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Grand Comics Database--Open Access version.pdf

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SELECTEDWORKS™

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Grand Comics Database <http://www.comics.org/>

Online databases can be very useful for catalogers. AV catalogers routinely refer to the Internet Movie Database (IMdB.com), popular music recording catalogers have All Music (allmusic.com), and so on. There is a similar resource for information on comic books and graphic novels which merits closer attention: the Grand Comics Database (GCD).

The GCD is a large database of printed comic books and graphic novels, organized and maintained by volunteers. Asian manga is included as well, but the coverage of American-style comics is much more robust. The site is multilingual, and can be accessed in English, German, Dutch, and Swedish. The home page presents a reasonably clean starting point, with no ads or popups, though there are prominent “Donate” buttons at the header or footer of every page. A search bar – with “advanced search” options – always appears at the top of every page as well, making navigation simple.

The database grew out of an Amateur Press Alliance that exchanged floppy diskettes by mail in 1994. By 1997 the database was hosted online, and in 1998 the database moved to its current site. As of this writing, the site boasted over 9,000 publishers, 99,000 series, 1,300,000 issues, and 1,700,000 stories indexed.

The database has entries for series names, issues, and individual stories within issues. One-off novelties like comic book/vinyl record sets and coloring books are also included, as are comic strips that occur in magazines, providing the host magazine is mostly graphic works. The amount of data for each entry is quite impressive, including everything from binding and paper stock to genres and characters. Moreover each field is indexed, so that users can search credits, publishers, dates, and more.

This wealth of information is entirely entered by volunteers. However the extensive “Formatting Documentation” provided for the volunteers gives detailed instructions that would warm the heart of any cataloger. Some effort was made to standardize how the data is entered too. ISO-639-1 is used for recording languages, for example, and personal names are entered according to the form in specified reference sources.

The searching capabilities of the GCD are somewhat limited. The basic search is a keyword that can be checked against all the indexes, or some selected groupings of indexes (e.g. “all credits”). The advanced search allows one to search all the individual indexes, but with extremely limited use of Boolean operators: “and” is the default, and it is not possible to use “or” within a single index.

The basic search allows some basic syntax to modify searches. The asterisk (*) can be used to truncate terms. A minus (-) placed before a term filters out matches. Other punctuation marks, including the ampersand, are ignored.

Hyphenated terms are a bit of a problem for the search engine too. Hyphens are not ignored in queries, but are dropped from the index. Searching “Spider-Man” as a series name returns 845

hits but “Spiderman” returns 124 different hits. “Spider man” searched as a phrase will not retrieve the titles “Spider-Man” or “Spiderman,” and there is no option to use a wildcard. This coupled with the lack of an OR option, is problematic because many superhero comics use hyphenated or potentially hyphenated names for series or characters: –man, –woman, or –men. The searching also focuses in on strings rather than words, so a series search for “Thor” will retrieve not just “The mighty Thor” but also “The Authority” and “The best of Gil Thorp.”

While the primary audience for the GCD is fans and collectors of comic books, it is also useful for catalogers. The presence of scanned covers is a useful aid for identifying runs of comic books, as many titles are discontinued, revived, merged, or split, and mini-series or special “one shot” issues are very common, creating a multitude of similar titles. The credits listings include both the real name and pseudonyms for writers and artists, which is very helpful for authority work. For example, searching for “Fletcher Hanks” reveals over a dozen pseudonyms such as C.C. Starr, Barclay Flagg, and my favorite: Haye Maker. In each case the credit is entered with the pseudonym in brackets (e.g., Fletcher Hanks [as Haye Maker]). This makes the GCD very helpful for finding variant usages when creating or updating authority records for comic artists and writers. Finally, the indexers also note compilations, reprintings and republications, making the GCD a great tool for tracking down original publication dates and identifying different editions.

Rating: 4 out of 5

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