I want to introduce you to a dangerously wonderful thing: the Digital Comic Museum (DCM) at http://digitalcomicmuseum.com.1 It's clearly wonderful, because it's full of scans of old comics from yesteryear that are in the public domain. Dangerous? Because someone had to do the painstaking research to ensure that these works really are in the public domain. The archivists know what I'm talking about.

DCM is a pretty grassroots effort. The header on every page of the site proclaims “We are the best site for downloading FREE public domain Golden Age Comics. All files here have been researched by our staff and users to make sure they are copyright free and in the public domain.” DCM’s FAQ explains2 that they make careful checks using UPenn's Catalog of Copyright Entries before publishing entries for user submitted scans.

DCM also lists in its FAQ titles and publications that are not acceptable for upload as they are not in the public domain. These include obvious choices such as DC, including its absorbed rival All American Comics, as well as Marvel, including its previous incarnations as Timely and Atlas. Similarly, and just as obviously off limits, are mainstays like Archie Comics, Mad Magazine, and anything owned by King Features or Universal Features. Also not to be plumed are the many classic horror stories of EC Comics, some of whose titles like Tales from the Crypt and Weird Fantasy are currently available in reprints from Dark Horse under the “EC Archives” moniker (a few different publishers have had a crack at the EC vaults over the years, with varying levels of quality in scans and recoloring work).

What you will find on DCM is more than enough to hold your interest. This is a treasure trove for researchers and fans alike. Some of the DCM archives are strips of pre-1923 origin like Little Nemo in Slumberland and Gasoline Alley. The bulk of the material is from the Golden Age of the late 1930s through the 1950s, however, and seems to land in the public domain via lack of copyright renewal. This isn’t surprising given the frenzied pace of creation in what was then a very ephemeral medium, and the subsequent chaos of publisher name and ownership changes, mergers, and closings. The interests of the period, when superhero comics were just in their ascendency, mean there is representation for genres like war, romance, Westerns, and detective books from publishers like Charlton, Dell, Hillman Periodicals, St. John, and Ziff-Davis.

Publications of the U.S. government are, of course, in the public domain. DCM has some good scans in this category as well, including many issues of the now legendary Army rag PS Magazine: Preventative Maintenance Monthly, created in 1951 and for many years by the legendary Will Eisner. Sadly, the uploads for this title start with issue 85 from 1960, 1951-1959 issues are not currently represented, nor is the magazine’s predecessor Army Motors. More complete runs of PS Magazine, from 1951 to 1971, are available from VCU Libraries Digital Collections.3

You have to appreciate the time and gumption put in by the DCM staff to clear these pieces of history for upload. Here’s just one legal quagmire I wouldn’t want to step into. And since I am not a lawyer, the following is a quick gloss of the rights to one very interesting pulp hero, crime-fighting Buddhist “The Green Lama,” as I understand them. The character was created by pulp writer Kendall Foster Crossen, writing at the time under the pen name Richard Foster (he had a lot of pseudonyms). This green-cowled “man who defeats death” himself wrote them. The copyrights to the comics were not renewed. Marketing new derivative works based on those stories would violate the original copyright. Those rights are still held by Crossen’s daughter Kendra Crossen Burroughs, herself an author whose works include an annotated edition of the Bhagavad Gita (along with translator Shri Purohit Swami) as well continuations of the adventures of another of her father’s pulp detective creations, Manning Drake. The Green Lama is trademarked by Argosy Communications in agreement with the Crossen estate. There have been authorized and unauthorized publications featuring the Green Lama in pulps and comics over the years. But the 1940s comics do appear to be in the public domain. DCM is not marketing anything new in offering up the original scans of the comics, so it would not seem to be in violation of Crossen’s copyright here.

Needless to say, society benefits from a robust public domain. Without it the Green Lama and friends would not have been able to take on Frankenstein’s Monster in 1943.

You must register to be able to upload and download from DCM. The registration process features no fewer than three bot checks. Comics available for download are compressed into CBR, CBZ, or CBT formats (variations on RAR, ZIP, and TAR files, respectively), so readers will need a digital comics reader like Comix or CBViewer to read the files.4

Readers can donate to help DCM cover their server costs and other operating expenses. This reader plans to do so. $ endnotes on page 85