

How can 575 comic books weigh under an ounce?: Comic book collecting in the digital age.

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How Can 575 Comic Books Weigh Under an Ounce?: Comic Book Collecting in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Once a quest that often took years of visits to flea markets, garage sales, used bookstores, and shop, collecting an entire run of a comic book title may become as easy as downloading a file. With the advent of DVD-ROMs published by Graphic Imaging Technology and other companies of such titles as The Amazing Spider-Man and The Fantastic Four on a single DVD, comic general readers may be more and more tempted to read on screen in the future. This paper discusses the consequences for the comic book collecting hobby and the comics industry as a subculture that print begins to mutate in the digital age.

Helping a friend move, I once filled up the back of a pickup truck with comic books. . . anyone else who has ever moved a comic book collection, especially a sizable one, . . . material presence, particularly its weight. Individually, the typical printed comic book

The Flash—can seem insubstantial, but a monthly accumulation of *Flash* issues over can fill a box, and a comic book collection of many titles can fill a room and beyond

Consequently, anyone who collects comic books has to deal with this factor of materiality further by collected comics often being bagged and boarded for preservation purposes according to grades of physical condition from mint to poor for commercial or trade purposes. In addition to the material nature of the books themselves, comic book collecting often involves collectors physically, as putting together a collection, if one didn't buy the series from the first published, can involve years of visits to flea markets, garage sales, used bookstores, comic conventions, and comic book stores, among other places, in order to find all the issues one is collecting. Even if a collector orders an issue online through eBay or elsewhere, the issue must be packaged and transported physically to the collector. Thus, most of the social aspects of comic book collecting have been based around the materiality of comic books. But with the development of electronic publishing, the automatic association of comic books with physicality is challenged. The material aspect of comics has been revealed to be a mere vehicle of information. A comic book collection of, say, *The Avengers*, that once filled a box can weigh under a pound if inscribed on a slim computer disc, the disc itself perhaps soon to be discarded as obsolete. Or the files encoded magnetically on a computer in one location and downloaded to another location over the Internet. But is the disc or the electronic files it holds a comic book collection? They do not have the weight of the printed comics, but does it have at least the significance? The advent of DVD-ROMs collecting decades of such titles as *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Fantastic Four* on a single disc, comic book collectors and general readers may be more and more tempted to view the comic book screen in the future. What happens to the comic book collecting hobby and the community traditionally based in print, as they begin to mutate in the digital age? This article explores these questions.

“For many comic book readers and collectors, the idea that a comic book can exist other than in print may be difficult to accept.”

Though the production process of comic books has changed over the years, today computers are often used at various stages. As McCloud recognized back in 2000 in *Reinventing Comics*, indeed, before a comic is printed, it may only exist in digital form—written, drawn, inked, colored, lettered, and proofed as an electronic file. However, when the production process is complete, the result is usually a printed comic book, typically in a comic book store in a process described by J. Pustz that involves more than just a commercial

“many regulars find that the real reason for people visiting comic book establishments is interaction with the people there, including other customers and employees. The comic book store is a site for culture as well as commerce.”^[2] So, for many comic book fans and collectors, the idea that a comic book can exist other than in print may be difficult.

Nevertheless, electronic comic books have existed for a number of years. McCloud's multimedia CD-ROMs in the early 1990s such as *The Complete Maus* by Art Spiegelman were a step with taking comics beyond print.^[3] Indeed, the *Maus* CD-ROM was used by Spiegelman not only the comic but also background material such as sketches and family photographs. Modern electronic comics seek to enhance the words and pictures of the comics medium by adding animation, sound, and other special effects. But, one could argue that, for example, the “animated comic book productions” and “digital comic books” DVDs produced by Intec Interactive and Eagar, which took existing comic books from the publishers CrossGen and Marvel and transformed them into multimedia productions, can't be considered comic books anymore but instead are a new art form.^[5]

By contrast, the digital comic books that this article focuses on are identical to their print counterparts. The essential difference is that one is read on paper and one is read on screen. In recent years, comic books from the past have begun to be scanned and archived electronically, and offered on disc. The best known of these products are produced by Graphic Imaging Technology, New York City,^[6] but other companies producing similar products include the aforementioned Media^[7] and Antarctic Press.^[8] GIT has produced approximately 30 CD-ROMs and DVD-ROMs, primarily of Marvel comics.^[9] GIT was producing DVD-ROMs that contained decades of comic books, such as *The Amazing Spider-Man: The Complete Collection* DVD-ROM which featured 50 years of *Spider-Man* comics from 1963 to 2006.^[10] However, in late 2007, Marvel pulled out of the GIT, presumably to concentrate on their new online Digital Comics Unlimited (DCU) which offers readers access to past Marvel comics online on a subscription basis,^[11] but also to publish DVD-ROMs on their own.^[12] In addition to the loss of the Marvel license, other factors that have kept by GIT have included companies such as another major comic publisher, DC, being reluctant to embrace the technology because of difficulties paying royalties to past creators,^[13] and the reluctance of comic book stores to stock the new type of product.^[14] Despite the obstacles, GIT and other companies continue to archive comics digitally in this manner; GIT's latest releases include collections from Archie Comics, and a set of Star Trek comics collecting work from various comic publishers.^[15]

However, the existence of the comic DVD-ROMs raise questions about comic book

“By definition, comic books are floppy paper things with staples.”

files on the DVD-ROM be considered a comic someone can purchase for \$50 a DVD-ROM collection of *Uncanny X-Men*, then will the original print collection be as high as they are currently, say as measured in the *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*? [16] Does a collection have the same effect upon readers electronically as it does in print? To help answer such questions, I put together a survey.

I distributed it at my local comic book store (Astound Comics in Westlake, Ohio), and electronically to some fellow comic book readers that I knew. Subsequently, the survey was mentioned in a couple of online articles by journalist Michael San Giacomo and some other comic book readers contacted me to fill out the survey. [17] Altogether, I received 28 responses, all of which were interesting. (The [survey](#) can be read after the bibliography at the end of this paper.) The survey is perhaps not the most rigorously scientific given its ramshackle distribution, but the survey's answers to the questions above when combined with other research results.

First of all, most of the survey respondents (20.5) did not regard the electronic file collection (one respondent thought that it partly was and partly wasn't). The reasons for this conclusion varied from the traditional association of comic books with print (“By definition, comic books are floppy paper things with staples”) to an emphasis on first appearance (“a collector is someone who owns the originals in the format they were released in”), to the effort involved in collecting (“A collector, and his collection, is what you hunt down, and buy. Having a collection of comic in a digital format is not collecting. It would be simply owning.”) to the active maintenance of the collection (“Finding them in nice condition, taking care of them, so on and so forth are all part of the collecting experience that I think are missing from the electronic format.”) (7.5) who viewed the electronic files as a comic book collection stated variations of “No, it was the comics that mattered and not the format attached to the comics (“Comics are not just about the original art. So digital collections are just as valid as paper collections. Collecting is about being engaged by the art, engaging the artists if possible, and engaging others in the community. It's ultimately about human experience, not about pieces of paper or bits of information.”)

Clearly, each of the possible answers to the question “Would you consider a comic book collection in an electronic format to be truly a comic book collection?” has merit. The majority of respondents who thought the answer was No have tradition on their side. Comic book collecting as a hobby emerged around print, eventually becoming “the nation's third largest collectible market”

coins and stamps.”^[18] Obviously, having a complete collection of a comic book title electronically negates a bit of the rarity that the physical collection possessed previous terms of monetary value (after all, people interested in reading the title who would previously to find the scarce original issues would presumably drop out of the collection in terms of the effort put forth to gather the collection (several respondents noted that, while able to read the comics, the hunt for various issues was a great deal of the appeal of the collection). However, as one respondent noted, both the printed and electronic collections may be considered comic book collections, but in different senses: “I suppose it is a collection, but not the same as a traditional comic book collection of comics in longboxes. Instead, it’s a digital file collection that lacks the tangible, physical nature of a collection. It’s like with music—you trade your CD for an iPod. It’s similar but not the same.” So, the traditional comic book collection of printed comics may continue, but will be more akin to collecting first edition books or original artwork. People interested in just reading the comics may be satisfied with an electronic version. Recent trends in printed comic book back issues have been less in demand suggest such a shift is going on in the industry.^[19] However, this is likely due to the popularity of printed graphic novels, which cover entire storylines of a comic book title and are currently effectively eclipsing the importance of monthly comics in the estimation of industry insiders.^[20] Still, this trend will likely continue as electronic comics become more common.

In fact, 24 of the 28 respondents to the survey had already read an electronic comic book. While traditional comics being collected and offered on disc, current comics are being offered electronically, including one that made its debut not in print, but on a cell phone.^[21] As noted previously, just as multimedia comic CD-ROMs, there may be a tendency eventually for creators of electronic comics to go beyond the traditional boundaries of print, but comics in their traditional form adapt quite well to screens. Economic pressures such as rising paper and printing costs may lead to more comics being published electronically. Provided one has a computer and Internet access, it is cheaper to publish a comic online than in print. As cartoonist Ryan North notes, “Publishing a comic online is easier, cheaper and you reach a much wider audience.”^[22] Furthermore, the appearance of bootlegged comics being made available online suggest that a demand exists for electronic comics. This demand currently is not well met by the major comics publishers, who are still figuring out how to adjust to paperless comics.^[23] Even Marvel’s DCU initiative generated a lot of readers wait at least six months past the print appearance of a comic to see it posted online. When Marvel ended its relationship with GIT, some of the collectors I surveyed who had purchased Marvel DVD-ROMs and seemed interested in purchasing further releases did start to

as a way to meet this desire. In contrast to most of the survey respondents who con- version of a comic book superior to the electronic version, some collectors clearly electronic version. For example, as one collector on GIT's online forum explained electronically avoided the storage of boxes upon boxes of print comic books somev having to move them all when changing residences, "I love to READ comics. Not ST feed such a demand for electronic comics (and help stave off piracy), comic book p probably have to eventually offer their material electronically, perhaps in a fashion sound recordings are often available both on CDs and as downloads. However, sucl comics industry will likely be slowed by the considerable clout of comic book retail vested interest in the present print-based distribution system and may view elector which presumably could be sold directly from the publishers, as unwanted competit Gomez argues in his book *Print Is Dead: Books in Our Digital Age*, such change may be and more people are turning away from traditional methods of reading, turning inst computers and the Internet for information and entertainment."^[26] The comics pub undoubtedly follow their readers in this migration, as they recognize the importanc their efforts to reach more readers.^[27]

However, will the existence of electronic comics mean that print comics will cease not, because—as the survey responses revealed—a considerable attachment to prin Furthermore, while it is common to see print or electronic publishing as a dichoton quite complementary in practice. For example, readers who just want to read a com print may someday read print-on-demand comics, the source files of which are distr electronically (akin to today's Marvel's Essential and DC's Showcase Presents volu obviously could be sold in comic book stores, which because of the social nature nc continue to attract a loyal customer base (and, of course, some comics-related mat figures, statues, and t-shirts cannot be downloaded).

Ironically, another result of the comics medium losing its traditional association wi we can now more clearly see the materiality factor inherent in print so the printed materiality becomes emphasized. Examples of this manifestation include the recent *Vault: A Museum-in-a-Book with Rare Collectibles from the World of Marvel*, with its inter well as the increasing presence of high quality hardback editions of comics such as Editions, many of which appear to be sold to readers who have likely read the comic Such high-end print publications take advantage of the tangible and interactive aspec medium, and all the advances in printing technology over the centuries. In addition

art and writing of the comics, the books operate as works of art themselves with the binding, covers, and pages. Any electronic publication of the same comics would be the aesthetic quality of the reading experiences offered by these beautiful volumes. humble beginnings of comic books when they were priced at a dime and often printed on paper possible, [30] this perhaps final evolution of comics in print stands in sharp con-

“The monthly comic may not be able to sustain itself in print much longer.”

However, a fundamental shift probably will occur in the near future, one in which most of the material that makes up those titles that originally appeared, and the comic book in its traditional pamphlet form may become an endangered species. As Chris Warner, an editor at Dark Horse Comics, notes, “The comic book pamphlet is already an artifact.” [31] If the comic book as a print-on-demand product, the monthly comic book may not sustain itself in print much longer due to the low cost of the material available on the investment given the costs of marketing, producing, and transporting.

With the availability of the electronic comic, this monthly serialized tradition of comics may flourish. Already, a company, DriveThruComics, offers downloads of traditional comic books. [32] With titles offered at a third of the price of their print counterparts, such downloads may become more popular and could potentially increase sales of titles to readers priced out of the print comic market. The downloadable nature is significant because the notion of ownership appears to be important to comic book collectors, even with electronic comics. As one survey respondent stated, “I own a comic book which is based on a rental model, “At least with the DVDs, I own something.”

“I have known collectors who have bought years of a title without ever reading it.”

The importance of the ownership issue may reflect the value of collecting as an activity itself. As the sociologist Jean Baudrillard has observed, “collecting represents a rudimentary way to exercise control over the world.” [33] The collector, by selecting from and sealing off a portion of the world, is constructing in or through the collection an internal world, perhaps one even fundamental to his or her identity. This internal world is seldom complete, and the collector who finishes the pursuit of one comic book may subsequently embark on the pursuit of another. Baudrillard, in his theorization of the act of collecting, even notes collectors buying things because they’re part of a series, even if the individual objects are of little interest to them beyond their presence as part of the series.

subsequently embark on the pursuit of another. Baudrillard, in his theorization of the act of collecting, even notes collectors buying things because they’re part of a series, even if the individual objects are of little interest to them beyond their presence as part of the series.

description that fits many comic collectors I know. I have known collectors who have a title without ever reading it, and other collectors who will complain about a title for not buying it, even though they could purchase numerous alternative titles. Most comic collectors could share similar anecdotes about themselves and others that would appear as baffling behavior without a familiarity with either comic book collecting or an understanding of collecting in general.

Perhaps even more strangely, Baudrillard further suggests, collectors may never truly complete a collection; [35] apparently the satisfaction derived from the collection itself is by the satisfaction to be gained from pursuing new additions to it. Similarly, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has theorized about what he calls the “object a,” [36] an abstraction of desire that becomes identified with a particular goal or object. The object a symbolizes all that is missing in a person’s life and a person may feel that he or she will achieve a sense of lasting satisfaction by possessing that object, or completing that goal. [37] Missing comics from a collection become an object a for a comic book collector. The comic book collector may very intensely desire the missing holes in her or his collection, and spend considerable energy, money, and time pursuing them. Of course, since the object a is ultimately an abstraction of desire, perhaps even the satisfaction itself, only temporarily attached to a particular object or objective, it can never be truly satisfied, even when the person possesses the sought-after object or has fulfilled the intended goal. A collector who has long sought a particular comic book, or to complete a particular set of comic books, may think that upon fulfillment of the long-awaited goal he or she will feel complete. But instead, upon fulfillment of the initial quest, shortly afterward a new object or objective will serve as an object a, and the collector embarks on yet another comic collecting quest. For Lacan, this is because the lack we feel can never truly be filled, but nevertheless we continue to pursue desired objects, hoping for the sense of completeness we feel they promise.

Baudrillard and Lacan help to illuminate the activity of collecting in general, and the activity of collecting comic books in particular. Fundamentally, for our examination of electronic comic book collecting, our understanding of the comic book collecting activity reveals why the notion of owning electronic files, might always be a factor in collecting. Furthermore, such an analysis of why some survey respondents disdained the loss of the hunt for a missing issue when the entire comic book run electronically. The thrill of the chase per se provided perhaps the primary appeal of collecting as the comics themselves, as does interacting with the objects in the collection, preserving them or sorting them and so forth. Such physical aspects of comic book

transformed, if not abandoned, when comic books go digital. There are no longer a bag and board, organize, and store in boxes. To a veteran collector, the loss of such much of the joy out of comic book collecting.

However, pursuing a collection of electronic files can still provide this dimension of several survey respondents noted. Though the files may not be able to be directly to one will likely still need to search out certain issues and organize the files on the computer reading device. Furthermore, some comic book collectors who are more interested in comics than the other aspects of comic book collecting anyway, may well welcome the bother and expense of archiving, organizing, and storing print comics. They may also hunting for a particular missing issue will likely not mean having to leave the house. Collectors can track down a missing issue from their computer. Issues of electronic comics stay accessible from the initial publishers for long periods, so that someone who was no longer have to pay an exorbitant amount for an issue on the collector market, with popular comics once they went out of print. So, some older comic book collectors may welcome a shift to electronic comics. And, of course, the notion of an electronic collection may not be as foreign a notion to younger people, as one survey respondent are getting used to technology at an early age, and aren't afraid of reading off of a screen.

Ultimately, comics have always been designed to the format (look at the current six most storylines in monthly comics, which are obviously written with an eye towards an entire story arc in a trade paperback publication, arguably to the detriment of the individual comic). The distribution method may change, but the fascination with the comics medium remains the same. We may look back years from now and think that an electronic collection is not such a strange idea, even if it weighs no more than the electronic comics reside in. In any case, the true measure of a comic book has always been its effect on the reader.

Thanks to Scott Rudge of Astound Comics, Michael San Giacomo of *Newsarama* and Brent Fishbaugh, and all the survey respondents for their assistance with this article. I am also grateful to the comics scholars of the Comics Art & Comics Area of the Popular Culture Association for their assistance with an earlier version of this article, which I presented as a paper at the 2008 Joint Confer-

Frederick Wright, Ph.D., has long been interested in how electronic publishing affects popular culture previously based in print. His doctoral dissertation, *From Zines to Electronic Publishing and the Literary Underground* (available online at <http://zinebook.com/resource/wrightdissertation.pdf>), explored how zine publishers of the World Wide Web at the turn of the century. Currently an assistant professor and Pre-Law Program Coordinator at Ursuline College in Pepper Pike, Ohio, Wright, like his superhero characters, also has a secret identity, as the novelist Wred Fright. His most recent work on paper is *The Pornographic Flabbergasted Emus* (ULA Press, 2006), chronicling the adventures of a garage rock band in a college town, and his most recent novel published electronically is *Omega Glee* (currently being serialized on *Wredfright.com*), concerning two bloggers who survive while the world falls apart. Wright earned his Ph.D. and M.A. from Kent State University and his B.A. from Bowling Green State University. He can be contacted at either fwright@ursuline.edu or wredfright@yahoo.com.

Comics Books on DVD-ROM Survey

I am conducting research on how the advent of entire runs of comic book titles on DVD-ROM (e.g., [The Amazing Spider-Man: The Complete Collection](#) DVD-ROM published by GIT, which covers 30 years of [The Amazing Spider-Man](#) comic book in electronic format) might affect the practice of comic book collecting. As a comic book collector/reader, you might be able to assist me in answering the following questions in the survey sheet. There are no foreseeable risks involved in the filling out of this questionnaire, and all participation is voluntary. I may utilize your responses to survey questions in any scholarly materials that arise out of this research.

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The survey is on both sides of this sheet of paper. Should you need more room to answer, please feel free to continue your answer on the blank space on the back of this sheet.

1) Have you ever read a comic book in electronic format? _____ Yes _____ No

If you marked yes, then what did you think about the experience of reading a comic book in electronic format as opposed to reading a printed comic book?

If you marked no, then why have you not read a comic book in electronic format?

2) Have you ever purchased or used a DVD-ROM which collects a run of a comic book (e.g., the aforementioned The Amazing Spider-Man: The Complete Collection DVD-ROM)?
_____ Yes _____ No

If you marked yes, then would you purchase/use another? Why or why not?

If you marked no, then what are your reasons for not purchasing/using such a product?

3) Would you consider a comic book collection in electronic format to be truly a comic book collection? _____ Yes _____ No

Please explain the reasoning behind your answer.

4) How many years have you been reading comics?

5) Do you consider yourself a comic book collector? _____ Yes _____ No

6) If there's anything else you would like to note about your thoughts regarding comic book collecting in electronic format and the future of comic book collecting, please feel free to jot them down.

Thank you for participating in the survey. I may be conducting some more in-depth research in the future. If you might be interested in participating further, then please provide your name and contact information below. If you would prefer to remain anonymous, then please do not provide your contact information or indicate to me that you desire to remain anonymous should I utilize your responses in a paper or any other scholarship that arises out of this research. If you would like to see a paper that results from this research, then please just let me know here as well.

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12. Newsarama Staff, "Marvel's FULL September 2008 Solicitations," *Newsarama*, <http://www.newsarama.com/comics/080617-marvel-sept-solicits.html> (accessed August 21, 2008). Marvel's DVD-ROMs seem to include fewer issues on them than their comic book counterparts. The first two releases of their "Digital Comic Book Archives," featuring Hulk and Iron Man, only offered 50 issues of each title, in comparison to the equivalent GIT disc which offered about 500 issues each, and at a price not much less than what GIT was offering—about three times as large (\$29.95 vs. \$49.95). The initial sets seem also to have disappeared from the Marvel Web site solicitations for products being released in September 2008, suggesting they've either been canceled or delayed. Since going out of print, the GIT comic books have become collectible items themselves. I have seen the GIT Iron Man comic book for over \$100 on Amazon and eBay.[↑]
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