

Comics Across Media

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“Comic Book Companies and Experimentation with Transmedia Property Management and Digital Delivery”

The importance of comic books and comics-originated properties to IP holders and entertainment companies remain tremendous in a media environment characterized by a desire to foster multiplatform franchises/brands and exploit an increasing number of delivery outlets and consumption opportunities. To do so, publishers are recalibrating how they can best make use of comics in terms of both content and form, including creating the new Chief Creative Officer title and experimenting with digital delivery.

Marvel Entertainment and DC Entertainment, the top two North American comics publishers and IP holders, have each established a new position, the Chief Creative Officer, as part of recent corporate restructurings meant to better take advantage of (and, just as importantly, to create greater visibility for) their properties across media—including publishing, licensing, video games, film, television, and animation—in an effort to capture a larger overall market share in each field. The primary and immediate goal is to get as many characters as possible on-screen, especially the big one. This is particularly imperative for DC’s parent company Warner Bros., which must fill holes in its yearly movie release schedule now that its lucrative Harry Potter series is coming to a close.

While this goal is nothing new, the creation of the CCO signals a philosophical change in how these corporations approach transmedia properties and storytelling, and how their publishing wings (in NY) and production studios (in LA) communicate and coordinate with each other. The CCO is a brand manager and quality control officer, operating both as a liaison to talent and producers (especially for Marvel) and as a sort of shepherd or guiding hand charged with ensuring that characters and their stories remain true in essence and spirit to the source material, intending to prevent different media divisions from creating conflicting versions of characters that deviate wildly from the original properties, previously a widespread and problematic issue for DC in particular.

The industry is also attempting to boost the overall number of comic book readers through aggressively pursuing the digital delivery of original and repurposed content in order to generate new revenue streams, further monetize their vast libraries, create promotional buzz, drive curious consumers to retail stores, and build online content distribution services. Though still a fraction of the one billion dollar US market for comic books, the increasing number of digital outlets (via devices like the iPhone and iPad) and titles available (hundreds added every week) have provided new opportunities for publishers to access a mass audience far beyond those who purchase hard copies at comic shops. Indeed, according to publishers, the majority of digital comics sales come primarily from lapsed fans and new readers curious sample the form.

Digital delivery, whether the future of comics or merely an alternative content consumption option, has the capacity to impact the medium in a number of significant ways. Some comic book fans lament what they see as the beginning of the end of traditional periodicals (“floppies”) and are skeptical that the digital viewing experience will be able to be as satisfying as that of reading a hard copy. Retailers, especially comic

book shops, remain concerned that digital comics will lure away their base (more than ever now that both DC and Marvel are increasingly experimenting with the simultaneous day-and-date release of both physical and digital comics) despite publishers' assurance that their goal is to use digital comics to entice customers into stores and onto print collections. Finally, some creators have contended that digital delivery is beginning to impact form as writers and artists look to take advantage of digital comics display by adapting page layouts specifically for the screen (especially for the iPad) and by experimenting with issue length, with the understanding that those reading digital comics on the go with mobile devices will likely consume them in smaller "bite sized" increments.