

tune in online



WHAT DO A GRUMPY SEER, TWO AMERICAN GAMERS LIVING IN JAPAN, AND A TEEN LIBRARIAN HAVE IN COMMON? THEY ARE PROTAGONISTS IN WEBCOMICS.

Thanks to the efforts of comic-loving librarians like Robin Brenner and others, libraries across the nation have growing graphic novel and comic book collections. Enter webcomics, the next genre that needs shelf space—and Web space on your teen page. Webcomics, as the name implies, are comics hosted on Web sites instead of printed in newspapers or books. Webcomics have been bringing humor, satire, and social commentary to computer screens ever since authors gained the ability to upload images to the Internet. One webcomic with which you might be familiar is *Unshelved*, which was created by Gene Ambaum, the pseudonym for a real teen librarian in the Pacific Northwest. Although these comics are available primarily online, many have been converted into graphic novels and could be hiding amongst your collections. If you browse the graphic novel shelves at your library and find the title *Megatokyo*, then you are already collecting webcomics.

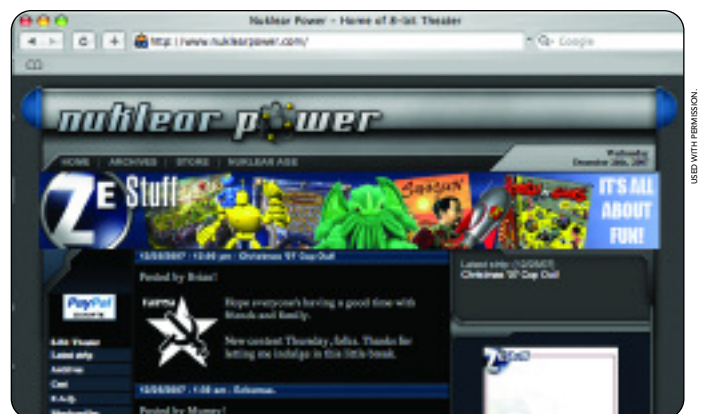
Many writers and artists of webcomics have the same hobbies and interests as today's teens, such as graphic novels and technology. Webcomics reach an audience that has a strong affinity with technology. Generally this group of teens plays video and tabletop games, enjoys fantasy, and surfs the Web—all common themes in the webcomic genre.

LITERARY ASPECTS

Webcomics differ from one another, and their story lines can be as simple as an individual strip or as complete as that of a full-fledged book. A great example of this is *Dominic Deegan*, created by Michael “Mookie” Terracciano. It features a grumpy seer who is blessed with visions of the future, but who makes his wage by answering local villagers’ mundane questions. The comic began with mostly puns and stand-alone strips, but it has evolved into a continuing story with a growing cast of diverse characters to whom readers can relate. Mookie adds depth to his world by using characters with unique flaws and insecurities that parallel our own. Although his story is set in a fantasy world, Mookie addresses the topics of suicide, manipulation, rape, power, and death. Every action has a real consequence, which makes fans come back for more. Because of *Dominic Deegan*’s success, Mookie frequently hosts a program for other webcomic creators at comic conventions called “Writing Unique Heroes and Memorable Villains.”

Another popular webcomic is *Order of the Stick*. It is about stereotypical characters who go on adventures in a *Dungeons & Dragons* world. The unique thing about this comic is that everyone is drawn with detailed hair, clothes, and weapons overlaid on the basic stick figure frame. Its humor is derived from experiences playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and other role-playing games.

Order of the Stick is not the only webcomic about role-playing. Exploring what characters do when a player is not controlling them is a common theme. A unique webcomic is *8-Bit Theatre*, which uses



images from the 1987 *Final Fantasy* game to explore the lives of Black Mage, Fighter, Red Mage, and Thief. The most popular webcomics feature two gamers fresh out of high school or college who are living on their own. *Ctrl-Alt-Delete*, *Penny Arcade*, *Megatokyo*, and many others fit into this classic model.

If you are looking for the best webcomics, there are two places online to begin your search. The first is **Web Cartoonist Choice Awards** (<http://www.ccawards.com>), which features awards given annually by webcomic creators to the best in various categories. For a writer, illustrator, or comic to be eligible for an award, a peer must submit a nomination, like the Academy Awards. The winners represent a different grouping than “the most popular.” Check out **The Webcomic List** (<http://www.thewebcomiclist.com>) to find out which webcomics are the most popular. This site is an index for webcomics; it tracks how many people visit a webcomic, shows how

often the webcomic is updated, and serves as a readers' advisory site for webcomic fans.

CREATORS

The creators of the webcomics that I have mentioned generally work on their comics full time to ensure quality, but, like most artists, they began by creating webcomics in their free time from school or work. Very few webcomic creators are able to turn their projects into full-time careers because it takes business skills to bring webcomics offline and to market their products. Some creators support each other by forming small companies to sell graphic novels, T-shirts, and original art. A few have even worked with established graphic novel publishers, such as Dark Horse and Tokyopop, to ensure that their comics are available for library purchase. Most are independently published, sold, and shipped, so they often go unnoticed by libraries.

If you are looking for specific items to add to your collection beyond graphic novels, two resources that are helpful to both veterans and newbies are **Reinventing Comics** by Scott McCloud, and **The History of Webcomics** by T. Campbell. McCloud, a comic book writer and artist, has published several exceptional books about creating comics. In **Reinventing Comics**, he outlines the origins of webcomics, with resources for starting your own webcomic. It was written in 2000 as an update to his popular book **Understanding Comics**, but it also covers many issues relevant to digital media online.

Campbell, a prolific webcomic writer, worked with dozens of artists to create **The History of Webcomics**, which showcases several themes, from the daily life of two completely opposite high school girls to a comic about a group of science fiction enthusiasts who travel to a fantasy dimension. The book covers the prehistory of webcomics and its birth online. Because so many of the events took place digitally, there is little record of the evolution of the webcomic medium; however, Campbell does an excellent job of capturing the path webcomics have taken to get to the popular, cross-cultural media they now are.

Providing up-to-date materials about Web design, business practices, art techniques, and publishing guides will help support webcomic creators who use your library.

COMMUNITY

Unlike traditional print, webcomics have a unique connection with their readers. Being hosted on the Web allows the artists and writers to directly link to additional information about the comics, the creators' contact information, and forums for readers to discuss the comics. Every webcomic has a forum, and they are even built into sites, such as **Keenspot** (<http://www.keenspot.com>), that host budding creators.

Libraries can also use this same technology to create local communities on the Web sites. Forums are discussion boards that are broken up into topics to which registered users can reply; they are similar to book discussion groups but online. Some forums discuss Harry Potter, critique fan art, and play word continuation games. Another way most webcomic sites connect to readers is through blogging. Artists and writers find that they can post updates about their comic, happenings in their life, and other random thoughts through blogging.

WEBCOMICS LIBRARY PROGRAMS

Do you have a writing club at your Library? One way to support aspiring artists and writers is to invite both together for a program about creating comics or picture books. The same partnerships necessary for a writer and artist to create a picture book are required for two people to create a comic. Your workshop could focus on storyboarding, a skill used for creating movies, video games, and other visual media. Another possibility is developing a continuing story. Webcomic creators often advise people to start creating the comic, even if the idea isn't fully formed, because it will morph into something better in time or lead to a new idea. So encourage your teens, no matter how young, to pursue their interests now.

Another activity that bolsters webcomic creators is to challenge artists to draw a scene from a book or fairytale as a comic. There are many classic novels being turned into graphic novels (for example the *Graphic Classics* series and those mentioned in this issue's *Graphically Speaking* column), and it could be a fun way to get your teens interested in some of the books they have to read for school.

Finally make sure that aspiring writers and artists have access to certain software, such as Photoshop, to be able to create and edit their comics digitally. Most libraries have a computer with Word, Powerpoint, and Excel, but lack a digital studio where teens can edit videos, create images, and record podcasts. These things can help your teens develop skills for the twenty-first century.

As you can imagine, there really is a webcomic for everyone. Some have large followings, others do not update regularly enough to get a following, and some are stand-alone stories. As a librarian, you can help to encourage the next generation of webcomic creators through your collections, programs, and information on your Web site. Consider integrating webcomics into your Teen Tech Week celebration this year. ■

BOOKS

Campbell, T. **The History of Webcomics**. Antarctic Press, 2006. 192p. \$14.95. 978-0-9768043-9-0.

McCloud, Scott. **Reinventing Comics**. Paradox Press/DC Comics, 2000. 256p. \$22.95. 978-0-06-095350-8.

WEBCOMICS

8-bit Theatre. <http://www.nuklearpower.com>.

Ctrl-Alt-Del. <http://www.ctrlaltdel-online.com>.

Dominic Deegan. <http://www.dominic-deegan.com>.

Megatokyo. <http://www.megatokyo.com>.

Order of the Stick. <http://giantitp.com/comics/oost/latest.html>.

Penny Arcade. <http://www.penny-arcade.com>.

Unshelved. <http://www.overduemedia.com>.

WEB SITES

Keenspot. <http://www.keenspot.com>.

Web Cartoonist Choice Awards. <http://www.ccawards.com>.

The Webcomic List. <http://www.thewebcomiclist.com>.

Jami Schwarzwaldner is a Teen Librarian at the Pierce County Library System in Washington State. She began reading webcomics in college during down time at her part-time job as a reference assistant. For more information about webcomics or gaming check out her Web site at <http://www.mbmpl.org>.

