makeuseof.com

presents

BAM!

Your Guide to Digital Comic Books

By Lachlan Roy

BAM! YOUR GUIDE TO DIGITAL COMIC BOOKS

By: Lachlan Roy
http://lachlanroy.com

Edited by: Justin Pot

Cover image includes parts by:
antipathique via Shutterstock

Table of Contents

Introduction

Superman.

Spider-man.

Batman.

The X-Men.

Even if you've never picked up a comic book in your life, you've almost certainly heard of these legends. Ever since the 1930s superheroes have been here to stay. They've taken the world by storm time and time again. They've worked together, fought together and against each another in nearly every thinkable combination. With almost 80 years of back-story just think of the rich history to be discovered. And that's just for the famous ones. Think of the hundreds of other heroes, each with their own back-stories, their own archenemies.

And that's just the superheroes.

Romance. Drama. Sci-fi. Fantasy. Horror. Crime. Comedy. There are comics for all genres, comics for all ages.

Wouldn't it be great to have access to all those stories? To be able to read the epic tales of great people having great adventures?

"But comic books are expensive!" I hear you say. "Besides, wherever would I keep them all? I don't have time to find a comic book store, let alone spend time looking through all the books to find what I want!"

I might have the solution for you.

Maybe that's not you. You've already been enlightened. You've been reading comic books for years, and you've grown with the characters that you love so much along with the collection that archives their adventures.

What would happen if something were to happen to your beloved comic books? What if they were stolen? What if there was a fire?

I think I have a solution for you, too.

Digital comic books. They may not give you the feeling of freshly printed paper or that strange sensation you get from opening a new issue for the first time, but they come pretty close. Interested? Read on.

Digital Comic Books

Offline/Local Comic Books

The first kind of digital comic books that I'll be talking about is the Comic Book file. While they're rarely used for new comic books to be purchased, they have their own uses. Comic book files are perfect for creating digital archives of comic books you already own.

The other main use for comic book files is for reading comics which would otherwise be impossible to obtain or read, such as Japanese manga. There are many series that are great to read but will likely never be translated to English and distributed outside of Japan; these are translated by fans and distributed online. This is called *scanlating* (a cross between *scanning* and *translating*), and is admittedly at best described as a moral grey area.

Finally, it is possible to buy comic books to download and store on your computer through web stores such as Wowio (more on that later).

File formats

Digital comic books come in many daunting guises, but they're not as different or as mysterious as you might think.

Most digital comic book files are little more than an archive filled with image files – one image per page. If you open one of these archives it'll look something like this:

Name	Date Modified	Size	Kind
00-FrontCover.jpg	19/12/2008 10:55 AM	340 KB	JPEG image
SKC-01-Flying-over-city.jpg	19/12/2008 10:55 AM	381 KB	JPEG image
SKC-02-SKLanding.jpg	19/12/2008 11:27 AM	295 KB	JPEG image
SKC-03-Meeting-the-girl.jpg	20/12/2008 10:46 PM	254 KB	JPEG image
SKC-04-Girl-faces.jpg	19/12/2008 11:44 AM	479 KB	JPEG image
SKC-05-Almost-crying.jpg	19/12/2008 10:55 AM	307 KB	JPEG image
SKC-06-Sitting-down.jpg	20/12/2008 10:50 PM	610 KB	JPEG image
SKC-07-Look-at-the-reader.jpg	20/12/2008 10:53 PM	496 KB	JPEG image
SKC-08-Christmas-is-MINE.jpg	20/12/2008 10:56 PM	524 KB	JPEG image
SKC-09-Nemo-turn-around.jpg	19/12/2008 12:17 PM	549 KB	JPEG image
SKC-10-Pointing-alone.jpg	20/12/2008 10:57 PM	344 KB	JPEG image
SKC-11-Alone-really.jpg	19/12/2008 12:34 PM	426 KB	JPEG image
SKC-12-Pointing-with-gang.jpg	20/12/2008 11:03 PM	512 KB	JPEG image
SKC-13-Wildcard-is-my-favorite-.jpg	19/12/2008 12:41 PM	311 KB	JPEG image
SKC-14-Over-the-hill.jpg	20/12/2008 11:05 PM	340 KB	JPEG image
SKC-15-The-Hollidazer.jpg	19/12/2008 10:55 AM	270 KB	JPEG image
SKC-16-Fantom-get-shot.jpg	19/12/2008 12:52 PM	520 KB	JPEG image
SKC-17-Breaking-the-post.jpg	19/12/2008 1:01 PM	483 KB	JPEG image
SKC-18-Fight.jpg	19/12/2008 1:06 PM	328 KB	JPEG image
SKC-19-Nemo-pointing.jpg	19/12/2008 1:10 PM	487 KB	JPEG image
SKC-20-Crazy.jpg	19/12/2008 1:38 PM	479 KB	JPEG image
SKC-21-Falling-Down.jpg	19/12/2008 11:17 AM	229 KB	JPEG image
SKC-22-In-the-barn.jpg	19/12/2008 1:42 PM	455 KB	JPEG image
SKC-23-Its-a-hit.jpg	19/12/2008 1:53 PM	270 KB	JPEG image
SKC-24-Dropping-Wildcard.jpg	19/12/2008 3:13 PM	512 KB	JPEG image
SKC-25-Charge02BB.jpg	19/12/2008 10:55 AM	283 KB	JPEG image
SKC-26-Ramming-Nemo.jpg	19/12/2008 1:56 PM	401 KB	JPEG image

Even though they work in the same way, there are still plenty of different formats that you might come across, so here's a quick list.

CBR

CBR stands for *Comic Book R*. I know: that doesn't really go a lot further to explaining what it is. It's quite simple – the 'R' comes from the fact that a CBR file is little more than a renamed RAR archive.

In fact, although a file with the .cbr extension can be opened almost exclusively by comic book readers, once that file has had its extension changed to .rar it can be opened by most archive applications.

CBZ

Just like CBR files are just renamed RAR archives, CBZ files are just renamed ZIP archives. There's not much more to it than that!

CB7

In the same way, you can probably guess that CB7 files are simply renamed 7z archives.

ZIP

Most comic book reader apps have support for normal .zip files too, which are a whole lot more common than their Comic Book File relatives. There's the added bonus that you don't need to modify the file to open it to get to the files inside.

PDF

The last particularly common type of comic book you'll find is packaged as a PDF, just like the guide you're reading right now. These have their own advantages; you can usually read a PDF without any special sort of program, regardless of the computer you use. They can take up more space and be more difficult to work with than other formats, however.


Icons courtesy of lopagof

Finding Comic Books

Golden Age Comics

The vast majority of comics that you'll find that you can download are from the *Golden Age* of comics – that is, comics that were published between the late 1930s and the early 1950s. Many of these comics are now in the *public domain*, meaning that they are no longer covered by copyright and are free for anyone to download.

Golden Age comics are known mostly for the introduction of the archetypal superheroes such as Superman, Wonder Woman and Batman. While large publishers closely guard these popular characters, they gave rise to hundreds of smaller, lesser-known superheroes with all sorts of superpowers that are freely available.
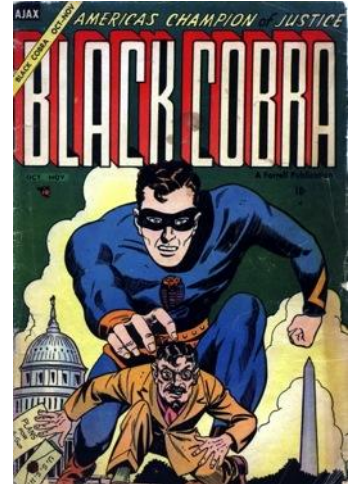
There are a few places for getting public domain comics, with the most noteworthy probably being the Digital Comic Museum. It requires you to sign up to download files but it is free.

Modern Age Comic Books

While still not particularly widespread, legal modern comic book files are becoming more common. Comic Book Files (such as .cbr files) are often used by independent artists to distribute their work offline. For example, Flashback Universe is a group or artists and writers who have decided to freely distribute their comics only as .cbr files in order to raise awareness and push for a better future for comic book distribution.
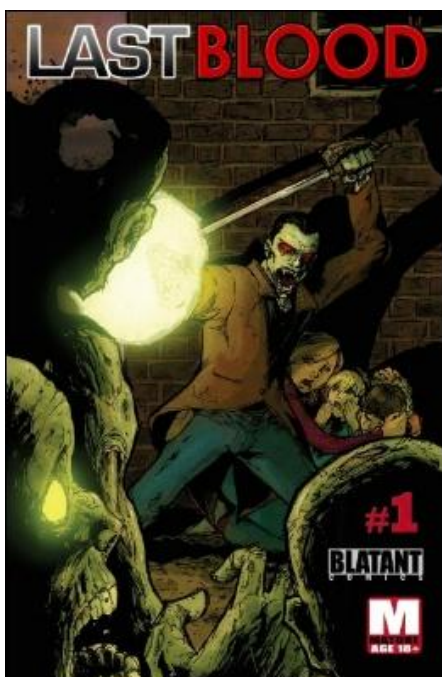
Examples like these have led rise to stores such as Wowio which allow customers to buy books and comic books and download them as DRM free files. While Wowio takes a slightly different approach to Flashback Universe and distributes most of its comics as PDFs, the intent is the same.

Wowio might not be able to distribute content which belongs to major publishers, but it's a great place to find comic books from brilliant artists who would otherwise go unnoticed.

Take *Last Blood*, for example; a series in which vampires must protect humans from a zombie

infested world in order to secure their dwindling food source.

Making your own Comic Book Files

Say you've got a collection of comic books that you want to make sure are safe. They're understandably very precious to you, and you'd hate it if anything happened to them.

As a precaution, you might want to consider making your own Comic Book files. It's a lot easier than you might think – all you need is a scanner!

The first step is by far the most consuming one – you'll need to use scanning software (which should have come with your scanner) to scan each page onto your computer. More advanced scanning software can automatically straighten your scanned pages as well as making it easy to split double pages.

You'll want to fiddle around and find out the perfect settings for you before you get started. Higher quality scans look great and capture more detail, but take longer to scan each page and will take up quite a bit more space. However, if you've got the time and the hard drive space then it's definitely worth having a high-quality backup of your beloved comics.

Ideally the scans can be saved as a series of sequentially numbered JPEG files. This shouldn't be a problem as it's the default operation for most scanning software, but it's important that you get the numbering right, as this is what a comic book reader will use to order the images once you're done.

The next step is to add all the images into an archive file. It's important that the files are in the root of the archive (that is, they're not in a folder within the archive), otherwise the reader won't be able to open them! Windows, OS X and Linux all have tools to create archives ("Send to > Compressed (zipped) folder" in Windows and "Create Archive" in OS X and Ubuntu), so this doesn't require any special software. The final step is to turn the archive into a Comic Book file. Chances are the archive that you've created is a .zip file; if so, rename the file extension from ".zip" to ".cbz". If you've made a .rar archive, rename it to ".cbr", and if you've made a .7z archive, rename it to ".cb7"

That's all there is to it! It can be a lot of work, but ultimately it's worth it to have a digital copy archived away just in case something happens to your physical copy.

Reading Comic Books Files

Unfortunately there isn't a recent, supported application that runs on all three major operating systems. However, there are some great applications out there for each platform. Let's take a look at some of the major ones.

Windows

ComicRack is by far the most popular comic book reader for Windows. It is often referred to as "iTunes for comic books", and it's easy to see why. ComicRack is as much a comic book library as it is a reader, with a lot of features such as conversion between most popular Comic Book file formats that gives it functionality similar to calibre, too.

Installing ComicRack is just like installing any other Windows application, so you shouldn't have any problems. Just download the .exe file from ComicRack's download page and you'll be good to go.

ComicRack automatically makes itself the default application for any comic book files (that is, CBR, CBZ and CB7 files). To add a folder to the ComicRack library (and all of the comic books inside), you can click on "File > Add Folder to Library…" and browse to the folder that contains all of your comic books.

For more information, you can read more about ComicRack over on the main MakeUseOf site, courtesy of Simon.

Mac OS X

On the opposite end of the spectrum, with relatively few features, is one of the favourite comic book readers for Mac OS X: **Simple Comic**. As you might suspect from the name, Simple Comic focuses on doing what it does well: reading comics, and nothing else, instead of piling on features and creating an entire library for your comic books

Simple Comic has support for all the major files (and some less common ones, too) as well as a few features which make reading that little bit more enjoyable, like a loupe for looking at small details and being able to choose whether comic books read left to right or from right to left (useful for reading Japanese manga).

To use Simple Comic, simply download it from the website, extract the application from its zip file and put it in your Applications folder. Then, right click on any Comic Book file, click "Get Info…" before selecting Simple Comic from the drop down menu under "Open with:".

Ubuntu

Your best bet for a comic reader for Ubuntu, and most Linux distributions, seems to be a program called **Comix**. This is closer to Simple Comic than ComicRack in that Comix is deliberately made to be a lightweight reader rather than a library application. You can get it by downloading it from the Ubuntu Software Centre or by downloading the binary from SourceForge (check the link).

The only downside to Comix is that it doesn't support rar files out of the box (or, by extension, .cbr files). However, this is easily fixed by installing "unrar" from the Ubuntu Software Centre or your distribution's package manager.

Online Comic Books

How they work

The problem that haunts many major comic book publishers is piracy – they don't want to let you download the latest comic books in a way that makes it easy to upload them again for *other* people to download without paying for it.

This has given rise to major publishers such as DC Comics and Marvel to create online comic books. When you buy a comic it is added to your account. You can read it at any time through your web browser using Adobe Flash (which supposedly prevents you from downloading the images yourself), or using a dedicated app for Android, iPod, iPhone or iPad.

Apps made for mobile devices are able to download the comics and store them locally (so they can be read any time, even without an Internet connection), which is acceptable to the publishers since the closed nature of the device's file system makes it difficult to get to the files.

Advantages

This model has plenty of upsides. Publishers benefit because this method, to all intents and purposes, tackles piracy. While it is still technically possible and straightforward to pirate these comic books, it would be a tedious task that makes it hardly worth the hassle.

There are benefits for the consumer, too – the comics are still cheaper than a physical copy and are usually available just as quickly. The quality is high, and the use of Flash allows you to zoom and pan just like using a downloaded file with a comic book reader.

As pages are only loaded as you read them and aren't stored permanently, very little store space is used.

Disadvantages

The big downside for readers is that they don't actually own the file, and will never have it as a file on their computer that they can back up. This has a couple of implications. First, those who wish to read on their computer must have an Internet connection to read the comics at all. Second, if the publisher decides to make the comic unavailable, those who have paid for the comic will suddenly no longer have access to it.

The method of delivery can also be a major problem. Adobe Flash is notorious for being an intensive process; it typically makes the computer work harder than a native comic book reader would. While this isn't a problem for powerful desktop

computers, it can be a problem for older, less powerful computers (which might become unresponsive) or laptops running on batteries; Flash can cause the battery to run out much faster.

What you can get

The range of content available through online comic books is much greater than that available for downloading and reading offline.

Publishers large and small are making their comics available online, from individual, independent artists all the way up to the giants like Marvel and DC Comics.

Whether you're after the first ever issue of *Wolverine* first released in 1986, the latest issue of *Kick-Ass* or looking out for something new to read, there's plenty to find!

Where you can get it

There are a few places to get the latest and greatest comics online. You could go down the path of buying comics from their respective publishers, or alternatively you could use a service such as ComiXology, which acts as an online storefront for many publishers.

How much?

Pricing can vary depending on the source, but typically costs significantly less than a physical copy in a store. Many online stores have free samples to get you started on a few different series, too.

Subscriptions can also save you a lot of money – for example, while committing to 12 physical paper issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* will cost $27 (six months of a single comic), $60 will buy you unlimited access to *all* of Marvel's comics for a *whole year* through their Digital Comics Unlimited subscription.
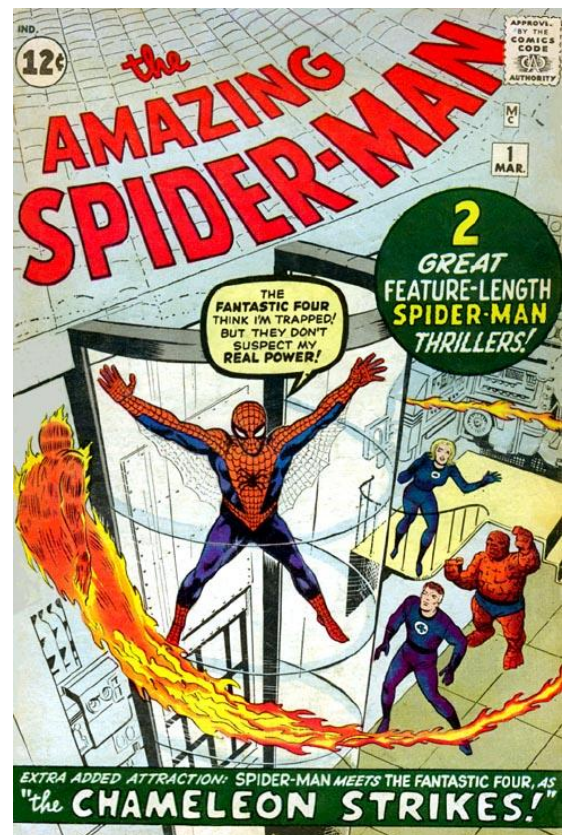
The first issue of The Amazing Spider-Man, *March 1963*

Graphicly – the best of both worlds?

So you want the wide variety and cheap prices of the online comic stores, but you'd really like to download them to your desktop to see them on the big screen, even without an Internet connection. But surely that's not possible, is it?

Enter Graphicly, a company that started up last year and is starting to look like a great solution for everyone.

Why Graphicly?
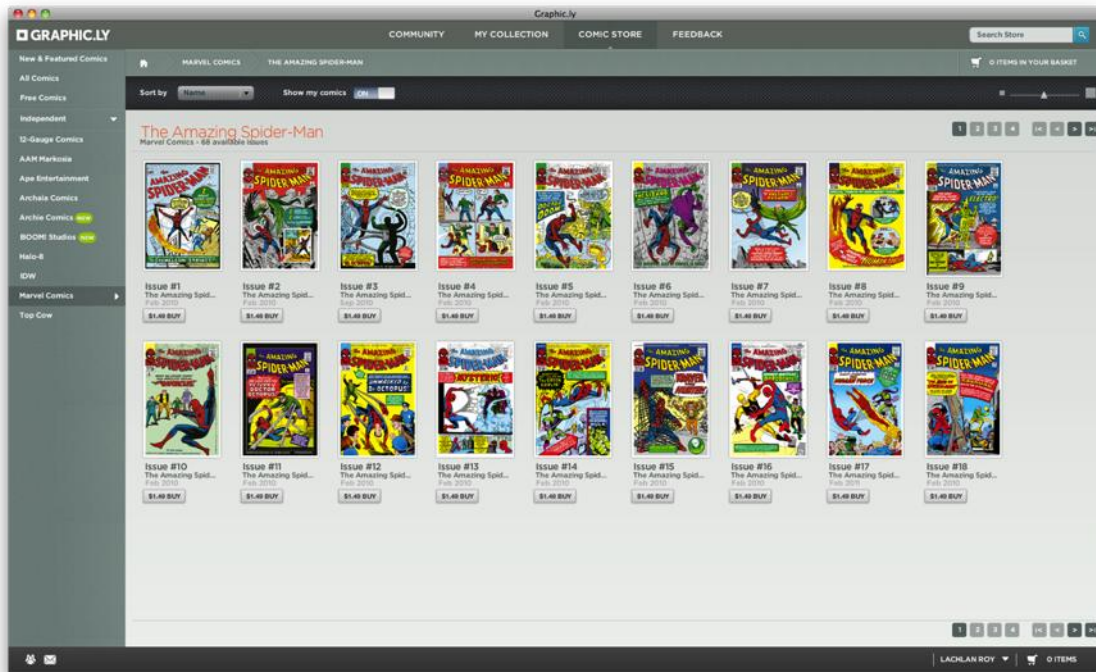
Graphicly brings the online comic book store to your desktop. It has easy access to the wide variety of comics available online including the latest and greatest from the publishing giants as well as smaller, independent publishers and artists.

Furthermore, Graphicly lets you download purchased comics to your computer, allowing you to access them even when you don't have an Internet connection. When you're away from your own computer you can still access purchased comics via the web reader.

Graphicly isn't exactly perfect; files are still locked away and encrypted, so you can't access the comics to read them with other programs or back them up yourself, and it still uses Flash to run on the desktop (through Adobe's AIR platform) so

you'll still want to be careful if you're running on batteries, but it's definitely a big step in the right direction.

Getting Graphicly

Installing Graphicly is really easy. Although Adobe's AIR platform can be a little more resource-intensive than native programming languages, it does have its advantages; Adobe AIR applications are cross platform (so it works on any operating system that supports Flash) and can be installed with little more than a few clicks.
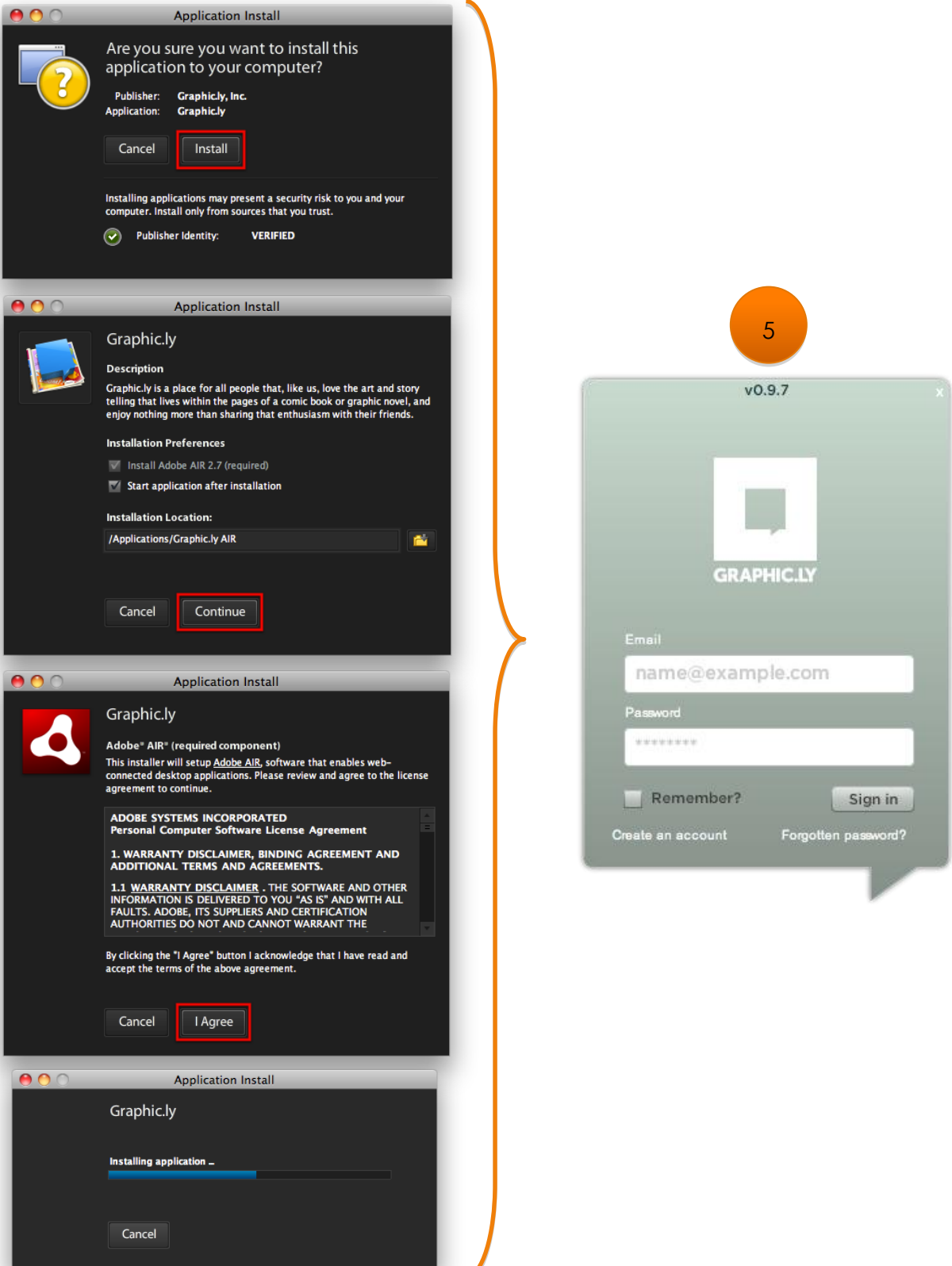
To get Graphicly, head over to http://graphicly.com/apps.
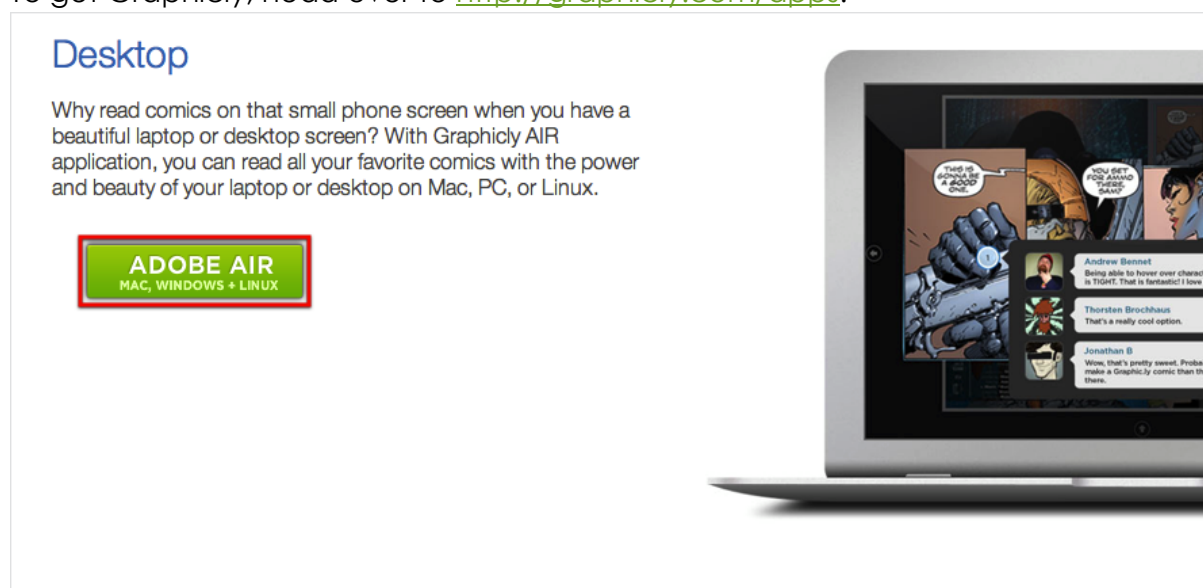
At the top of the page you can see Graphicly's mobile applications, but we're interested in the desktop application. Click on the green button to get started.
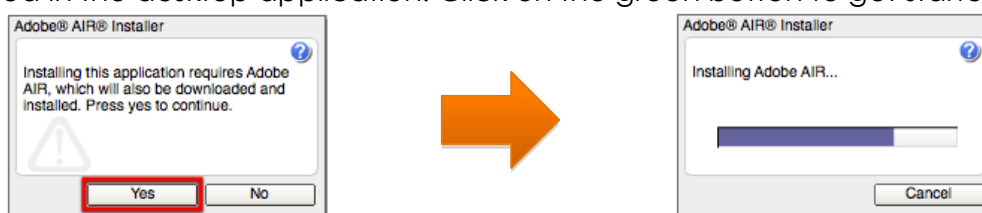
You'll be asked to install Adobe AIR. Clicking on "Yes" will download and install the files required to run AIR on your computer. You'll only need to do this once; next time you want to use an AIR application you'll just need to install the application itself. Next the installer gets all the files it needs to have ready before it can start installing Graphicly. Once that's completed you'll be ready to start the installation of the actual program. It's a simple process that you can follow on the next page.
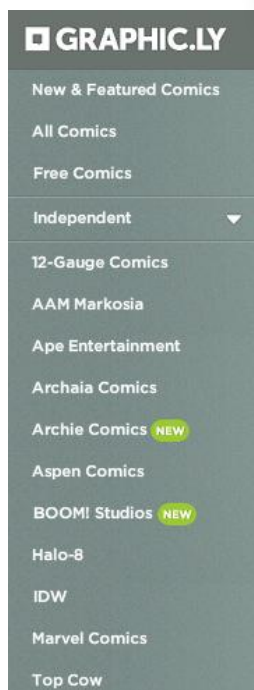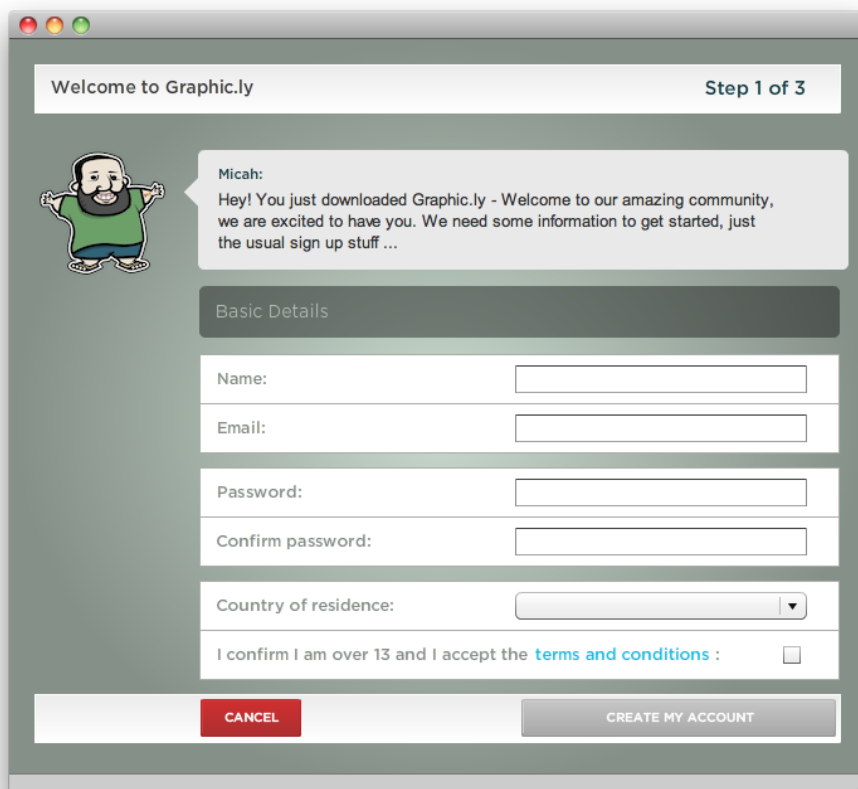
Installing Graphicly

Using Graphicly

Graphicly will start once it has been installed, presenting you with a sign-in window. If you've already signed up to Graphicly on the website then you can use these details to sign into the desktop application, otherwise you can click on "Create an Account" in the bottom left hand corner of the sign in window.


Just fill in the details and create an account – you'll be set to go in no time at all. Once the account is all set up you should be logged in automatically.

The front page showcases the newest and featured comics. Have a look at these; clicking on any cover will bring up a description, a list of the creators and a rating for the comic.

For now though, let's have a look at some of the other things on offer – the left side of the window is the navigation bar. Here you can either browse for comics by publisher, or have a look at either all comics or the comics made freely available.

Let's go to the free comic section to try Graphicly out.
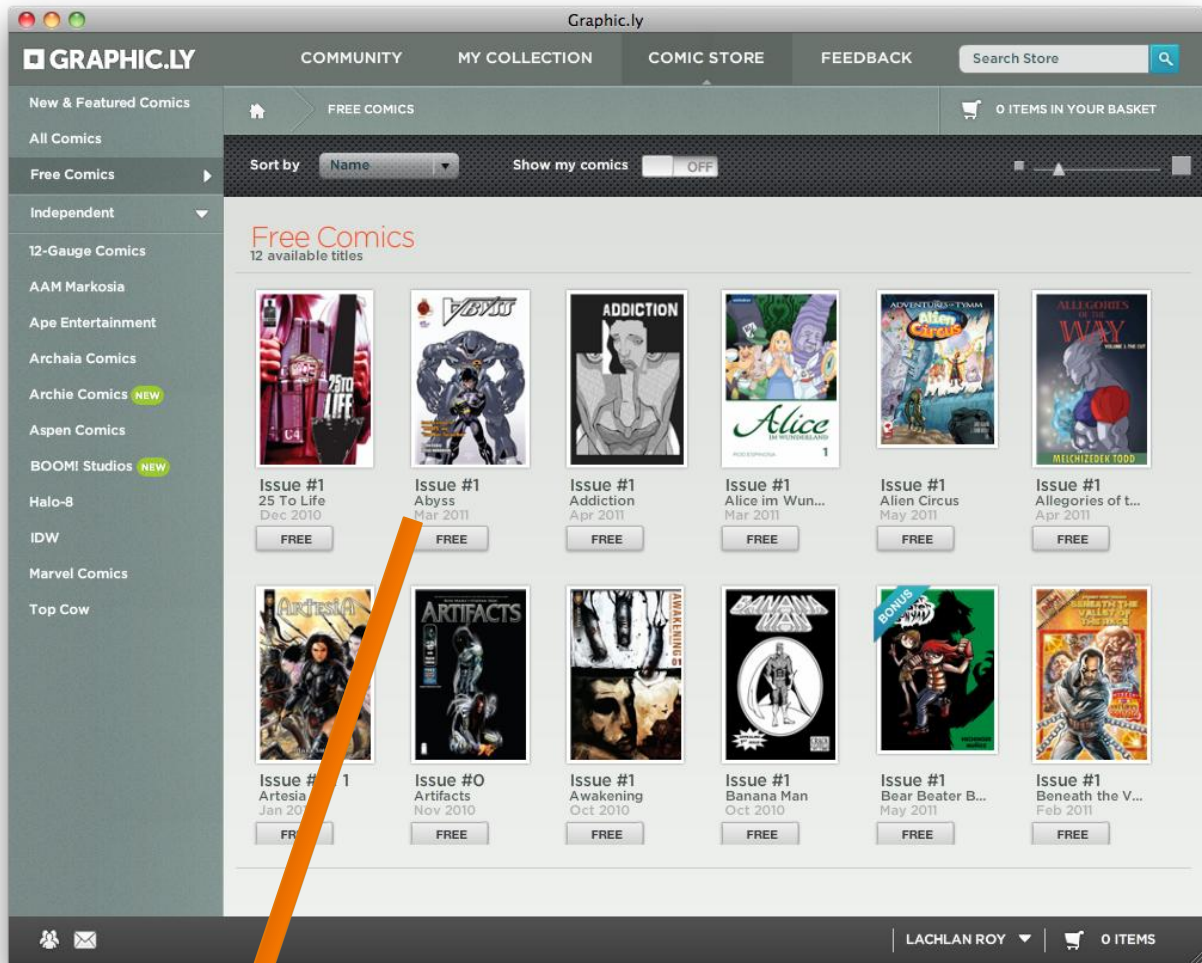
Abyss #1
Red 5 Comics - March 2011
22 Pages

Description
The worlds greater super-villain, Abyss, has been killed and thats the start of the story-- Comedic, dysfunctional and heroic adventures begin when oblivious billionaire heir Eric Hoffman inherits his fathers fortune, killer robot and infamous legacy.

Creators
Author	Kevin Rubio
Letterer	Comicraft
Artist	Lucas Marangon
Colorist	Andrew Dalhouse

Rating
ENJOYMENT	STORY
ART	COVER

SHARE   FREE

I like the look of Issue #1 of *Abyss*, so I click on the cover. The description and ratings look good, so I'll click on "Free" to add it to my collection (or if it wasn't free, it'd be sent to my shopping basket). It's fairly obvious when something's been added to the collection, as you can see below:
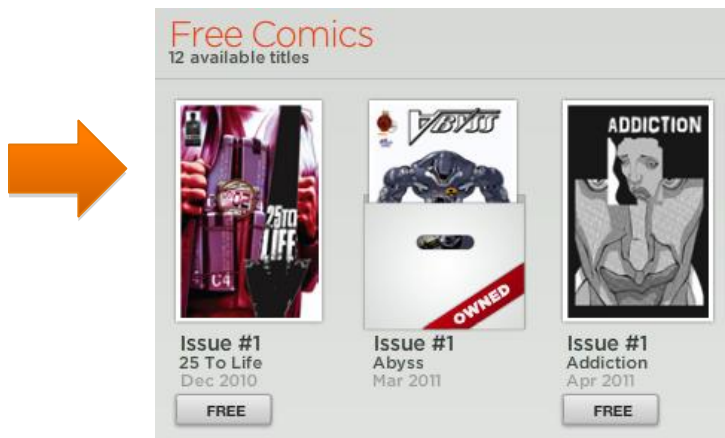
Now that we've chosen a comic to download, we can click on "My Collection" at the top of the window. First you'll be shown all the comics in your collection.

As you can see, there are a couple of comics already there: I downloaded *Atomic Robo* earlier, and I've added another comic called *Angelus* to my collection as well.

Now that the comics have been added to the collection we're able to download them. To do this I clicked on "Ready to Download" in the navigation bar, which takes me to a list of the comics that are in my collection but I haven't downloaded yet.

As you can see, *Atomic Robo* isn't in this list as I've already downloaded it, but *Angelus* and *Abyss* are.

Downloading each comic is simply a matter of clicking the "Download" button beneath it. When a comic starts loading, its button greys out and says "Downloading", and a progress bar appears in the bottom right hand corner of the window.

Clicking "Download" for more than one comic will start the first comic downloading and then queue the others. The number of comics in the queue is shown under the download progress bar.

Once the comics are finished downloading they're ready to read! You can select a publisher from the navigation bar or select the comic from the "All Comics" list.

To start reading, just select the series and then click "Read" below the issue that you want to start reading. Alternatively, you can click on the cover to read the synopsis before you start reading.
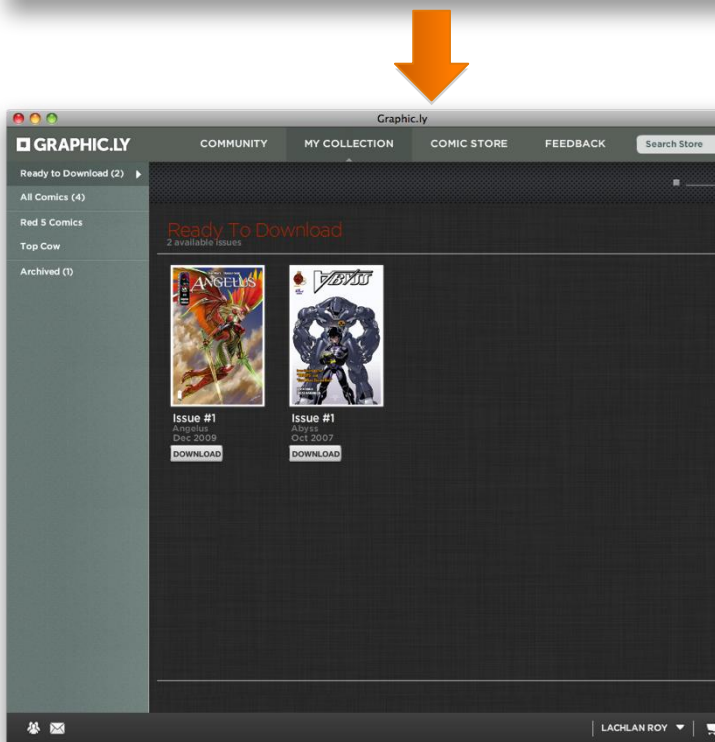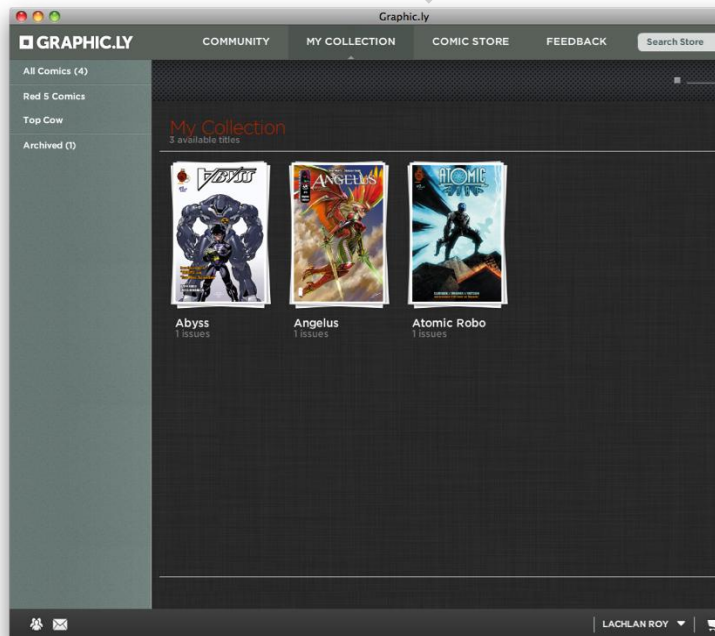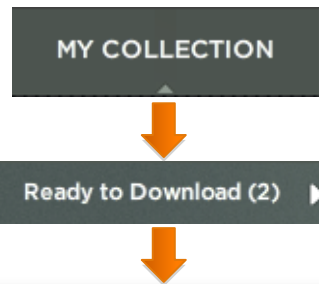
Graphicly is great for reading comics on your computer. As soon as you click "Read", Graphicly goes full screen to show you as much detail as possible. The interface gets out of the way, and all that's left is the comic.

The controls are pretty simple. From the keyboard, the up and down arrow keys go to the previous and next double page spread respectively, while the left/right arrows go to the previous or next panel on the page. Alternatively, you can click on the arrows on the edges of the screen to move forwards and backwards.
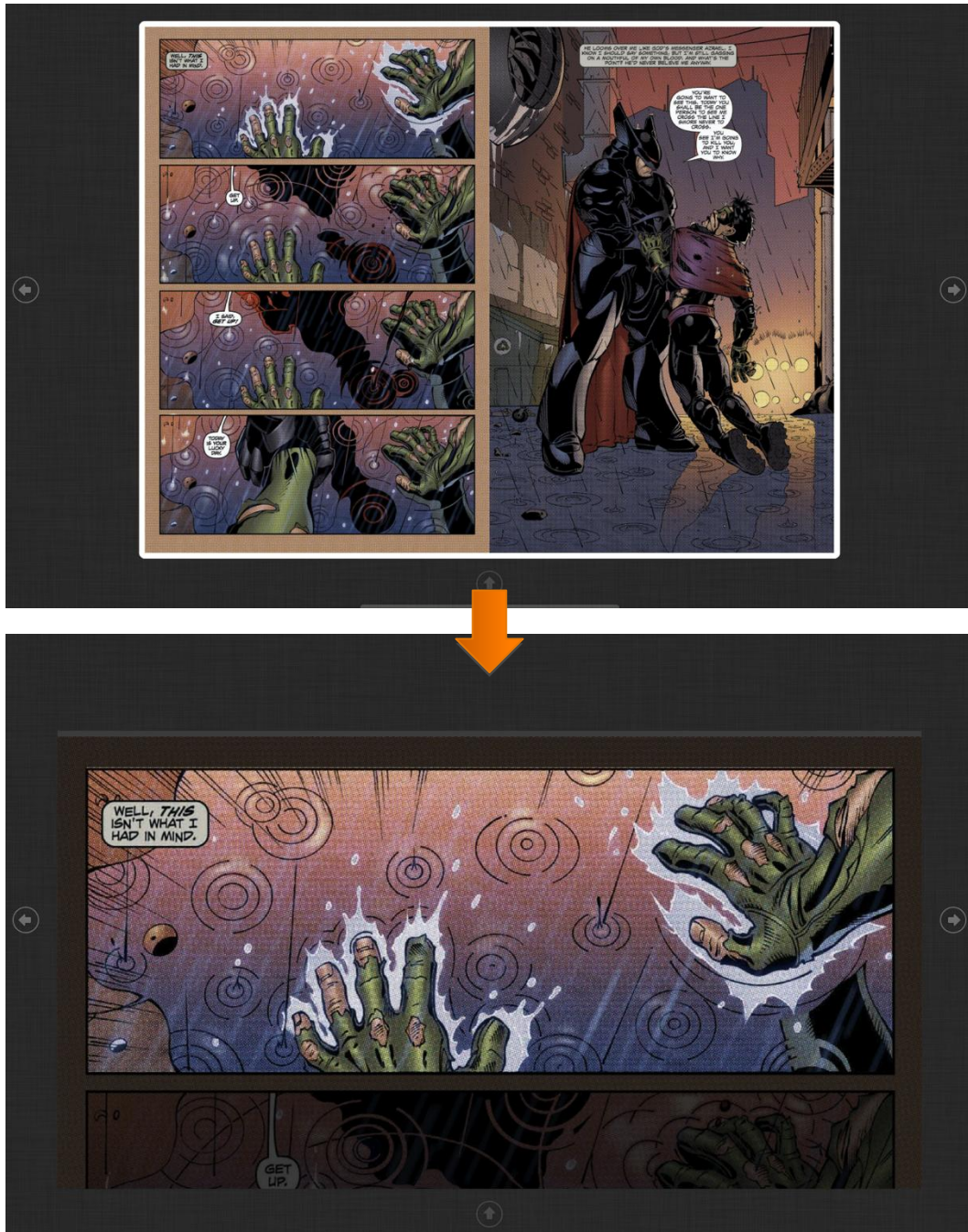
Clicking on the arrow at the bottom of the screen brings up the menu. Each of the buttons is fairly self-explanatory:

You can hide the menu again by clicking on the bar itself (not the icons).
By default the view mode is set to "Graphic.ly Flow", which means that every time you press the left or right arrow it will move to the previous or next panel, zooming up on it to show you all the minute details and make it easy to read. It's a great way to read comics, but if you don't like it you can always choose one of the other view modes to simply change to a different page.
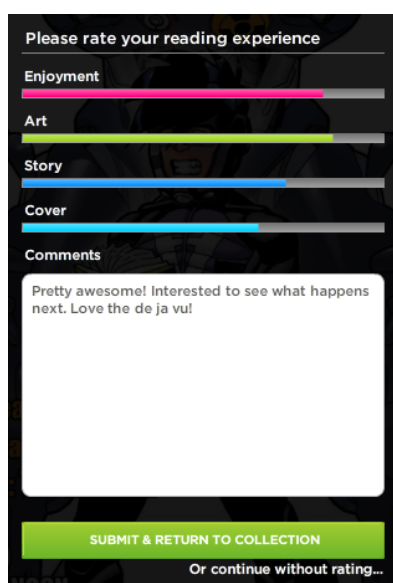
Once you've finished reading a comic you're asked to rate the comic on its "Enjoyment", "Art", "Story" and "Cover" factors. You don't have to do this, of course, but it does help others when they come to find what to read next.

Next, you're given the option to "archive" the comic. This deletes the comic book from your computer and removes it from the "All Comics" list. However, you can choose to re-download the comic at any time by clicking on "Archived" in the navigation bar on the left hand side.

The last thing that's worth talking about is the social side of Graphicly – down in the bottom left hand corner of the window you'll find buttons for the "Friends" and "Messages" screens, respectively.

You can add people on Graphicly to see what they've purchased, read and reviewed recently, as well as a timline similar to Facebook where you can write your thoughts about comics or anything else.

Webcomics

What are Webcomics?

As the name suggests, webcomics are comics published on the Internet. While some webcomics have printed versions, these printed versions are usually brought out much later than the original upload of the comic and brings the comic together into more conventional chapters and volumes.

Two things make webcomics slightly different to traditional comic books. First, webcomics are, more often than not, updated page by page instead of in issues or chapters (although they'll often be structured into chapters).

Second, most webcomics are free to read. The artist usually makes money by showing ad banners, taking commissions, or through donations. Typically a lot of the money which they earn goes right back into running the site.

Ctrl+Alt+Del: An example of an awesome, free to read webcomic

Just like printed comics, there's a wide variety of different genres of webcomics; comedy, drama, sci-fi, horror, fantasy, crime and romance and more are all here. The great thing is that it's really easy for anybody to start up a webcomic – you can see some interesting comics that you'd never see in a store.

How do I find great webcomics to read?

It's really easy to find webcomics that are suited to you. There are plenty of sites which have lists of webcomics ranked by popularity for various genres.

The most popular is probably Top Web Comics, but there are others like Comic Rank. Alternatively, you can go to websites dedicated to hosting webcomics, such as KeenSpot, SmackJeeves or DrunkDuck.

Conclusion

So, let's see.

We've learned a lot about digital comic books, haven't we? Whether they're local comic book archives like CBR or CBZ files or the latest and greatest from a web store, or a web comic that's distributed completely via the web.

We've had a look at comic book readers for each of the major platforms as well as Graphicly, the mighty morphin' power reader that's cross platform and hooks up to the Internet to buy new comic books.

We've covered the basics on making your own comic book files to back up your physical copies. We've even lear-

Hey, you! Yes, you! Get your head out of that comic book!
… oh, wait. I guess I brought this on myself, didn't I? Enjoy!

Further Reading

- 10 Comic Blogs That Every Comic Book Fan Should Read
- DigitalComicMuseum: Extensive Collection of Free Downloadable Comics
- 8 Awesome Webcomics
- ComicMaster: Create a Graphic Novel Online and Print
- Cool Ways to Read Comics On Your iPhone (+ some apps)

Did you like this PDF Guide? Then why not visit MakeUseOf.com for daily posts on cool websites, free software and internet tips.

If you want more great guides like this, why not **subscribe to MakeUseOf and receive instant access to 20+ PDF Guides** like this one covering wide range of topics. Moreover, you will be able to download free Cheat Sheets, Free Giveaways and other cool things.

Subscribe to MakeUseOf : http://www.makeuseof.com/join

MakeUseOf Links:

Home:	http://www.makeuseof.com
MakeUseOf Directory:	http://www.makeuseof.com/dir
MakeUseOf Answers:	http://www.makeuseof.com/answers
Geeky Fun:	http://www.makeuseof.com/tech-fun
PDF Guides:	http://www.makeuseof.com/pages/
Tech Deals:	http://www.makeuseof.com/pages/hot-tech-deals

Follow MakeUseOf:

RSS Feed:	http://feedproxy.google.com/Makeuseof
Newsletter:	http://www.makeuseof.com/join
Facebook:	http://www.facebook.com/makeuseof
Twitter:	http://www.twitter.com/Makeuseof

Download Other MakeUseOf PDF Guides!

Like us to download: http://www.facebook.com/makeuseof