Webcomics: The Influence and Continuation of the Comix Revolution

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Underground Comix and Webcomics: An Introduction

The Underground Comix movement that began in the 1960s has been given a wider audience on the internet as a new generation of readers discover long-established artists and writers. These new readers are also able to buy comics on the internet that were nearly impossible to find in most markets when they came out, which are still difficult to find today, long after their publication. Whether as reprints, as electronic reproductions, or the genuine artifact on eBay or another auction site, these comics can circulate among those who have never even heard the term "Head Shop." But the internet is more than a distribution medium for classic Underground Comix and classic Underground Comix artists still producing new work. The internet has given rise to a new generation of comic artists who use the internet as their sole means of production and distribution. In many cases, these webcomic artists are working within the spirit of the Underground movement as reflected in their subversion of comic book conventions and their freedom of expression in content and form. In this paper, we explore some of the connections between Underground Comix and certain webcomics in terms of the themes they share, the types of issues they tackle, the style in which they address these issues, and the audiences they address.

Before exploring these connections, however, webcomics must be more clearly defined. Many people are only familiar with webcomics through Scott McCloud's explanation of them in Reinventing Comics, where he took on the role of a spokesperson for webcomics. While McCloud offered an initial study on webcomics, this paper does not operate within a McCloudian definition of comics, where he expounds upon their potential to revolutionize all comics production. In this paper, the term webcomics must be distinguished from hyperbolic proclamations about the internet as an inevitable site of radical aesthetic evolution and economic revolution for comics. The problems with McCloud's claims about the liberatory and radical properties of the internet have been addressed by others, like Gary Groth in his article for The Comics Journal, "McCloud Cuckoo Land." Our argument does not claim that the internet is a superior comic medium, free of those "tiny boxes" and "finite canvases" that seem to trouble McCloud (online). Further, we recognize that the internet has not offered a level playing field, free of corporate domination, "a world," to quote McCloud's Reinventing Comics, "in which the path from selling ten comics to selling ten thousand comics to selling ten million comics is as smooth as ice" (188, Panel 1). With these caveats, we argue more limitedly that digital technology offers new avenues of aesthetic experimentation for comic artists and that the internet has given some comic artists a modest prosperity that they would not have without the internet as a means of distribution.

The obvious benefit of the internet as a distribution medium for many webcomic artists is the freedom to release comics that the mainstream industry and audience would reject. The end
goal of these artists is not to go from selling ten to ten thousand to ten million comics because—even if that were possible for an independent artist to do—it would require pandering to the broadest possible audience. Instead, many webcomics include themes and deal with issues that mainstream comics do not. Many of them are written by people with offbeat interests for people with similar interests. Some of these deal with precisely the same themes that the Underground Comix of the 60s did—politics, sex, and drugs. In some cases, the artists putting forth these works share many of the ideals and habits of their 60s counterparts. Charles Brownstein makes this point in a review of webcomics, which appeared in *The Comics Journal*, "Tape This To Your Cubicle Wall." In his review, Brownstein makes the connection between webcomics artists and Underground Comix artists explicit, saying, "The undergrounds were born from an inky orgy fueled by dangerous drugs. 30-some years later a few of the most pioneering web artists are growing up with the same anarchic spirit and psychedelic sensibility" ([online]). This claim is certainly true of some of the examples he uses and of webcomics in general. The web allows webcomic creators to write comics with content which is outside of the acceptable bounds for typical mass-released comics. Not all of them would appeal to a wide audience, but there are a number of high quality webcomics on the internet that are produced for very specific and large, yet distributed audiences. The web itself serves as the distribution method, much like the head shops used by the Undergrounds for distribution.

Both in tackling taboo subject manner and in the often irreverent way that they do so, webcomic artists are following paths opened by Underground artists. One example is Patrick Farley's website, e-sheep, which Brownstein links to the underground stating, "the stories on the site share the early underground's penchant for taboo busting humor, depictions of drug experiences, and the critical satire of politics, corporate culture, and religion" ([online]). One of Farley's webcomics, *The Spiders*, was released soon after the September 11th attack and was set in the Afghanistan desert and deals with the oppressive Taliban regime, but in a dark and yet humorous manner, far from what most of the mainstream was doing at the time ([online]). Another Farley webcomic that exemplifies the sort of edgy humor and unconventional style reminiscent of the underground is Apocamon ([online]), which is a Manga-influenced darkly comic version of the book of Revelation done in Flash. The whole project includes the main story, and the design, in which Farley connects the design metaphor of his site between Apocolyptic figures and Pokemon.

In addition to the obvious connections between Underground Comix and webcomics that share their dominant themes are those examples that fit within the spirit of the Underground and Alternative movements, but are not similarly illicit or explicit. Some webcomics are offbeat, certainly tame enough to be in the mainstream, but are in one way or another not something a mainstream press would see as an acceptable risk. Webcomics are unhindered by their offbeat content and presentation because they use the web as their method of distribution. The fact that the web offers a source of income through payment programs, like PayPal donations, allows the artists greater freedom in regards to their artistic goals or their political ideals than if they were working under an editor for a mainstream company. Many of these comics would have difficulty within the mainstream, because their content is targeted at a relatively small demographic, just as the Undergrounds were. In the same manner that early Underground Comix were historically situated and distributed in head shops that catered to a specific audience, webcomics are often best suited as webcomics simply because their intended audiences are frequent web users. Many webcomics are written within, and for, the hacker/geek sub-culture, and many more contain computer related themes, such as those webcomics that talk about or parody popular video games, like Tim Buckly's Ctrl+Alt+Del ([online]), which appeals to a relatively small but devoted fan base.
What Are (or Aren’t) Webcomics?

When speaking of webcomics, we specifically mean comics that are made first for the web, made by an independent creator, who may be working with others, but who all have no originary print version and no corporate sponsorship. As a growing form, this is a very loose definition and will change with the form itself. Webcomics, in our limited sense, are very much like Underground Comix because they are made and distributed by a small group and have no massive financial backing. Webcomics are also unfettered by the rules of syndication and censorship. While some webcomics do adhere to certain levels of restriction and censorship, most are profane and frequently reference or depict sex, violence, and other controversial themes by controversial means in terms of art, language, and style. With these often profane or simply non-normalized comics, webcomics appeal to a small demographic and use the web as a distribution method to access their decentralized readers. Even though the readerships are often small, webcomics can reach a great percentage of that demographic, which is why they present new options in the distribution for Underground Comix, which cannot reach as many readers as easily or directly because of the complications and costs of print distribution.

The visual style of webcomics also presents new artistic possibilities, as the Underground Comix movement did. Many webcomics use sprites, which originated in video games where sprites were the "animated" two dimensional characters on the two dimensional backgrounds, from early games like the first Legend of Zelda and the first Final Fantasy. Sprites appeared to move through slight variations in presentation. Some of the exploratory art styles are fairly random or are exploratory in their essence, like ExplodingDog.com; others are exploratory art styles because of the combination of odd elements which add to the overall parody of each of the elements and methods. Parody comprises a large portion of all webcomics, and most parody the norm for their readership. While Underground Comix often parodied gender relations, drugs, and popular culture, webcomics frequently parody popular culture, video games, and table-top role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons.

In the same manner that Underground Comix presented the underground drug culture and a number of other underground movements, webcomics present the hacker movement, which argues for "Open Source" and conscientious coding. Many webcomics focus on subculture areas, like hardcore video gaming, role-playing games, computer programming, and other forms of "geek culture." In fact, comic strips that deal with how computer source code operates and its proper implementation is often the topic of webcomics like User Friendly.org. User Friendly mocks the establishment, mainly by ridiculing the Microsoft Corporation, and derides corporate creations while showing the superiority of Open Source systems like Linux. Open Source means allowing all users to see and read the computer source code. In doing so, the working instructions for a program are readily available and the program can be modified and used without cost. According to hacker cultures, Open Source is a freedom of information issue. Interestingly, the webcomic User Friendly has released printed books after its web release through O'Reilly Press. This shows the interrelations between the hacker subculture and webcomics because O'Reilly Press is a high-level technical documentation publisher, printing books on Linux, Dreamweaver, Perl, and other expert-level computer systems and applications. User Friendly is the only comic O'Reilly Press prints, which shows how, while User Friendly is not part of any particular mainstream movement, it is widely read within its demographic of computer specialists.

While the argument could be made that webcomics as described here are simply genre works that fit their online readership, this would ignore the fact that webcomics explore styles and themes, which oppose established norms for general society and for their own readership.
Webcomics also have a very specific distribution and community that is intrinsic to underground movements but not to genre fiction. Homogenizing webcomics into merely a genre because of their relationship to geek and online culture would be equivalent to homogenizing Underground Comix into a single genre based on their relationship to drug culture. Either of these abstractions is false because of the complexity and richness of the Undergrounds and of webcomics.

Webcomics present a structural revolution for artists and readers. In this sense, webcomics present radical new possibilities like Underground Comix did. But webcomics are not the infinitely ideal answer Scott McCloud would have them be. Webcomics do allow new freedoms and can be seen as a response to the complaints about space constraints, artistic freedom in terms of color and word usage, and artistic freedom in terms of the themes addressed. Perhaps the most famous complaint about the traditional comic strip medium comes from Bill Watterson’s speech “The Cheapening of Comics,” in which he discusses the commercial side of comics as cheapening comics as an art form. In the speech, Watterson argues for a mass medium that allows the same freedoms found in Underground Comix. One of Watterson’s key complaints is that in newspapers, the overall space is limited and the design constraints, such as panel format, shape, and alignment, are further limiting (online). Webcomics can and do answer this complaint because they remove spatial constraints, theoretically allowing for infinite space.

However, the space in webcomics is not ideal as McCloud would have it, because the space is limited by computer technology, including screen sizes, pixel depth, and download times on the web. While these are constraints, these constraints are equal to those seen by Underground Comix, in terms of page layout and feasible page sizes. In the near future, webcomics cannot present a revolution in terms of McCloud’s “infinite canvasses,” because infinite canvasses would require infinite load times and infinite scrolling (online). However, webcomics do alleviate Watterson’s complaints on the small and shrinking print comic strip spaces and webcomics do allow for the possibility of a return to the options of Krazy Kat and Little Nemo in Slumberland. Watterson argued that being able to draw larger panels or being able to add a greater number of small panels allowed for better storytelling. He stated that these panel options even allowed for wordless strips because the drawings could finally stand alone instead of being complemented or explained by the text (Tenth Anniversary Book 15). Webcomics often have strips with just this kind of variety. All of the artists who work to create comics can draw a strip if they choose, or they can fill an entire webpage with their comic. Additionally, they can vary between styles of presentation and form and webcomics do not require panel borders, although many webcomics do use them.

Figure 1. “I love when i wake up and you are beside me”
Exploding Dog from http://www.expl...ry2/ilovewhen.html
� 2003 Sam Brown

Webcomics also present a revolution in possibilities because they are not limited by print costs. A webcomic which uses color and is of a certain size and pixel depth, will take the same space to house and the same time to download for computer viewing regardless of whether it uses ten or thirty colors, or juxtaposes real and drawn images, or operates in a collage effect.
Artists are thus free to explore using real images and artwork without worrying about the costs of production. For instance, the website *Exploding Dog* features images with captions and iconic repeated characters. Whether or not the characters are the same from one single panel comic to the next, or whether they appear to be the same because of the iconic nature of the comic, is difficult to determine. It is also difficult to determine whether or not *Exploding Dog* is a comic. As with the changes with Underground comics, the freedom of webcomics causes the definition of comics to open and fold yet again. Webcomics also allow for relatively easy archiving of older comics. Having these archives allows readers to easily access multiple comics, helping to alleviate pressure for daily strips. *Exploding Dog* has four years of comics accessible through the website. Also, webcomics are housed within websites, so the webcomic artist can easily add comments, thoughts, notes to explain or add depth to the comic, or to provide reasoning for a break in the storyline. This parallels the commentary offered by many Underground Comics. *Exploding Dog* operates almost entirely as a break from storyline because each comic is drawn based on quotes that the readers email the artist. This format precludes any sort of predetermined linearity other than that within the individual comic. Comic books have 'Letters to the Editor' sections which function like the additional webcomic space devoted to thoughts on the comic, but most webcomics also have forums where comic artists can easily communicate with readers. The forums sections are most like the 'Letters to the Editor' portion of comics. But webcomics also have their websites to preface the comic with notes on the author, on the story as it evolves, writings on comics criticism, and the similar commentary, which most print comics do not have. In this way, webcomics allow for an enhanced interactive relationship between artists and readers. Barry T. Smith, the artist who writes and draws the webcomic *Angst Technology*, writes that, "The web has allowed me the creative freedom to write and draw as I please and write what makes me laugh" ([online](https://example.com)). While Smith continues to support himself with another job, he is able to connect with thousands of readers, to offer merchandise of and to have sponsoring advertisements of his choosing because he, like other webcomic artists, controls the entire media entity which houses *Angst Technology*. Where Underground Comix allowed for artistic freedom and control, webcomics offer these along with additional options.

**Webcomic Underground Content Awareness of Medium**

Because webcomics were born of a networked medium, they have been strongly influenced by traditional works from multiple cultures, and they are founded in the discussion and technology present with the web. *Penny Arcade* is treated as a high-level member of video game journalism because their webcomic site also features the artists' and writers' commentary on video games. *Penny Arcade* has even been featured in the print magazine *Computer Gaming World Magazine* because of its thematic pertinence to video games and because of its relationship to video game media. Likewise, Brian Clevinger's *8-Bit Theater* has been reviewed in several video game magazines, including *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, the largest video game magazine in print. The relationship of video games to webcomics could be seen as fan idolatry of one medium through the use of another, but the relationship is more complex, especially because webcomic creators post video game reviews and their thoughts on the comic medium and on webcomics.[8] *Angst Technology*, *Penny Arcade*, and *8-Bit Theater* all have posted essays on comics, webcomics, and explanations of their sites.

In addition, webcomics mention other media which fit with their reader's interests, like table-top role-playing games such as *Werewolf* and *Dungeons and Dragons*. While these topics seem appropriate for the pages of newspapers that carry *Dilbert* or *Foxtrot*, webcomics significantly differ in variety (even day-to-day variety between strips), in the depth of technical information given, and in the content in which it is approached. Just as some Underground comics could
be said to be dealing with relationships, like other comics do, the actual manner in which the relationships are dealt with is the difference. Where regular comics might discuss dating or flirting, Underground Comix might cover ass-fucking and orgies. Mainstream comics may deal with playing video games, but where Foxtrot would make jokes about how complex video games have gotten by showing the father in awe of his son’s game-playing ability, Penny Arcade shows Gabe and Tycho playing a video game and discussing button mashing (a term that describes players who play fighting games by simply mashing buttons rather than learning how to properly execute the fighting moves) and ends with a defeated Gabe saying “I wish you were fucking dead” (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Penny Arcade Strip. from http://www.pennyarcade.com/comic/2003-01-06.png © 2003 Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik

Showing two characters playing video games is nothing out of the ordinary for print or web-based comics, but the profanity would not be in a mainstream print comic. This Penny Arcade strip shows the two main characters, who are representations of the writer and artist, but many of the strips are based on external characters, some of whom are repeated and some who are not. The lack of completely consistent characters violates the general comic strip habit of using stock characters as well as the comic book convention of having sequential storylines. Penny Arcade is indicative of the overall state of webcomics where continuity is not a pivotal point and where the webcomic is organized more like a thematic conglomeration like MAD magazine than a continuing strip. Like Penny Arcade, 8-Bit Theater has several stock characters. But these stock characters and the plot are often interrupted by self-referential comics by Clevinger and by other comics. Other comics include Clevinger’s Dynasty Memories comic line, which is completely separate from the 8-Bit Theater comics, but which are sometimes given in place of the regular comic. Penny Arcade and 8-Bit Theater exemplify the explorative and open nature of webcomics by having both regular characters and storylines while also mixing these with comics containing alternate storylines and characters.

Forbidden Culture (Drugs, Dorks, and Hackers)

Parodies are often used in webcomics and the works parodied directly demonstrate both how webcomics are able to reach a very select readership and how the ethical dimensions of webcomics constitute something more than simply a capitalistic venture. Similarly, Underground Comix artists were attempting to write what they wanted, and to reach an audience with that writing. For that, they often parodied both their readers and institutions with which they disagreed or disapproved. Underground Comix and webcomics are related because of their ethical dimension and specific readerships. In addition to the technology related aspects of webcomic ethics are the technology and dork culture related parodies. In 8-Bit Theater, one of the characters, Red Mage, acts as though he’s playing a character using absurd interpretations of the rules of the table-top role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons. The Red Mage character is a parody of role-playing games, role-playing game players, and the
character creation systems in video games, which is often based solely on the statistics of the character's attributes (strength, wisdom, intelligence, charisma). In most media, these parodies would be fairly abstract because the role-playing demographic is rather small across any geographic area, but webcomics often parody or praise role-playing because their demographic can be largely comprised of role-players and those familiar with role-playing. This specific demographic allows for jokes about concepts like ‘THAC0,’ which is one component of the *Dungeon and Dragons* standard computation for fighting. THAC0 stands for "to hit armor class zero" and is computed when attacking. THAC0 is a difficult component to compute, even for seasoned players, and is described as:

To make an attack roll, the character's THAC0 must be known. This depends on the group and level, if the attacker is a player character or NPC, or the Hit Dice if the attacker is a monster or an animal. All 1st-level characters have THAC0s of 20, regardless of class. For a character of level 1 through level 20, consult Table 53. This table lists the THAC0 number of each group through 20th level, so players don't have to perform any calculations. For a character higher than 20th level, find the Improvement Rate for the character's group in Table 54. There you'll find the number of levels a character must advance to reduce his THAC0 by 1 (or more) points. Calculate the character's THAC0 according to his level. The DMG contains the information on monster THAC0s. (Cook and Weis 183)

Computing THAC0 was the bane of many table-top role-playing gamers, and it is a reference with which most general readers would not be familiar because the reference is far too obscure. Nevertheless, THAC0 is mentioned a number of times in *8-Bit Theater* and other strips. Also frequently mentioned are strategy-miniature games like *Warhammer*, which deals with the playing of table-top strategy games using hundreds of small metal figurines which look like orcs, elves, or other fantastic or science fiction characters. These references would alienate a large percentage of possible readers, but webcomics are concerned with their interests instead of how they can appease a mainstream audience. Because webcomics are not dictated by mainstream market needs, they are both more able to address specific audiences like the role-playing readers and they are more able to question areas that mainstream comics lack the space and resources to do. In addition to parodying their readers' interests, webcomics also parody the flaws with those interests, including the treatment of women in both comics and video games.

Female characters in mainstream comics and in video games have most often been treated as weak princesses who must be rescued or protected. In her article "Women in Comics: a Space for Recognizing Other Voices," Ana Merino discusses the complicated relationship of women working in, and women depicted in, comics. Her discussion is directly applicable to the gender problems with and within video games (online). Interestingly, webcomics exactly question and undermine positions based on gender as portrayed in most mainstream comics and video games. *8-Bit Theater* exploits the stereotypical group of male fighters, "The Light Warriors," whose first quest is to save the kidnapped princess, Princess Sarah. But as the tale unfolds, it quickly becomes apparent that Princess Sarah is not innocent, nor is she in need of help. Instead, she is Evil Princess Sarah, who arranges to be kidnapped, or kidnaps herself, and then manipulates the situation to her own advantage.[4] The only obstacles to Sarah's plans are the absolute imbecile villains with whom she is forced to work, such as the one who wants to give his prisoners cookies. *8-Bit Theater's* other main female character is White Mage. She is also extremely powerful, and her power is restrained only by her ethical and moral commitment to the powers of good. However, when Black Mage rudely offers sexual come-ons and tries to seduce White Mage, she becomes angry with him and she fights and defeats him, showing that she is more powerful. Additionally, in these situations Black Mage's outrageously sexist manner is portrayed as being both stupid and insane.[5] In their questioning of gender
norms in comics and video games, webcomics present alternate portrayals of women in comics and video games. This ethical side to the subject matter is made possible through the method of webcomic publishing, which is very akin to the independent publishing of Underground Comix.

While not all webcomic writers have specific goals in mind, the nature of webcomic writing and distribution allows webcomic artists to express their beliefs and to tell stories without censorship and without a specific marketing goal in mind. This freedom has led to a very feminist approach towards the female characters and to webcomics including arguments over freedom and ethical behavior. The ethical behavior proposed is far from the mainstream because it situates itself in terms of Open Source code and the ethical creation and distribution of technology. Like discussions of drugs, race, and sex, which were needed when the Underground Comix presented them, so are discussions of Open Source and computer technology important to webcomic readers today.

Further, webcomics facilitate communication between readers and webcomic artists, which allows webcomics to discuss these ethical concerns with those aware, and those unaware, of issues like Open Source and Copyleft. The concern that webcomics exhibit toward the functionings of technology show that webcomics are working towards freedom, individual rights, and social rights in the same manner that Underground Comix did for print media. One of the social issues addressed by webcomics is hacking. For most people, hacking means the illicit destruction or invasion into another's digital equipment or services, like stealing bandwidth or deleting someone else's computer files. However, to those in the webcomic community, hacking is the ethical exploration of and improvement on existing Open Source technology. While many of the webcomic readers may not initially understand the significance of the different arguments on each webcomic site, they can easily become familiar with them because of email, forums, and pages facilitated through the webcomics that describe their writers’ positions. In these ways, webcomics become a transmission medium for arguments for greater freedom in computing and technology. User Friendly is perhaps the best known of the webcomics fighting for computer and networking rights. While User Friendly is an extreme example, 8-Bit Theater frequently refers to the hacking magazine 2600 and Sam Brown indicates on Exploding Dog that he does not mind if people take his images for personal use, as long as they do not use the images for commercial purposes, a sharing that is an example of the Open Source related notion of Copyleft in itself.

In addition to social movements and parodies of social forms, webcomics have a further ethical dimension in their acts of parody. Recently, Penny Arcade made the comic in Figure 3 and was told to remove the image by the American Greeting Card company, who owns the trademark to Strawberry Shortcake. Penny Arcade quickly protested with a petition. The petition expressed anger and promised to boycott the American Greeting Card Company unless the censorship of Penny Arcade was lifted. The petition gathered over 15,000 signatures within a few days. Additionally, before Penny Arcade removed the image, a number of sites copied the image and then hosted it in protest to keep the image from being suppressed. Like Penny Arcade, many other sites included a description of what happened, links to the petition, and links to email the American Greeting Card Company directly. The concern for free speech remains a constant in webcomics because they so often use parody and because the laws governing the web as a new media form have still frequently fallen into hyperbole over the supposedly radical nature of the new form. Because of these concerns and the lack of sufficient legislation to protect parody on the web, hacking as an ethical belief and discussions over free speech are constants in the majority of webcomics; either in the comics themselves, or within the websites that house them. This ethical dimension also includes the
comraderie founded in networked nature of webcomics, where each webcomic regularly links to other webcomics. *8-Bit Theater, Angst Technology, User Friendly, Life of Riley*, and *Ctrl+Alt+Del* all have links pages where they provide links to other webcomics. Webcomic writers also regularly hold online discussions and include each other in the overall network of authors and readers. The networked nature of webcomics proves a webcomic subculture exists which seeks to foster the creation and distribution of independent webcomics.

Figure 3. Removed from *Penny Arcade*, http://www.penny.com/2003-04-14a.html 2001 Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik

**Revolution in Distribution and Webcomic Economics**

Webcomics are often seen as inferior comics because almost anyone with a computer and an internet connection can create a webcomic. Even the descriptions on pay-to-read webcomic sites like Serializer.net and ModernTales.com stress that they exist to make quality webcomics available. Quality webcomics in this usage seems to mean webcomics made by known artists and writers. However, the revolution that webcomics present is in allowing unknown comic writers to make and share their work. Many webcomics are started simply as a leisure activity by the writers (like *8-Bit Theater* and *Angst Technology*), and then they gain a large and growing audience so that they come to be a secondary or primary job (see *Penny Arcade* and *8-Bit Theater*). Because they can appeal to and reach anyone on the internet and because they can be immediately published and distributed at no cost (or no costs until server loads and bandwidth costs grow), webcomics can easily and quickly garner a large audience. In such cases, webcomics often survive by requesting donations, which actually works on a small scale. Some webcomics use donation prizes like computer screen wallpaper or autographed copies of printed versions of the comic for donators. Webcomics often use small printing companies which will produce, without any upfront fees, posters, t-shirts, mugs, and other items with a percentage or flat rate being paid to the artist. Some webcomics also make use of advertisements. Unlike mainstream comics, yet like the Undergrounds, webcomics can pick and choose their advertisers because of their independent nature. Other webcomics mass sites like ModernTales.com and Serializer.net offer a few free comics, but for full access they require a nominal fee. These sites are also like Underground Comix and webcomics in their
desire for free expression, but they have molded their format into a more traditional business model than the vast majority of webcomics. While these seem like minor methods of making money, they are effective; and Penny Arcade, prior to removing their donation bar, often received over 5,000 dollars a month in donations alone. Brian Clevinger of 8-Bit Theater survives on his earnings from donations and royalties from the sale of his shirts and other items. Although Clevinger must pay his server and bandwidth costs, from this income he still makes a small profit, which is unusual for most independent comic writers. While most webcomic artists turn little or no profit, many can support their distribution costs and the online archiving of their past work. By being able to support themselves and to support their archives, they still have the possibility of garnering more readers and of continuing on as comic artists, especially as the webcomic readership grows.

Conclusion

Webcomics are certainly not the cure-all for problems faced by the comics medium in terms of distribution, limitations of the print medium, or restrictions for new artists entering the industry. However, they do represent new possibilities in comic production, distribution, and freedom. The most significant aspect of webcomics is not their economic feasibility; it is their ability to explore new possibilities in making comics, especially as they are unhindered by the standard production costs associated with color and format, and the standard restrictions in terms of comics themes and narratives. This ability to explore the comics medium with an ethical dimension and a networked culture is what Underground Comix brought to comics years ago. Thus, webcomics are the continuation and remediation of a revolution which has already begun. New topics like Open Source and new possibilities like photographic quality images have been added to the revolution, but the revolution is the same in spirit, and one which the web medium is conducive to continuing. While Marvel, DC, and Garfield strips are available on the web, webcomics like Penny Arcade and 8-Bit Theater also populate the web with equal ease of access and availability, creating a new space for subversion, exploration, and change.

Notes

[1] At the time of this publication, Serializer.net and Moderntales.com are the main exceptions to this because they do have a large financial support, with all the benefits that brings.


[5] For an example of White Mage and Black Mage as a moron, see http://www.nukl...ly.php?date=010511.

[6] In accordance with the hacking community, “hacking” is the positive and legal manipulation of technology to learn and improve, “cracking” is the illegal destruction or manipulation of technology for self serving or destructive purposes, and "script-kiddies" are those who know how to do neither and instead download programming scripts to then act as crackers.

References


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