

# UPDATED DAILY: WEBCOMICS, WEB ARCHIVING?

## WHAT ARE WEBCOMICS?

Let's start this off with a definition:  
For the purposes of this project, we define webcomics as comics published initially or exclusively on websites, through periodic updates. (Digital comics exist as a broader category, and may be published via other digital means.) Like minicomics and zines, webcomics offer a (mostly) democratic platform for creation and publication; individual artists can make and share work that might otherwise be passed over by traditional publishers. Webcomics are also a relative newcomer on the sequential storytelling scene, with the first instance, Eric Milliken's *Witches and Stitches*, distributed via CompuServe in 1985.<sup>1</sup>

Over **fifty-thousand** webcomics have been published online since then, though only a portion of those remain active.<sup>2</sup>

Some of those comics have made their way to print; far more will be born to, and die by, the internet. If we can agree that these works have artistic, social, and cultural value, though - and this value has been pretty well established with comics and graphic novels - any efforts towards preservation will have merit.

Webcomics aren't just static, context-free images; they can incorporate **hypertextual** and **intertextual** elements, **animation**, and **non-linear storytelling**. Add in the transmedia opportunities with social media and fan communities, and you've got yourself a format ripe for experimentation, and tricky to capture.

So how do you conceptualize preservation efforts for these materials?

## The literature on webcomics is limited, but we can look to other disciplines and research.

- **Copeland:** digital preservation activities of public library users, and social/cognitive influences on personal preservation activities.<sup>3</sup>
- **Kaye et al:** scholars' archives with personal and professional materials; the archives' role in identity construction and impression management.<sup>4</sup>
- **Marshall:** the role of social communities, audience-generated metadata, and the flawed idea of a master "reference copy."<sup>5</sup>
- **Slania:** online art ephemera and webarchiving challenges, including cultural, technical, economic, and legal.<sup>6</sup>



Maybe the immediate answer isn't a tool, or some kind of prescriptive practice - maybe we need to be looking at something else! But where do we start, if not with web archiving?

Why don't we ask the artists? They're the ones making this work, and spending precious time and resources to make it available - often freely, or for very, very little compensation. Any attempts at a solution need to consider their perspectives and challenges to undertaking (or not taking) steps to preserve their work.

## PILOT SURVEY:

- 25 questions, designed to understand the technical decisions and behaviors of webcomic artists
- administered to a small pool of artists, and followed up with one-on-one qualitative interviews (4 surveys, 3 interviews so far)
- invited feedback about the questions from the participants

## GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

**RQ1: What are the characteristics of webcomic artists' digital information and materials?** (That is, how are they making their comics?)

**RQ2: How do webcomic artists save and organize these materials?**

**RQ3: What are the social, cultural, economic, or cognitive/affective influences that contribute to these creation and preservation decisions?** (survey phase 2, interviews)

## WHAT'S THE SURVEY SAY?

### Characteristics of webcomic artists' digital materials:

- Blend of file types, proprietary formats, and backup systems

Surveyed artists are using some combination of graphics software files (Photoshop, Manga Studio Pro) and non-proprietary files, and saving high-resolution versions alongside their production/web files.

- High-resolution files are kept in anticipation of printing, and preservation methods are almost entirely reliant on duplication.

Naming and organizing conventions also vary between artists.

- File loss is common, and ranges from minimal to extensive ("I'd have to redraw those pages if I wanted to publish it.")



Dylan Meon, "Family Man," <http://www.lutherlevy.com>

### When the Darkness Presses



Emily Carroll, "When the Darkness Presses," <http://www.emcarroll.com>



Victoria Goop, "Baldersdash," <http://www.baldersdashcomic.com>



Randall Munroe, "xkcd," <http://xkcd.com>

Format, technique, and content vary between webcomics, but also how artists use the medium of the web. Emily Carroll's webcomics utilize scrolling and image mapping to guide the narrative; in this example, the "banner ads" play a role in the story.

One of the original and largest webcomics collectives, **WebcomicsNation**, folded two years after the untimely death of its founder. While the main site was captured by the Internet Archive through 2013, the comicsthemselves are no longer readable. Of the top 50 comics from WCN in 2011, roughly half no longer exist online in any format.

Old projects and websites fade into the void; this is an expected, often accepted constraint of the medium. For some, that ephemerality might even be freeing.



"I FEEL VERY STRONGLY ABOUT THIS MEDIUM, BECAUSE IT GAVE ME A WAY TO PRACTICE MY STORYTELLING AND FIND MY VOICE, AND TO WORK THROUGH A LOT OF ISSUES I DON'T THINK I WOULD HAVE BEEN COMFORTABLE TALKING WITH OTHER PEOPLE ABOUT ... SOMETIMES YOU JUST CAN'T TALK ABOUT PROBLEMS WITH PEOPLE THAT YOU KNOW. JUST SEEING YOUR WORK OUT THERE, GETTING FEEDBACK FROM SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT YOU, I THINK THAT'S ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THINGS ABOUT WEBCOMICS."

"READERS GO INTO THIS WITH THE IDEA THAT IT MIGHT BE ABANDONED. IT'S TRANSIENT; YOU GO WITH AN IDEA UNTIL IT RUNS OUT, AND THEN YOU MIGHT PICK UP ANOTHER PROJECT, AND COME BACK TO THE OLD ONE LATER."

## NEXT STEPS!

- Research partnership
- Complete pilot survey; amend for wider distribution
- Web archiving or preservation workshops for students
- Extended literature review: what does the information landscape look like for webcomics?

<sup>1</sup> Garrity, Shaenon. "The History of Webcomics." *The Webcomics Journal*, 15 July 2011.  
<sup>2</sup> Estimate based on number indexed on Comics Rocket. <http://www.comicsrocket.com>  
<sup>3</sup> Copeland, Andrea. "Analysis of Public Library Users' Digital Preservation Practices." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 62.7 (2011): 1288-1300.  
<sup>4</sup> Kaye, Joseph, et al. "To Have and to Hold: Exploring the Personal Archive." *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, 2006: 275-284.  
<sup>5</sup> Marshall, Catherine C. "Digital Copies and a Distributed Notion of Reference in Personal Archives." *Digital media: Technological and social challenges of the interactive world* (2011): 89  
<sup>6</sup> Slania, Heather. "Online Art Ephemera." *Art Documentation* 32.1 (2013): 112-126.