

An Escape From the Slush Pile: A Web Site Tries Out New Comics

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Richard Perry/The New York Times

Richard Bruning, left, Kwanza Johnson and Ron Perazza, of DC Comics and Zuda.com.

By GEORGE GENE GUSTINES
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DC Comics, the venerable publisher of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, will introduce today an online imprint that amounts to a virtual slush pile, accepting submissions from the public and paying for the best comics that come in.

The imprint, called Zudacomics.com, will permit aspiring cartoonists to register at its Web site and submit an eight-panel sample of their work. Starting in October and each month thereafter, editors at DC Comics will select 10 entries, post them for public view and invite people to vote for their favorite. Editors may also declare as many as six submissions to be instant winners during the calendar year.

"We've always found interesting stuff in submissions," said Paul Levitz, president and publisher of DC Comics. "One of the problems that comics have today, I think, is that open door is much more closed. This creates a more open door."

Most people who produce online comics do so as labors of love. Some post their work online free, hoping to catch a publisher's eye or gain a following, but Zuda will offer a rare chance to become a paid professional.

Each winner will be awarded a one-year contract to produce their online series, DC Comics executives said. The company, a division of the Warner Brothers Entertainment, part of Time Warner, views the initiative as a chance to increase its library of intellectual properties, which can be lucrative as films, television shows and toys. DC Comics will also have the right to print the comics in collected editions.

"We're not looking for a specific type of material — we're actively looking for everything," said Ron Perazza, the director of creative services for DC and one of Zuda's chief architects.

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“We’re going into this with no ego. We can’t possibly know what an entire community will want to read,” he said.

The only standardized part of a submission will be its presentation, which will consist of eight screen shots. “Everyone has the same size page and the same number of pages,” Mr. Perazza said. Beyond that, “the community vets what they want and that’s what we decide to publish,” he said.

Having the marketing muscle of a major publisher and paying producers for their work sets Zuda apart from most online comics. A site like www.act-i-vate.com, a collective of by-invitation-only comics creators, is a place for the artists to hone their craft and one-up each other.

Closer to the Zuda model is DrunkDuck.com. The site, which was acquired last year by Platinum Studios, allows creators under contract to share in deals for things like downloadable content, comics-related ring tones or toys.

Then there are those creators who go it alone, like the husband-and-wife team of Phil and Kaja Foglio, who publish “[Girl Genius](#),” about a teenage girl who is heir to a family of mad scientists. The comic, in the traditional printed format, sold 7,500 to 9,000 copies an issue. Now that the Foglios have stopped printing and instead post the comic online, they say they have 100,000 readers.

“We lost some readers who said, ‘I enjoy having the comic books,’ but that’s more than made up by people who never would’ve seen it all,” Mr. Foglio said.

Like book publishing, the comic book industry has a history of authors who vaulted to prominence after their work was plucked from a heap of unsolicited manuscripts. “One of my proudest moments as an editor was buying a Marc DeMatteis story out of a slush pile,” said Mr. Levitz of DC. Mr. DeMatteis has gone on to write countless titles for DC, [Marvel](#) and other publishers.

Mr. Levitz said the Internet presents an easy place for spotting fresh talent. “We’ve seen a real wellspring of creativity” by people posting their online comics, he said. “And it’s been a different kind of material than publishers have been putting out.”

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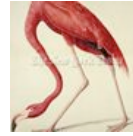
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