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## Decoder Ring--Collaboration is King in Cartozia

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# Decoder Ring — Collaboration is King in Cartozia

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



It is refreshing to see creators mobilize and take advantage of the Web as a tool of their trade in the era of digital publishing. Of late, it is hard to recall a project more exciting than *Cartozia Tales*, a small group storytelling venture that recently crowdfunded the first ten printed issues of its independent comics anthology. The group is clearly savvy of the Web as a tool for both creation and distribution. Creators **Sarah Becan**, **Lucy Bellwood**, **Isaac Cates**, **Shawn Cheng**, **Lupi McGinty**, **Tom Motley**, **Jen Vaughn**, and **Mike Wenthe** made a simple Squarespace site to showcase their initial art and blog news and updates. They created a project Twitter handle (@Cartozia,<sup>1</sup> though many of the crew are active under their personal accounts), and pointed people to Kickstarter. Once word got out about the creators involved and their idea, *Cartozia Tales* made its Kickstarter funding goal, with 763 backers pledging \$44,151, just over their modest \$39,900 goal.<sup>2</sup> In short, this is how you do collaboration today.

As its cartographic name implies, *Cartozia Tales* recalls the maps common in sword-and-sorcery storytelling, the introductory spreads of **Tolkien's** Middle-Earth or the campaign settings of 1970s and '80s paper RPG games like early *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Cartozia's* map isn't just for dressing or ambiance, however. It really does play a central role in the storytelling. The core creators, led by writer and editor **Isaac Cates**, have split their map of Cartozia's isles into a nine square grid. Placenames like Whistlepig Woods and Smitherreens, so instantly evocative as to make **A.A. Milne** jealous, are sure catalysts

for starting narratives. Creators alternate grid locations with each issue, incorporating each others' ideas, characters and settings as their own muses dictate. They will reference each others' creations, but not necessarily pick up previous storylines. With this loosely rotating structure in place, they have embarked to build a constantly evolving shared world.

Guest authors and artists will also feature in each issue to keep *Cartozia* fresh, both by adding new ideas and styles, and doubtlessly allowing each of the core eight creators a chance to take a month off and focus on other projects. The roster of guest creators is already impressive. **Adam "Apelad" Koford** of pioneering Webcomic *Laugh-Out-Loud Cats* fame is in *Cartozia Tales* #2. *American Elf* creator and cartoonist laureate of **Vermont James Kochalka** also wrote a story for this issue. Upcoming guests include such heavy hitters as **Kelly Sue DeConnick**, who revamped **Marvel's** *Captain Marvel* as an empowering feminist icon and co-creator (with **Emma Rios**) of the atmospheric and macabre *Pretty Deadly* from **Image**. **Ben Towle**, writer and illustrator of the indie Webcomic *Oyster War* and historical fiction graphic novel *Midnight Sun* from **SLG Publishing**, is also on the guest roster. **Cates** currently has commitments for guest slots up to issue eight.

Bonus works are created as companions to each issue. The small volumes available from the *Cartozia* crew include *An Alphabetical Bestiary of Cartozia* and *An Introduction to Cartozian Magic*, each available on their store.<sup>4</sup> The zine-like references harken back to the endless D&D sourcebook days

of **Gary Gygax** and **Dave Arneson** at **TSR** and will be instantly familiar to role-players.

The four-heads-tall characters and anthropomorphic animals are evidence of the books' all-ages format. "If you can read," they offer, "you're part of the audience we imagine."<sup>5</sup> This approach has gained praise from both **Comics Alliance's** **Chris Sims**<sup>6</sup> and **Geek Mom's** **Jenny Williams**.<sup>7</sup>

The *Cartozia* group was also forward-thinking enough to include "Libraries and Librarians" as a backer level on their Kickstarter, complete with promotional materials and an allusion to a librarian character in their world:

#### LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS:

A ten-issue subscription, plus access to our curriculum of activities (on cartooning, mapmaking, storytelling, etc.), plus 30 full-color bookmarks and a 2'x3' poster drawn by our core cartoonists. The poster features Malith (a librarian of Erissa, her daily struggles in a library of rare enchanted tomes, and her inspiration in nurturing the curiosity of young readers. (It's funny and just a little sweet.) Add \$15 to receive the "fun bonuses" for each issue; add \$55 (+\$35 if international) to receive two copies of each issue.<sup>8</sup>

If your library didn't get in as a Kickstarter contributor, don't worry. You can still subscribe or buy individual issues and bonus books on *Cartozia's* Big Cartel storefront at [cartozia.bigcartel.com](http://cartozia.bigcartel.com). 🐼



Figure I: Map of Cartozia, Image: [cartozia.com](http://cartozia.com)<sup>3</sup>

#### Endnotes

1. Twitter, "Cartozia Tales (Cartozia)." Last modified Nov 23, 2013. Accessed November 24, 2013. <https://twitter.com/cartozia>.
2. Kickstarter, "Cartozia Tales: Ten Issues." Last modified Oct 01, 2013. Accessed September 23, 2013. <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1765342446/cartozia-tales-ten-issues>.
3. Cartozia, "Cartozia Tales." Accessed November 21, 2013. <http://cartozia.com/>.
4. Big Cartel, "Home / Cartozia Press." Accessed Nov 23, 2013. <http://http://cartozia.bigcartel.com/>.
5. Ibid. 3.
6. **Sims, Chris**. Comics Alliance, "Buy This Book: 'Cartozia Tales.'" Last modified Sept 24, 2013. Accessed November 21, 2013. <http://comicsalliance.com/buy-this-book-cartozia-tales-kickstarter/>.
7. **Williams, Jenny**. Geek Mom, "Comic BooksKickstarter: Cartozia Tales Creates a Comic Fantasy World for the Whole Family." Last modified Sept 24, 2013. Accessed November 24, 2013. <http://geekmom.com/2013/09/kickstarter-cartozia-tales/>.
8. Ibid. 2.