



AP Centerpiece: Comic book publishers making the leap to mobile phones

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. - Sean Demory realized a long-held dream of becoming a published comic book writer when "Thunder Road," a post-apocalyptic adventure he developed with artist Steven Sanders, was released.

"I've been plugging away and pitching things for 15-20 years," Demory said. "This is the first one that landed in fertile soil."

But don't look for the tales of Merritt and his buddies on the shelves of a comic book store or even the Internet. "Thunder Road" is the first comic book released in the U.S. exclusively on a cell phone, part of a lineup of mobile comic books offered by Kansas City-based uClick.

"It opens up a market that wouldn't necessarily be seen as a traditional comic market," Demory said of the launch last month.

Several companies are experimenting with putting printed material on mobile phones, including publisher HarperCollins' announcement this summer it would begin putting excerpts of new books on Apple Inc.'s iPhones.

Mobile comic books are still in their infancy in the U.S. - uClick says it's grown to about 55,000 readers a month in the first year of offering its GoComics service.

But it touches on two strengthening trends: Comic book creators looking to leap to the digital arena, where production and distribution are cheap, and the demand by wireless providers for data-rich applications to drive future revenues.

"Obviously comics have a pretty large following," said David Oberholzer, associate director of content programming for Verizon Wireless, which offers GoComics along with competitors AT&T Inc. and Sprint Nextel Corp. "You want to mimic what's out there already and have that on your deck."

For \$4.49 a month on Verizon, or \$3.99 a month for AT&T and Sprint, subscribers can view nearly a dozen different traditional comic books. There's also a separate subscription service for Japanese comics called manga.

The comic books range from well-known names like "Bone" and "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles," to up-and-coming books, such as crime noirish "Umbra" and Hindu folklore-inspired "Devi." The comics site adds new chapters or issues for each title every week.

Jeff Webber, vice president of product development for uClick, the digital arm of newspaper feature distributor Universal Press Syndicate, declined to provide revenue figures, saying some of the 55,000 monthly readers include people using free trials.

But he said the company, which already lets people view comic strips on their wireless devices, is pleased with the comic book feature's growth and may allow users this fall not only to subscribe but buy whole issues over the phone.

"We know there's a lot of interest out there and we're trying to find the best way to serve the customer," Webber said.

Mobile comics have been a cellular mainstay for years in manga-crazy Japan, where some titles already begin life on cell phones before going to print.

Stu Levy, chief executive officer of Los Angeles-based TokyoPop, one of the leading U.S. publishers of manga, said the domestic market is still way behind Japan. But he said he could see comics being released in the U.S. on mobile phones before coming out in print regularly in the next few years.

Levy, whose company provides most of GoComics' manga titles, said his company already is experimenting with adding animation and other cinematic touches to manga stories and tying in manga-themed games, ring tones, wallpaper and other content.

"I think that we're all still in the experimental stage," Levy said. "But I think with video and with technology that will allow the experience on the cell phone to become more engaging and more involved, we'll be able to touch more customers in a number of areas."

The GoComics reader displays each comic book a panel at a time, reformatted from the printed versions with larger typeface in word balloons, although some comics are harder to read than others. The phone's buttons advance each frame, allowing the reader to scroll across larger pictures.

Sanders, who did the art for "Thunder Road" as well as Image Comics' "Five Fists of Science," said the smaller screen does pose some challenges as space is at a premium. But he said the single panels also allow creators to better control how their audience reads the story, preventing them from ruining surprises by glancing at the next page.

He said he was initially attracted to the project because he believes digital publishing is a faster and cheaper way to get to market.

"I think the future of comics itself lies in digital format," he said, noting that the 10-cent comics of yesteryear have been replaced by \$3 and \$4 books. "It's lost that bang for the buck that you used to have as a cheap form of entertainment. There's not a lot of incentive for people who aren't already heavily invested in or used to reading comics to go out and buy them."

Wireless companies are still undecided on the future of mobile publishing as small screens and short battery lives make online reading a chore.

But Charles Golvin, a wireless analyst for Forrester Research, said comic books could be different because they're what he called "quick hit content," like ring tones and wallpaper.

"There are plenty of niches," he said. "My sense is that in the long term, as displays get better and networks get better and there's a better experience for all sorts of content, I think the comic book stuff makes a little bit more sense to me."

On the Net:

GoComics: <http://www.gocomics.com>

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