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Simoncini

The Impact of "Indies" on the Comic Industry

I was raised by a costume designer and an architect. I spent my childhood surrounded by drawings and paintings, microns and palette knives. It was a forgone conclusion that I would grow up to either love or hate art. My mother, the film buff, would point out the visual aspects of everything I watched with her, drilling into my head how the costumes and scenery made the story come to life. My father filled our apartment with furniture and plants and various tchotchkes, and I watched as each individual piece came together to make a room into a room. My parents' idea of entertaining a bored child was to write down some words on a piece of paper and tell me to draw them. To me, there was no such thing as non-visual entertainment.

So, while I loved reading books, it didn't occur to me as a child that I would be expected to read ones with no illustrations. I was outraged when I found out, but I trudged on reading the "boring" books until I enjoyed them.

We lived near a Borders, and I would go there after school to read whatever I could get my hands on. (My neighborhood library was, and still is, a pretty sad place. It wasn't much of an option.) I loved novels, especially ones above my age level. I got more enjoyment from young adult sci-fi and fantasy, but got a bigger ego boost from Serious Adult Novels and nonfiction. I still cared deeply about art. I wanted to be either a "surrealist" or a "novelist" when I grew up (I also read numerous art books).

So while I read a few comics, I didn't consider them legitimate art or literature. After all, art and words were entirely separate things.

Around middle school, a few events happened in quick succession that gave me a deeper context for comics: Manga became popular, giving me exposure to comics that told long form stories, instead of jokes about lasagna, or Superman's punch of the week. Then I discovered webcomics, and found even more compelling stories, which everyday people put online for free. After that, I found a few quality comic stores in neighborhoods I liked to frequent (near my middle school, near my house, and in Wrigleyville). Finally, in my freshman year of high school, Borders closed. My favorite hangout was gone. My heart was broken. The only bookstores I had left were secondhand and comic stores.

So, due to necessity, I read more and more comics. Some of them were the same sort of Garfield/Zits/Calvin & Hobbes stuff I had read as a kid, but a lot of them were masterpieces. And really, looking back, those comics were more legitimate than I gave them credit for. I read Carla Speed McNeil, Sophie Goldstein, Naoki Urasawa; dozens of brilliant artists and writers, making me see things in a way I had never considered.

And something clicked. Maybe it was nostalgia for my old picture books. Maybe it was my artistic roots. Maybe it was because comics are ideally structured to stimulate the ADHD brain. All I knew was that, suddenly, I didn't have to choose between two career paths that *maybe kinda sorta* suited me; I could combine them.

I fit in comics.

...Except I sort of don't.

When you think about comics, what is the first thing you think of? Superman? Batman? Captain America? Certainly not Koko Be Good or Galanthus.

I've found a niche for myself in webcomics and small press comics, where diversity is key, but where am I supposed to see myself in the Avengers? The answer is nowhere. Evidently, fat autistic queer women don't sell to the masses.

In today's society, there is an increasing spotlight on diversity. Gay marriage is being legalized all over the world. The Black Lives Matter movement is huge. The mentally ill and disabled are...honestly still treated like garbage and generally ignored by the media, but hey, we'll get there. With the huge popularity of Marvel films and DC cartoons, mainstream comics are picking up traction with every demographic imaginable. And yet, the characters remain mostly straight and racially homogenous, with strong, commanding men and women contorting "sexily" in the background.

Mainstream publishers have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. They have always made their money by pandering to straight white men, and they have no impetus to change now. They write diversity like they're begrudgingly filling out a very meager checklist. There are a few gems, like Young Avengers, or Blue Beetle, but for every one of them, there are ten Batmans. I am not exaggerating; there are more than ten Batman publications being circulated at any given time.

In independent comics – webcomics, self-published minis, small press graphic novels, etc. – you can find something by any type of person. There's no boys' club culture, no gate keeping. If you like comics, you're in the community. No one's

going to question the legitimacy of your knowledge or interest based on anything but what you know. If you make comics, your comics aren't judged on anything but whether or not readers like them.

Some people might say that, without being published by a “legitimate” publisher, all sorts of garbage could get through. While this may be true, it also means that all sorts of boundary-pushing, innovative work, which would never be seen in DC or Marvel, gets a chance to shine.



(*Stand Still, Stay Silent* – a free to read webcomic, though the artist, Minna Sundberg, has a lot of work/merchandise for sale in her online store.)



(*X-Force* – A Marvel publication, which you absolutely have to buy if you want to read it. The artist, Rob Liefeld, is one of Marvel's major artists.)

(But obviously I'm a bit biased.)

All that creative freedom comes at a cost though. No one goes into comics to get rich, but if you're in indie comics? You're lucky if you only need one other job. I read a lot of accounts (often in comic form) about financial struggles, and the things people do to succeed in the field.

Mainstream comic publishers pay much better, and it's extremely telling that they employ mostly white men. And when the stories are written by white men, and drawn by white men, and circulated by white men, whom do you think the stories are going to be about? Who is supposed to read them? If I were to take a wild guess, I would say: White men.

Not only comics, but every form of mainstream media is controlled by, and aimed toward the most privileged members of society, while everyone else must either accept crumbs, or make their own media. And making your own is costly, and time-consuming, and, above all, uncertain. You could win big, or, more likely, utterly fail. And when all the money is being given to White Guys #1-200, how many people can really afford that risk?

Over the course of this writing project, I have self-published a mini-comic. Look for *Upgrade* by Lily Reeves at Chicago Comics or Quimby's! It costs \$5. That may seem kind of steep for a 15-page comic, but consider: The store keeps 40% of the profits, which means I get \$3. Each book cost me \$2.40 to print, which means that I get 60 cents for all of the work I put in, and the paper/supplies I used. I also submitted to an anthology that promised \$50 (or slightly more, depending on how successful the Kickstarter is) a page for each member of every comic's creative team.

This would include artist, writer, letterer, etc. But there's no bonus if you do it all yourself, as I do.

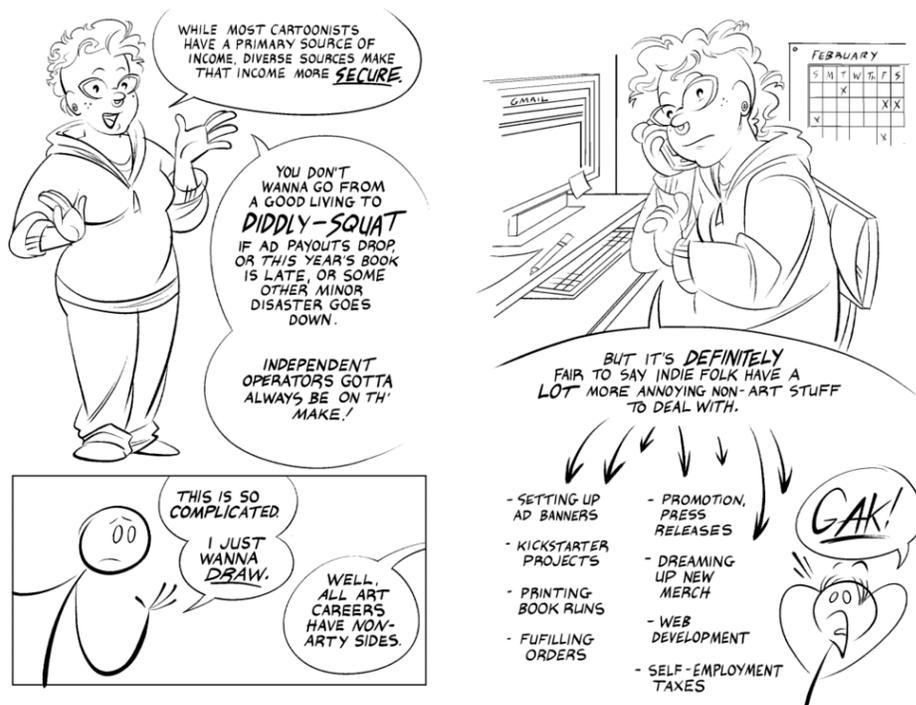
In a Marvel publication, you only do one job, usually. You draw, or you color, or you write, or you ink, etc. You don't have to print it yourself. You don't have to advertise it yourself. You don't have to walk into the comic store and put it on the shelf. You do one thing.

Starting out at an established company, any one of these jobs can get you over \$100 per page.

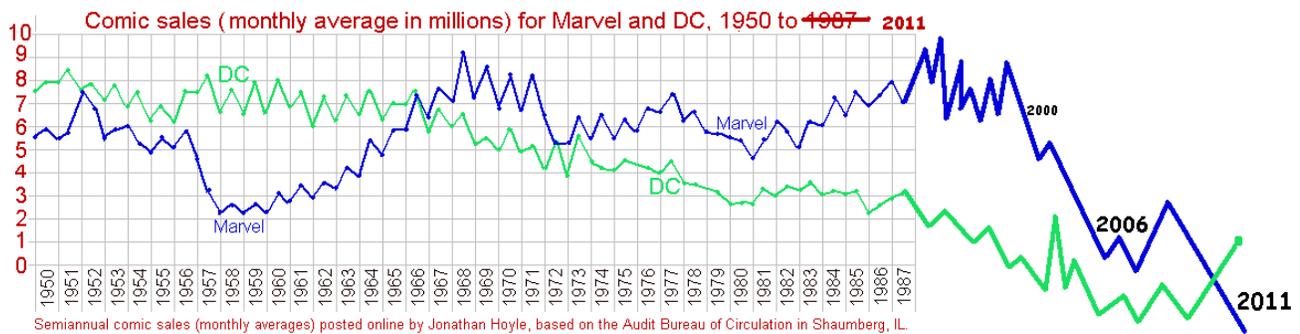
And that's without licensing rights!

When you look at the statistics, there are more women and people of color in independent comics. Also, comparing the ratios, the disparity between their pay and white men's pay is much smaller than their counterparts in corporate comics.

Surprise!



(Excerpts from *Everything I Know* by Spike Trotman.)



(Marvel and DC circulation statistics.)

Comic readership on the whole has been on the decline since the late 80's/early 90's. However, in the past decade or so, comics have entered a renaissance, especially indies. More people than ever are making and reading independent comics.

There are quite a few factors. One is the return of Image Comics. Image was founded in 1992, and was very successful for a few years, until it broke up in 1996. Now that it's back, it's known for publishing extremely popular, envelope-pushing titles, such as Saga, or The Walking Dead. Saga, a monthly-serialized sci-fi epic, has appeared multiple times on the New York Times Best Seller list. The first trade paperback volume, collecting issues 1-6, was published in October, 2012. In less than a year it sold 120,000 copies.

While Image only makes about one sixth of the revenue of DC or Marvel, that percentage is growing rapidly. Image's success shows that readers have a hunger for new, different kinds of comics.

The rise of the internet is also incredibly important. Self-published zines used

to be available only to people in one's area, advertised by word of mouth or "hole in the wall" stores. Today, independent work can be seen by anyone online.

Homestuck, a free, online webcomic, has millions of readers. It became so popular that PBS's Idea Channel did a special on it. (They compared it to James Joyce's Ulysses, due to its length and complexity.) Despite it being free to read, its author is able to live comfortably on merchandise revenue alone. This would be impossible without the internet.

With more and more comics and more and more platforms, comic readership is growing again, but not in the "Big Two" industry leaders. The mainstream appeal of independent graphic novels such as Persepolis with non-comic readers, the success of online series, the millions of people who watch The Walking Dead on TV; all of these things move comics up and up in the public eye. And instead of white, straight males, 18-35, this new generation of comics has something for everyone.

American comics have been considered trashy since their inception in the 1930's. I listen to accounts of kids in the 1950's hiding their Supermans in their desks, for fear of their teachers ripping them up. Today, however, I have taken multiple college classes about comics. Everyone has seen at least a couple of superhero movies. Comics are entering higher art echelons, such as The New Yorker, or Broadway. (Alison Bechdel's Fun Home is a prime example.) Public opinion is changing.

This isn't to say that they're completely accepted. When I say that I want to make comics for a living, the first reaction I usually get is, "like, in the newspaper?" or, "is there any money in that?" The morally concerned American seems to have

moved onto video games when looking for something to demonize, sure, but comics are still a fringe interest. And independent comics are the fringe of the fringe.

Despite my career goals, I'm not that concerned about their popularity. As I said before, they are moving up in public esteem, and it's definitely not a failing medium. I didn't decide to go into this field to get rich, and there are more than enough comic readers and buyers to keep me afloat. Comics are an amazing medium, and I'm confident that more and more people are coming to appreciate that, but if people in general don't find them interesting, that isn't really my problem.

My problem is more about the internal comics community, and the implications it has about society at large. See, I consider myself to have about as much in common with the proto-typical "comics fan" as a Fellini fan does someone whose favorite movie is Scary Movie 4. I know that sounds INCREDIBLY snobbish, but hear me out.

Comics are an engaging medium, for sure. I love the fact that one person can simultaneously show and tell you an entire story with barely any budgetary constrictions. This means that a comic artist can show you exactly what they want you to see, and a writer can tell you the exact story they want to tell, without any red tape.

I firmly believe that mainstream comics do not take advantage of the medium's full potential. There is nothing BUT red tape. Creators are told to work together without testing compatibility. They are given strict deadlines, and strict parameters to fit mass-market appeal. In my opinion, good corporate owned comics

are good despite their lofty status, not because of it. These major publishers' set-ups actually hinder the creative process, when they're supposed to be circulating the best work in the field.

These bureaucratic shenanigans definitely make a buck, though. While I am loath to have my subculture represented by the archetypal neck-bearded nerd with a Cheetos-stained list of Black Canary's sexiest costumes, I have to admit that he represents a huge percentage of comic readership. This dude is pandered to with this unoriginal, offensive banality, and he completely eats it up. I don't like being lumped in with him, but I can't blame people for associating all of us with him when he's such an ever-present annoyance.



(Frank Miller's line art colored by Harvey James vs. the actual published version, colored by Klaus Janson – a prime example of putting incompatible creators together.)

The misrepresentation of the comics community and the lack of creative mainstream work are problems in and of themselves, but these aren't things I feel the public needs to spur to action over. Rather they are symptoms of the bigger problem of corporate greed in mainstream media as a whole.

Obviously I am not suggesting that comics and other media cease making money. Artists deserve payment. However, the current set-up stifles creativity and social progress.

It's important to compare the differences between mainstream and indie comics. To examine how Batman is so popular and bland, while gems like Templar, AZ and Finder are all but invisible to the public eye. Maybe big publishers like Marvel and small ones like Koyama Press could, figuratively, take a page or two from each other's books.

