

The Grand Comics Database (GCD): An Evolving Research Tool

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Introduction

It has become common to see news articles decrying Internet research as the sole resource used by students, and although the complaint is legitimate, the Internet has also given rise to scholarly tools such as online public access library catalogues. For the comics scholar, specialized research tools are evolving.

The Grand Comics Database, a new tool for cartoon art research, is an index of published comic books throughout the world. In 1994, a group of comic book collectors decided to begin a voluntary project to index every comic book ever published in the United States - currently estimated to be about 200,000 pieces. A comic book was defined as having 50 percent or more art and pictures working together to tell a story. This led to the inclusion of comic strip reprint books, such as Peanuts collections, into the database. Small press and educational comics are also indexed. This project primarily consists of a free searchable database of creator indices with optional data such as genre, character appearances, and plot. The GCD continues to evolve and now includes data from 13 countries and more than 60,000 comic books.

The GCD is an evolving project, and additions and changes are proposed and voted on by the group as a whole. Indexers currently reserve a comic book and then index a selected set of information from it including all the creators, the publisher, the date published, character appearances, and plot along with other information. The information is transferred to the coordinators who review the data and add them into the main database. Specialty editors work on ensuring the correctness of the data and make changes when necessary. All data are credited to the indexer who provided them.

Data are made available to individual contributors for their home use and are also loaded to a website with searchable capabilities for a wider audience. The long-term utility of this for comics research cannot be overstated. No single catalogue of any individual country's comic books exists, and most researchers are forced to use price guides for purposes that they are not designed for or rely on a possible catalogue of an artist's work. Unfortunately, few cartoonists have reached the stature of Jack Kirby, Joost Swarte, or Robert Crumb and have bibliographic overviews of their oeuvre; specialty subject bibliographies are almost non-existent although some, such as Dark Horse Comics publications, Arthurian fantasy, or Jews in comics, exist. A large portion of current comics research consists of finding the appropriate work to be able to study it. With the GCD, an index of a cartoonist's work can be generated in seconds and then used to guide research. As plot and genre fields are continually updated, research on specific topics will become easier to conduct. A paper on Batman's 1950s-era appearances can have the GCD generate a readily-made bibliography. The GCD also hosts mailing lists where specific questions not currently resolved by the database are usually quickly answered because of the high level of knowledge of the subscribers.

Overview

We are building a simple database that will be easy to use and understand, easy to add to, and easy for people to contribute to.

We will include information on creator credits, story details, and other information useful to the comic book reader and fan.

If we are able to take this to its ultimate conclusion, this database will contain data for every comic book ever published. It will be available to all for a nominal fee (cost of materials and postage, if any). We plan to offer at least limited access to the public at large through the World Wide Web.

This project is for us, and the people like us. We will use this as a comic-book database which can be searched and sorted. The database will be a resource for fans, hobbyists and collectors, with no commercial objectives. (GCD "About" 2000)

The GCD is a free, nonprofit, non-commercial,² international volunteer effort based on the Internet with members from 18 countries. The project's goal is to continue to expand an online searchable database to include the creator, along with other information, of every comic book ever published. The database is a resource for fans, hobbyists, collectors, historians, and scholarly researchers. In the US, about 150,000 to 200,000 comic books have been published with about 5,000 added every year.³ As noted, the GCD's definition of a comic is a book that is 50 percent or more art and/or pictures which tells a story⁴ and thus includes small print run fanzines and minicomics. The definition is flexible and includes borderline indexed material of interest to a scholar, such as children's joke and gag cartoon books (e.g. Will Eisner's *101 Outer Space Jokes* and *Star Jaws*).

As befits a volunteer project, the GCD has a limited organizational structure. The current formal positions are membership coordinator, reservations coordinator, data coordinator, editor in chief, and web site / email list-serv administrator. With the exception of the last, the positions are filled by volunteers after a polling of the group, usually when the current officeholder indicates a desire to step down. In November 2000, an elected board of directors was created due to the project's growth beyond its *ad hoc* structure. Participants in the project overlap, but include indexers, experts (frequently creators), users, and administrators / technicians. Email lists are the main communication tool for the project. Three major email lists exist: the Main list (for discussions related to the project including the comics industry, current and historical), Chat list (non-project-related topics of interest), and Tech list (discussions of a technical nature related to managing the database). Several international lists have been established for major non-US indexing sections, including German, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish, French, and International (General).

History

The GCD builds on several decades of comic book cataloguing. Jerry Bails and Howard Keltner each self-published books in the 1960s. Robert Overstreet's *Price Guide* series began in 1970 and was the first widespread source for publication information on comic books. In 1977, the Amateur Press Alliance for Indexing (APA-I) was formed by Gene Reed, Mike Tiefenbacher, and others to catalogue comic books. The paper-based, mailing group still exists with a membership capped at about 25 people. Bob Klein and Tim Stroup, members of APA-I,

came up with the concept of the electronically-based GCD. Klein recalled the origins of the project,

As part of APA-I, we also had a very good sense for the shortcomings of paper-based distribution. We were also very enthusiastic for the sorts of information you see in the GCD. Tim and I were each very comfortable with the electronic medium, and very quickly the conversation turned to sharing indexing information in a common format using electronic media for storage and distribution. In March of 1994, we decided to form a group and see how far we could go with creating an electronic version of APA-I (Klein, 1997).

Klein and Stroup were joined by Jon Ingersoll, after which, they began planning the project:

Between the three of us, we defined the early goals for the group. Very importantly, we also set standards for submissions and defined methods to collect and distribute information. We planned very carefully, and we tried a few experiments within our small group of three. In retrospect, a lot of it seems very crude from today's vantage point. We distributed indices on floppy disks via surface mail and the file structure was basically one-file-per-title.

Once we were satisfied that we knew how we wanted to start, we used email to canvas friends and acquaintances from APA-I as well as other contacts in fandom to form the original group of about ten. We were very keen on deliberately avoiding unrealistic goals. There had been several previous attempts to set up similar groups. All had died very quickly. It appeared that most had goals or methods that were not capable of sustaining volunteer organizations. We did a lot of planning (Klein, 1997).

Stroup assumed the role of the membership coordinator, Klein the data coordinator and Ingersoll the reservations coordinator.

Technology assisted the GCD in another way beyond computerized indexing. Klein feels, "Perhaps our biggest single asset was the reflector that Jon Lovstad, another early member, set up for us. It has enabled us to maintain a level of timely communication and activity that rivals any industrial concern." The computers that made the GCD possible also shaped its growth, according to Klein, who added:

Our joint experience in APA-I was a good school for the GCD. The dynamics of that group helped guide us in setting up the GCD. Even with that, we did have a lot of new ground to cover. The electronic medium is so fast and so powerful that we have had to improvise a lot. From the beginning it was clear that we would have people looking for a variety of information, satisfying a variety of purposes, not just the sorts of things that the APA-Iers were after. At the same time, it was clear that we needed to standardize on a format, as APA-I never needed to do. The original design tried to moderate between several pitfalls. The project was designed to walk the line between covering enough information to attract the interest of most fans and avoiding a narrow look at comics, and yet we didn't want to include such a lot of data that it would be a burden on an indexer. We had to navigate between the user needs and the indexer's dedication (Klein, 1997).

The GCD has evolved at a steady pace. All three founders stepped down from their original positions, while far more people have joined than the original ten. The original exchange of files via floppy disk, is done over the Internet now. Online indexing is planned for the near future. The founders originally planned to index just North American/English books, but other

languages were added. The informal barrier fell when Randy Scott indexed several Mexican comics and Rhode added in *Superman Og Fredsbomben*, a Danish story never published in English. The data format has been redesigned and added to several times, and continues to change. In 1997, Klein felt,

I've been very surprised at our success in almost any dimension. The fact that most of us are still getting used to the power of the networked computer means we have a lot more growing to do. But surprisingly for all the changes in some things (mostly format), the other aspects of the project are still very close to the original outline. I think our current charter is almost identical to the original. [But] in spite of our successes, we still haven't met one of our key goals - that's to make our information available to fandom at large. That's still in the future (Klein, 1997).

Resources and Companion Projects

The three email lists provide a forum for the discussion of comic book credits and contents. Participants include comic historians, scholars, fan experts, professional comic book writers and artists, book authors, convention organizers, store owners and other retailers, fanzine publishers, current and former comic book publishers and owners, and comic book distributors. Projects affiliated with the GCD include Howard Keltner's *Golden Age Comic Book Index* book/database, Jerry Bails' *Who's Who of 20th Century American Comic Books* database, Michigan State University Library's Comic Art Collection run by Randy Scott, *I.N.D.U.C.K.S.: The Disney Comics Database*, Dan Stevenson's efforts to identify all known comic books, John Bullough & Michael Rhode's *Comics Research Bibliography*, Bob Beerbohm's research on the history of comics distribution and retailing, Bill Schelly's research on the history of comics fandom, and Doug Wheeler's research on Victorian and pre-Golden Age comics. The GCD has assisted projects including a Curt Swan index compiled for his daughter, the compilation and exchange of circulation data through the efforts of Russ Maheras and Bob Klein, which has been used by the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund and other researchers, identification of western related comics for Bob Phillips' planned book, identification of uncredited Golden Age artists, and aiding DC Comics in art credits for their *Millennium Editions* and *Archives* volumes.

Current statistics (as of September 2000):

13 countries, 9 languages, 174 indexers, 1016 publishers, 6221 series, 62,771 issues, 308,743 features, 1,082,082 credits.

Countries with books included: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States.

Dates of comics indexed (US terminology): Platinum Age (before 1938): 255; Golden Age (1938-1955): 12,111; Silver Age (1956-1972): 12,682; Modern Age (1973-2000): 35,779.

Comics indexed by country: American: 57,465; Italian: 4,042; Swedish: 409; Canadian: 315; British: 150; German: 112; Netherlands: 87.

Major companies indexed: Acclaim: 555; American Comics Group: 465; Archie: 470; Charlton: 852; Dark Horse: 912; DC: 18,936; Dell: 2,724; EC: 329; Eclipse: 641; Editoriale Corno: 461; Fawcett: 908; Fiction House: 765; First: 570; Fox: 349; Gladstone: 618; Gold Key: 2,262; Harvey: 383; Image: 533; Lev Gleason: 353; Malibu: 336; Marvel: 13,611; Quality Comics: 961; Sergio Bonelli Editore: 349; Warren: 375.

Unsurprisingly for a fandom-based project, the most indexed books are superheroes, Disney,

and recent American (i.e. the mainstream). The least indexed comics are non-Disney humor, Archie and Harvey comics, undergrounds, non-US comics, genre-specific books (i.e. westerns, funny animal, TV-tie ins), alternatives (especially self-published and minicomics), giveaways, and comic strip / gag cartoon reprints in book form.

Database

The main database resides in Norway and is currently implemented in FileMaker Pro. Data are provided for research in simple tab-separated plain text files or through an online search database. The website search engine is open to the general public, but to receive a copy of the entire GCD, 100 issues must have been indexed by the requestor or equivalent work performed. The Database is actually two main databases - a "series" level that describes the entire publication and an "issues" level that delineates the contents of each single issue. Contributors reserve a book or series. They then send in data for each field, some of which are optional,⁵ and the information is integrated into the main database, and redistributed to the membership at large. Thumbnail scans of covers have been added to the online database for aid in identification of issues, but are not distributed. The database is migrating towards a fully-relational system, with anticipated "look up" tables to reduce the error rate; Jerry Bails has already provided a non-interactive list of comic book creators. The indicia provides the official data for the comic book's main description of title, number, and publication date unless it is obviously and egregiously in error. The data for specific issues can be problematic. Until the 1960s, most comic book creators were not credited, and work was often signed by a creator who used ghost writers and artists. At times, even the publisher did not know who actually did the work. Shops such as Eisner & Iger which prepackaged material for publishers in the late 1940s used multiple artists on jobs.

An extended explanation of the fields and sample files can be found on the GCD's website,⁶ but a brief look at them is instructive. As the GCD has evolved, new fields have been added when a need for them has been agreed on by a majority of the current members. Series data tracked includes: title/book name, publisher,⁷ imprint (like vertigo for dc or epic for marvel), years began & ended, first and last issues, tracking (title and publisher changes, numbering explanations), country and language(s) of publication (currently only USA, Canada, Italy and Sweden are trackable on the website), format (physical description), and notes and comments. Issue data tracked includes: issue number, cover date, price, feature type (cover, story, text article, letters page, etc.), genre⁸, strip name (mostly for anthology books like "Superman" in *Action Comics*), title of story, creator credits (story, art, etc), characters, notes, synopsis, and reprint information.

Conclusion

The GCD has grown in six years, from an idea to an online resource with more than 60,000 comic books indexed. Books from 13 countries are indexed, and while still United States-centric, the project continues to expand globally. If the volunteer organization is able to maintain its focus, the GCD will be a major resource for comics scholarship.

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Ray Bottorff, Jr. and **Michael Rhode** are both board members of the GCD, members of the comics-indexing APA-I, and serve as associate editors for Jerry Bails' *Who's Who in 20th Century American Comic Books* database. Bottorff is in charge of promotions for the GCD. Rhode is a co-author of the online *Comics Research Bibliography* and also writes on comics. He is on *IJOCA*'s editorial board.

Endnotes

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1. Part of this paper is based on a slide show that is the work of the GCD, especially that of Lionel English, Jon Lovstad and Tim Stroup. Earlier versions have been presented at comic conventions and ICAF 2000.
 2. Requests for data for similar commercial projects have been received and are usually debated on the list. None have been agreed to as of this writing.
 3. The difficulty in pinpointing the number of comics published, even currently, highlights the need for the GCD.
 4. The definition permits the inclusion of photonovels or fotonovelas, the popular photographic-style sequential art. For example, *My Brother / Mi Hermano*, an anti-AIDS photocomic published by the American Red Cross in 1990 has been indexed in the database.
 5. For additional information on each field, see *Submission and Distribution Formats*, by Bob Heer, on the website at <http://www.comics.org/format/format.html>.
 6. At <http://www.comics.org/format/format.html>.
 7. Artificial family names have been imposed on some publishers, such as DC Comics, which has used the names All-American Comics, Arleigh Publishing, Detective Comics, Impact Comics, National Periodical Publications, Paradox Press, Piranha Press, Superman DC Comics, and Superman, Inc., among others, in its publishing history.
 8. The genre field should be of interest to the popular culture community beyond comics scholarship. The addition of the field sparked a heated debate among members who had strongly-differing opinions about the level of information to include. Comics can obviously fall into more than one genre. The current operating list, maintained by Bob Heer, is:
Adult - comics not for sale to minors, usually of a salacious nature, i.e. *Zap*, *Trashman*, *Snarf*;
Adventure (action) - "Realistic" action and adventure stories that rely on the efforts of normal people to handle crises, i.e. *Congo Bill*, *Indiana Jones*;
Animal - stories starring animals that are supposed to act like real animals, i.e. *Lassie*, *Rex the*

Wonder Dog, Fury, Black Stallion;

Bio - biographies of real people, i.e. *The Life of Pope John Paul II;*

Car - stories involving automobiles first and humans second, i.e. *Drag 'N' Wheels;*

Celebrity - fictional stories involving famous people, usually licensed, i.e. *Jerry Lewis, Bob Hope, Ricky Nelson;*

Children - stories involving, or for, children, i.e. *Little Lulu, Casper, Little Archie, Richie Rich;*

Crime - realistic action and adventures stories involving the committing or solving of crimes, i.e. *Crime Suspense Stories, True Crime;*

Detective - stories centered around a particular detective, i.e. *Charlie Chan, Detective Dan, Roy Raymond;*

Fact - comics meant to teach, i.e. *Real Fact, Donald Tells about Kites;*

Family - humor stories centered around family life, i.e. *Simpsons, Foxtrot, Arlo and Janis;*

Fantasy - comics featuring elves, fairies, or magic, i.e. *Elfquest;*

Funny animals - stories involving animals, furry or otherwise, acting as people; i.e. *Donald Duck, Bugs Bunny, Omaha the Cat Dancer, Usagi Yojimbo;*

Gags - usually a panel, or one or two page stories ending in a punch line, i.e. *Peter Pupert, Casey the Cop, Laffs, New Yorker* cartoon collections;

Horror - stories involving the inhumanity of man, generally with gruesome consequences, i.e. *Tales from the Crypt, Creepy, Eerie;*

Humor (comedy) - humorous stories that don't fit other categories, i.e. *Groo the Wanderer, Powerhouse Pepper, Torchy, Mutt and Jeff;*

Jungle - comics set in the rainforests of the planet Earth, i.e. *Tarzan, Kazar, Sheena;*

Kung fu (martial arts) - stories involving real or purported martial arts of the orient, i.e. *Master of Kung Fu, Judomaster;*

Medical - stories involving the medical profession, usually with some actual medical content, i.e. *Young Dr Masters, MD;*

Monsters - stories featuring regular people versus horrible creatures, i.e. *Creatures on the Loose, Frankenstein, King Kong, Godzilla;*

Occult - featuring the supernatural, magic, demons, etc. Also known as mystery, supernatural or ghost stories, i.e. *Adventures Into the Unknown, House of Mystery, Sandman, Dr. Strange, Spectre;*

Period - using a historical background other than war or western, i.e. *Buccaneers;*

Political/propaganda - material usually designed to put forth a political point of view or call to action, i.e. *Battle for Survival, Steve Ditko's Avenging World, Real War Stories;*

Religious - centering around religious proselytizing, i.e. *Archie's One Way, Cross and the Switchblade;*

Romance - involving love, sex and romance, usually one shots or anthologies -- continuing series about Romance are usually considered **Soaps**, i.e. *Young Love, Secret Hearts.*

Satire - featuring humorous commentary on society and human relationships including parodies, i.e. *Mad, Cracked, Crazy, Cerebus, Howard the Duck, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles;*

Science fiction - stories involving outer space, time travel and parallel worlds, i.e. *Mystery In Space, Alien Legion, Star Wars, Dr. Who, The Twilight Zone;*

Sitcom - featuring comedy in a domestic or work situation involving continuing characters, i.e. *Sgt Bilko, I Love Lucy, Millie the Model, Tessie the Typist;*

Soap - featuring continuing romantic dramas, i.e. *Love and Rockets;*

Sports - involving sports, i.e. *Baseball Comics, Strange Sports Stories*;

Spy - involving spies and intrigue, i.e. *I Spy, Man From Uncle, Honey West, Nick Fury*;

Super-hero - involving people in outlandish clothing fighting crime, i.e. *Superman, Batman, X-Men*;

Sword and sorcery - using a combination of swordplay and occult themes, i.e. *Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser*;

Teen - humorous stories centering around teen age life, i.e. *Archie, Dobie Gillis, Scooter*;

War - featuring the armed forces in wartime, i.e. *Blazing Combat, Two Fisted Tales, Sgt Rock, Sgt. Fury*;

Western - Generally period stories centering on the American frontier, i.e. *Tomahawk, Two Gun Kid, Lone Ranger, Roy Rogers*.