

How cartoons joined the 21st century

Forget paper and wave goodbye to inky fingers. Simon Usborne discovers the hottest comics are strictly online

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¹ On Friday, the biggest names in comics will descend on Manhattan for one of the most important weekends in the calendar – the New York Comic Con, or convention. Among the legends who will down pens for the three-day inkfest are Jerry Robinson, the man who created the Joker; Joe Simon, who invented the first Batman prototype at Marvel; and Al Plastino, an early Superman draughtsman who went on to conceive Supergirl. They are masters of their craft who need no introduction to the fans who will fly from all over the world to meet them, but there are new names knocking on the door to the comics hall of fame.

² Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins don't have the pedigree of the grandfathers of graphic novels, but with more than three million readers, they're doing pretty well. What makes their success remarkable is that they have built their pictorial empire in less than 10 years – and without even putting pen to paper. Better known by their comic alter egos, Gabe and Tycho, the two Americans, who are both

32, are at the forefront of a growing force in cartoons – the webcomic.

³ Penny Arcade, which Krahulik and Holkins started as a hobby in 1998, has grown into an online phenomenon, offering its readers satirical comment on the computer games industry three times a week. And while it's arguably the biggest and most successful webcomic, it's not alone. Google 'webcomic' and prepare to be swept away by a digital tsunami of strips catering for every conceivable comic fan – from maths geeks (Xkcd) and gaming nerds (Penny Arcade) to manga maniacs (MegaTokyo) and sci-fi buffs (Girl Genius). As with all things net-based, a lot of it is bad, but those who are doing it well are not only changing the way comic fans get their fix, but helping to redefine the medium.

'an online phenomenon'

⁴ 'Traditionally, when someone wanted to get comics out they used

to have to do a small print run or photocopy them,' says Tim Pilcher, author of *Essential Guide to World Comics and Erotic Comics: A Graphic History*, 'They would put them in the post or try to sell them at fairs and conventions, which meant they were limited to an audience of 200 if they were lucky. The internet means the same artists can reach a global audience automatically. Comics have become a much more egalitarian medium.'

⁵ The internet has not only opened the industry to the likes of Krahulik and Holkins, and a generation of comic artists who might otherwise toil away at their drawing boards unnoticed, but given them free rein to experiment. While many sites offer comic strips that are scans of their print counterparts, others have introduced animation or a zoom function that highlights where the action is. Purists baulk at such innovations. 'Unlike film or plays, which are passive, comics require the participation of the reader to think about what's happening between the scenes you see as panels, and decide at what pace ➡'

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➡ to read the story,' says Gary Tyrrell, who runs the webcomics blog Fleen.com. 'Ironically, by throwing animation or interactivity into webcomics, you risk losing that essential "comic-ness".'

⁶ Thankfully, there is plenty online to satisfy the more traditional consumer. Established publishers are awake to the shift from print to web. Marvel, the powerhouse behind the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, X-Men and Spider-Man, has launched an online service, Marvel Digital Comics Unlimited. Subscribers can view more than 5,500 comics in Marvel's giant back catalogue, as well as at least one exclusive online story a week.

⁷ 'It started as a promotional exercise,' says John Dokes at Marvel Digital. 'It's a great outlet for fans to be reading digital stuff and to tie into other things happening in Marvel, such as the movies.' But, while Marvel won't reveal how many people subscribe to its digital service, rapidly improving technology means it has ramped up its online content. 'In the early days of the internet it used to take 24 people ages to make one online comic. It now takes a person a couple of hours. That speed and the low cost of online comics mean we can really take advantage of our great library.'

⁸ DC Comics, Marvel's major rival and the publisher behind Superman and Batman, also has an online arm, but some say a big part in the big players' decision to go digital is the threat to the industry posed by

piracy. The scanning and sharing of print comics on bit-torrent sites (the same kinds of illegal operations that distribute films before their DVD releases) is rife. 'They're being forced into a corner,' says Pilcher. Or, in Dokes's words, 'More companies will gravitate to providing a legal alternative. Primarily, this is an evolution in our product.'

⁹ But surely the combined might of new sites such as Penny Arcade, as well as digital offerings from the giants of print, spells the end of the paper comic? To those who love them, this would be a tragedy. 'What webcomics don't give you is the ritual of hunting down and collecting back issues,' says Pilcher, who used to manage a comic shop before becoming an assistant editor at DC Comics. 'You'd go into a shop and talk about the comics you loved – it was like a club. I'm still friends with guys I met in shops 20 years ago.'

'it's readers who are calling the shots'

¹⁰ To the relief of Pilcher and other shop regulars, there are signs that the webcomic could nurture rather than threaten its print predecessor. As well as getting an immediate audience of thousands or even millions, webcomic artists are increasingly crossing back into print – and it's readers who are

calling the shots. 'There's a vast amount of material online and a lot is dross, but the web allows the public to decide what's good,' says Pilcher, who believes this democratic filter system is depositing gold at the doors of publishers. 'They then say, look, these guys are getting six million hits a day – we should publish a book.'

¹¹ One quirky example is a satirical webcomic called Garfield Minus Garfield, in which Irish artist Dan Walsh reproduces classic Garfield strips with all characters except the cat's owner, Jon Arbuckle, removed. 'It turned a saccharine strip with a cat into a darkly funny, manic-depressive diatribe by a lonely bachelor,' Pilcher says. The weekly uploads attracted a sizeable audience, including Garfield creator Jim Davis. Ticked, he put his name to a book published last October. 'Something that had its genesis in a newspaper was adapted online, became a hit, and then became a book,' Pilcher says. 'The industry is linking and crossing over and smart publishers are seeing that.'

¹² There are others who would not mourn the death of the print comic. 'The costs of printing and distribution mean that some creators have given up on print as their first method of distribution,' says Tyrrell. 'But is that traditional channel worth saving? Webcomics mean more people have an opportunity to discover independent creators. Webcomics mean I don't have to be in the ➡'

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➡ right place at the right time to buy a hand-stapled minicomic to discover new talent. Nor do I have to wait three months between issues. Everybody wins.'

¹³ Comic buffs dismiss them as gimmicks but DIY webcomics are a fun diversion for the casual (and

unskilled) cartoonist. I Googled 'comic generator' and had a bash at the first result, a build-your-own Garfield strip. It was easy – you scroll through elements in a tool bar, including characters in different poses, click and they appear. Other tools allow you to flip, rotate, resize, and add text to speech bubbles.

Within minutes I had my own three-frame Garfield strip. Sadly, one thing a site can't generate is a talent for comedy... ■