Decoder Ring: A Funny Thing Happened When Amazon Bought the Forum

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April was a month for big changes in the digital comics world. If you were at the "The Continuing Evolution of Digital Comics in Libraries" panel at ALA Midwinter, or read Phil Morehart’s excellent summary on the American Libraries Magazine site, you could be forgiven for thinking that the panelists have some form of precognition when talking about "shifting models of distribution and subscription.1"

Fresh off Amazon’s purchase of Comixology only weeks earlier, the digital comics leader announced it will no longer allow in-app purchases. This splits the user experience significantly. Only reading will be done in the app, while purchasing must take place on the Comixology Website. The app itself will sync the purchases.

The impetus for this change is no doubt Amazon’s refusal to yield to Apple’s 30% take on in-app purchases. An outcry was raised quickly, with the community seeing both readers and independent creators suffering as the giants maneuver around one another. Anger is not necessarily aimed at the two equally, however. Writer Gerry Conway, architect of the classic death of Gwen Stacy storyline in The Amazing Spider-Man and co-creator of Punisher and Firestorm, clearly blames one more than the other: "Amazon did this. It did it for one reason, and one reason only: to advance their proprietary hardware platform, the Kindle, at the expense of Apple’s platform, the iPad and iPhone."

Conway worried about what a lot of creators and publishers are worried about: loss of readership and sales as the processes of reading and buying are disconnected. He notes that the physical and cultural inaccessibility of the brick and mortar comic book shop, particularly to new readers, has been a long-standing problem that digital comics have so far made up much ground in addressing. “Comic book publishers know this, and that’s why they’ve embraced digital distribution while still trying to support the comic store experience. Comixology provided a fabulous tool to do so — a way to easily introduce casual readers to new comics and provide quick and easy access to the vital impulse buy.”2 Say what you will of Apple, but they did create a platform that publishers could reliably use to deliver digital content to readers, even new readers.

As with many big announcements, reactions came in waves. Artist Skottie Young, a frequent contributor to Marvel with his visual reimaginings of Frank Baum’s Oz as well as popular mutant titles, offered his second take. “I may have jumped the gun on negative @comixology talk. I shopped the online store last night. It’s pretty solid. And more cut for everyone.”3 The higher cut Young refers to here is the different split from Comixology’s Website interface, where Comixology has always taken a 50% cut and publishers and creators split the rest.

If that arrangement holds now that the Comixology site is the only point of sale, it would be nominally better for creators than the app, where Apple and Comixology each take a sizeable cut. Still, other creators in Young’s feed echoed Conway’s points. Artist Kody Chamberlain responded, “The higher cut is nice, but I still don’t like requiring readers to do extra work to get the books.”

A more complicated process of discovery with less choice for the reader seems like more of a negative than the margins are a positive. A proportionally bigger piece of a much smaller pie is not a win. Time will tell how these changes in the most successful digital comic app affect the industry.

Mark Waid’s Thrillbent, profiled in this column in November 2013, also announced a new iPad reader app (with Android forthcoming) and major changes to their sales model in April.6 In what Waid is calling “Thrillbent 3.0,” the publisher is offering digital subscriptions with access (read “viewing” rather than “downloading”) to its titles for $3.99 monthly. That’s a small, recurring price for access to 250 comics and growing. The new model may interest many libraries.

What of Waid’s assertion that readers want to own the files for the comics they buy? Perhaps not in enough numbers to sustain the company. But Thrillbent’s dedication to upfront dealing is not changing. Readers can still choose to purchase DRM-free downloads of high-quality PDFs for issues they wish to own outright.

Waid and company also promise Thrillbent will continue to put out free content to reach old and new readers. They begin by giving those jumping on with Thrillbent 3.0 subscriptions a DRM-free download of Waid’s Eisner-nominated collaboration with artist Barry Kitson, Empire. The rights to the dystopian, superpowered political thriller reverted to Waid and Kitson ten years after its joint release from Image’s Gorilla Comics imprint and DC.

The changes at Comixology and Thrillbent are indicative of the shifts going on right now. The opportunities for mutual benefit between library and comics communities are big here. John Shableski, library manager at iVerse, noted that some professionals “don’t understand how library readership impacts the industry.”4 Comics need libraries to be that hook for new and casual readers, especially right now. Libraries need to get access to what patrons want to read, and to have the ear of adaptable and forward-thinking publishers. When you’ve got a big challenge, you team up.