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The Android's Dungeon: comic-bookstores, cultural spaces, and the social practices of audiences

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An adequate understanding of the readers of comic books and graphic novels must extend beyond reader–text relationships to comprise contexts of reception. Chief among these is the direct-market comic-bookstore. In contrast to newsstand distribution, the direct market represents the institution of comic-book collecting and connoisseurship as subcultural practices. Comic shops are not simply distribution points in a commodity chain but also social settings integral to the reproduction of comic-book fandom, yet they occupy an ambivalent position between the comic-book industry and its consumers. Citing findings from qualitative research conducted in three Canadian comic-bookstores and drawing on the work of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and Erving Goffman, this article develops three approaches to the sociology of the comic-bookstore, theorizing them as locales for interaction among participants; as nodes, interlocks and regions articulating the communities served by a given store; and as both sanctuaries from mainstream hierarchies of taste and status, and arenas of competition for social and cultural capital.

Keywords: comic-bookstores; audience practices; sociology of culture; qualitative methods; North America

The Android's Dungeon & Baseball Card Shop is Springfield's local comic-bookstore in the TV series, *The Simpsons*. It and its proprietor typify the picture many of us have of comic shops and comic fans.[1] Indeed, *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening has said the smug, opinionated Comic Book Guy was inspired by '*every* comic-bookstore guy in America' (Rhodes 2000, p. 26). This picture – in its obsessiveness and fetishism, its pedantry and cliquishness, its homosociability and awkwardness, and its attendant air of despair – represents the very worst of comic-book culture. While aspects of the stereotype are true, they are by no means the whole story.

In this article, I want to 'bend the stick the other way' and construct a different account of comic shops and of their staff and patrons. Drawing on the work of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and Erving Goffman, I shall develop three complementary approaches to theorizing comic-bookstores as social settings: (1) as locales providing spaces for interaction among participants; (2) as nodes, interlocks, and regions relating contingent communities of practice; and (3) as both 'sanctuaries' from mainstream hierarchies of taste and status, and arenas of competition for social and subcultural capital. In this way, I hope to make a modest contribution to this special issue's call, quoting Barker

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(2010, p. 234), to ask questions 'about readers, collectors, reviewers, circuits of reception, [and] the longer-term shifting public status of comics'. An adequate understanding of the audiences of graphic novels and comics must extend beyond reader–text relationships to comprise contexts of reception. Chief among these contexts, at least in North America, is the direct-market comic-bookstore.

Method

This article draws on research conducted in three comic-bookstores, which I shall call 'King Street Comics', 'Downtown Comics & Collectibles', and 'Eastside Games & Comics'. Sites were initially approached on the basis of local prominence (i.e., they were familiar to me from my own participation within the scene or were mentioned by other study informants). However, as volunteers responded to my invitations to take part in the study, I attempted to enhance validity by including points of contrast within the admittedly small sample. Each store is located in a different neighbourhood, and they range in age from 37 (Downtown) to eight (King St.) to three (Eastside) years in business.[2] Eastside Games & Comics is the product of a merger of existing game and comic stores, and its comics section is the smallest of the three stores, while Downtown Comics & Collectibles is by far the largest and is the only store of the three to have significant involvement in the investors' and collectors' market.

This is part of a larger study I am conducting on 'nerd culture',[3] and since my research object is the subculture as instantiated in one Canadian city, rather than individual sites composing it, the time spent in each store was quite short by conventional ethnographic standards. Moreover, my focus on a single metropolitan area needs to be complemented with comparative studies of comic stores in communities with different demographic characteristics, levels of competition (not only between comic-bookstores but also with game and hobby shops, bookstores, libraries, etc.), and national or regional traditions of cultural production in order to confirm that the findings described here can be generalized to other regions and nations. That is to say that this is very much an exploratory study. Nonetheless, it provides some resources for re-embedding comic-book fans' reading practices in their generative social context. In each site, I conducted interviews with owners, managers, or staff, and completed two to four sessions of participant-observation, depending on the frequency and variety of in-store activities. Interviews were semi-structured, and guides were modified on the basis of findings as the study progressed. All interviewees were men, and most were Caucasian. Fieldwork discussed in this article took place between November 2009 and June 2010. To put my own research and the sites studied in context, I shall begin with a brief overview of the history and political-economy of the direct-market comic-bookstore.

Understanding comic shops

The American comic book began its life as a truly mass medium. One of the few cultural commodities that children could purchase with their own pocket money, comics were an extremely popular form of entertainment from the 1930s through the 1950s, peaking at an estimated total annual circulation of more than a billion copies (Gabilliet 2010 cited in Beaty 2010, p. 203). Although remembered by many fans as a renaissance in the field, the 1960s marked the beginning of 'a decades-long period of economic contraction that would winnow the number of publishers, curtail employment opportunities, and see the survivors pursue a single lucrative genre – superheroes – to the near-total exclusion of other

alternatives' (Beaty 2010, p. 203). The emergence of the direct-market comic-bookstore represents the process whereby reading and collecting comics became basically subcultural practices.

According to the trade association ComicsPRO, there are approximately 2000 comic-bookstores in North America, which are responsible for 60% of the roughly $700,000,000 in annual sales of new comics and graphic novels (A. Emmert, personal communication, 20 April 2011).[4] However, comic-bookstores antedate the direct market, having emerged from the practices of fans and collectors rather than as the distribution arm of the comic-book industry. The owner of Downtown Comics & Collectibles described the earliest comic-bookstores he remembered visiting in the 1960s and 1970s as '*largely* people selling used comics or collectors' comics and often something else, either paperbacks or movie posters or things like that'.[5] At this time, new comics were sold through newsstand distributors, a system in which some early comic shops participated but which had significant drawbacks for dedicated readers:

> You used to go buy your comics at a 7-Eleven or a drugstore or a corner newsstand. Which was always, 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 [. . .] The reason comic-bookstores could never work with local distributors was that the distributors typically decide how many you get of everything [. . .] And most people prefer it that way, but of course comic-bookstores would never like it that way because they would get too many Archies and not enough Marvels (Owner, Downtown).

The direct-marketing of comic books to specialty retailers developed in the 1970s as a 'win–win' solution for publishers with declining newsstand circulation and retailers with a clientele of adult collectors, and the system was firmly entrenched by the 1980s. Today, distribution is for all intents and purposes monopolized by Diamond Comics Distributors. Direct-market retailers order specific comics in the specific quantities that they believe their patrons will buy, but because comics are sold to *them* by Diamond on a non-returnable basis 'retailers are exposed to risk while publishers are relatively insulated from it'. If demand is poorly anticipated, it is the retailer left holding the mylar bag: 'Unlike vendors in the newsstand market, unsold comics not only fail to earn back their initial cost but also consume physical space and person-hours when they pass into inventory' (Hatfield 2005, p. 23). Or, as one Eastside Games & Comics staff member put it, every order is 'like playing the lottery'.

Thus, economic rationalization has contributed to American comics' distinctive characteristics by orienting the market as a whole to the desires of a relatively small audience of superhero fans, principally reached through the network of direct-market comic shops.[6] In the context of a precarious niche market, maintaining a base of dedicated and predictable consumers is a rational strategy, hence the industry's emphasis on a narrow range of genres and formats, overuse of popular characters (e.g., Marvel's Wolverine and Deadpool), and the endless parade of what King Street Comics' owner calls 'infinite events' (e.g., DC's *Identity Crisis, Infinite Crisis*, and *Final Crisis*). Its unintended consequence is the reproduction of comic-book fandom as an ever more insular subculture. But, despite significant economic constraints, producers, retailers, and fans of comic books retain a degree of agency in their pursuit of common goods.

Comic-bookstores as social settings

Matthew Pustz (1999) begins his *Comic Book Culture* with a description of a comic-bookstore in Iowa City, Iowa. It is in stores like this – wherever two or three 'true believers'

are gathered – that he locates comic-book culture: 'The comic book shop is a meeting place, like the clubhouse at a country club or a small-town barbershop. It is a place for commerce, but, more importantly, it is a place for culture' (Pustz 1999, p. 6). Audience practices are shaped in important ways by the spaces where they take place and they, in turn, reshape their social contexts. In the following sections, I want to explore three approaches to the sociology of the comic-bookstore, emphasizing interactions among participants, relationships between different communities within and without comic-book culture, and processes of valuation and status competition.

Locales

Theories of reception that focus exclusively on interactions between texts and readers tend to elide the socially situated dimensions of reading. By this, I do not only mean those acts of reading that take place in contexts of co-presence, such as watching a movie at the cinema or discussing a novel at a book-club meeting. Rather, I am trying to get at the ways that 'competent' reception depends on a set of skills, knowledges, and dispositions that is learned from other participants in a taste culture. This is only a special case of the more general principle that practical reason has a sensuous foundation, as Antonio Strati (2003, p. 53) has noted:

> Aesthetic understanding, in fact, prompts considerations that question and undermine the exclusive reliance on cognition – on the rational and mental – by studies of social phenomena in organizational settings that take due account of our knowing in practice, as experienced and supported by the senses rather than just the way that we think.

Once internalized, competences and tastes are misrecognized as natural and immediate. Nonetheless, 'as the act of perceiving and judging sensorially, *aesthetics is that form of organizational knowledge which is personal and collectively socially constructed at once*' (Strati 2003, p. 55). Insofar as this knowledge is embodied – and aesthetic understanding, rooted in sensuous perception, is fundamentally embodied – it can only be learned by interaction with other participants. Thus, most cultural practices require physical spaces for 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger 1991). Giddens (1984, p. 118) calls such spaces 'locales':

> Locales refer to the use of space to provide the *settings* of interaction, the settings of interaction in turn being essential to specifying its *contextuality* [. . .] Locales provide for a good deal of the 'fixity' underlying institutions, although there is no clear sense in which they 'determine' such 'fixity'. It is usually possible to designate locales in terms of their physical properties, either as features of the material world or, more commonly, as combinations of those features and human artefacts. But it is an error to suppose that locales can be described in those terms alone [. . .] A 'house' is grasped as such only if the observer recognizes that it is a 'dwelling' with a range of other properties specified by the modes of its utilization in human activity.

Locales are constituted by the interactions taking place within them. Moreover, they locate practices in a structured/structuring context. Comic-bookstores are locales in this sense, and reception practices are transmitted through interaction among members of the communities that inhabit them.

With the exception of the annual Free Comic Book Day promotion[7] and unlike game stores, most comic shops do not use store events to attract customers. Rather, the experience of shopping for comics is itself understood as a social event. In the words of Downtown Comics & Collectibles' owner, 'Definitely, it's a social activity. The conversation that they have with other customers and ourselves is, yeah, that's a big part of it.' Similarly, the

owner of King Street Comics contrasted the solitary nature of reading comic books with the sociability enabled by interaction with others who 'understand and share their interests' within the store:

> I think it's actually really important that certain types of people get that opportunity to share their . . . you know, their love for the medium or even just to get that social interaction because it seems like a lot of them probably don't get a lot of social interaction otherwise.

Some customers do exhibit an 'in-and-out' attitude towards buying comics, but many take time to browse and discuss their thoughts with acquaintances, strangers, and store employees. During participant-observation sessions, I heard customers talk about comics and their creators (e.g., whether a series is currently good, when a particular issue will be released, which artists they prefer, etc.); games, toys, and other store merchandise; books, television, movies, and video games; and their personal lives. Conversations were peppered with intertextual references to subculturally relevant media.[8] Although stores are often quiet enough to remind visitors of a library, silence is punctuated by boisterous discussion and debate. During stores' busier periods, they are unmistakeably venues for social interaction.

Nodes, interlocks, and regions

Comic-bookstores do not, however, serve only comic-book readers. In fact, the term is something of a misnomer: Comic shops are indeed central to the practices of comic fans and collectors, but most are *also* game shops and toy stores and purveyors of t-shirts and miscellaneous licensed merchandise. In a previous state of the field – and despite the stereotypical opposition between 'nerds' and 'jocks' – many sold sports cards and memorabilia, although that market is now stagnant. Interviewed retailers believed they would not be able to remain profitable or even solvent if they only sold comics. Asked how they would describe their stores to people who had never visited them, interviewees responded as follows:

> Well, certainly, it's popular culture with a comics focus. Everything revolves around comics. The toys that we sell tend to be comic-related, the posters we sell for the large part very . . . you know, *genre*. Genre including all the fantasy video games and movies and things like that (Owner, Downtown).

> It really depends on who I'm talking to. If I'm talking to somebody who I think has no idea what a game store is, then I'll say a board-game store because then they don't confuse it with a computer-game store. I'll say a comic-book and board-game store because then they get it: Okay, this is a place for geeks, and it's kinda nerdy and stuff like that, and it's not a video-game store where cool kids go (General manager, Eastside).

> I guess I would just say that . . . as broad a selection of comic book or comic-book-related merchandise. Not all of the action figures could be considered comic-book-related but, you know, that genre at least, science-fiction, fantasy. And, yeah, we just try to have as wide a variety as we possibly can (Owner, King St.).

'Popular culture', 'comics', and 'genre' are attempts to name the tacitly understood logic of their product range. They designate a set of genres and forms that are valued within the subcultural scene while excluding others that are equally or more popular among 'mainstream' audiences. This set is neither natural nor necessary but the product of contingent processes and the cultural labour of comic-bookstore owners.

The point extends beyond stores' inventory to their relationships with other local groups and organizations. Comic shops are nodes in a wider network defined by relationships of sponsorship and promotion. Events unrelated to comics that I attended within the local nerd-culture scene were often sponsored by comic-bookstores, and these same events

were also sponsored by game stores, publishers of role-playing and video games, and so on. Within comic-bookstores themselves, flyers advertised a range of events for comic-book, science-fiction, and media fans in the area. Weekly visits to the comic-bookstore expose even the most monomaniacal comic fans to a range of practices and communities. Fine and Kleinman (1979, p. 8) use the term 'interlock' to describe structured forms of interaction between small groups that spread 'cultural information and behavior options'. As interactionists, they emphasize the roles of individuals who are 'members of multiple groups simultaneously', 'maintain acquaintance relationships outside the major groups with which they communicate', 'perform particular structural roles in intergroup relations', or communicate by means of mass media (Fine and Kleinman 1979, pp. 10–11). Comic-bookstores turn this definition inside out, providing a fixed space that multiple, contingently related groups and communities access.

According to Giddens (1984, p. 118), 'locales are typically internally *regionalized*, and the regions within them are of critical importance in constituting contexts of interaction'. Comic-bookstores' regionalization enables them to function as both subcultural and public spaces. For Pustz (1999, pp. 19–20), the structuring opposition within comic-book culture was that between fans of the superhero genre and those of 'alternative' comics. Interviewees indicated that these communities have reached a rapprochement in the last decade or so, as major publishers have begun limited experiments with other genres and as 'auteur' writers have become their creative stars. At the same time, the position of graphic novels and comics in the mass market has changed significantly:

> Animated television series such as *Sailor Moon* and *Pokémon* fuelled an explosive interest in Japanese manga comics in the late-1990s. Hollywood summer blockbuster films such as *X-Men* in 2000 and *Spider-Man* in 2002 cemented the superhero as the predominant staple of Hollywood summer blockbusters through to this day, and reignited interest in the comics on which they were based [. . .] The final element in the bookstore puzzle has been the rise of the 'literary' graphic novel, which is indebted to the more personal storytelling traditions of the 'underground comix' movement in the late sixties [. . .] The intersecting retail successes of manga, superhero collections, and high-minded graphic novels have integrated comics into the general publishing industry so that they no longer exists [sic] outside of the general economy as they did for decades (Beaty 2010, pp. 204–205).

In the face of increased attention, comic-bookstores must manage the differing expectations and habits of subcultural and mainstream publics. Distinctions between insiders and outsiders are now arguably more significant than those between sub-communities within comic-book fandom, although retailers must still cope with the idiosyncrasies of the core of 'picky' collectors and superhero fundamentalists among their patrons.

In this connection, it is worth considering the physical organization of comic-bookstores. Reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1977) analysis of Kabyle houses, stores are regionalized to homologically reproduce in-group/out-group oppositions. Signs, posters, and displayed products simultaneously advertise the store's product range to outsiders *and* block windows, closing its interior off from view. Inside, relatively 'accessible' products – those more likely to have crossover appeal with broader audiences – are typically located at the front of a store, and more obscure or exclusively subcultural products are located progressively farther in the back. Indeed, although periodical comics are still central to comic shops' business models, none of the stores studied shelved new comics near the entrance. They are closest at King Street Comics, but a customer must still pass a section of used and discounted comics, a rack of t-shirts, and a shelf of more 'literary' graphic novels to reach the current week's comics. At Eastside Games & Comics, one must make one's way past a cooler of drinks and snacks and a shelf of board games, a selection of 'all-ages' comics

(many collected in digest format), and staff-recommended graphic novels in order to access new comics. And at the largest store, Downtown Comics & Collectibles, shelves of manga, racks of toys and merchandise, and several shelves of trade paperbacks and graphic novels lie between the shopper and recent periodical comics; on Wednesdays, new issues are laid out on a counter even farther back in the store until staff have time to make space for them on the rack. The physical characteristics of the stores and the ways staff organize products within them define regions, making some customers feel welcome in the subculture's 'sanctum sanctorum' and leaving others on the periphery.

However, 'regionalization should be understood not merely as localization in space but as referring to the zoning of time-space in relation to routinized social practices' (Giddens 1984, p. 119). For example, new comics go on sale every Wednesday, and so this is when the most dedicated comic-book readers and collectors do their shopping, as King St.'s owner explained:

> Well, I guess, Wednesdays, obviously, we see more of the nerdier side, if you will. The hardcore comic-book fans. And, I guess, on the weekends and other days you tend to see more of the people who are just curious about it.

Regionalization of time tends to separate active participants from casual shoppers. As a result, outsiders – those who have perhaps seen a graphic novel reviewed in the newspaper, are shopping for a friend or relative, or are simply curious about the pop-culture artefacts displayed in the window – are not likely to be exposed to comic-book *culture* when they enter a comic-bookstore. However friendly or helpful staff are – and, *contra* the *Simpsons* stereotype, most clearly make an effort in this regard – a 'time-space edge' (Giddens 1984) exists between the subcultural communities centered around comic-bookstores, on the one hand, and members of other taste cultures and interpretive communities, on the other. Neophytes remain isolated from core social activities that define the store as a locale of comic-book culture, and the regionalization of space and time offers a real, if not insurmountable, barrier to full participation.

Sanctuaries or arenas?

Giddens's concept of regionalization is an extension of Goffman's 'dramaturgical' sociology. For Goffman (1959, p. 106), a 'region' is 'any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception'. Comic-bookstores, 'claimed' as subcultural spaces although formally open to wider publics,[9] meet this criterion:

> The comic book shop itself is another way in which this culture is closed off to most Americans. Although the shop may function like a clubhouse for regular readers, for most others it is so intimidating that new readers, especially women, can find it difficult to become involved [. . .] For longtime readers, the environment is normal and sometimes even comforting (Pustz 1999, p. 23).

Regions are of sociological interest because they are constitutive of 'performances' taking place within them. Developing the theatrical conceit, Goffman distinguishes between 'front' and 'back' regions with respect to particular performances. A front region is where performances actually take place, impressions are managed, and performers are available to audience scrutiny, while a back region is 'a place [. . .] where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course'; boundedness is particularly important here, allowing performers space to prepare for performances and to let down their guard out of sight of the audience (Goffman 1959, p. 112).

However, a region's 'frontness' or 'backness' is relative to the performers and audiences in question:

> Back regions involved in ritualized social occasions probably often do quite closely resemble the 'backstage' of a theatre or the 'off-camera' activities of filming and television productions. But this backstage may very well be 'on stage' so far as the ordinary routines of social life [. . .] go (Giddens 1984, pp. 126–127).

From one point of view, comic-bookstores are a back region for fans, a 'sanctuary' from mainstream hierarchies of taste and status, and a safe space for 'geeking out'. As Pustz (1999, p. 6) writes, 'Fans also find a supportive atmosphere at their local comic shop [. . .] Comic book fans who might otherwise be afraid to talk about their hobby for fear of ridicule can go to a comic book shop and find themselves reaffirmed.' This is corroborated by King Street Comics' owner, who said he would not describe his shop as 'a haven for nerds [. . .,] although that could apply'. Asked about customers 'hanging out' in the store, he mentioned 'high school kids that are a little shy' as an example of those who benefit from opportunities to interact with other fans:

> They might not enjoy going to school, and they might not have someone at school that they can talk to about it, but when they go to the comic store, they know that they're in an environment where they're with people that will understand and share their interests.

While the stigma associated with comic books (or, more precisely, adults who read comic books) has arguably diminished, there are still occasions that polarize the in-group/out-group opposition. While I was conducting participant-observation, two young people passed Downtown Comics & Collectibles on skateboards, and one said to the other in a taunting voice, 'Look, it's *your* store!' The other retorted sarcastically, 'Oh my god, because I'm totally a fucking nerd.' In the face of negative valuations by outsiders, the continuing importance of comic-bookstores and other back regions cannot be overestimated.

Of course, no social setting, however communalized, is entirely free from competition and conflict. When subcultural participants are viewed as a 'team' (Goffman 1959, chap. 2), then stores provide a back region. If, however, they are viewed as individual performers, then this 'sanctuary' re-emerges as a front region for self-presentation and status competition. Fan communities tend to be structured in terms of social capital and field-specific forms of cultural capital,[10] such as knowledge and collections (Fiske 1992, Brown 1997), and comic-bookstores are one arena where capital may be accumulated and displayed. One commonly observed strategy is to affect a chummy relationship with staff members, who are endowed with high levels of social capital within the store: During two successive sessions of participant-observation at King Street Comics, for example, the same customer spent his entire visit cracking jokes directed towards the owner as he made his way around the shop. Another is to engage in discussion and debate with others in the store, providing opportunities to make knowledgeable statements and exercise 'good' aesthetic judgement. These were often observed among customers who entered the store together, but neither was it rare to see conversation between patrons who gave no sign of being well acquainted with one another. Especially in the case of the smaller stores, King St. and Eastside, the latter kind of conversation frequently expanded to encompass more and more of those present in the store, giving everyone a chance to impress others with a little-known fact, an insightful opinion, or a clever media reference.

Conclusion

More could be said about the direct-market comic-bookstore and its relation to the audiences of comic books and graphic novels, and I hope I have made the case that much more ought to be said. Comic-bookstores are integral to the reproduction of comic-book culture in North America. They are not simply links in a commodity chain or cogs in a cultural industry: They are settings for the pursuit of social practices. Nick Couldry (2004, 2006) has provocatively argued that media studies has been too focussed on media and that a less media-centric media studies would investigate the variety of 'media-oriented practices' implicated in people's everyday lives.[11] With respect to graphic novels and comic books, this change of perspective leads to three important conclusions.

First, the media-oriented practices of comics' audiences are not limited to the reception of comics. A variety of practices unfold (at least in part) within comic-bookstores. Only some of them are directly oriented towards comics, but all of them relate to and define these locales. As Couldry (2004, p. 125) reminds us, 'in many cases, "media consumption" or "audiencing" can only be understood as part of a practice that is not itself "about" media: what practice this is depends on who we are describing and when'. For example, the same behaviours of browsing and shopping in comic-bookstores take on very different meanings depending on whether, for a given individual, they are part of the practice of 'reading' or of 'collecting' comics. Differing ratios of readers to collectors (and the particular kinds of collecting practised by the latter) produce quite different spaces, and the particular kinds of reception involved cannot be assumed *a priori*. Furthermore, relationships between practices oriented to comics and those oriented to other goods commonly sold in comic-bookstores, such as games or animated films, need to be better understood. We ought to replace the ideal reader posited by abstract theories of reception or naïvely presupposed by scholarly 'readings' of cultural texts with a more realistic – which is to say, theoretically and empirically adequate – account of individuals as socially embedded agents, some of whom may not identify as part of the audience for comics and graphic novels.

Second, recognition of reception as practice entails a certain scepticism towards aesthetics. As Brienza (2010, p. 107) notes, referring to Lent's (2010) review of pioneering studies in comics, the field is dominated by 'either historical or textual [research], whereas social science treatises were – and presumably still are – a distinct minority'. This is not to deny the importance of aesthetics, as Hatfield (2010, para. 24) suggests the label 'cultural studies' too often implies, but to properly 'sociologize' them. I do not mean merely that creators, retailers, or readers from particular backgrounds are more likely to bear certain tastes,[12] but that aesthetic judgements are based on practically generated classificatory schemes, which are maintained and sustained by social groups and acquired by participation in a given social practice:

> A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the standards of authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them [. . .] (MacIntyre 2007, p. 190).

Thus, the question, 'is this comic good or bad?' might be better replaced by ones such as, 'how do different audiences evaluate this, and what reasons do they give for their opinions?' In doing so, we should not ignore 'quality' or retreat into a simplistic populism, but rather seek a level of reflexivity about our own reading practices and judgements, thereby avoiding the trap of aesthetic crypto-normativity.

Third, that reception is a *social* practice draws our attention to the conditions under which it may survive and flourish. Comic-bookstores – and the social interactions for which they provide space – 'anchor' practices of reception (Couldry 2004, Swidler 2001). They

are institutions that sustain comic-book culture (MacIntyre 2007, pp. 194–195). Yet, comic-bookstores occupy an ambivalent position between the comics industry and its audiences; they are needed by both producers and consumers but are often treated only instrumentally, as facilitating the distribution of material goods rather than sustaining practices related to them.[13] Thus, as we have seen, comic shops are economically vulnerable – not least to their own customers' attempts to maximize their entertainment dollars:

> They don't really understand that most comic-bookstores are mom-and-pop shops and that we don't get the bulk discounts that a lot of other stores get or that the big chains get. What surprises me is just the fact that people think that our costs are so low that we would be able to afford to compete with places like Amazon or Chapters[14] that buy such great bulk that they can give out, like, 20% discounts on trade paperbacks or whatever (Manager, Eastside).

With rising costs and increased competition from mass-market bookstores, online retailers, and digital distribution (whether legitimate or 'pirated'), many retailers are struggling and a number have closed up shop (see note 4). If the claims I have made regarding the importance of comic-bookstores to comic-book culture are valid, then we may expect significant repercussions for the practices of comic readership as these institutions change or disappear. Web-based discussion forums and news and review websites may be used to transmit practical knowledge and aesthetic dispositions in ways that are similar to the social uses of comic shops that I have described, but translation to new media will change audience practices in unpredictable ways. In the meantime, owners and staff must themselves negotiate identities as both fans and workers in the comic-book industry. Indeed, they were fans first, and their understandings of what comic shops and comic-book culture are all about derive from participation in practices of fandom.

In conclusion, following Couldry (2006) and *mutatis mutandis*, we may ask if comics studies has been too focussed on graphic novels and comics. 'A typical feature of the comics studies genre', writes Hatfield (2010, para. 10), 'is the *attempt at definition*, which by now constitutes a distinct rhetorical convention – a formula or strategy for, in essence, the initial framing of comics as an object of study.' Such definitions are 'fraught' not only because they involve navigating academic notions of importance but also because they are exercises in articulating practical knowledge and making explicit that which is tacitly grasped. Or, as Bourdieu (1990, p. 86) famously said, 'Practice has a logic which is not that of the logician.' Attempting to formally theorize and define the objects of practice, we run a real risk of misrepresenting them (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). I have tried to show that looking to the spaces and settings where comics are encountered, discussed, and purchased (or not), where they are *positioned in the field of practices that gives them meaning*, may be a fruitful way forward. Further empirical research – both quantitative and qualitative, but especially qualitative – is needed to complement comics studies' existing strengths in historical and textual analysis and to better understand the lived experience and practical logics of reception as they unfold in comic-bookstores and other locales.

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Notes

1. Throughout this article, I use 'fans' to mean members of an 'engaged' audience for graphic novels and comics without strictly defining the quantity or kind of that engagement. Other scholars, such as Jenkins (1992) or Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) emphasize the particular characteristics of fans as 'active' or 'resistive' audiences. As will become apparent, I want to retain a more open-ended definition of what it means to be a fan.

2. Ages are given as of writing. Downtown Comics & Collectibles was established in 1974, King Street Comics in 2002, and Eastside Games & Comics in 2008.
3. Two game stores and four local clubs and organizations were also included in this research project.
4. Mail-order, internet, and bookstores sales compose the remaining 40% (A. Emmert, personal communication, 20 April 2011). These figures are up from the $425,000,000 reported in 1997 but not quite returned to 1993 levels, when $850,000,000 in sales were reported. However, the number of comic-bookstores has contracted by roughly one-half (McAllister 2001, p. 17).
5. Quotations from interviewees have been edited for clarity and economy, although I have tried to retain the character of their phrasing. Ellipses without brackets indicate a pause, and especially stressed words are set in italics.
6. Cf. Beaty (2010), who argues that the comic-book industry has become increasingly integrated into the larger entertainment economy in the aftermath of the 1990s 'speculator boom'.
7. Free Comic Book Day is a promotion run by Diamond Comics Distributors and sponsored by publishers, printers, and conventions, *inter alia*. Special issues are produced, made available to retailers at discounted prices (most are less than $0.50 per copy, according to King St.'s owner), and then given away to patrons in order to promote local comic-bookstores and publishers' forthcoming releases.
8. See Peterson (2005) on the performative dimensions of intertextuality.
9. Territoriality is a longstanding theme in subculture studies. See, e.g., Clarke's (2006) well known description of 'the magical recovery of community' among locally based 'mobs' of Skinheads.
10. See Bourdieu (1984, 1986), and cf. Thornton's (1996) concept of 'subcultural capital'. Economic capital is the price of admission to practices, such as reading or collecting comics, that are commodified and located within commercial spaces, but I have not yet seen evidence that it functions as a salient axis of discrimination among participants.
11. See also Schatzki *et al.* (2001), Reckwitz (2002), Warde (2005), MacIntyre (2007, chap. 14), Knight (2008), and Bräuchler and Postill (2010).
12. Although this is very much open for empirical investigation. See, e.g., Bourdieu's (1984, p. 360) discussion of the new petite bourgeiosie's attitudes towards popular culture for an interesting echo of one aesthetic common among fans: 'Their ambivalent relationship with the educational system, including a sense of complicity with every form of symbolic defiance, inclines them to welcome all the forms of culture which are, provisionally at least, on the (lower) boundaries of legitimate culture – jazz, cinema, strip cartoons, science fiction [. . .;] but they often bring to these regions disdained by the educational establishment an erudite, even "academic" disposition which is inspired by a clear intention of rehabilitation [. . .]'
13. Although I have emphasized practices located at the level of reception, it should be noted that most comic-book creators are also fans, and so productive practices are articulated in important ways with those of consumption.
14. Chapters is a Canadian chain of 'big box' bookstores.

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