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- Press Releases

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- California | Local
- National
- World
- Entertainment News
- Business
- Sports
- Politics
- Opinion
- Columnists
- Print Edition
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- Travel
- West Magazine
- House & Garden
- Health
- Food
- Car Culture
- Obituaries
- Crossword, Sudoku
- All Sections
- Corrections

- BUY, SELL & MORE
- Jobs
- Cars
- Real Estate
- Apartments
- Personals
- Deals at Local Stores
- Coupons
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Menace to Comic Heroes?

Digital piracy is creeping into the industry, threatening small publishers. Some say, though, that it can attract new readers.

By Michelle Keller, Times Staff Writer
May 29, 2006

Since their smashing introduction in the 1930s, comic-book heroes such as Superman and Batman have been fighting evil right and left, keeping cities safe and delighting fans.

But these days they and other stalwarts of the industry are stuck in the grip of a sticky Web that could ensnare even Spider-Man. They face foes that couldn't be imagined 70 years ago: digital pirates.

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Digital scanning and sharing of comic books have begun to make a dent in the business, driven by easy-to-use file-sharing tools and a culture in which enthusiasts eagerly pass along their copies to one another.

"No comic sells enough to lose some of the market," said Chris Gage, who has written for DC Comics Inc. and independent publisher Arcana Studio. "If your comic book doesn't sell a certain amount of copies, it can get canceled."

Gage, a writer for "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit" and other

television shows, is well aware of piracy in all forms of media. The West Hollywood resident worries most about his first creator-owned comic, "Paradox," which debuted last year and whose survival depends on healthy sales.

Estimates for the number of comic books shared online are fuzzy because it is difficult to track specific downloads on so-called peer-to-peer networks.

But an informal Web poll of 4,621 readers from December 2004 to December 2005 by Comic Book Resources, an online magazine, found that more than 30% had downloaded a comic book at least once. Twelve percent said they downloaded comic books regularly.

"Are there downloaders in the tens of thousands? Possibly," said Todd Allen, an independent online media consultant and adjunct professor of e-business at Columbia College Chicago. "Are there millions? Not likely."

It's certainly not as widespread a practice as music file sharing, but the comic-book business is much smaller. Although the top 10 comic books may have runs of 100,000 to 150,000 copies for each monthly issue, even giants such as DC Comics and Marvel Publishing have books that sell about 20,000 to 30,000 copies. And many comics don't even break 5,000 anymore, Allen said.

It's the little guys that stand to lose the most. Guys such as Robert Burnett, whose Los Angeles-based production company, Ludovico Technique, launched a comic series last year. "Living in Infamy," about a witness-protection program for super-villains, runs about 2,000 to 5,000 copies an issue.

"Comic-book piracy for us would be a problem," Burnett said. "Our retail price is \$3. Every book that we sell matters."

Burnett said he was unaware of piracy of his comic books but was concerned it might



Publisher
(Gary Friedman / LAT)
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happen in the future.

"Comic books are a labor-intensive proposition," he said. "Our people have to get paid."

Driven by collectors and hard-core fans, the comic-book industry will always have its share of loyal paper-copy readers. Aficionados will continue to head to the comic-book store Wednesday mornings, when new titles go on sale, to leaf through the colorful pages and breathe in the freshly printed ink.

"The collector mind-set says, 'I need the paper issue,'" said Gene Kannenberg Jr., director of ComicsResearch.org, a website devoted to scholarship on comic books and strips.

Still, readership is declining. Comic-book publishers are having a hard time, in particular, catching the attention of younger readers, who either are tuned in to a plethora of other media — video games, movies, music, social networks — or would rather get their fix of the action characters free online.

Shane Coleman, a clerk at Golden Apple Comics on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, says he sees few from the high-school-and-younger crowd saunter in. The younger customers who do drop in look mainly for horror stories or the Japanese comics known as *manga*.

"You tend to see more people my age come in," said Coleman, an avid collector who, at age 30, considers himself somewhat old-school.

For some readers, the waiting-for-Wednesday tradition is waning. "Zero-day comics," as they are referred to when they are available online the same day the paper copy hits store shelves, appeal to a younger generation used to getting news, music and movies instantly.

The piracy may start simply enough.

A friend of a friend of the artist or writer will get an advance copy and scan it online, said Ryan Liebowitz, owner of Golden Apple Comics.

And, Coleman said, "a lot of the younger generation, they want it now. They don't care if they have it in their hands."

There are multiple-image readers and formats for passing around comics. Users typically scan the files, turn them into readable formats and upload them onto sites such as Pirate Bay, <http://www.thepiratebay.org>, for users of the BitTorrent protocol.

These sites work by breaking a large file into smaller pieces stored on different users' computers. When a user wants to download a specific file, BitTorrent searches around the Web for the fragments and pieces them back together, allowing for the faster transmission of large files.

"It's fairly easy to download them," said Yero Dermenjian, a 22-year-old microchip designer from Saugus, Mass. But "it's not as easy as it's become to download, say, music."

Often offered as series of comic books, the files can be as large as 100 to 300 megabytes, requiring patience to download, Dermenjian said.

"It can take some time depending on your Internet connection," he said. "That's still significantly easier than actually earning the money to buy those same comics."

A self-described serious comic-book reader, Dermenjian said he still regularly buys paper copies of series he likes.

"I have typically downloaded books that I generally wouldn't purchase," he said.

Coral Parmar, a systems programmer in Elmwood Park, N.J., said he used downloads to "get a feel for what's new and what I might like."

Parmar, also 22, loves the instant gratification he gets with digital comics.

"Nothing bothers me more than reading the first few parts of a story arc and then being forced to wait a few weeks for the next portion, only to find out that it's been delayed another few weeks," he said.

But some comics are never printed after their initial releases. In such cases, the digital copies are all readers may have, said Michael Pemberton, an associate professor at Georgia Southern University who teaches a course on comic books in American culture.

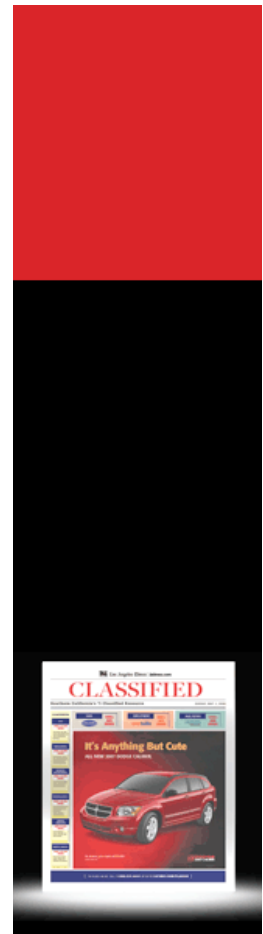
"It gives people the chance to read one or two of these issues, and then they might go to the comic-book store," said Pemberton, himself a devoted collector. "I see this as a

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kind of free publicity for the comic-book companies."

The major comic-book companies have been slow to respond to the digital age and piracy, consultant Allen said, although "my understanding is that they've told some websites to knock it off."

"It's a small community," Allen said. Even if only 15% of readers downloaded comics and bought only occasionally, alienating this group would be a huge mistake, he said.

Music downloading, in which users are able to share essentially perfect copies of original recordings, is a different matter. In response, the Recording Industry Assn. of America has filed thousands of lawsuits against individuals.

Marvel and DC Comics declined to comment on the issue of comic-book piracy, but Marvel has taken some steps in venturing into the digital realm. In late 2005, the company began offering comic books that could be viewed only on its website, <http://www.marvel.com/digitalcomics>. But the titles, such as "Ultimate Spider-Man #86" and "Uncanny X-Men #420," cannot currently be downloaded onto a user's computer.

Comic-book blogs and readers are buzzing about whether a service such as Apple Computer Inc.'s iTunes, in which readers would pay a small fee for downloads, would work. Some scoff at the idea of ever reading comics online, but for those used to doing nearly everything online, the idea is appealing.

"Personally, I don't see a lot of value in a comic book after I've read it," Dermenjian said. "But I don't have the heart to throw them away. So if there was a way for me to read them and keep them without having them clutter up my house, I would definitely be interested."

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