Waid** has long been of the idea that unauthorized downloads are a potential source of new readers that should be courted rather than prosecuted. **Waid** has started a new publishing venture called **Thrillbent**, where he releases comics for free download weekly.

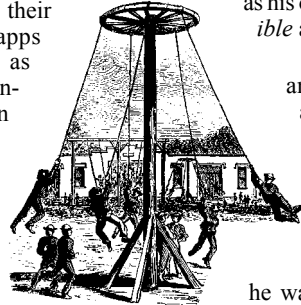
"Digital comics distributors like **Comixology** and **iVerse** continue to be great and valuable partners to us, and our comics will remain for sale through those platforms, as well. I get that there are plenty of comics readers who value the convenience of cloud-based services," **Waid** posted on the **Thrillbent** site (Waid, 2013). "But we hear constantly from readers who prefer to own and collect the comics and files they buy so they're accessible with or without an internet connection, and we're happy to oblige."

Luckily, libraries don't have to choose just one approach. **Comics Plus: Library Edition** provides an easy way to set up digital comics lending with no upfront costs. Likewise, creating guides and reading lists that link to free digital content like **Waid's Thrillbent** comics requires some expertise and time in, but what a way to target content to your patrons, from readers of all ages to rising faculty with research interests in the corpus.


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Author Bio

Jerry Spiller is an instructor of Web Design and Interactive Media at the **Art Institute of Charleston**. His courses include Nonlinear Narrative, Developing Rich Media Applications, and Interactive Message Design. His interests include digital storytelling and narrative and linguistic structures in information design. **Jerry** spent his formative creative years in Chapel Hill, where he earned both a B.A. in Asian Studies and Geography and a Masters in Information Science at the **University of North Carolina**. 

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Thursday, November 7, 10:20-11:10
Francis Marion Hotel, Carolina Ballroom
- **PANEL DISCUSSION: *Publishers and the New Open Access Mixed Economy.***
Friday, November 8, 12:45-2:00
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Schedule a meeting with ACS Publications by emailing LibraryRelations@acs.org

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From A University Press — The Publisher as Problem Solver

Column Editor: **Leila W. Salisbury** (Director, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS 39211; Phone: 601-432-6205) <lsalisbury@ihl.state.ms.us>

Next year I'll celebrate my 20th year in scholarly publishing, and I've been thinking about how my role in the process has changed over time. I began as an unpaid copyediting intern, and for a while I was so deeply immersed that I couldn't read a novel without a red pencil in hand, ready to mark typos and other errors that the publisher had missed. Later, I spent ten years in a marketing role, including several years as a publicity manager.

I loved that publicity job, and I felt powerful. I'd spend weeks before media calls in New York and DC reading manuscripts and taking notes, wanting to be prepared for any questions book reviewers might have (they're a very smart lot). It was like readying for oral exams on a wide range of subjects, and I've always maintained that working in scholarly publishing is like being in school all the time in the best possible way. I also felt like I could really make things happen, reviews, interviews, and general buzz. If I worked hard enough, the book would get the attention and recognition it deserved.

While this was a noble and youthfully enthusiastic outlook on my role in publishing, as the years

passed, I watched good books get passed over (I often secretly believed that if the same book had been published under a trade house imprint the results would have been dramatically different). I worked hard, but sometimes books I loved didn't succeed in the ways I thought they should. By the end of my tenure as publicist, I had come to a completely different understanding of what it was that I did. Instead of having the ability to make things happen, I realized that what I really did was to create the best possible conditions for things to happen, and the rest was up to the universe.

Today, as a press director and as an acquiring editor, I embrace my chief role as that of problem solver. I likely began to espouse this outlook while I worked in marketing. In that department, one of the chief goals of the job is to make things easy for others. Make it easy for a harried newspaper editor to cover a book by sending him or her a review copy, descriptive materials, a ready-made op-ed piece written by the author. Make it easy for radio producers to book an author by supplying them with suggested interview questions or a sample Q&A. Make it easy for bookstores, wholesalers,

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