Marvel to give original comics new life online

Publishers turn to the Web to introduce kids to classic characters.

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Marvel is putting some of its older comics online today, hoping to reintroduce young people to the X-Men and Fantastic Four by showcasing the original issues in which such characters appeared.

It's a tentative move to the Internet: Comics can be viewed only in a Web browser, not downloaded, and new issues will not go online for at least six months after they first appear in print.

Still, it represents perhaps the comics industry's most aggressive Web push yet. Even as their creations -- from Iron Man to Wonder Woman -- become increasingly visible in pop culture through new movies and video games, old-school comics publishers rely primarily on specialized comic shops for distribution of their ink-and-paper product.

"You don't have that spinner rack of comic books sitting in the local five-and-dime any more," said Dan Buckley, president of Marvel Publishing. "We don't have our product intersecting kids in their lifestyle space as much as we used to."

Translate "kids' lifestyle space" into plain English and you get "the Internet." Marvel Entertainment Inc.'s two most prominent competitors currently offer online teasers designed to drive the sales of comics or book collections.

Dark Horse Comics now puts its monthly anthologies "Dark Horse Presents" up for free viewing on its MySpace site. The images are vibrant and large.

DC Comics has also put issues up on MySpace, and recently launched the competition-based Zuda Comics, which encourages users to rank one another's work, as a way to tap into the expanding Web comic scene. DC President Paul Levitz said he expected to put more original comics online in coming years.

"We look at anything that connects comics to people," Levitz said. "The most interesting thing about the online world to me is the opportunity for new forms of creativity... It's a question of what forms of storytelling work for the Web?"

For its mature Vertigo imprint, DC offers weekly sneak peeks at the first five or six pages of upcoming issues. The publisher also offers downloadable files of the first issues in certain series, timed to publication of the series in book or graphic novel format.
The Web release of DC’s "Y the Last Man" sent sales of that collection soaring at Bridge City Comics in Portland, Ore., shop owner Michael Ring said.

“They really do tend to be feeder systems,” Ring said of online comics. “They give people that initial taste.”

For Marvel, the general public has often already gotten its initial taste through movies like "Spider-Man" or the "Fantastic Four" franchises.

The publisher is hoping fans will be intrigued enough to shell out $9.99 a month, or $4.99 monthly with a yearlong commitment.

They'll be able to poke through, say, the first 100 issues of Stan Lee's 1963 creation "Amazing Spider-Man" at their leisure, along with more recent titles like "House of M" and "Young Avengers." Comics can be viewed in several formats.

Ring expects Marvel's effort to put a slight dent in the back-issue segment of the comic shop industry, where rare, out-of-print titles sell for hundreds of dollars on EBay and at trade shows.

Though most comic fans are collectors, some simply want to catch up on the backstory of their favorite characters and would no longer have to compete with collectors -- and pay top dollar -- to do so.

About 2,500 issues will be available at the launch of Marvel Digital Comics, with 20 more being released each week, at www.marvel.com/digitalcomics.