CHAPTER

03

Digital Comics and Critical Librarianship:

What, Why and How: A Perspective from the UK

Thomas Gebhart

Introduction

Digital comics are at the cutting edge of how imaginative, immediate, and emotionally engaging stories can be told in the twenty-first century. The creators of digital comics harness new and emerging technologies to create and distribute innovative forms of storytelling. Digital comics also have the capacity to reflect and contribute to social and cultural change by foregrounding marginalized voices. The ways digital comics are created, published, and consumed means that they can circumvent traditional publishing routes to provide a "new space for subversion, exploration, and change."[1] Just as readers are able to engage with and enjoy these new expressive forms, it is vital that cultural institutions record and recognise these new methods of creative expression.

Despite the sheer volume of digital comics available online, in many ways, digital comics are more fragile than their print equivalents because they tend to sit outside of traditional collection development routes. The absence of a print original "poses the problem of the future conservation and management of the comics heritage," making

digital comics collections important and timely.[2] Furthermore, I would contend that collecting digital comics is one way of practicing critical librarianship and making collections more representative and accessible. Focusing on digital comics in scope of the British Library's Web Comics Archive, this chapter explores what digital comics are; their potential to contribute to library collections that are more diverse, inclusive, and representative; and offers some examples of how to collect digital comics.

What is Critical Librarianship?

As defined by Emily Drabinski, critical librarianship is a framework that "acknowledges and then interrogates the structures" of power—such as racism, patriarchy, and capitalism—that underpin social, cultural, and political structures.[3] Stephanie Grimm and Olivia Piepmeier expand on this in the introduction to their essay collection *Comics and Critical Librarianship: Reframing the Narrative in Academic Libraries*. For them, critical librarianship "comes from an intentional engagement with the political and social dimension of libraries" to recognize that forms of systematic prejudice, like race, racism, sexism, and heteronormativity, have influenced collection building.[4] Critical librarians "acknowledge the contingency and constructedness" of the world and aspire to develop purposeful collections that are diverse, inclusive, and challenging to norms and stereotypes.[5] Essentially, critical librarianship is both about recognizing how and why people have been represented, the systems of power and control that have influenced collections, and establishing the proactive role that librarians can have in highlighting and addressing questions of exclusion and diversity.

In the same edited collection on comics and critical librarianship, Kamaria Hatcher explains why comics can contribute to collections that help overcome the "dangers of a single story."[6] Hatcher argues that comics can speak to important topics in a powerful way because "graphic narrative is a representational mode" which establishes a deep connection in the reader and supports "growth and diversity via storytelling and empathy."[7] The formal qualities of comics, and their combination of image and text, means they have an ability to tell narratives that move beyond representation to create empathy in the reader for the characters and stories presented. Chapters by Brian Flota, Mitchell Crumpton, and Solomon Jones Jr. give practical examples of how targeted acquisition can help realise critical library collections. Flota puts forward the case that targeted comic book collections can preserve access to a body of work by creators from marginalized groups that historically have been "hidden or willfully excluded from the *archive.*"[8] Crumpton and Jones Jr. highlight the role comics can have in creating diverse and inclusive collections that actually represent students and users because their experiences and stories are visualised in comics.[9] Taken together, we see how comics by marginalized creators might challenge stereotypes and engender empathy whilst also challenging stereotypes. These chapters make a clear connection between collecting comics and the practice of critical librarianship, and I would argue that digital comics have the potential to further amplify collections that are diverse and inclusive.

What are Digital Comics?

Digital comics is an umbrella term covering a multitude of expressions that encompass a range of publications, platforms, formats, and behaviours. These can include:

- digitised and born-digital comics;
- comics distributed using Web or mobile technologies, digital files, or apps (such as Webtoons, Comichaus, or Comixology);
- experimental comics that use multi-cursal narrative structure, text, illustration, music, animation, and interactivity;
- transmedia or augmented reality comics; and
- comics distributed using social media platforms, creator websites, or crowdfunding sites.

These examples are by no means exhaustive and, to complicate things, a digital comic may co-exist on multiple platforms and in different formats. Digital comics can be created or read on computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, or any similar digital device. Mainstream publishers like D.C., Marvel, and Image do publish digital-first comics as well as same-day print and digital versions of their comics, but the focus of this chapter, and the digital comics mentioned herein, is on independently produced comics in the English language that are born-digital.

The origins and evolution of digital comics are closely linked to the development of the internet—in particular, the advent of the World Wide Web.[10] Accordingly, Wershler, Sinero, and Tien characterize the history of digital comics as "haphazard and complex," largely because individual creators were grappling with emerging digital technologies to create and distribute their comics independently online with no precedent.[11] Leah Misemer argues that webcomics, the dominant form of digital comics, function as examples of how digital technologies evolved and proliferated on the Web.[12] The first regularly published Anglophone comic on the web was David Farley's *Doctor Fun* (1993–2006), which used a gag strip format and had its own website.[13] Other significant examples of self-published webcomics from North American creators include the long-running *Penny Arcad*e (1998–present) written by Jerry Holkins and illustrated by Mike Krahulik; Kate Beaton's award-winning *Hark! a vagrant* (2007–2018); and x*kcd* by Randall Monroe, started in 2005 and still being published.[14] From a UK perspective, since 1998, John Allison has produced a series of acclaimed webcomics in the *Scary Go Round* setting, including *Bobbins* (1998–2002, 2014–present), *Scary Go Round* (2002–2009), *Bad Machinery* (2009–present*)*, *Giant Days* (2011–2013) *Steeple* (2019–present), and *Wicked Things* (2020–present).[15] Other notable UK webcomics include the satirical *Jesus and Mo* (2005–present), published by a creator using the pseudonym Mohammed Jones; the ongoing digital comic *Widdershins* (2011–present) by Kate Ashwin, which mixes adventure and magic in the Victorian era; and Tab Kimpton's *Discord Comics* (2006–present), home to a series of LGBT* and Queer digital comics by Kimpton.[16]

Definitions and understandings of digital comics differ among scholars, practitioners, and librarians, particularly when describing digital or webcomics. Dittmar differentiates

between online digital comics and downloadable digital comics, stating, "All web comics are digital comics, but not all digital comics are web comics."[17] Kleefeld distinguishes between digital and webcomics based on the software used by the reader to access the comic: digital comics are "viewed through proprietary application software"; webcomics "can be viewed natively in any web browsing software."[18] However, digital comics often exist simultaneously on the Web and through proprietary software. Some apps, such as Webtoons, allow the reader to view comics on the web or via their own software. For comparison, Halsband and Grimm define webcomics as "comics originally and intentionally created to live and be viewed in an online format, whether on a website or other digital platform."[19] This description could include what other collections and scholars define as digital comics.

Jen Aggleton, initial curator of the Web Comic Archive, developed a working definition of digital comics for the British Library (BL), which establishes features rather than criteria for items in scope of the collection.[20] According to this working definition, digital comics are items published in a digital format, contain a single-panel image or series of interdependent images, have a semi-guided reading pathway, and are likely to have visible frames, iconic symbols, and lettering which communicate additional meaning.[21] They may contain moving images or audio but cannot consist entirely of either of these media. It is significant that the BL's working definition is for digital comics, not just webcomics, as it seeks to acknowledge the scope and breadth of digital comics even though collection development is currently aimed at webcomics. Part of the British Library's remit is to preserve material for future generations, so anticipating and futureproofing where possible must be considered. Aggleton suggests that the working definition is revised periodically and the collection's scope updated to include changing views which consider sociocultural influences and socially accepted formalist features. Such an approach is in line with Hague's social definition of comics, which places self-definition from creators and social contexts of production or reception over form.[22] I would argue that self-definition and social contexts of understanding are a particularly important consideration when looking to engage and work with marginal groups or individuals for critical library collections. Côme Martin is another comics scholar who argues convincingly that creators' goals and motivations must be accounted for when discussing digital comics.[23]

The publishing practices and cultural impact of digital comics seem comparable to that of underground comix in the '60s. Digital comics can react against mainstream standards and political norms of the day in a similar way to underground comix, which often engaged with issues around race, gender, and sex.[24] It is worth noting that underground comix were often populated with racist, sexist, and homophobic images and text. Whilst digital comics may adopt similar publishing practices or reference comix of the sixties, it is to push back against this legacy. Sean Fenty, Trena Houp, and Laurie Taylor make this connection clear: the Web gives creators the "ability to explore the comics medium with an ethical dimension and a networked culture" with "content which is outside of the acceptable bounds for typical mass-released comics."[25] Online distribution means comics can attract "very specific and large, yet distributed audiences" potentially amplifying the kind of change achieved by underground comix.[26]

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the number of comics creators that use social networks to publish, promote, and build communities online. There is a very personal side to how creators use social media, not just as a promotional tool or revenue stream but to build solidarity with fellow creators around shared identities and values.[27] The ability of communities to coalesce around a creator or comic is one way in which digital comics act like social networks. Rachel Smith's *Quarantine Comix* exemplifies "the

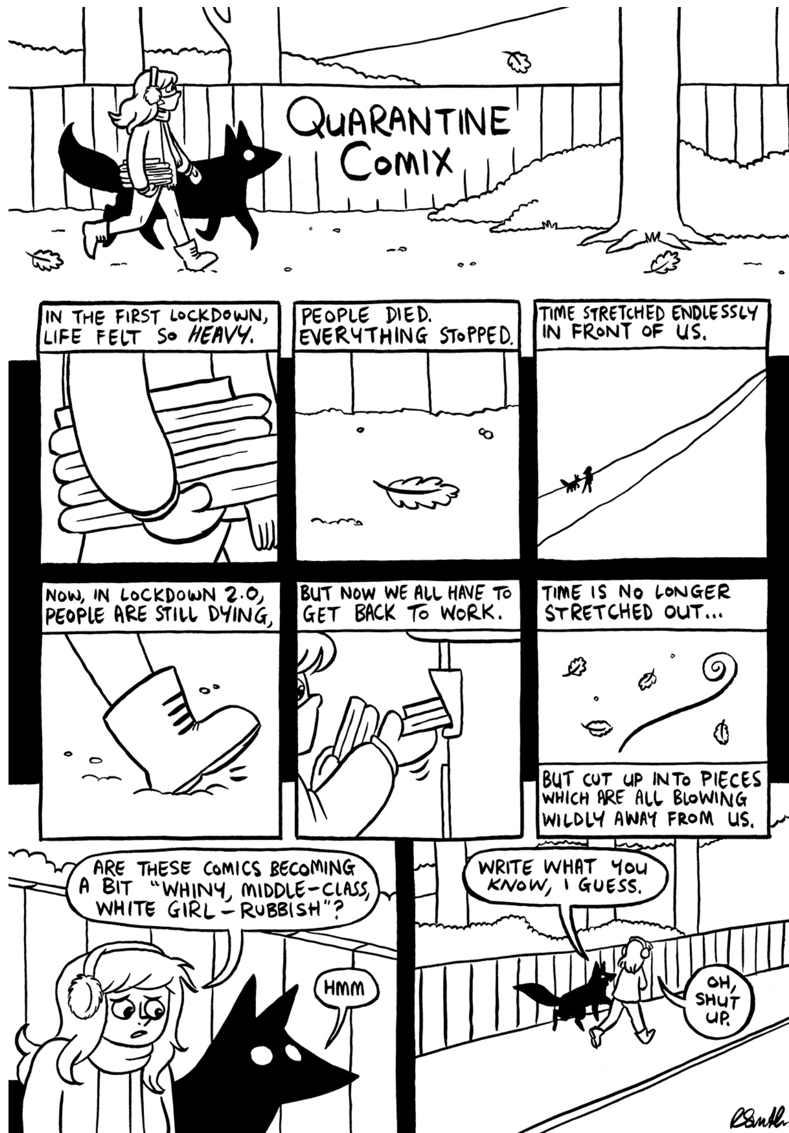

Figure 3.1. Rachel Smith, *Quarantine Comix* #247, https://twitter.com/rachael_/status/1339206097278787586, December 16, 2020. Used with permission.

convergence between digital comics and social media."[28] Furthermore, in naming the comic *Quarantine Comix*, rather than "comics," Smith is recognising an affinity with the publishing practices and content typical of underground comix and her own webcomic.

Using the hashtag #QuarantineComix, the comic is available on social media via Smith's Twitter* page, even though she also has a personal website for her other comics.[29] By publishing the comic directly on social media, Smith is capitalizing on the capacity for digital comics to harness social media's directness and reach. *Quarantine Comix* is published daily, mixing humour, sincerity, and pathos to chronicle the mental ups and downs of life during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. The comic has been praised for its raw and honest portrayal of the experience of day-to-day life and is an example of *diary webcomics*, a subgenre of webcomics that uses a very personal, lived approach, which benefits from the immediacy that digital comics and social media afford creators. This type of digital comic can respond to something that happens that day, then be published almost immediately. Kleefeld identifies diary webcomics as a genre uniquely suited to the digital environment.[30] They take what may seem like niche, extremely personal stories, making them relatable and universal. If the social and cultural impact of webcomics is primarily "connecting individuals in a positive, self-affirming way," *Quarantine Comix* achieves this impact with ease.[31]

Why Collect Digital Comics?

The social and cultural contexts of digital comics resonate strongly with the ambitions of critical librarianship. Even the most cursory search for digital comics will reveal a multitude of comics produced and distributed online by a vast array of creators, covering a diverse and surprising mix of genre, themes, and characters. The speed of production and consumption on the internet added to "capitalism's systemic imperative toward social, economic and technological acceleration, and the associated cultural lack of interest in the problems of duration" means digital narratives, such as digital comics, are under threat of being lost as web pages are changed or removed.[32] The fact that digital comics are often by creators from marginalized and underrepresented groups or identities adds urgency to the need to collect them. Self-publishing in the digital environment makes creating comics viable when compared to traditional print routes, but the visibility and status that print confer may be absent. This makes collecting digital comics challenging because they sit outside traditional acquisition and publishing routes. Where librarians can attend zine or small press fairs to acquire self-published comics, no online equivalent really exists for digital comics.

Digital comics are examples of born-digital publications with no print counterpart that have complex software or hardware dependencies. Lynda Clark, Giulia Carla Rossi, and Stella Wisdom from the British Library contend that such new digital formats are

* Editor's note: This book was written before Twitter was renamed X in July 2023.

"already at risk of rapid obsolescence" because they are created and exist within a "continuously changing marketplace."[33] The same digital marketplace lets creators and libraries "harness the possibilities that digital technology presents."[34] Caylin Smith and Ian Cooke, also from the British Library, state that these possibilities include "diversification in individuals and groups creating and publishing content," which in turn allows the library to engage with creators that exist "outside of the traditional definitions of publisher."[35] The same conditions that allow marginal, underrepresented creators to make comics also make it hard for libraries to identify and collect digital comics. Another complication is that people creating digital comics may not view themselves as being publishers, but UK non-print legal deposit requirements mean that digital comics sit within the realms of digital preservation and web archiving. Any digital comic hosted in the UK or by a UK-based creator is in scope for collection.

Another factor to consider is that comics have "a reach that is as democratic as it is immediate" because their use of iconography, symbols, and images to construct narrative meaning can transcend social and cultural as well as linguistic boundaries.[36] Building on these formal qualities, Howard and Jackson, writing about comics by Black creators, state that comics are often many people's first exposure to "social justice pedagogy in action."[37] These attributes are further enhanced in digital comics by the diverse nature of the people creating them. Digital comics by creators from a range of genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and other identities can act as primary sources for social movements.[38] Samantha Close argues that "the formal blend of limited texts and visible discourse makes webcomics a generative site of bottom-up thought on and practice of gender and sexuality."[39] Alex Norris's *Webcomic Name* is an example of how webcomics might do this. The comic comments on social and cultural issues in a humorous and self-deprecating way, such as how identities around gender and sexuality are socially constructed, using a deceptively simple formula: a three-panel comic strip format, anthropomorphic characters, vivid colours, and each strip's final panel repeating the catchphrase "Oh no." Norris identifies as queer and non-binary, adding a personal dimension to the comic.[40]

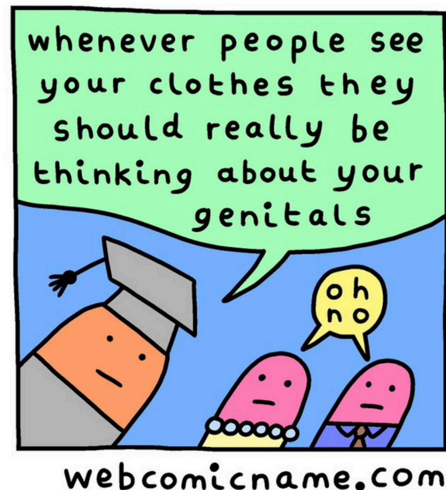

Figure 3.2. Alex Norris, *Webcomic Name*, https://webcomicname.com/post/187671320574, September 12, 2019.

Creators from marginalized communities may not have access to traditional print publication and distribution, which is why archiving, collecting, and preserving digital comics by these creators is so important. Crumpton and Jones Jr. note that Black creators have fewer resources and opportunities and, therefore, publish independently

or self-publish webcomics.[41] Black creators must look for alternative modes of production and communication which have been achieved through conventions, online communities, and new economic approaches that the digital environment facilitates. Communities that exist outside of the mainstream are independent and self-actualized in ways the mainstream will not sustain because of dominant social and market forces. By developing independently, beyond dominant forces, they enable "a supportive, accessible, and distributed community for creators… [encouraging] new participants and new projects."[42]

Started by Zain Dada and Kumail Rizvi, *Khidr Comix Lab* is an example of this approach.[43] Using the word "comix" in a similar fashion to *Quarantine Comix*, the project is informed by questions around "who is afforded the space to imagine" and a desire for "there to be many more stories about and by these kinds of storytellers." [44] *Khidr Comix Lab* provides a platform for Black, Brown, and Muslim creators in the UK, adding lived experience to the stories they tell. The website currently hosts digital and web comix that blend autobiography (*Being Black and Working Class*), graphic journalism (*Britain has a problem*), and science fiction (*Escapade*) to tell personal, vivid, and imaginative stories with characters and themes often neglected by the mainstream.

These examples demonstrate how digital comics produced outside the mainstream may have what Hilary Chute calls "complete artistic and intellectual freedom to represent an artist's personal vision."[45] The potentially unmediated publication practices of many digital comics and their communities of creators and readers can provide valuable documents of first-hand accounts of cultural, social, and political movements. The personal quality of many digital comics can provide valuable personal insights which amplify comics' capacity for creating empathy. Not only are digital comics available to a greater audience, but also the stories they tell are ever more diverse and capable of generating empathy and a sense of inclusion for marginalized groups and individuals, meaning that they should be collected by cultural institutions.

How to Collect Digital Comics

At this time, library collections, by virtue of the technical challenges involved, have tended to focus on webcomics. Archiving webcomics can be achieved through existing workflows using domain crawling, but the challenges around collecting digital comics that feature video, animation, or audio are more problematic.[46] When collecting digital comics, because of the vast amount of content being created, key issues include identifying what to collect, how to recognize them, and making them accessible.

Started in 2017, the Web Comic Archive is a themed collection within the UK Web Archive, a partnership of the six UK legal deposit libraries to preserve UK-hosted websites.[47] As well as broad, domain scale archiving, the British Library is also undertaking curated, focused crawls on specially chosen topics. The Web Comic Archive is one of these themed collections and currently hosts fifty-five digital comics websites. Most of these websites were archived through direct curatorial input, although the public can nominate websites for inclusion, and existing staff at the Legal Deposit Libraries

are able to add sites to the collection. Nicola Bingham, lead curator of the UK Web Archives, notes that whilst domain crawling will certainly pick up webcomics on UK domains or hosts, there is currently no automated way to surface them or add them to the collection. Someone would need to query the domain crawl dataset, which consists of millions of URLs, to pick out related material and add it to the collection.[48] On top of issues around staff capacity, current web archiving technology means that there are difficulties collecting some formats, such as apps and social media sites.

Digital comics are also collected as PDF files by the British Library as a direct feed from the Comichaus app. At time of writing, 356 comics have been collected this way.[49] Comichaus is a database and marketplace for independent comics. Their app allows creators to upload PDFs of their comics to Comichaus and the British Library as part of the same process. The British Library was able to partner with Comichaus as the app was being developed to ensure that digital comics uploaded to the app can, with the creator or publisher's consent, be sent to the British Library to fulfil Legal Deposit obligations.[50] Comics are collected by the British Library as a feed directly from the app and processed as part of digital legal deposit.

The Global Webcomics Web Archive is another example of how collecting digital comics can build partnerships and foster collaborations across institutions.[51] The Global Webcomics Web Archive was developed by librarians at the Ivy Plus Libraries Confederation using the Internet Archive's Archive-it web archiving service. As of this writing, the collection has 175 webcomics and allows people to nominate websites for inclusion. Such an approach can only help to strengthen practice in how libraries approach digital comics, innovative digital formats, and the work of marginal and underrepresented creators in the future. It is also important that best practices in managing and organizing digital comics collections be shared amongst the library community.

The task of archiving and preserving the Web is daunting, vital, and significant. Kamila Pietryk succinctly expresses how "our shared cultural heritage is problematized" by the ephemeral nature and speed of the internet, making the obligations of cultural institutions to preserve cultural output for current and future generations even more apparent.[52] Whilst organisations like the Library of Congress and the British Library are already involved in archiving web and digital comics, other libraries can help by creating their own collections. Digital comics develop outside the comics mainstream and established acquisitions routes, meaning extra "effort might be required to ensure these voices are represented."[53] This is why "purposeful collection statements and advocating for student input" might be necessary for digital comics collections.[54] Acknowledging the technological challenges of archiving digital comics that include animation, audio, video, or any other expanded elements, there is still value in collecting or curating such comics.[55] This can be as simple and responsive as creating thematically linked reading lists of webcomics and allowing students to include their own webcomics and recommendations.

The British Library's partnership with Comichaus and recommendations from the public shows how collecting digital comics means looking beyond traditional acquisition routes. It demonstrates that digital comics collections create an opportunity for

librarians to communicate directly with creators, advocate for suggestions, and consult with practitioners and library users on the scope and nature of the collection. Collecting digital comics is an opportunity for direct user engagement with library collections, and a chance to build and develop collections that accurately reflect the identities and voices of people using those collections.

For this to be effective, it may require a shift in the library's role. Halsband and Grimm argue that libraries must adopt "proactive and collaborative approaches to collection development and selection," where libraries have a role as facilitators, relinquishing some control over selection and description to communities with specialist knowledge of digital comics.[56] The digital environment allows a "flood of content that makes becoming noticed very difficult… may also lead to problems for audiences who find it hard to locate the high-quality work amongst the constant stream of content."[57] Library collections which allow crowdsourcing and other practices from citizen science may help identify and index digital comics without necessarily attaching aesthetic value or judgment.

Appealing for input from the public may also support the information needs of creators and readers by reflecting their community behaviours, language, and identity. Abigail De Kosnik's identification of rogue archives and archivists echoes these sentiments.[58] Rogue archivists are non-professional volunteers, fans, or practitioners often drawn from the very communities or groups they want to archive. Their work creates the possibility that subcultural and marginalized groups have archives of their own, which they and members of their community construct and operate, instead of just relying on traditional memory institutions for "recognition and admission of their cultural materials."[59] Rogue archives are defined as being constantly available online; accessible to anyone with an internet connection; contents that can be freely downloaded or streamed, with no regard for copyright; and to have content not collected in a traditional memory institution.[60]

These two final criteria place rogue archives at the fringes of legality in regard to copyright and content. Saying material unlikely to ever be collected by traditional memory institutions either underestimates the remit, scope, and ambition of some of these institutions, or it anticipates that only the most marginal cultural, social, and political content will be in a rogue archive. It also underestimates the ambitions and aspirations of critical librarians.

Within the bounds of professional standards, critical library collections can learn from rogue archives and archivists, particularly in their democratic, grassroots approach to collection building. Incorporating aspects of this approach to digital comics collections would allow communities of affinity a significant role in creating and maintaining digital archives. It may encourage creators who are ambivalent or hostile to any collection on social, cultural, or political grounds to be involved. The rogue archive approach might mitigate the potentially negative impact of imposing authority or definition that may limit inclusion or participation from creators and readers, which is of particular concern when working with marginal groups.

Conclusion

As much as collecting digital comics can mitigate "the possibility of a digital black hole," it also provides an opportunity for librarians to practice critical librarianship.[61] Undoubtedly, the challenges of collecting digital comics are social and cultural, not merely technological. Ideas such as rogue archiving create a conflict with long-held professional expectations around librarianship. Individuals from marginal and underrepresented groups may be apprehensive or hostile about collaborating with academic libraries they may perceive as having been complicit in perpetuating systems of exclusion and oppression.

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that digital comics provide an opportunity for marginal and underrepresented creators, voices, and themes to become part of academic library collections. By adopting an approach similar to that demonstrated by rogue archives and archivists, collecting digital comics allows libraries new avenues to engage with their users, whether students or researchers. Libraries can open their digital spaces and expertise to amateur or non-professional creators, librarians, or archivists in a way that encourages engagement with collections at the same time as making collections more inclusive and representative. User recommendation is one way of developing collections that include and represent the multitude of creators and audiences out there. There is a precedent for this in library-supported activities such as zine workshops and, on a larger scale, citizen science. By involving creators and allowing nominations from the public, digital comics collections can mitigate against the influence of gatekeeping practiced by vendors and academic presses on typical library collection development practices. Digital comics collections have the potential to draw people into libraries through interaction with and contributions to the collections without having to access the library physically and, crucially, to see themselves and their stories represented in library collections, enabling critical library collections.

I would argue that the creators of digital comics and critical librarians share "a conviction and a radical hope that things could be different from the way they are now," whether this is on personal, cultural, or political levels.[62] If digital comics provide an outlet for creators from diverse and marginal backgrounds but are at risk of being lost or going missing in the digital environment, somebody should collect and archive them. Librarians have the skills, knowledge, and expertise to contribute to such a project, so should get involved. The move towards critical librarianship, purposeful collection development, and decolonizing the collection suggests that librarians are interested in challenging, questioning, and subverting narratives, perspectives, and ideologies that in the past their collections may have perpetuated or legitimised.

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