Understanding understandings of comics: Reading and collecting as media-oriented practices

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Abstract

Much writing about comic books and comic-book culture assumes we all know what a comic-book fan is and what she or, more often, he does. This may be premature. The audiences of comic books and graphic novels are best understood as participants in a set of socio-cultural practices. 'Audiencing' thus relies on skills and tastes acquired through participation in a community of fellow reader–practitioners. This article draws on qualitative research in comic-bookstores and interviews with a small group of current and former audience members to explore the range of practices oriented to contemporary comic books, paying particular attention to the emerging divide between readers and collectors. The rise of graphic novels and of 'slabbed' collector's comics both signal a new autonomy of reading and collecting from each other. What it means to be part of the audience of comic books depends very much on what practice(s) one actually undertakes as an audience member.

Keywords: comic-book fans; collecting; reading; graphic novels; practice theory.

1. Introduction: What is a (comics) fan?

Beginning in the early 1990s, an important body of work in media studies has made the fan a stock character in cultural analysis. Fandom has served as a 'critical case', extending our ideas of what audiences can do with mass-media texts. In fandoms, theories about the active and cunning audience are made flesh. Appealing to fandom can also be rhetorically useful. It can deflect 'so what?' criticisms by demonstrating that people other than the author care about the subject at hand. And conflicts between fans' desires and producers' profit motive provides a way to import self-evidently 'significant' categories like resistance and struggle from the political realm to that of pop culture.

Fans have been particularly important in comics' development. As Ian Gordon points out in this issue, comics fans have pursued – successfully or otherwise – a variety of career

paths in and alongside the industry. Beginning in the second half of the 1960s, the older generation of writers, artists and editors (some of whom had participated in older science-fiction fan communities and some of whom were simply working commercial artists) were gradually displaced by new cohorts that had grown up with comics and comics fandom (Gabilliet 264). With the withering of mass-market newsstand distribution in the 1970s and 1980s, the new model of 'direct-market' distribution to specialty retailers oriented the American comic-book industry to a relatively small market of dedicated fans (Beaty, 'Recession'). As Paul Lopes writes, 'By the late 1980s, most comic book publishers had moved to this direct market as the main focus of their publishing efforts, supported by what had become a vibrant, but marginal, subculture of comic book fans' (91). As the fan communities that formed around comic-bookstores, conventions, fanzines, and discussion forums became the primary market for comics, the tastes and aesthetic discourses that they nurtured also came to dominate comics production. All this means that the reader of a comic book is generally addressed as a fan.[1]

Several other contributions to this special issue interrogate the ordinary language category *fan* in relation to comics. Their arguments suggest a need to get beyond the stereotypes and investigate the experiences real people have with comics. I want to advance that project a little further along, but rather than looking at who claims this 'membership category', I'll explore some of its 'category bound activities' or 'predicates' (see Locke, this issue; Sacks). We will understand comics fans better if we know how they themselves understand the objects of their fandom.

Elsewhere, I have argued that consumers of cultural goods such as comic books and graphic novels are best understood as participants in a range of cultural practices. 'Audiencing' – and particularly the affectively engaged audiencing associated with fans – is an example of what I call a consummative practice. That is, it involves practitioners investing immaterial and affective labour in objects through or alongside their consumption. As collective, social practices, however, this immaterial labour is made quite visible in the spaces of fandom. Consummative practices (like all social practices – cf. MacIntyre; Schatzki) articulate diverse activities together by means of shared orientations, providing the basis for action and practical reason (including aesthetic evaluations).

In this article, I discuss a subset of findings from a multi-site qualitative study of the 'nerd-culture scene' in a Canadian city. I interviewed staff and organizers at three comic-bookstores (Warren, owner, King St. Comics; Sean, owner, Downtown Comics & Collectibles; Scott, Alex and Nathan, staff, Eastside Games & Comics) and a small local convention (Peter, organizer, City Comic-Con) and conducted limited participant- and passive-observation on site. In a second phase of fieldwork, I conducted qualitative interviews with participants in the scene, including several current and former comic-book fans that I'll call Solo, Mr. Fox, Wedge, and Steve. All names, including store names, have been changed.[2]

My research suggests an increasingly important distinction in the comics audience between practices of collecting and reading. Where these were once more or less synonymous and interchangeable predicates of comic-book fans, they have developed more

or more autonomy. Indeed, for many people I spoke with, *reader* and *collector* have become distinct categories with very different understandings of what comics are. This split in comics' readership has been enabled by material transformations of the comic book itself – chiefly, by the development of the trade paperback / graphic novel publishing format and the introduction of CGC comics. These examples show how audience practices, on the one hand, and industrial and commercial institutions, on the other, interact to produce comics fandoms.

That my informants were largely recruited from comic shops and conventions in one city in Canada means I'm dealing with a restricted slice of the 'comics world' (Beaty, *Comics vs. Art*). Studying comics fans in another national/cultural context, within a distinct scene (avant-garde, self-published minicomics, for example), or in a different period would certainly yield different results. But it is precisely my argument that the *idea* of comics fandom as a single entity – usually represented by 'mainstream' American comic fans – obscures a variety of concrete social practices. That this is true of even the most familiar of comic-book cultures suggests the need for empirical research that investigates audiences in their own terms and with as few blinders as possible.

2. A practice approach to audiences and reception

To say that a fan is someone who participates in fan culture begs the question of what culture is. Arguably, this word is often used in an ad hoc, pre-theoretical way – even in cultural studies. Ann Swidler has suggested that definitions of culture in terms of mental representations or beliefs are inadequate, since they render our object of study invisible and inaccessible (74). Rather, culture can be approached in terms of the practices that people do and the discourses they use to describe, explain and evaluate these practices. As Swidler writes, 'By taking culture out of the realm of individual subjectivity (or the realm of transcendent values hovering over or behind social action), the turn to discourse and practices gave the study of culture an empirical object' (75).[3]

Just as practice-theoretic frameworks have forced social scientists to re-think their assumptions about 'objects' like societies and cultures, thinking in terms of practice challenges naïve theorizations of 'the media'. Drawing on Swidler, Nick Couldry (*Listening*; 'Media as Practice') argues that a new research paradigm is needed to overcome media studies' 'mediacentrism'. We cannot assume a priori that mediated representations are privileged sites for analyzing any and all social phenomena. Moreover, paradigmatic strife between those who privilege 'structures of media production' and those who concentrate on the 'structuring properties of the text' has further distorted our picture of how media matter in everyday life ('Media as Practice' 118):[4]

> It is to escape that constraint that my proposed paradigm starts not with media texts or media institutions, but with practice – not necessarily the practice of audiences […], but media-oriented practice, in all its looseness

> and openness. What, quite simply, are people doing in relation to media
> across a whole range of situations and contexts? (119; emphasis in original)

That is to say, we should think of media in terms of the practices that take them as their object. A video game, for example, is not a self-evident object for analysis. First, the game's 'content', its design expressed in code, must be mediated into some container – it can be played, for example, on a PC, a mobile phone, or a dedicated console. But second, and arguably more importantly, it is mediated by its players' practices. If we compare the dedicated gamer with someone who uses gaming to socialize with friends or someone just killing time, we see that the medium may be the same, but the experience produced is different because the game is being subordinated to quite different ends. The media are only one part of human subjects' individual and collective projects. The real question is precisely how they are – more or less effectively – enrolled into these projects (Couldry, 'ANT and Media'). Media scholars should attend to the quotidian practices that involve media and the discourses members generate to monitor their (and others') activities.

Couldry's proposal perhaps needs to be distinguished from what has been a dominant paradigm for studying audiences in media and cultural studies. Talking about how people engage with and use cultural objects certainly sounds a lot like active audience theory, but a practice-theoretic account of audiences is distinct – and, I contend, superior – for two main reasons. First, fan/audience studies have, like much of mainstream social science, over-emphasized cognition. On this view, the activity of audiences consists in 'decoding messages' or somehow expresses their (propositionally formulated) beliefs and attitudes. It treats action as if it were merely discursive. Second, while 'activity' may be entirely individualized, practices are inescapably collective. Even when pursued alone, they depend on a dense, multiply articulated assemblage of know-how, beliefs, and material resources; they are social through and through. Thus, active audience theory tends to abstract generic competencies or literacies away from the situated social practices that produce them. Although Couldry insists that media-oriented practices may only incidentally involve cultural goods as means to their ultimate ends ('Media as Practice' 125–26), this paradigm is also a useful way of approaching those practices principally concerned with media, such as those that we collect together under the umbrella of fandom.

What makes a practice 'fannish'? Generally, we understand *fandom* to mean two different but closely related things. We use it to describe a quality of individuals, signifying a kind of devotion to a cultural object (i.e., a text, genre, or creator/celebrity). At the same time, it can also refer to a system of more or less formally organized cultural institutions, including clubs, conventions, and specialty publications and communication channels, in which people gather around their shared commitments to cultural objects. In surveying the variety of practices that constitute fandom in both senses – from fan art and fan-fiction to vidding, filking and various forms of remix, from 'smoffing' (i.e., organizing conventions) to quotidian viewing rituals and 'geeking out' in conversation – two features strike me as distinctive. First, they all involve or enable forms of criticism and connoisseurship. Second,

they are charged with a sense of affection, pleasure, and even commitment or loyalty. For these reasons, I refer to these practices (whether they are undertaken by self-described 'fans' or not) as consummative practices.

On this view, goods – including cultural commodities and media texts – are not truly 'themselves' until they are put to use within some social practice. Baudrillard introduced the notion of consumativity as a form of 'consumption-power' corresponding to the Marxist concept of labour-power (83). His pun reminds us that we do not simply use up ('consume') goods but complete ('consummate') them in use. It captures consumption's productive side particularly well. Take, for example, the proverbial distinction between a 'house' and a 'home'. The former is merely a physical structure, a piece of the built environment and the end result of a commodity-chain put into effect by a real estate developer, while the latter is a result of the home-making practices and labour of the people who inhabit it: by painting, decorating, arranging furniture, and conducting their lives within it, they consummate the building. Similarly, the fan practices mentioned above involve real, material productivity – making and doing things – as well as immaterial or affective labour 'that produces immaterial products, such as information, knowledges, ideas, images, relationships, and affects' (Hardt and Negri 65). This labour not only invests the objects of fandom with meaning but takes them up as instruments for accomplishing things, even things as simple as meeting people and starting conversations (see, e.g., Berenstein, this volume). Fans use them to achieve particular, socially constructed goods and pleasures, to develop specific competences and skills given by their practices, to create communalized social relationships with other practitioners, and to elaborate a sense of identity – or, at least, of the place that these practices hold in their conception of the good life (MacIntyre 187–97). In doing so, they tend to transform what these objects are in accordance with their practically constituted goals.

Couldry's is a provocative and powerful solution. It reconceptualizes media studies' traditional objects of analysis (producers, media, and audiences) in terms of human beings' entanglement with social practices (production practices, mediating practices, and audience practices). It thus draws media studies closer to the fundamental social-scientific frameworks. Perhaps more significantly, Couldry is calling for a radically context-dependent media studies, for his paradigm requires empirical research into how particular media-oriented practices unfold among particular social agents at a particular conjuncture. Thus, our claims about comics are incomplete if we do not account for how particular people use them in 'comics-oriented practices'. My research in one city's nerd-culture scene suggests, for example, two distinct practices available to today's comic fans that have tended to transform their objects' material form in line with distinct orientations to them.

3. Varieties of comics-oriented practices
The world of comics often seems a Manichean one – not only in the good-versus-evil morality plays that dominate its output but also in its economic and social organization. Formerly, the structuring division within the field of comics was between 'mainstream' (i.e.,

superhero comics published by DC or Marvel) and independent or alternative comics.[5] As recently as 1999, Matthew Pustz wrote that 'most alternative-comics fans would not be caught dead reading mainstream comics. And, for that matter, most mainstream readers do not like alternative comics. Consequently, there has been little crossover between these two groups' (13). However, this divide has been significantly ameliorated. Mainstream publishers have diversified what superhero stories look like by adding a sprinkling of 'semantic' elements from other genres (Altman).[6] Beginning with Valiant and Image Comics in the early 1990s, independent-but-not-quite-alternative publishers began offering mainstream-style comics outside of the established narrative universes of the so-called 'Big Two'. More recently, a number of publishers have carved out niches in the direct market with comics based on licensed properties and non-superhero action genres (e.g., Kirkman, Moore, and Adlard's zombie comic, *The Walking Dead*). Creators like Ed Brubaker, Mark Millar, and Jeff Lemire (inter alia) now move back and forth between the worlds of work-for-hire and creator-owned publishing with relative ease, and Hollywood has optioned and produced films based on both kinds of comic. For all of these reasons, working out the difference between mainstream and independent/alternative comics has become a basically academic exercise, and the difference is much less salient to many readers than it once was. But in talking to retailers and members of the comics audience in the course of my research, it became apparent that a new division has emerged between those who define their fandom in terms of collecting comics and those who some orient themselves to comics as readers.

3.1. Collecting

When people talk about comics fans, they often speak as though collecting and fandom are synonyms. Bart Beaty, for example, calls readers 'undeveloped fans' (*Comics vs. Art* 156); the most casual member of comics' audiences, the reader merely 'consumes comics […] without developing a strong involvement in the comics world or its specific institutions and rituals'. True fandom, by contrast, requires such 'strong involvement', and 'one of the most rudimentary levels of participation is by engaging in collecting' (155). Collecting is thus a kind of 'dispersed practice', a basic competence that underlies a range of collectively accomplished activities (Schatzki 91), not only those of comic fans but also collectors of stamps, coins, art, and so on. Collecting comics can also be understood as a substantive or 'integrative' practice (98) that articulates activities, skills, and motivations into a coherent, intelligible whole. But collecting isn't just one thing; as the following excerpts from interviews suggest, there are different ways of being a collector:

> Wedge: For me, collection is sort of like comics where you … you have a set group of things that you want to get, and you like uh … buy all the issues for this thing. That, to me, is collecting.[7]

> Sean: When you're talking about collectors, there's collectors who collect the vintage, old comics and there's the collectors who like to complete series from the new comics that come out on the rack.

Indeed, based on my interviews and observation, there are at least three distinct kinds of comic-book collector. These ideal-types can be distinguished by their dispositions towards the act of collecting itself. I'll refer to them as *completists*, *hobbyists*, and *speculators*. As we proceed through that list, the activity of collecting becomes more autonomous from the original consummative practices of aesthetic appreciation: completists collect as a means to an end (namely, their enjoyment of comic art); hobbyists interpret collecting as the substance of fandom; and speculators collect as a straightforward monetary investment.

3.1.1. Completists

Pustz writes, 'Comic books […] need to be purchased and collected to have any impact on fans' (19). There was a time when collecting was prerequisite to reading comics with any commitment because fans simply could not rely on newsstand distribution. As Sean, the owner of Downtown Comics & Collectables, explained, distribution channels were unpredictable prior to the creation of the direct market of specialty retailers:

> Comics used to be sold on newsstands. You know, you used to go buy your comics at a 7-Eleven or a drugstore or a corner newsstand. Which was always, you know, for a comic-book fan, was usually a little bit difficult because you couldn't get all the comics you wanted, or you had to go to several places, or they wouldn't get very many and they'd sell out, and things like that.

Thus, one could not buy comics casually if one wanted to read them seriously: the next instalment had to be sought out purposefully, whether by going to 'several places', trading with other readers, or through the tertiary market for used comics. With the creation of the direct-market comic-bookstore, specialty retailers who understand (though fallibly) fans' tastes act as curators (see also Woo, 'Alpha Nerds'), and fans are able to 'subscribe' to specific comics by placing standing orders with their local comic shop. But even with this more rationalized distribution system, the serial nature of many comics exerts a 'gravity' that pulls readers into completism, as evidenced in Solo's account of how she became a regular reader of comics:

> Solo: I started going to comic cons because of Peter, who was my teacher, so that connection was there. And there it's mostly trades – er, it's mostly floppies, so I bought some … sets.
>
> Ben: Sort of bundles that the dealers put together?

Solo: And then, for some reason, I just went on this crazy – I think I read *Identity Crisis* in a hardcover. I had a hardcover of *Identity Crisis*, like the DC … and then I got, I went on this mission to find *52* in back issues, so I got all the *52*s, and then that led into needing to have *Final Crisis*, and then that led into needing to have *Blackest Night*. And like that's probably when I collected most of my floppy stuff and actually had a subscription […].

In Wedge's words, the compulsion to collect comics is 'sort of like … the closest thing to addiction, I guess, that I've had.' But this 'addiction' offers distinct pleasures, too. In addition to keeping things for their sentimental or nostalgic value, Steve explicitly identified satisfaction or pride in completing a run of issues as a key to his collecting practices:

Steve: That's definitely both kind of a collector – just to say, "I've got *a* to *b*." Like, to say, "I've got the entire collection from here to here."

Ben: So, the completist kind of thing?

Steve: Yeah, so a level of kind of completion and satisfaction of collection because … I mean, some things are easy to collect and some things are hard. So the harder it was to collect, the more likely I am to keep it for a longer period of time.

Whether the relevant set is defined in terms of a given on-going series, everything featuring a particular character, or everything produced by a given creator, completists are committed to not missing anything. But when extended beyond publishers' current lists, collecting requires more than attention and dedication: It demands a re-orientation to comics as at least collectable, if not collectables.

3.1.2. Hobbyists
For some, collecting is more than a prerequisite to reading comics. It's the core of their fandom, and they even talk about collecting comics as 'the hobby'. When I asked Wedge to name different communities of nerds and geeks, this is how he described comics fans:

And then you have the – I guess, the comic books, the people who go to comic-book conventions […]. Whereas they also might be a little bit more into the nerdy side of things, where they're kind of obsessed with collecting and maintaining their collections and getting the newest books and that sort of thing, I guess.

This fits with Tankel and Murphy's portrayal of comic-book collectors. Contrasting them with speculators (about which more below), they suggest that hobbyist collectors 'value possession and preservation in the present, while deferring financial gain' (59):

> The comic book collector should be described as a *curatorial consumer*, a curator, an archivist, and a preservationist for artifacts that have meaning for their cultural lives. The financial investment in preserving these artifacts does not represent any rational cost/benefit ratio if viewed only in a monetary sense. The value received from these artifacts is measured in terms not usually mentioned in the course of mass production and consumption; that is, in aesthetic pleasure and personal satisfaction[…]. (66; emphasis in original)

Jeffery Brown has suggested that collections objectify the cultural capital of fandom, showcasing one's 'ability to distinguish between objects of worth and worthlessness, a knowledge of important canonical features, and a substantiation of "good taste"' (23). Even before the direct market, there was an infrastructure of comic shops and conventions serving the hobbyist collector. Tankel and Murphy emphasize the archival materials (bags, boards, and boxes) that comic shops made widely available and the numerous publications that report on the collectors' market (64). To take Robert Overstreet's *Comic Book Price Guide* as an example:

> Each annual *Guide* was several hundred pages long, consisting of introductory articles on collecting, grading, buying, and selling comic books, a market report, investor's data, charts of the most valuable comic books […], directories of comic book stores and dealers, and articles and features on a small number of comic books of historic or investment interest. (Beaty, *Comics vs. Art* 159)

Such collecting is hardly casual. It demands significant investments of time and money and the cultivation of specialized knowledge and skill.

At City Comic-Con, although casual attendees would wander in off the street to look for graphic novels they'd seen reviewed in the newspaper, the centre of gravity was clearly the dealers selling individual back issues. Many collectors used 'want lists' to keep track of their quarries, rather than simply browsing. These lists ranged in complexity from a few handwritten pages or a notebook to well organized binders and, in one case, a spreadsheet on a laptop computer. If they were simply interested in reading these stories or looking at this art, there are – as we shall see – easier ways to access it, but the thrill of the hunt and the pleasures of owning the object were clearly important motivators.

3.1.3. Speculators

Comic-book fandom has its own Rogue's Gallery of villains. Over the last twenty years or so, the speculator has earned a place alongside anti-comics crusader Fredric Wertham, Batman director Joel Schumacher, and inker Vince Colletta. As I listened to conversations in comic-bookstores and talked with people, it was clear that a discourse blaming speculators and the early 1990s boom for many of the industry's ills still circulated widely. This period was described by Sean as a time when 'people were buying ten copies of number one issues and things like that and trading them like penny stocks'. Peter, the organizer of City Comic-Con, painted a more colourful picture of the boom:

> When the sports cards came in in the late '80s / early '90s, and comics were hot and sport cards were hot and Image came out and all of that, so everything was speculative. And it all became about the money and just how can you fuck people over for money, right? […] Everybody and his dog opened up a comic-bookstore around that time, and the only – and most of these were people just selling their collections to start with, really – so the only way you could get new customers was to discount. And we reached the point where stores were offering 40 percent off cover price, and at the time cover price was maybe a buck or something. […] You know, like, 50 percent off *Batman* […] so new comics were almost a loss leader. And that's kind of screwed it up.

In the final sentence, Peter is referring to his perception of local comic fans as particularly cheap consumers. As a result, he said that the 'core' of his convention's attendees is people 'looking for cheap comics'.

Pustz points out that the collectors' market in new comics – as distinct from the 'high-end collectors' market' – was a relatively recent phenomenon, and this is what most people meant when they mentioned 'speculators'. Well publicized auctions of classic comics in the early 1990s cemented the idea that comics could be a lucrative investment (Beaty, *Comics vs. Art* 165), and a new price guide, *Wizard*, gave contemporary comic books the treatment that *Overstreet*, *The Comic Buyers Guide*, and others had given vintage comics (167–68). As Brown suggests, the 'fiscal value of a good comic collection' provides a means of translating its internally defined 'cultural value' into terms recognized outside the practical community of collectors (27). The idea of comics' investment potential – circulated by mainstream and subcultural media alike – drew new collectors into the market, and publishers responded by more thoroughly incorporating the logic of the collectable, introducing multiple variant covers, covers with special printing gimmicks, and packaging the comic with extra merchandise sealed in a 'polybag'. These strategies encouraged collectors to buy several copies of the same comic in the hope that they could eventually cash them in for a substantial return on investment. And despite the contemporary

contempt for the speculator boom, it's clear that many fans were caught up in this version of collectability, which required only minor changes in orientation from the older practices of hobbyists.

All the comic fans I interviewed referenced the economic value of comic books. Sometimes this was mentioned as a belief held by others unfamiliar with the field, and sometimes it was a belief that they themselves had been disabused of:

> Steve: Yeah, some of them were bought not because I wanted to read them or enjoy them but because I thought they'd be valuable at some point later on. Which is probably completely untrue, but … I can hold out hope.

> Wedge: The comic market became so saturated um that … comics weren't really worth what they thought they were worth, so … getting rid of them for any amount of money was … hard, so then I ended up just finding somebody that … He got a good deal because he got a tonne of comics, and then I got some money, which was reasonable […].

Downtown Comics & Collectables was the only one of the three stores I studied that was involved to any significant degree in the market for comics that might be objects for speculation.[8] (Even then, Sean admitted it was a relatively insignificant revenue stream for the store, although it was the part of the business he said he personally enjoyed most.) While I was hanging out in the store, a man and two boys – one a teenager, the other about ten or twelve years old – came into Downtown. The man, presumably the boys' father or guardian, gave the younger one a stern talking to about what to do if he found something he wants. He then walked towards the back of the store where Sean keeps the 'old comics' with the older boy, pointing out comics that he owns or once owned. Later on after the younger made his decision, the father insisted that he also buy a board and mylar sleeve to keep the comic from getting 'messed up in your bag'. As they checked out, he remarked to the boy that in sixty years he'll be able to 'calculate the profits' from the comic he just bought. Despite having missed the speculator boom by nearly twenty years, this man clearly oriented to the act of collecting as a primarily financial rather than emotional investment and was inducting two younger fans to his speculative orientation.

While collecting in all its forms is not necessarily incompatible with reading comics, retailers do note that collectors, in Sean's words, 'tend to be a little bit pickier about condition':

> The few comics that come out nowadays that will be worth anything are gonna have to be [laughs] in really nice shape for that to ever happen. And some people, even though they know their comics aren't gonna be particularly worth anything, are just picky and like them to be in nice shape, and that's merely a personal choice. So, I mean, yeah, you notice which guys

have to have every issue and which ones are faithful about coming in for them and how they take care of those comics.

Wedge goes even further: 'obsessive might have some negative connotations that I don't necessarily mean there, *but* in order to be a collector you have to be kind of obsessive'. In response to this 'pickiness' or 'obsessiveness', some stores pre-emptively put comics – including graphic novels and trade paperbacks – in plastic sleeves in order to maintain their condition. Although they are very unlikely to appreciate in value, King St.'s Warren says 'there are people who are collectors and who are very particular, and if there is even the slightest ding, you know, bent corner, crease, then it's going to hurt the potential for the book to sell'. Nonetheless, he recognizes that this makes it more difficult for customers to 'browse' these books, an activity fundamental to shopping for comics, especially among those more interested in entertainment than exchange-value. Indeed, the fear of depreciating valuable investments deters collectors from reading the books they've purchased. Sean said that 'not too many people buy the old comics just to read them' and admitted that he himself read few contemporary comics – at least compared with his employees.

This tension reached its apotheosis with the development of CGC comics. Comics Guaranty, LLC is a private company that offers a service designed to make the buying and selling of collectable comics more rational and secure. Collectors pay to ship their comics to the CGC facility, where their condition is graded using a company standard. They are then sealed in a tamper-proof plastic case (in collectors' jargon, 'slabbed'). Thus, the collector has unassailable proof of the comic's condition when selling it but gives up the ability to actually read it (to do so would break the seal and invalidate the certified grade). In Sean's words, the CGC offers 'a *terrific* system for taking a lot of the mystery out of buying comics': 'This way, the customer is on the same level [as the dealer] and much more comfortable spending the money.' Although Sean notes that it is easy to acquire a 'beater', or reading copy, of even quite valuable comics, it remains the case that investing in CGC comics means investing in unreadable comics.

In the same way that a carefully archived superhero comic from the 1960s is a very different object – and implies a very different set of practices – from a dog-eared Archie digest in a doctor's waiting room, CGC comics entail a distinct orientation to collecting. They represent the triumph of exchange-value over use-value. As Walter Benjamin put it, the collector 'makes his concern the transfiguration of things. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them' (*Arcades Project* 9). Once the insistent need to be instrumentally useful has been removed, the commodity may be re-enchanted as part of the collection. However, in recognizing an object's collectability, collectors open the door to its re-fetishization. The mass-produced collector's item – particularly if it is relatively old or rare or both – seems to command the auratic quality that attached itself to artworks (Benjamin, 'Work of Art'). This reproduces the collectable as a commodity, potentially reactivating its exchange-value. Hence, collectors

are always speculators in potentia, rescuing objects from the curse of usefulness but delivering them to another master, the market.

3.2. Reading

Thus, all three types of collector are opposed by an orientation towards use-value. 'Using' comics means reading them, an act which, from a dedicated collector's perspective, 'damages' the object. And the wide-spread availability of affordable reprints in graphic novel / trade paperback format short-circuits the logic of scarcity that produces collectability in mass-culture artefacts. But reading is not simply a matter of rejecting (or temporarily bracketing) comics' investment value, and the attention given to how graphic novels have attracted new readers to comics neglects the profound changes the format has enabled in the practices of comics' existing fans. They have also enabled reading to emerge as a distinct media-oriented practice within comics fandom.

Publishers have long reprinted older comic stories in order to extract additional value from material they had already paid for. But it was only in the late 1980s that reprinting comics as *book* books rather than another *comic* book became a common publishing strategy. As Julia Round notes, 'While some might argue this process maintained the status quo of the comics audience by feeding the collectors' market, repackaging and reissuing also altered perceptions of comics by allowing for large, book-format bindings that brought them closer to the notion of a literary text' (17). The 'literariness' achieved by graphic novels and trade paperbacks can be interpreted a number of ways. It certainly gestures at the idea of legitimacy or consecration. The publishers' initial forays were expensive, deluxe series like 'Marvel Masterworks' and 'DC Archive Editions', the very names of which emphasize the artistic or historical significance of the comics reprinted between their hardback covers – perhaps intended as a consolation prize for those who could not acquire the real thing. But literariness also implies that the comic is not a unique, auratic object but only a disposable container for symbolic contents that can be reproduced again and again (Benjamin, 'Work of Art'):

> Thus, from the point of view of investment potential, the turn towards graphic novels that was so critical in terms of legitimating comics as cultural material for adults in the wake of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* has been derided by *Overstreet* as "a real dilemma for the collector in our hobby" because graphic novels, like prose novels, "generally do not appreciate in value." The graphic novel "dilemma" sits awkwardly with the *Guide*'s previously stated rhetoric about collecting "for fun and pleasure," but it is consistent with the *Guide*'s real focus on mercantile issues and aligns neatly with the gatekeeping role that the *Guide* plays in the market. (Beaty, *Comics vs. Art* 162)

Subsequent reprinting programs, such as Marvel's 'Essentials' and DC's 'Showcase Presents', took this idea further. They put texts that previously required patient collecting to acquire back into general circulation, not as reproductions of historical artefacts but as cheap cultural commodities designed to be read. And paperback collections of recently completed or in-process comics stories (rather than 'masterworks' of the past) seem to escape the collector's logic altogether, as these comics have never been unavailable.

Even though the direct market was originally created to cater to collectors, the relative non-collectability of the graphic novel / trade paperback format has economic advantages for retailers. Whereas unsold periodical comics become deadstock almost immediately and few ever increase in value, trade paperbacks remain sellable more or less indefinitely:

> Sean: They don't stale-date. You get the same discount on your trade paperbacks as you do on your newsstand books, so … I mean, one stale-dates after four to six weeks […] but most paperbacks, yeah, they have a much longer shelf life.

In the 1990s, publishers began to permit retailers to order single copies of graphic novels. This significantly reduced the risk associated with ordering for comic shops (Weiner 10). As a format not principally oriented to the collectors, graphic novels and trade paperbacks have also been able to reach outside of the comic-book direct market into spaces like public libraries and mass-market bookstores. Comics' increased availability in convenient formats that can be purchased outside the implicitly subcultural space of the comic-bookstore has offered options for new and returning readers that previous generations of collector–fans simply did not have.

Despite their buying habits, active comics fans Solo and Mr. Fox categorized themselves as readers. Solo had amassed several 'shortboxes' of comics in her apartment, but she defined and interpreted her own practice as principally about characters and stories, not objects. In fact, when her local comic shop closed, she quit periodical comics cold turkey – a move incentivized by how much money she had been spending on her comics habit. Today, she occasionally goes to a mass market bookstore to purchase a trade paperback. Mr. Fox still visits his preferred comic shop (Downtown) weekly to buy the series he views as too good to wait for, but he shows little attachment, if any, to the comics he buys. He donates them to children's hospitals when he can replace them with a trade paperback collection. King St. and Downtown's owners estimated that the majority of their customers were more like these two than dedicated collectors. As Sean said, 'When I first started out [in the 1970s], it was entirely about collecting. Now it's about reading.' While I was conducting observation in Downtown Comics & Collectables, for example, Sean took a phone call from someone inquiring whether the store would buy some of his old comics. Sean replied, 'That's a series that was really popular when it was coming out, but I don't carry it as a back issue – not because it's worthless but because I don't have the space …

Most of the people that collect that series are buying the graphic novel.' Alex, who manages the comics end of Eastside Games & Comics and himself a 'trade-waiter', claimed it is 'normal for people to switch over to trade paperback nowadays'. And whenever he talked about his customers and what they bought, Alex always spoke in terms of 'taste' – a category of little salience to speculators, at least.[9]

However, this transformation is by no means universal. I also overheard a Downtown customer inform a staff member, 'I don't really do the trades. I like the originals', and every comic-bookstore I studied was still at its busiest on Wednesdays, when the bulk of their regular customers gathered to buy the week's new releases – most in the periodical format. Moreover, trade paperback series offer a compromise with the collector's impulse. First editions of certain graphic novels have a resale value, just as first editions of prose books have their collectors, too, and book design has been used to prime the completist impulse, with a series' trade dress prominently displaying volume numbers or fragments of a larger picture on the spine.[10] If the object is not collectable in itself, publishers may include content that is exclusive to a particular edition, like the special features or 'extras' on a DVD. Warren noted, for example, that although collected editions sometimes fail to reproduce all of the cover art from the original issues, many do feature a cover gallery, script excerpts, and preparatory sketches or other 'unfinished' artwork. And Mr. Fox, Alex, and Sean all mentioned how trade paperbacks looked on one's bookshelf as an appealing aspect of the format, suggesting that the distinction between 'library' and 'collection' can be fuzzy.

4. Conclusion

Beaty (*Comics vs. Art*) is correct to point out that the distinctions I have described are in many ways about rival definitions of what comics are: Fun or profit? Culture or commodity? Art works valued for the aesthetic experiences they enable or mass-media ephemera valued for their nostalgic connection to the collector's youth? These poles (and the various points along the continuum they define) structure the comics world today. But these definitions don't come from nowhere. We can point to the economic interests of an Overstreet or a Sotheby's – or, conversely, to publishers who profit from trade paperbacks sold in bookstores but not from back issues sold on the tertiary collectors' market. But we must also acknowledge that ordinary collectors and readers have distinct practical orientations to comics that are prior to these definitions. Indeed, in calling them 'definitions', we are arguably only reformulating propositionally what is implicit in their practices (and thus risking a form of 'scholastic fallacy'; Bourdieu). When considered as media-oriented practices, a whole other side of comics fandom comes into focus.

While actually reading a comic is undoubtedly a cognitive activity that decodes meanings from a text, it is also a material practice – as is cataloguing and preserving the comic or sending it to the CGC for grading. Comic books take up physical space, and so storing and disposing of them are activities with which comics audiences must perforce engage. I listened to many stories about people coping with the size of their comic collections. Peter said that there was always a handful of 'dealers' at City Comic-Con who

were simply guys trying to unload their collection because they were moving or getting married, and tales of (presumptively male) collectors forced to sell off their comic books by romantic partners were basically conventional within the culture.

> Solo: I get guilty about the amount of space things take up. And the amount of stuff that people have. Like, just a little bit of a global consciousness … that I feel like if I can have it in a digital format that's archivable and real and easy to read, then I'd rather have that because it's not taking any space up except on my hard drive, and that's an acceptable place.

> Steve: Unfortunately, one of the things I don't have here is a fairly large comic-book collection. My parents still have that stored because it's just too hard to ship.

> Wedge: [Purging collections is] sometimes predicated on … external forces, like a wife. [laughs] Yeah, 'cause I certainly wouldn't have got rid of as much stuff as I did. Any of the time, probably.

The practical challenges to home-making entailed by being a comics fan are rarely mentioned in accounts of active audiences who subversively read against the grain or in more recent accounts of fan cultures as a form of 'collective intelligence' (Jenkins; cf. Ito et al.).

Comics-oriented practices also cultivate particular dispositions and affects alongside those generated by the texts themselves. The 'thrill of the hunt' and the joy of uncovering something valuable – whether economically, in terms of subcultural canons of taste, or only as the last item from an incomplete set – is key to the collecting practices I've described. Long-term with these social practices also accounts for the profound sense of loss that comes through when collectors talked about items they had to give up in a previous purge of their collection:

> Steve: It's like the pound of flesh closest to my heart. When I part with anything, it's always, it's always … ((wincing)) "Okay."

> Wedge: The most money I've ever spent on a comic was *Iron Fist* 14, which is the first appearance of Sabretooth. And I think I spent 150 bucks on that um … and it took me … that one took me three years to find a copy. Like, I hadn't found – I hadn't even seen a copy of it? until I found that, and it was in really good condition and uh … I ended up selling it, which was a big mistake but [laughs] to pay rent, probably. [laughs]

If, as many scholars have suggested, comic collecting is substantially fuelled by nostalgia (this is an open question subject to empirical investigation), then nostalgia for lost nostalgia items cuts deep. The investment of immaterial and affective labour into the objects of media-oriented practice means that these objects can provoke affective responses even in their absence and independently of any particular qualities of the text itself.

And, just as the direct-market comic shop is a nexus for fan practices oriented to different media (Woo, 'Android's Dungeon'), comics fans also engage in other practices, forming articulated chains or networks of practice that escape neat definitions of comic-book culture. Some of these articulations may be idiosyncratic, but others are evidently quite widely shared. Wedge and Solo both mentioned that collecting comics could easily lead to collecting related merchandise, such as action figures portraying comic-book characters. Similarly, taste for and knowledge about certain kinds of games, books, movies, and TV series could generally be assumed in comics spaces, and a certain degree of familiarity with comic book characters and creators was often shown in other nerdy spaces.

So not only are comics-oriented practices not necessarily about interpreting the meanings of comic art and narrative, they may not even be about comic books per se. Nonetheless, they form the immediate, practical context of comics' reception (whatever that reception ends up entailing). All this is to say that situated analyses of how individual members of the comics audience engage with comic books in their everyday life are desperately needed. We need to recognize the distinctions and differentiations between comics-oriented practices that are already immanent to the structure of comic-book culture. When we do so, it should become apparent that 'reading' and 'collecting' comics are hardly self-evident, straightforward activities. What they are and what they mean cannot be assumed – not even from the state of comic-book culture a few decades ago, for they are moving targets subject to reinterpretation and re-articulation over time. As with the examples of 'slabbed' collectors' comics and graphic novel / trade paperback reprints, even the comic book itself is not a stable object, as it is transformed by its enrolment in the practices of comics fans.

Acknowledgements:

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Notes:

[1] Because of how I recruited participants, this data set is somewhat biased towards people who participate – or have participated – in the comic-book culture centred around comic shops and conventions. Burke (this issue) has discovered that active participation in this culture is not a prerequisite to self-identification as a 'fan'. The orientations to and understandings of comics held by such fans demand further research.

[2] The study also included research in specialty game stores and with other organizations and participants who had little, if anything, to do with comic books.

[3] My framework departs somewhat from Swidler's in that I treat not only with habitual but also intentional practices and locate discourse in actual enunciations.

[4] Couldry perhaps has in mind the debates between political-economists of communication, with their focus on the organization and ownership of production, and more humanistically oriented scholars, such as those associated with cultural studies or *Screen*'s psychoanalytic media theory.

[5] Again, my frame of reference here is English-language comics primarily oriented to the direct market.

[6] Most commonly, those of crime, noire, and police procedural in examples such as *Gotham Central*, *Alias*, *Top Ten*, or *Powers*. More recently, DC Comics' September 2011 relaunch of their entire list included several new series seemingly intended to pursue this strategy, such as *Demon Knights* (fantasy), *All-Star Western* (Western), and *Men of War* (war comics).

[7] In interview excerpts, underlining represents added emphasis, ellipses without brackets indicate pauses, and doubled parentheses represent non-linguistic utterances or actions such as laughter.

[8] Eastside kept only limited numbers of back issues on hand, and King St.'s stock was more oriented to completist and hobbyist modes of collection.

[9] This is not to say that speculators have no taste, but that, qua speculators, their evaluative discourse pays it little heed. Ironically, however, completist and hobbyist collectors may be

better positioned to make the discriminations necessary to identify truly valuable comics and are less likely to be taken in by gimmicks such as relaunches or fancy cover treatments. [10] However, not all publishers have successfully implementing this strategy: Todd Allen, writing for the *Publishers Weekly* blog, cites complaints of Marvel collections 'flipping from a hardcover to a softcover to a hardcover to an omnibus, making it harder on consumers to find the content they're looking for and then leaving them with an uneven and varied set of volumes on the bookshelf'.