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

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

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.”²

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.”³ 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 reimaginations 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.”⁴ 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.”⁵

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.”⁷ 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. 🌱

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Endnotes

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