

## A Future for Comics (Revised 2008 Edition)

By Alan David Doane

It is my long-held belief that the direct market network of mostly superhero-oriented comic book stores is headed for extinction. The reason it is passing into history is because it excludes new readers and embraces only an existing “fan base,” willfully ignoring the fact that comics as a vital, living artform are so much more than superheroes. At the same time, a minority of shops within the direct market are reaching out to a broader audience for comics, one nurtured by mainstream media coverage like comics receive on National Public Radio or in print publications like *Time Magazine*. The question is, will the truly full-service comic book stores that point the way to the future serve as an example to the majority of stores currently dependent on Diamond’s weekly shipments of superhero titles? Or will the backward, pro-superhero (but ultimately anti-comics) policies of such stores destroy the direct market before a transition can be made to a viable graphic novel-dominant marketplace that serves all comics readers?

In the 1970s and '80s, the direct market thrived because superheroes were about all there were in comics, at least in North America. Alternative/ground-level titles like **Elfquest**, **Cerebus** and **Love and Rockets** were curious sidebars to what most readers thought of as comics, but in the 1990s and especially since the beginning of the 21st Century CE, those comics as well as manga and newspaper strips, have come to define what the average person thinks of as comics. Meanwhile corporate superhero comics have marginalized themselves through editor-driven, continuity-dependent, poorly-crafted "events" like DC’s **Identity Crisis** and its descendants. Such titles create a frenzy of interest in the minority of comics readers who value the sub-genre of superhero adventure fiction more than they value the artform of comics as a whole. This is a minority that would much rather watch *Heroes* on NBC than ever crack open a graphic novel not published by Marvel or DC. It’s not comics they’re fans of, it’s superheroes and all the adolescent power fantasies the sub-genre implies.

Such readers don’t consider actual quality much of an element in the debate over the future of comics at all, and have created an artificial sales bubble that is destined to feed on itself until the direct market itself collapses. The collapse of the direct market in the 1990s was based in large part on the fact that the comics that were selling weren’t very good, and therefore weren’t interesting readers in their contents as quality storytelling. The prime reason people were buying comics before the ‘90s collapse had more to do with issues of collectability and “investment.” But a comic book is worth nothing if it doesn’t contain a story that is well-written and well-drawn, and more importantly draws the reader into its world. And a comic that is worth nothing ultimately will drive its buyers away, however gratifying its short-term thrill of mere possession might be.

Looking at the most successful general-interest bookstores, both independents as well as chains like Borders or Barnes and Noble, I think it's clear that the only comic shops that are sustainable and viable in the long term are those that cater to readers of all ages, genders and interests. Stores that welcome entire families of readers, as good bookstores do. Increasingly the superhero convenience stores that make up the vast majority of the direct market cater primarily – if not only -- to male buyers interested primarily – if not only -- in continuity-heavy superhero events. But Diamond, and the direct market, are not comics, anymore than one 7/11 on the corner of a main street in a medium-sized town represents the entire market for potato chips. Diamond and the direct market it simultaneously serves and cripples represents only a small fraction of the overall comics market, as demonstrated in David Beard's revealing piece on Diamond's distortion of the perception of what is the market for comics, in **The Comics Journal #283** (June, 2007):

*“There will be no impetus to reform the data collection system upon which the cottage industry of comic sales analysis is built if we keep pretending that the current Diamond data is reliable...as long as we are dependent on Diamond data, our ability to assess the industry, market and medium is crippled.”*

Beard is critical of various “Top 300” lists and the like, and rightfully dismisses them as little more than public relations for a functioning monopoly that has every reason to foster the illusion that it is the comics industry, and no reason at all to provide good information about its true place in the overall comics market.

On a regular basis, articles appear online speculating about the sales number of comics and what their ultimate meaning is, and yet those sales figures are almost always based solely on Diamond's sales to comic book stores (as opposed to those stores' sales to their customers), most of which traffic virtually exclusively in corporate superhero comic books and associated items like t-shirts, action figures and other “collectibles.” But this “sales analysis” ultimately stands revealed as intellectual nerd-journalism, a blinkered and pretentious iteration of the old “Who's stronger, Hulk or Thor?” argument. It pays little to no attention to the wider market for comics in mainstream bookstores and other outlets (manga in CD stores, Archie Comics in supermarkets, etc.) and therefore, ultimately, has little value above that timeless debate about Thor versus The Hulk.

In fact, Beard states in his **Comics Journal** piece that “A strong argument could be made that no data would be better than faithful reliance in the data presented by Diamond.” When one pauses to reflect that good information about the true scope and nature of the whole market for comics is crucial to the health and viability of comic book stores now and in the uncertain future, one sees it is more than a numbers game for

superhero fans. The ability of shop owners to sustain their business and provide for their families is dependent on the accuracy of such information.

I have shopped at a lot of comic book stores since the 1970s, and stores that carry mainly the latest corporate superhero comics with a heavy emphasis on back issues increasingly fill me with indifference bordering on contempt. In the past few years, there has been more of an interest in comics among the general public than I have ever seen in my lifetime. And yet 9 out of every 10 comic book stores seem actively hostile to any potential customer that doesn't reflect back the owner's interests, attitudes and even appearance. For every clean, well-managed and professionally run comic book store I have been in, there are many more that are dirty, dark, ill-managed and altogether unpleasant places to shop. And if the lifelong comic book reader in me has learned to tolerate such deficiencies, getting married and raising two children has educated me mightily in what is or isn't a welcoming retail environment. In my 20s, I may have been amused by my wife's distaste for entering the average comic book store. Here in my early 40s, I not only understand it, I *share* it.

I do a lot of browsing of comic book stores in the company of my wife and children. That's four people in a given comic shop when we visit, and a savvy retailer should by definition want to generate interest in his wares from everyone that comes through the door. If my daughter can find a new issue of **Mary Jane Loves Spider-Man**, or even better, a new volume of one of her favourite manga series, then we're in good shape. Perhaps my son will find an issue of **Teen Titans Go**, or better yet his other favourites, Bongo's line of **Simpsons** comics. We know we're really in a good store if there are **Calvin and Hobbes** and **Peanuts** collections -- you know, comics people have heard of in the real world, outside the narrow boundaries of the mostly insular, unreflective and very likely doomed direct market.

To truly run a professional business, viable comics shops must recognize that manga is comics. **The Far Side** is comics. **Kampung Boy**, **Dennis the Menace**, **Archie** and **Mr. Natural** are all comics. And all of these, just a small portion of the breadth of the comics artform.

The very best shops want to sell comics to everybody, but most comics shops -- that network of mostly poorly-run superhero convenience stores -- have seemingly abandoned the future of the industry and the viability of their own business. I see elements of racism, hostility, ignorance, stupidity, and/or fear in these attitudes. It's hard to see what else might account for such self-destructive, shortsighted business practices. It's not like there aren't professional business models to learn from, and I can't imagine why one would start a business without making an effort to learn what the best practices are for the industry you want to be a part of.

After learning the ins and outs of rental contracts, insurance, vacuum cleaners, feather dusters and professional shelving, would-be professional comic book retailers should look at what it means to sell comics. What comics should be available in a good comic shop? Borders and Barnes and Noble have not created an enormous expansion of their manga aisles because they want to service non-buying browsers. Despite those deceptive "sales reports," people out there in the world are buying comics in huge numbers. But the superhero-oriented fraction of the overall comics industry grits its teeth and closes its eyes and re-defines "comics" so that **Civil War** or **52** are falsely seen as best-sellers by readers unable or unwilling to investigate deeper into the reality of the comics market. The end result is a false sense of security for readers comforted by superhero (and sales) fiction – and more dangerously, a false sense of security for superhero convenience store owners.

Among consumers of American-made corporate superhero comic books, yes, event comics sell pretty well. They did in the early 1990s, too, until the speculators and fanboys deserted the direct market and thousands of stores closed. Given the insecurity evident in catering only to superhero hobbyists, is it not absolutely absurd to ignore manga, artcomix and/or newspaper strip collections that appeal to a staggeringly wider audience than poorly-crafted, spandex-obsessed revenge fantasies? So-called "best-selling" superhero titles are barely a blip on a vast cultural movement toward true mainstream acceptance of comics.

The best we can hope for at this point seems to be that new stores slowly emerge inspired by the few existing good comic shops, to service the new audience before the old guard collapses from within. We can also hope that at least some stores -- it seems definitely to be ten percent or less -- are canny and visionary enough to both explore new readership avenues and expand their product lines wisely, slowly, and in a professional, businesslike manner. Because as nice as it is to have graphic novels widely available at Barnes and Noble and Borders, I personally prefer patronizing stores (and store owners) dedicated to the artform of comics. I think it's good for the future of comics to *have* comic book stores; I just want those stores to want to sell comics to everyone that wants to buy them, not just people that look, sound and act like the store's owner(s) and employee(s).

In an earlier, less considered version of this essay, I concluded by saying "In my darkest moments, I must say that the comics industry cannot die fast enough for me." Upon reflection, and after the passage of a couple of years, I have to admit I don't feel that way anymore. I will always value the artform over the industry – anyone who truly loves comics must -- but I don't want the industry to die. I want it to thrive. And it will only do so through visionary, professional business practices and an ongoing, genuine desire to sell comics to everyone that wants them.

So, what kind of comic book stores reflect the best future for the direct market?

To determine which shops are good, first we must determine what kind of shops are out there. What is the definition of "comic book store?" Diamond claims there are thousands of "comic book stores" in North America, but I would guess they really mean they have thousands of accounts, many of which may be much like the "hobby shop" near my house, which makes its bread and butter on radio controlled cars, accessories, snacks and soda, but has a small selection of comics delivered from Diamond weekly. They have a couple dozen subscribers, they carry comics, but in my view this is not a "comic book store." It is run more as a hobby than a business, and that is one of the key problems in the direct market as it exists today.

Too many shops are run by former fans who have never bothered to learn how to be professional businessmen. As opposed to the hobby shop above, these are actual comic book stores, but they have profound problems (that the people running the store are either not aware of or don't see as problems). Maybe you've been in one of these stores -- perhaps the owner/cashier was eating lunch at the cash register, maybe annoyed that you had a question for him. Perhaps the back issues have no prices on them, or the prices are subject to change because they've gone up in value since the last time anyone bothered to price them. Perhaps you can feel the dust caking on your fingers as you browse the back issues -- or even the new stock (!). And let's not even get into the hours the store is open -- they may be posted, but how often does someone have the door open and the store ready to welcome customers before or at the posted opening time? If it's not 99 percent (allowing for family emergencies and genuine traffic tie-ups), then it's not a professional business; it's a hobby.

These are the very worst kind of "comic book stores," providing a negative impression for customers, potential customers, and the people they may bring along with them, such as their friends or family members, any or all of which, under the right retail circumstances, may be driven to spend their money in the shop as well. But it's extremely easy to lose interest in a dirty, dark pit that your comics-reading friend/boyfriend/husband/co-worker may have dragged you in to. It is almost needless to say that virtually all of the shops that fall under this criteria focus almost solely on corporate superhero comic books, and if there are other interests in evidence, they will be similarly off-putting. For example:

I've been in shops that had bad VHS tapes of professional wrestling playing on a small TV on the counter all the time. Superheroes and professional wrestling, we get it -- whatever your entertainment, it must involve men in tight clothing locked in dramatic conflict. "Not that there's anything wrong with that," to coin a phrase, but when a young mother comes in looking for **Persepolis** because she heard a wonderful interview with

Marjane Satrape on NPR and looked up "graphic novels" in the phone book, don't be surprised when she sees this environment and rightly assumes she probably won't find what she's looking for. I'll go so far as to say that if she asked nicely and the owner was in a good mood, he might order it from Diamond for her, but she'll never get to that step in the process -- the amateurish retail hell she has entered into is something she wants to exit, and try to forget. She may find what she's looking for at Borders, she thinks -- how often has anyone turned and walked out of that or any mainstream bookstore because of the environment they were confronted with upon initial entry?

And while I'm at it, have you ever been able to guess the main interest of the owner or manager of a mainstream bookstore simply by how the books are racked, or by what videos are in stock? Now ask that question about the comic book stores you've been in. If any specific genre dominates, with everything else abandoned to the manga or artcomix ghetto in a dark, inconvenient corner of the store, again, this is not the comic shop of the future.

There are stores that are slightly or significantly better than this, but which are still flawed. The owner or manager may have a more expansive view of comics as an artform, and may even be open to stocking comics from other countries. Certainly he should be, since those comics are building new audiences across all ages, genders and interests, and presumably they want to not only stay in business, but experience growth from year to year. But the limiting factor I see in a store like this is the continuing emphasis on corporate superhero comics, from the window displays to the huge waterfall racks to the posters, action figures and other items on sale.

Certainly superhero comics have a place in even a good comic book store, but if they are obviously favored over every other genre of storytelling within the comics artform, then the store is limiting its potential income and very likely turning people off, if they even walk through the door. I've actually seen a comic shop that carried a decent starter stock of manga, but there was no mention of manga whatsoever in the window display, yellow-pages ad, or anywhere else. If you browsed the shelves in the back for a while, though, you might stumble over them. I submit to you that you should not have to stumble over a comic book store's manga selection. Not that it should be emphasized any more than any other type of comics, but certainly it should be given equal prominence, like in a real bookstore. All of this applies to artcomix/alternative comics/undergrounds, what-have-you, as well. It's fine -- preferable, perhaps -- to have different displays and areas for all the different flavors of the comics artform. But a new customer coming through the door should not be able to guess which one is the owner/manager's favorite, and certainly they should not be hit over the head by such poor management of the store's retail space.

So those are the shops I think we mostly have now -- non-comics hobby shops with a Diamond account for a few interested customers; shops run by fans who are unwilling to create a welcoming, professional retail environment for a wide range of potential customers; well-meaning, more expansive shops that still have an over-emphasis on superheroes for one reason or another. Not as off-putting as the previous two types, but still cutting themselves out of the growing market for all kinds of comics aimed at all types of readers. The chances of these stores continuing to exist in another decade depend, in my opinion, largely on whether they can adapt to the emerging marketplace for comics. The ones that don't adapt may not go out of business --although I think a majority of them will -- but the ones that survive may find themselves doing merely that: Surviving. I think if I owned a retail business I would want to do better than that.

By now you may have a pretty good picture of what I think is the type of shop that will exist in the future, after the superhero convenience stores have mostly burned themselves out. I'll grant you there may always be stores that traffic primarily if not solely in superheroes, but for them to genuinely compete with full-service comic book stores in the same communities, they will have to either clean themselves up and learn better business practices, or they will go even further to seed, looking like nothing so much as that adult book store the town council keeps trying to kick out of town by changing the zoning laws every six months. Either way, those superhero-oriented stores will still be welcoming only one kind of customer, while that customer's family and friends gets its comic fix elsewhere.

The comic book stores that will thrive in the future will have a number of things in common:

- \* They will be clean
- \* They will be well-lit
- \* They will be well-organized
- \* They will open on time
- \* They will have prices clearly marked and up to date on all merchandise
- \* They will operate their business in accordance with local, state and federal laws, including labor and employment laws
- \* They will not favor one genre or sub-genre over another
- \* They will recognize that all comics are comics, no matter what country they originate from, or what format they are published in

- \* They will actively welcome all people interested in buying some kind of comics to shop at their store
- \* They will recognize the transition from periodical pamphlet comics to more appealing and enduring graphic novels, and accommodate the readership's clear preference for comics with a spine and a complete story
- \* They will actively seek to buy from a variety of distributors, not relying on one monopolistic distributor for the entirety of their business, and not settling for receiving books "whenever Diamond ships them," but rather, as soon as they are available, in order to better serve their customers

If the place you buy your comics at meets most or all of these criteria, be happy that you are supporting a professional comic shop that represents the best possible future for comics retailing.

If the place you buy your comics at fails to meet most (or all) of these criteria, you should probably start looking for a better shop. Not to punish your current shop, but because their days are very likely numbered. And more importantly, because you are probably missing out on a great many comics you would enjoy but have never seen. There's whole galaxy of worlds to be explored in the comics artform, and comic book stores that exist in the future will be your gateway to new experiences, new voices and new stories in comics. The great news is, some of them are out there right now, pushing comics forward every day.

But their efforts are vastly overshadowed by the superhero-centric stores that continue to live in the glorious past of the '80s and '90s, when it made a kind of sense to emphasize superhero comics, because that's virtually all there were, and all they could sell. But in the 21st century, the world outside the direct market is gobbling up comics in ever-increasing numbers; it's just that superhero comics are not in the majority of what it is they're buying. Manga and artcomix have both made huge inroads since the century began, albeit in different manners and different numbers, but they're indisputably the comics that sell outside the insular (I always want to say "inbred," but I'm trying to be nice), misinformed (again see that David Beard piece in **The Comics Journal #283**) and ultimately self-destructive world of the direct market.

One criticism angrily lobbed by hardcore superhero convenience store customers at me when I bring up this subject is the idea that I don't want superhero comics available at all, anywhere. When discussing this in casual conversation, I usually say something like "You could stock all the superhero comics in a dumpster behind the store, and you wouldn't lose one superhero-oriented customer. If it's Wednesday, they know what they want, and they'll do whatever it takes to get it."



Have you ever experienced a superhero-heavy comic book store on Wednesday afternoon? It's quite a lot like watching addicts line up for methadone outside the clinic. All that space -- all that goddamned space -- that retailers at superhero convenience shops devote to superhero comics? It's a total waste of their retail space. The vast majority of such shops could easily cut that space in half without dropping a single title, and devote the newly-created space to comics other people would like. People like the wives, girlfriends, children and friends the superhero addict drags along with him to the store. What if those people find something to read? Would it really be so awful to generate income from both your regular superhero guy and his girlfriend?

Believe it or not, the answer in some cases is yes. A lot of retailers are extraordinarily comfortable with the established "Good Ol' Boys" atmosphere of their shop, and they would gladly eschew growing their business if they don't have to deal with women. Or kids. Or, worst of all, women and their kids! Don't believe that's a real, existing attitude within the direct market? Then you haven't been in many comic book stores.

I admit my standards are high for comics retailing; they're high for the same reason my standards are high for quality inspection of the food my family eats. I want the best, and I want to be able to rest assured that my family and I will enjoy a safe and viable product for years to come. If your store meets most of my criteria for being a good one, then I have no problem with you. But if women and children feel unwelcome in your shop, if you are rude or deceptive to your customers, if you don't open on time and can't for the life of you imagine why anyone would want to read comics that you don't want to read -- or stock -- then yeah, I am talking to you. Or about you, at any rate.

Because, really, I am talking to people who buy comics. Not "Comics consumers," not "collectors," "fans," or little-z Marvel zombies. I am talking to people who like to read comics, who want to share their passion for the artform with their friends and loved ones, and who want to support stores that have a good chance of surviving the current transition from floppy monthly pamphlet comic booklets to the comics the whole world has definitively said it wants to read: Comics with a spine and a complete story. And what I am saying is this:

Please vote with your dollars. Please support the shops that work hard to present the best face for the artform we love, and who try damned hard to sell comics to everyone that wants to buy them, whatever country they originated in, and whatever format they are presented in. If your dealer presents a sloppy retail environment, or demonstrates unprofessional business practices, or worse, both, then find a better shop. They're out there. We're not really talking about stores that only exist in my imagination; they already exist right now. Some are better than others, but if you are buying from a dead-end retailer, you already know there's a problem. I've just been trying to help you put into words what the problem is, and suggest some solutions. I'm not trying to ban

superhero comics, I'm just lobbying for a world in which superhero comics don't continue to alienate readers of other comics, who already exist, and who want to buy more comics -- from anyone who wants to sell them to them, in a welcoming and professional manner.