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Back to the Panels

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Action-packed superhero movies have dominated theaters in recent years. Most can recall the low bellow of Bane’s voice, or the competitive advantages of Iron Man’s red suit, but how well do you really know the characters? More of their story is intricately weaved through comic books.

In spring of 2013, Matt Sierra had the idea of creating and being president of a club he was passionate about: comics. After finding an Iowa State faculty member to sponsor, the ISU Comic Book Club was born.

They officially meet on Mondays from 8 to 9 p.m., although many members show up at 6:30 p.m. and often stay until late. At first, the club had set discussions, but most of the time they just have conversations about anything and everything related to comics.

A variety of people can be found in attendance at ISU’s Comic Book Club. They range from people who just started reading comics to people who have been reading comics for years. Majors of members include pre-graphic design, linguistics, aerospace, physics and kinesiology. The treasurer, Nathan Schwartz, is double majoring in aerospace and physics.

Superheroes have flown out of their books into major movie franchises and TV shows such as ABC’s “Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D,” the agency in charge of getting the Avengers together. This show features non-superhuman S.H.I.E.L.D agents who are pulled into working on new cases taking place in the world of the Avengers.

The prominence of superheroes in pop culture has expanded the fandom of comic books. Member James Heckathorn says, “there is something for everyone [in comics].” He says any genre on TV and in movies, such as comedy or drama, can be translated in comic books.
When members were asked how much they spend on different comics, Schwartz said, “I don’t even want to know how much I’ve spent.” Issues are typically $3 if the title is published monthly or $4 if published twice a month. Special editions could be anywhere between $8 and $9 says Schwartz. Member Holden King admits the most he’s spent at one time on comic books was $80 altogether.

“This is not a cheap hobby—but it’s worth it,” Sierra says.

Perhaps next the time you are feeling adventurous, check out your LCS (local comic store): Mayhem on Lincoln Way or Shield Comics on Main Street.

Shield Comics opened in November. Store owner Chris Pellack has been working in comic book shops for 25 years, and has been a fan for about 35 years. He’s been hooked on comics ever since he spent a summer reading through his brother’s collection.

The store name comes from Captain America’s shield, a replica is placed above the cash register. Pellack says, “it’s kind of a cool little center piece.” He picked up the shield several years ago from a company called Factory X. The shield is made out of aircraft aluminum. When he goes to conventions he tries to get writers and artists who’ve worked on the Captain America comic to sign or do little sketches on the shield.

“The Avengers” and “Batman” are products of Marvel and DC Comics, respectively. Both DC and Marvel are major players in the comic industry. King says both companies are superhero oriented. In addition to DC and Marvel, more independent companies like Dark Horse, Image and IDW Publishing are putting out great titles, according to Heckathorn.

DC and Marvel create huge productions that cost millions of dollars, but Pellack wishes they could add a single screen at the end of films that says, “if you want to learn more about a character, go check out your local comic book store.” He doesn’t want a plug just for his store, but rather for all comic book stores. He hopes this will increase interest in the inspiration behind the big superhero blockbusters.

Pellack says people of all ages frequent his store; comic books aren’t just for children. Schwartz says they even have advisory labels to deter young minds from reading mature content.

While Pellack got hooked on the Avengers, Spiderman and Thor (mostly Marvel heros), many people don’t know how much their favorite heroes have played a role in building comic book history.

Schwartz says he is by no means an expert on the history of comics, but he is familiar with the Golden, Silver and Bronze Ages and the ’90s when it comes to comics. The Golden Age was marked by the creation of Superman by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, and also produced DC’s “original” superheroes such as Batman, Wonder Woman, the Original Green Lantern and Flash.

According to Schwartz, the ’40s and ’60s were characterized by a shift of audiences’ preference. Post-World War II, people began reading horror, western and romance comics. More mature content was also published in comics at this time. It lead to the creation of the Comics Code Authority, which seeks to evaluate the maturity of content in comics.

The Silver Age began in the ’60s and it is thought that the creation of the modern Green Lantern and Flash mark the beginning of this age. Another superhero boom began when Stan Lee (the editor of Marvel at the time) heard DC was going to make a superhero team comic—“The Justice League of America.” Together with Jack Kirby, Lee created “The Fantastic Four.”

The Bronze Age is when comics started to have darker qualities, including more violence and gore. Comics were no longer marketed toward kids. “Watchmen” by Alan Moore, the “Dark Knight Returns” by Frank Miller and “The Sandman” by Neil Gaiman were written during this time. Schwartz says these titles weren’t comic successes, but were literary successes.

The ’90s comics are marked by big artists leaving DC and Marvel in favor of smaller independent companies. It was during this time that Image Comics was created and it allowed creators to make their own work. This time was also marked by the interest in comic book selling; the comic with the first appearance of Superman sold for more than $1 million dollars. According to King, “comic books were better than gold” during this time.

Today’s technology has advanced the art production of comic books. According to Schwartz, this “Modern Age” that comic books are in now is marked by smooth, computer-assisted art. He also says the more decompressed story style is akin to reading a screenplay.

John Cunnally, a professor of art history in the College of Design, is looking at the social impact of comics and graphic novels. Graphic novels really took off with “Maus” by Art Spiegelman. It was published in 1991 and Spiegelman received a Pulitzer Prize for his work.

Cunnally says, “Whoever heard of a comic book winning a Pulitzer Prize?”

**Whoever heard of a comic book winning a Pulitzer Prize?**

**COMIC BOOK JARGON**

**TRADE:** collected edition, 6 or 7 issues, hard cover

**PULL-LIST:** subscription at the local comic book store, a file under your name (Wednesday)

**OMNIBUS:** completely collected series

**LCS:** local comic store

Cunnally asserts that graphic novels and—by extension—comics are a suitable medium for adult themes. What makes graphic novels so appealing is that they are subversive and often represent the underdog, according to Cunnally. They also are a more interactive medium, as the reader can make connections between the panels and drawings.

Cunnally believes graphic novels should be incorporated into undergraduate English classes. They reach across different cultures spanning from Korea to the Middle East. Even Obama and McCain produced comics for their campaigns. Cunnally says students should make their own graphic novels. They don’t have to be good at drawing; they will have “the ability to express themselves through the lines.”