

Comics Bibliography module recommendations

Purpose:

That the GCD create a comics bibliography module within the database to fulfill one of its stated goals: "The ability to record references to all books and articles about comics stories, strips, and panels, their creators, their publishers, or profiles or histories of comics features, characters, or publications." For the sake of brevity, this document will hereafter refer to such references as 'about comics' references, or sometimes as 'bibliographic citations'.

The goal of this project is to create a database of comics research, a database that will allow users to search for, display, and enter/edit basic bibliographic information pertaining to 'about comics' citations and to allow generous keyword tagging of the entries and cross-reference links to other GCD objects to make them searchable.

There are three distinct use cases: The Researcher (consumer of content; focus on search, display, and browse); the Indexer (content editor; adds, edits, and removes content); and the Approver (reviews Indexer changes; approves or rejects changes, or interacts with Indexer).

There are two distinct types of indexes: the general citation, which focuses on the citation and its content and includes enough information about the originating publication to identify it; and the fanzine/trade magazine index, which focuses on periodicals specifically dedicated to the comics industry, such as the Comics Journal or Alter-Ego, where we focus both on the citation and its content and additionally focus on the publication itself, similar to how we index comics publications.

The proposal calls for implementing the project in two phases plus a small amount of preliminary work. Phase I would require the preliminary work as a prerequisite, but takes advantage of our existing workflows. The main bit of additional work needed for Phase I would be some additional work to Search to make sure we can call out the new entries in their own category. Phase II describes a simplified workflow that would require additional tech work to implement, though it could be leveraged to improve data entry for both comics and citations in 'other' publications. Phase II would be an improvement, but Phase I describes an implementation that could be up and running quickly with minimal tech work that would fit into our existing indexing framework.

Preliminary Work

Because of the parallels of the fanzine/trade magazine indexes with our existing comics publication indexing, it was decided that it was desirable to treat this project as an expansion of our existing content indexing module rather than a brand new standalone module.

This would entail the following changes:

- Allow/require users to decide whether series are a 'comics' series, an 'about comics' series, or an 'other' series; where an 'about comics' publication is a publication where at least 50% of the editorial content is about comics (parallel with the comics publication definition); and where other is any publication that contains either comics material, 'about comics' material, or both, but does not meet the criteria of a comics publication or an "about comics" publication.
- Add an 'about comics' Type as a content type. 'About comics' content can appear in any of the three types of publications mentioned above.
- For story/content records, add a 'page_numbers' field.

This preliminary work should be able to be completed in house, as it mostly consists merely of adding new values to existing fields (drop downs and radio buttons) rather than new tables or new screens, plus a small change in business logic for the third bullet above.

Phase I

The only material difference between a comics publication index and an 'about comics' publication index would be that the expectation that comics sequences account for the majority of the pages in the former while 'about comics' sequences account for the majority of the pages in the latter. Otherwise they would behave identically as far as data entry and approval. Add series to publishers, add issues to series, add content to issues.

For citations in 'other' publications, the workflow for indexing comics in 'other' publications is actually identical to the workflow for indexing content in a 'comics publication', except the 'other' publication flag restricts the content Types that can be entered to comics stories and similar types. To add citations to this workflow, we would merely need to 'about comics' as an additional Type that can be added to an 'other' publication. Furthermore, a Publication Type of Thesis, Dissertation or Web (only available for 'other' publications) would restrict the Types that could be indexed to 'about comics' only.

An abbreviated workflow for 'other' publications is described in Phase II, but the above workflow is sufficient to mirror what's already in place.

A brief description of the needs of each user type in Phase I:

End users

All citations should have a Type of 'about comics' no matter what type of publication they appear in so they may be searched uniformly. Users should be able to search by authors, titles, publication titles, keywords, synopses, dates, country of publication, language of publication, and

combinations of the previous, and should be able to sort search results. Although 'about comics' would merely be one type of content that could be indexed within a publication, like covers or comics stories, we would want to call it out as a distinct search type that would limit search results to this kind of content type. End users searching for this type of content would want to be able to disentangle it from non-'about comics' types.

Search results can be returned similarly to existing search results for comics, but again as a distinct subset.

These search enhancements would be the main additional tech work to implement Phase I.

Clicking through to a given search result should display a page the same as for a comics publication.

Indexers

As noted previously, workflow for indexers indexing an about comics publication should mirror the existing workflow for indexing a comics publication. Select or create a publisher; select or create a series; select or create an issue or a run of issues; add content (or select and edit content). We would expect the majority of sequences in an about comics publication to be of Type "about comics", but otherwise the indexing process would be the same, and other content types could be indexed as appropriate (comics story, illustration, house ads, etc). If we adopt a cover policy for about comics publications similar to comics publications, then we can reuse that existing workflow as well. So beyond the creation of the new options outlined under Preliminary Work, this workflow would require no modifications.

For indexing a comics citation in an 'other' publication, the workflow is again identical except for the following, as called out previously:

- Only 'about comics' or comics sequences can be indexed; other Types such as ads, blank pages, etc can not.
- We do not accept cover scans for 'other' publications.

These are all business logic restrictions that limit (or expand) the options available in a few dropdowns, but do not necessitate new screens or new workflows.

Keywords would be used extensively to document the particular comics stories, strips, panels, creators, publishers, comics features, characters, publications, themes, trends, etc covered in the book or article.

Approvers

Workflow for approvers would be exactly the same as at present; no new screens would be required.

Phase II

The system described in Phase I is workable, inline with our current workflows, and would require minimal tech work. It could be improved with these additional features, which should be evaluated independently.

For 'other' publications, Publication Type should be expanded to include Thesis, Dissertation and Web. These would only be used for 'about comics' citations, not comics. Therefore the Thesis, Dissertation and Web Publication Type would not be available for comics publications or about comics publications, and for other publications, if the Publication Type were to be set to Thesis, Dissertation or Web then the only content Type that could be indexed would be the 'about comics' Type.

As I type this, the current site code limits the workflow in such a way that hierarchical objects have to be created and approved sequentially (e.g. publishers have to be created and approved before series can be added to them; series must be created and approved before issues can be added to them, etc). But a code refactor is currently underway, and may be complete before this document is approved, that would make it possible to create an abbreviated workflow that would allow an index to be done as a "done in one".

The 'other' publication indexes would be a good test case for this simplified workflow, given that they're frequently standalone sequences from a given publication, rather than one of many from the same publication. An abbreviated workflow would be much less work for indexers and approvers, but would require a great deal of additional tech work since it would involve new indexing and approval screens and more complicated multi-object changesets.

As an example, a hypothetical workflow might involve an indexer starting with choosing to add a simple standalone citation. They then select the publication type, and then a data entry form is displayed appropriate to the publication type they selected (e.g. we don't show fields that aren't appropriate for the given publication type; field labels are appropriate to the publication type).

Phase II is not actually required to make the bibliography project work, so it could perhaps be considered as a separate project, or separate projects, after the fact. And the simplified workflow could also work for other areas of the site. A simplified workflow is not required to make the bibliography project work, but the bibliography project would probably be a good test ground for an abbreviated workflow. Other enhancements would be a special display format for 'about comics' search results that return results in a format more closely resembling a bibliography.

Costs and Timelines

The preliminary work and Phase I each require minimal tech work. The most time consuming would presumably be making separate search results for 'about comics', but even this shouldn't require so much work that it would be worth outsourcing. This could all be done in house with relatively little effort; no new tables or workflows are called for.

Phase II would require much more tech work, but is optional, and can be discussed and prioritized after the completion of Phase I.