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 the local comics shop, collecting an entire run of a comic book title may become as easy as downloading a file from the Internet. With the advent of DVD-ROMs published by Graphic Imaging Technology and other companies collecting decades of such titles as The Amazing Spider-Man and The Fantastic Four on a single DVD, comic book collectors and general readers may be more and more tempted to read on screen in the future. This paper explores the possible consequences for the comic book collecting hobby and the comics industry as a subculture traditionally based in 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. As a result, I, or anyone else who has ever moved a comic book collection, especially a sizable one, can testify to its material presence, particularly its weight. Individually, the typical printed comic book—say an issue of The Flash—can seem insubstantial, but a monthly accumulation of Flash issues over a number of years can fill a box, and a comic book collection of many titles can fill a room and beyond as it grows.

Consequently, anyone who collects comic books has to deal with this factor of materiality, emphasized further by collected comics often being bagged and boarded for preservation purposes, and classified 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 affects the collectors physically, as putting together a collection, if one didn’t buy the series from when it was 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 of the series one is collecting. Even if a collector orders an issue online through eBay or elsewhere, the issue still must be packaged and transported physically to the collector. Thus, most of the social practices 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 print has been challenged. The material aspect of comics has been revealed to be a mere vehicle of the art form. Now a comic book collection of, say, The Avengers, that once filled a box can weigh under an ounce, ensconced on a slim computer disc, the disc itself perhaps soon to be discarded as a vehicle in favor of files encoded magnetically on a computer in one location and downloaded to another over the Internet. But is the disc or the electronic files it holds a comic book collection? The disc certainly does not have the weight of the printed comics, but does it have at least the significance? With 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 read on screen in the future. What happens to the comic book collecting hobby and the comics industry, both traditionally based in print, as they begin to mutate in the digital age? This article explores such questions.

Though the production process of comic books has varied over the years, today computers are often used at some stage, as Scott McCloud recognized back in 2000 in Reinventing Comics. Indeed, before a comic is
“For many comic book readers and collectors, the idea that a comic book can exist other than in print may be difficult to accept.”

Nevertheless, electronic comic books have existed for a number of years. McCloud notes that multimedia CD-ROMs in the early 1990s such as The Complete Maus by Art Spiegelman experimented with taking comics beyond print.[3] Indeed, the Maus CD-ROM was used by Spiegelman to present not only the comic but also background material such as sketches and family photographs.[4] In fact, many 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 productions” and “digital comic books” DVDs produced by Intec Interactive and Eagle One Media, Inc., 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 some new, related 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 commercially on disc. The best known of these products are produced by Graphic Imaging Technology (GIT) in New York City,[6] but other companies producing similar products include the aforementioned Eagle One 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 a Marvel title such as The Amazing Spider-Man: The Complete Collection DVD-ROM which featured 560 Amazing Spider-Man comics from 1963 to 2006.[10] However, in late 2007, Marvel pulled out of their partnership with GIT, presumably to concentrate on their new online Digital Comics Unlimited (DCU) initiative, which offers readers access to past Marvel comics online on a subscription basis,[11] but also apparently to publish DVD-ROMs on their own.[12] In addition to the loss of the Marvel license, other hurdles faced 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 have included collections from Archie Comics, and a set of Star Trek comics collecting work from a number of publishers.[15]

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

However, the existence of the comic DVD-ROMs raise questions about comic book collecting. Can the files on the DVD-ROM be considered a comic book collection? If someone can purchase for $50 a DVD-ROM covering 40 years of Uncanny X-Men, then will the original print comics be valued as high as they are currently, say as measured in the Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide?[16] Does a comic book have the same effect upon readers electronically as it does in print? To help answer such questions, I put together a brief survey and distributed it at my local comic book store (Astound Comics in Westlake, Ohio), and sent it around 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 collectors contacted me to fill out the survey.[17] Altogether, I received 28 responses, all of which were very interesting. (The survey can be read after the bibliography at the end of this paper.) The survey, while perhaps not the most rigorously scientific given its ramshackle distribution, points the way to a few 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 files as a comic book 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 collection means owning the originals in the format they were released in"), to the effort involved in putting together the collection ("A collector, and his collection, is what you hunt down, and buy. Having an entire run of a comic in a digital format is not collecting. It would be simply owning.") to the active nature of maintaining the collection ("Finding them in nice condition, taking care of them, sorting them, etc. are all part of the collecting experience that I think are missing from the electronic format."). The minority (7.5) who viewed the electronic files as a comic book collection stated variations of the thought that it was the comics that mattered and not the format attached to the comics ("Comics are all copies of 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. Comics are 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 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 social practice emerged around print, eventually becoming "the nation's third largest collectible market, just after coins and stamps." Obviously, having a complete collection of a comic book title available electronically negates a bit of the rarity that the physical collection possessed previously, both in terms of monetary value (after all, people interested in reading the title who would have been forced previously to find the scarce original issues would presumably drop out of the collectible market) and in terms of the effort put forth to gather the collection (several respondents noted that beyond being able to read the comics, the hunt for various issues was a great deal of the appeal of collecting). However, as one respondent noted, both the printed and electronic collections may truly be comic book collections, but in different senses: "I suppose it is a collection, but not the same as the traditional comic book collection of comics in longboxes. Instead, it's a digital file collection. You lose the tangible, physical nature of a collection. It's like with music—you trade your CD shelves for an iPod. It's similar but not the same." So, the traditional comic book collection of printed comic books may continue, but will be more akin to collecting first edition books or original artwork, whereas those interested in just reading the comics may be satisfied with an electronic version. Reports indicating that printed comic book back issues have been less in demand suggest such a shift is going on in the comics industry. However, this is likely due to the popularity of printed graphic novels, which often collect entire storylines of a comic book title and are currently effectively eclipsing the importance of monthly comics in the estimation of industry insiders. Still, this trend will likely further intensify as electronic comics become more common.

In fact, 24 of the 28 respondents to the survey had already read an electronic comic. In addition to past comics being collected and offered on disc, current comics are being offered electronically as well, including one that made its debut not in print, but on a cell phone. As noted previously with the early 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 appear to be adapting to screens quite well. Economic pressures such as rising paper and printing costs no doubt contribute 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, "Putting something online is easier, cheaper and you reach a much wider audience." Furthermore, the increasing appearance of bootlegged comics being made available online suggest that a demand clearly exists for electronic comics. This demand currently is not well met by the major comic publishers, who still are figuring out how to adjust to paperless comics. Even Marvel's DCU initiative generally makes readers wait at least six months past the print appearance of a comic to see it posted online. In fact, when Marvel ended its relationship with GIT, some of the collectors I surveyed who had bought the Marvel DVD-ROMs and seemed interested in purchasing further releases did start to consider bootlegs as a way to meet this desire. In contrast to most of the survey respondents who considered the print version of a comic book superior to the electronic version, some collectors clearly preferred the electronic version. For example, as one collector on GIT's online forum explained, collecting comics electronically avoided the storage of boxes upon boxes of print comic books somewhere, and perhaps having to move them all when changing residences, "I love to READ comics. Not STORE comics." To feed such a demand for electronic comics (and help stave off piracy), comic book publishers will probably have to eventually offer their material electronically, perhaps in a fashion similar to how sound recordings are often available both on CDs
Here is the conversion of the text into a plain text representation:

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

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

The importance of the ownership issue may relate to the nature of collecting as an activity itself. As the sociologist Jean Baudrillard has observed, “collecting represents the most rudimentary way to exercise control over the outer world.” The collector, by selecting from and sealing off the outside world, is constructing in or through the collection an internal world, perhaps one even fundamental to his or her psychological identity. This internal world is seldom complete; for example, the collector who finishes the pursuit of one comics title will

Ironically, another result of the comics medium losing its traditional association with print may be that we can now more clearly see the materiality factor inherent in print so the printed book’s very materiality becomes emphasized. Examples of this manifestation include the recent book The Marvel Vault: A Museum-in-a-Book with Rare Collectibles from the World of Marvel, with its interactive objects, as well as the increasing presence of high quality hardback editions of comics such as DC’s Absolute Editions, many of which appear to be sold to readers who have likely read the comics therein before. Such high-end print publications take advantage of the tangible and interactive aspects of the print medium, and all the advances in printing technology over the centuries. In addition to showcasing the art and writing of the comics, the books operate as works of art themselves with the high quality of their binding, covers, and pages. Any electronic publication of the same comics would be hard pressed to top the aesthetic quality of the reading experiences offered by these beautiful volumes. Considering the humble beginnings of comic books when they were priced at a dime and often printed on the cheapest paper possible, this perhaps final evolution of comics in print stands in sharp contrast.

However, a fundamental shift probably will occur in the format in which most of the material that makes up those hardcover editions originally appeared, and the comic book in its traditional printed pamphlet form may become an endangered species, if not extinct. As Chris Warner, an editor at Dark Horse Comics, states, “The comic book pamphlet is already an artifact.” Aside from a print-on-demand product, the monthly comic may not be able to sustain itself in print much longer due to the limited return available on the investment given the costs of marketing, producing, and transporting it. However, as an electronic comic, this monthly serialized tradition of comics may flourish. Already, at least one company, DriveThruComics, offers downloads of traditional comic books. With many of the comics 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 book 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, unlike Marvel’s DCU, which is based on a rental model, “At least with the DVDs, I own something.”

However, such change in the comics industry will likely be slowed by the considerable clout of comic book retailers, who have a vested interest in the present print-based distribution system and may view electronic counterparts, which presumably could be sold directly from the publishers, as unwanted competition. But, as Jeff Gomez argues in his book Print Is Dead: Books in Our Digital Age such change may be inevitable: “More and more people are turning away from traditional methods of reading, turning instead to their computers and the Internet for information and entertainment.” The comics publishers will undoubtedly follow their readers in this migration, as they recognize the importance of this shift in their efforts to reach more readers.
often subsequently embark on the pursuit of another. Baudrillard, in his theorization of the psychology of collecting, even notes collectors buying things because they're part of a series, even though the individual objects are of little interest to them beyond their presence as part of the series.\[34] A description that fits many comic collectors I know. I have known collectors who have bought years of a title without ever reading it, and other collectors who will complain about a title for years, but continue to buy it, even though they could purchase numerous alternative titles. Most comic book collectors could share similar anecdotes about themselves and others that would appear as baffling consumer behavior without a familiarity with either comic book collecting or an understanding of the psychology of collecting in general.

Perhaps even more strangely, Baudrillard further suggests, collectors may never truly want to complete a collection;\[35] apparently the satisfaction derived from the collection itself is only rivaled 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 one feels is lacking in a person's life and a person may feel that he or she will achieve a sense of lasting fulfillment upon possessing that object, or completing that goal.\[37] Missing comics from a collection may serve as such an object a for a comic book collector. The comic book collector may very intensely want to fill the holes in her or his collection, and spend considerable energy, money, and time pursuing those comics. Of course, since the object a is ultimately an abstraction of desire, perhaps even the notion of desire itself, only temporarily attached to a particular object or objective, it can never be ultimately satisfied even when the person possesses the sought-after object or has fulfilled the intended objective. Thus, a collector who has long sought a particular comic book, or to complete a particular collection of comic books, may think that upon fulfillment of the long-awaited goal he or she will feel completely satisfied. But instead, upon fulfillment of the initial quest, shortly afterward a new object or objective comes to serve as an object a, and the collector embarks on yet another comic collecting quest. According to Lacan, this is because the lack we feel can never truly be filled, but nevertheless we still may pursue the 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 collecting of comic books in particular. Fundamentally, for our examination of electronic comic books, a deeper understanding of the comic book collecting activity reveals why the notion of ownership, even of electronic files, might always be a factor in collecting. Furthermore, such an analysis helps to explain why some survey respondents disdained the loss of the hunt for a missing issue when one purchases an entire comic book run electronically. The thrill of the chase per se provided perhaps as much of the appeal of collecting as the comics themselves, as does interacting with the objects in the course of preserving them or sorting them and so forth. Such physical aspects of comic book collecting are transformed, if not abandoned, when comic books go digital. There are no longer any print books to bag and board, organize, and store in boxes. To a veteran collector, the loss of such activities may take much of the joy out of comic book collecting.

However, pursuing a collection of electronic files can still provide this dimension of collecting, as several survey respondents noted. Though the files may not be able to be directly touched physically, one will likely still need to search out certain issues and organize the files on the computer or other reading device. Furthermore, some comic book collectors who are more interested in reading the comics than the other aspects of comic book collecting anyway, may well welcome doing away with the bother and expense of archiving, organizing, and storing print comics. They may also appreciate that hunting for a particular missing issue will likely not mean having to leave the house anymore. Instead, collectors can track down a missing issue from their computer. Issues of electronic comics may also stay accessible from the initial publishers for long periods, so that someone who wants to read it may no longer have to pay an exorbitant amount for an issue on the collector market, which often happened with popular comics once they went out of print. So, some older comic book collectors and readers may welcome a shift to electronic comics. And, of course, the notion of an electronic comic book collection may not be as foreign a notion to younger people, as one survey respondent stated: “Kids 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-issue arcs of most storylines in monthly comics, which are obviously written with an eye towards collecting the entire story arc in a trade paperback publication, arguably to the detriment of the individual monthly comic). The distribution
method may change, but the fascination with the comics medium essentially remains the same. We may look back years from now and think that an electronic comic book collection is not such a strange idea, even if it weighs no more than the electronic device the files reside in. In any case, the true measure of a comic book has always been its effect on the individual reader.

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Frederick Wright, Ph.D., has long been interested in how electronic publishing affects aspects of popular culture previously based in print. His doctoral dissertation, From Zines to Ezines: Electronic Publishing and the Literary Underground (available online at http://zinebook.com/resource/wrightdissertation.pdf), explored how zine publishers dealt with the rise of the World Wide Web at the turn of the century. Currently an assistant professor of English and the Pre-Law Program Coordinator at Ursuline College in Pepper Pike, Ohio, Wright, like most comic book superheroes, also has a secret identity, as the novelist Wred Fright. His most recent novel published on paper is The Pornographic Flabbergasted Emus (ULA Press, 2006), chronicling the misadventures of a garage rock band in a college town, and his most recent novel published electronically is Blog Love Omega Glee (currently being serialized on Wredfright.com), concerning two bloggers who fall in love 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 (such as The Amazing Spider-Man: The Complete Collection DVD-ROM published by GIT, which collects 42 years of The Amazing Spider-Man comic book in electronic format) might affect the hobby of comic book collecting. As a comic book collector/reader, you might be able to assist me in the research by answering the following questions in the survey sheet. There are no foreseeable risks associated with the filling out of this questionnaire, and all participation is voluntary. I may utilize your answers 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 a question, 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 title (such as the
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 books in electronic format and the future of comic book collecting, please feel free to jot them down here.

Thank you for participating in the survey. I may be conducting some more in-depth followup interviews. 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 this information or indicate to me that you desire to remain anonymous should I utilize any of your responses in a paper or any other scholarship that arises out of this research.. If you’d like to read the paper that results from this research, then please just let me know here as well.

Bibliography


Notes

10. Ibid.
12. Newsarama Staff, “Marvel’s FULL September 2008 Solicitations,” Newsarama, June 16, 2008, http://www.newsarama.com/comics/080617-marvel-sept-solicits.html (accessed August 27, 2007). Marvel’s DVD-ROMs seem to include fewer issues on them than their GIT 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 discs which contained about 500 issues each, and at a price not much less than what GIT was offering for sets 10 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 that they’ve either been canceled or delayed. Since going out of print, the GIT collections appear to have become collectible items themselves. I have seen the GIT Iron Man collection selling for over $100 on Amazon and eBay.
15. Graphic Imaging Technology Corporation.
Collecting comics is a rich person's hobby. Reading comics, is enjoyable and cheaper. Collecting used to be all about condition, and largely still is. If you are just getting started, check out the trades (trade paperbacks, essentially collected single issues in a bound copy) and digital copies. That is a good way to get into storylines, arcs or (more) Loading… Answer ·. Comic Book Collecting. How do comics become collectables? Christopher Green, Adolescent Trauma Specialist and Trauma Trainer (2013-present). Answered Aug 7, 2018 · Author has 79 answers and 6k answer views. I'd say when the appreciate well above what the asking price is.