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Promoting a Graphic Novel Collection: Sometimes Innovation Means Utilizing Someone Else's Expertise

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Abstract

The author describes an innovative way to promote a library's graphic novel collection using the format of the genre itself. The author describes his trepidation about his lack of artistic ability, followed by the successful experience of using *Comic Book Creator* software to create marketing material. A description of how the software works is provided and advice is offered to others wishing to do something similar.

You've heard the expression, "Sell the sizzle, not the steak." This article describes what I consider to be using the steak to sell the sizzle. Not long ago, I was a member of our local One Book, One Community committee. For our community-wide read, we chose *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. For those not familiar with *Persepolis*, it chronicles her life from the ages of six to fourteen as she grows up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. It's a poignant, child's-eye view of events as a repressive regime begins to exert its influence over people's daily lives. The reader journeys along with her as she comes to grip with the tragedy and the comedy in her new world order. *Persepolis* is written in the form of a black-and-white graphic novel and was made into an animated feature film released by Sony Pictures in 2007.

Our committee planned a series of events to complement and support the community-wide read. We had film screenings, panel discussions, a graphic novel workshop, and several other activities, which enhanced the One Book One Community experience. Two of the highlights were a workshop for students by artist Tom Fleming and a presentation by Kathryn Koob, former Iranian hostage and author of *Guest of the Revolution*.

Of course, an essential aspect of planning such a program lies in publicizing the events. A limitation was that everything had to be done on a rather limited budget. We thought it might be interesting if we did a promotion in the form of a page from a graphic novel. The committee agreed that flyers and posters created as graphic novel pages or comic strips could be a good way to attract attention. However, there was a drawback: I have no artistic talent.

I spent the next few days visiting the local comic book stores, asking if there was an aspiring local artist who might want to donate his or her talents for a good cause. I spread the word that although we couldn't pay for the work, we could afford to buy the supplies and that there would be a lot of publicity throughout the community. I tried to convince the comic book store owners that this would also make a nice portfolio piece for an upand-coming young artist.

I received the names of two people who might be interested, but as our deadline drew near, it became apparent that neither of these artists was going to come through. We were running out of time, and it looked as if my idea was going to die a quick death. At the last moment, however, one of my colleagues on the committee, Melissa Raymer from Cape Fear Community College Learning Resource Center, stepped up and created some wonderful artwork for our promotional material. She did an excellent job capturing the essence and the mood of Satrapi's book. The One Book One Community program was a success as evidenced by the high attendance at our events.

The idea of using the graphic novel style stayed with me. It seemed a natural way to market the graphic novels in our library's collection, and I wasn't ready to give up on it. I might not have artistic talent, but there might be software available that would compensate for my inability to draw a straight line. Sometimes, being innovative simply means relying on someone else's expertise to supplement your own abilities. With the plethora of software available these days, it is getting easier to tap into realms that were previously inaccessible, such as music, digital video, and animation. I searched the Web and discovered a program that combined the world famous artwork of Marvel Comics with a price that fit our budget.

The product was called *Comic Book Creator* from PlanetWide Games¹. The basic package allows the user to create comics using preloaded art or personal image files.

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¹ Author's note: Since this article was written, PlanetWide Games has undergone reorganization. The product's new name is MashON. It is being marketed as a "creative social media web platform". It provides a free, web-based tool for creating comic strips, comic books, and e-cards. However, there are numerous other programs available to design creative marketing materials using graphic novel and manga styles. Search the Web using the keywords "comic (or cartoon) design software" to see what is available.

The company also offered other versions of *Comic Book Creator* that included licensed images from such works as *Speed Racer*, *El Nacho Libre*, and *Marvel Comics*, among others. We purchased the *Marvel Heroes* version and were very satisfied with the results.

Fortunately for me, the learning curve was as reasonable as the price. When creating a new "book," a page format from a collection of preloaded template pages is chosen. Each page is chosen individually, so every page in the book can have a different format. For example, Figure 1 shows one of the basic two-panel pages, with the panels stacked vertically, and spanning the full page from left to right. A background, also known as a screenshot, is added into these blank panels. Some screenshots are generic background settings such as the sky or building exteriors and interiors. Others have characters already drawn in as part of the scene. In Figure 1, I've inserted a plain sky background in the top panel. In the bottom panel I've placed an image of Spider-Man and Wolverine in battle.

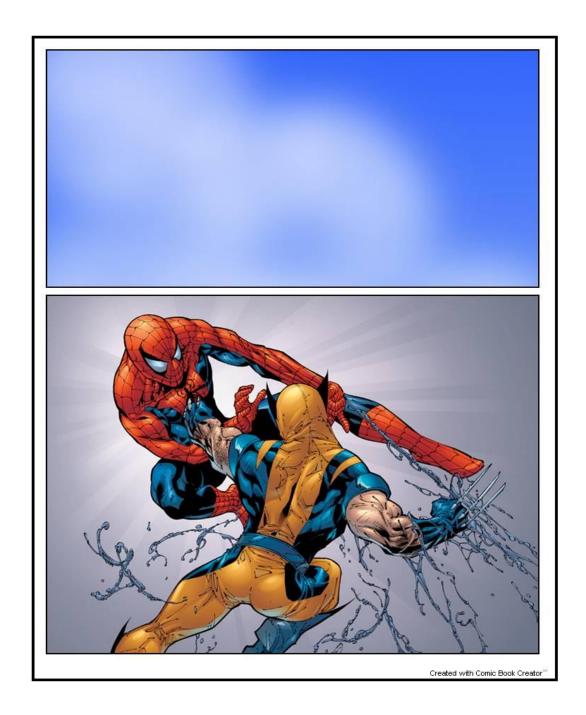


Figure 1™,© Marvel Entertainment, Inc.

The next step involves adding preloaded clip art, such as characters, titles, explosions, and even webs for Spider-Man. The clip art images can be rotated as much as 360 degrees so that Spider-Man can hang upside down from the ceiling, or Wolverine can be falling at a precarious angle. They can also be resized to create foreground and background perspectives. The images can even be enlarged so that they extend beyond the

boundaries of the panel and intrude into other frames. Thought or dialogue balloons and text boxes can be added. Figure 2 shows Elektra with an explosion behind her and a text box to her left. In the bottom panel, I've added a dialogue balloon.



Figure 2 ™,© Marvel Entertainment, Inc.

The software interface is simple and intuitive. Placing the screenshots and other images into a blank page is done by simply dragging and dropping the art from a menu onto the page. Figure 3 illustrates what the program looks like on a computer screen. In the center is a screenshot of Wolverine that has been added to a blank, full-panel page. On the left are some of the images in the clip art menu. On the right are controls that manipulate the text and images. Eight comic-book style fonts come with the software.

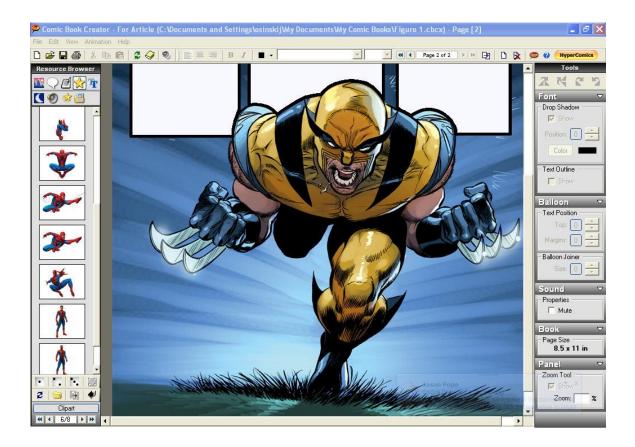


Figure 3 ™,© Marvel Entertainment, Inc.

I found what I needed in *Comic Book Creator*. It was inexpensive, easy to learn, and the artwork is licensed for non-commercial use. Also, once you get the hang of it, it's pretty fun to use! One drawback is that there are a finite number of images in the package. So, long term, repeated use of this software has its limitations. However, because the clip art can be manipulated, there is some flexibility in the sizing and positioning of the images. Thus, the same image can be made to look different by changing its characteristics and context.

Since acquiring this software, I have used it for publicizing the library's graphic novel collection, but it has proven to be a useful tool in other marketing projects as well, such as information flyers for distribution within the library. There are also opportunities for

outreach. For example, for a recent screening of the film *Iron Man* on our campus, I set up a table outside the theater and distributed flyers and other material to promote the library. Examples of some one-page handouts that can be created in a matter of minutes are shown in Figures 4 through 6.



Figure 4 ™,© Marvel Entertainment, Inc.



Figure 5 ™,© Marvel Entertainment, Inc.



Figure 6 ™,© Marvel Entertainment, Inc.

Like *Comic Book Creator*, other programs include the ability to drag and drop from menus of existing images. Some also provide the tools to draw original artwork and scan or upload printed material and photos. Others enable users to animate artwork and create digital motion files with or without sound. These could then be added to a

website or burned onto disc. The more you spend, the more bells and whistles you get. Regarding copyright: if the program contains pre-existing artwork, check the license for restrictions on the use of the images.

The idea behind using graphic novel or comic imagery is to target an audience that is already interested in the genre being promoted. For example, when handing out flyers to promote the library at a screening of *Iron Man*, an assumption can be made that a good percentage of the movie patrons would be fans of the graphic novel. Had the film been a romantic period piece, a different format would have been more appropriate. The style should have a natural, visual appeal to the intended audience. A flyer promoting a film collection might have borders that look like sprocket holes and frame lines. Or film scripts could be publicized using signs formatted to look like a screenplay. Nor is it necessary to limit yourself to print material when it comes to innovative promotions. Consider using software that can be used to compose music, edit public domain video, or do screen capturing of a computer.

Hopefully, your marketing material will attract people outside your target audience, persuading them to explore your collections further. Keep it fun! With some good inexpensive and open source programs, a limited budget doesn't have to limit innovation. On the contrary, sometimes it's one of the greatest motivators.

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