Review of:

40 Years of The Amazing Spider-Man and 44 Years of Fantastic Four

by James Bucky Carter

1. 
40 Years of the Amazing Spider-Man (2004) and 44 Years of Fantastic Four (2005) are two software packages that offer much of interest to the comics scholar, from the essential contents of the disks to the issue of exactly how to classify them.

2. The eleven CD-ROM set 40 Years contains every issue of The Amazing Spider-Man from 1963, including the 1962 Amazing Fantasy #15, the hero’s first appearance, for a total of 501 complete issues. 44 Years trumps its predecessor by including over 550 comics including annuals (a feature the Spider-Man collection lacks) on one DVD-Rom. Both packages utilize Adobe PDF technology to bring the collections to readers in an authentic form, though the reading experience is definitely novel.

3. Authenticity is an especially strong hallmark of the Spider-Man disks. Each comic was scanned from Marvel editor Ralph Maccio’s private collection, and signs of aging on earlier issues offer a charm and sense of history and use. Yellowed pages are kept yellow; stamps on covers have not been removed via image editing software, and slightly rolled spines are left undoctored. These issues were scanned and essentially left just as they were, once digitized, leading to the interesting intellectual question of “just how authentic is this authenticity?” The authenticity of 44 Years is unquestionably less pure than the Spider-Man collection, as brittle
and jaundiced pages have been cleaned up to help panels stand out from the pages. As well, both sets offer the comics “as they were originally published” (Eagle One Media) in that every issue is complete, including advertisements, letter pages, and front and back covers.

4. Depending on one’s screen size and Adobe software package, the interface experience can vary in quality. Viewers do not have the option of reading one page at a time – besides the covers, the pages appear two per PDF image – nor is there the rather obviously desirable ability for readers to virtually “turn the page,” also downgrading the authenticity of the reader-text interaction. If one uses an Adobe Acrobat Reader version lower than 6.0.1, a large block-style “MARVEL” watermark appears on each comics page, and though the ability to print out issues is a selling point of the software, these watermarks make it onto the print-outs also, even if they are not viewed on-screen. It can be tricky to get the two-paged PDFs directly centered such that they are the best size for readability and scrolling is adequately diminished. In short, the interface experience reflects the general existence of the packages: a blend of the excitingly authentic and tediously (at times) new.

5. Even when projected on a large screen such as often seen in university boardrooms, tiny and cramped print from the earliest issues (especially the Spider-Man comics) retains its original challenging legibility, and for both sets, amplifying beyond 400% renders the images fuzzy and pixilated. But, being able to magnify up to 400% allows one to focus on specific panels and images and aids in reading notoriously small and cryptic type from advertisements, a chore even for those with the luxury of having original copies at hand.

6. The time it takes to accustom one’s self to the products is a trade-off for an otherwise rich cultural and critical experience. Each series can be purchased for well under what it would cost to buy the original issues or even arrange travel to or photocopies from library collections. The $35.95-$59.99 price range for each collection is even less than it would cost to buy all the Essential trade paperback volumes, which do not include the adverts or letter pages and are printed in black and white.

7. Scholars can study the evolution of the Marvel style of storytelling from small chaptered selections within each issue’s storyline to the development of ongoing story techniques that span multiple issues. The technique of building the Marvel Universe by testing new characters, heroes and villains alike, within established series becomes historically evident in every generation of the comics.

8. The sets are perfect for comparing different artists’ takes on characters. Marketing techniques are also another avenue of study offered therein. Marvel’s in-house advertising schemes emerge as each issue passes. One sees in Fantastic Four adverts for Spider-Man and X-Men, their covers only slightly revealed to maximize reader intrigue. The longstanding tradition of cross-overs as in-story promotion is given historical perspective. Marvel’s infamous hype develops through a series of in-house ads touting issues from other magazines as the latest “triumph” and via creators’ interaction with fan mail.

9. Further, cultural theorists and those favoring psychoanalysis and gender issues can examine the history and evolution of advertisements beyond the company’s efforts to self-promote. For example, Charles Atlas-type ads are ubiquitous in early issues
but eventually taper off, and there are multiple and evolving images of women and girls as readers, consumers, and consumables available to the critical eye.

10. Then there is the enticing issue of classification. What exactly are these comics? They are re-prints, except that they have been re-imaged rather than reprinted, unless one cares to print them out and disregard the non-original watermarks. They are digital comics, but they aren’t. They meet the definition in that their reformatting “offers new avenues of aesthetic experimentation” (Fenty, Houp, & Taylor, 2005) but, except for a hyperlink to Marvel.com from the menu page, there is little interaction with the Internet and no attempt at being a web comic. They are better considered as digitized comics than digital. Though 44 Years is in DVD-ROM format, it is not a DVD comic like others offered from Eagle One Media, which also distributes these two titles. The DVD comics play like a movie with run times and effects. These two collections, however, attempt to present the comics in an almost all-original form. The packages are at the same time more authentic than anything on the market that comes close to equaling them (reprints, trade paperbacks), yet multiple steps removed from “the thing itself.” So, what are they?

11. What becomes clear when accounting for these packages is that they represent yet another hybrid in the realm of sequential art narratives. They are physical and textual hybrid constructions in the vein of Bakhtin (1981) and Bhabha (1994). Bakhtin says that a hybrid construction is

-an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactical) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages semantical and axiological belief systems” (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998, p.39).

These collections likewise combine markers, literal and digital text, mixed technologies, and therein multiple and combined ways of constructing.

12. Patricia Purtschert (2002) cites Bhaba to help articulate her notion of hybridity:

The concept of hybridity thus allows us to find an in-between space, where the ambiguous and undecided aspects of identities become visible and where the process of creating and stabilising dichotomies is still at work. Instead of eliminating this indecision in favour of a clarity that implies a constant transformation of differences into oppositions, hybridity offers a chance to reformulate identity by focusing on its process of construction and to analyse “the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed” (Bhabha 1994: 47).

40 Years of the Amazing Spider-Man and 44 Years of Fantastic Four represent a novel yet authentic way to experience or re-experience the history of two of superhero comics’ most recognizable and successful series and characters within an in-between space that mixes texts, technologies and interactions.
13. Works Cited


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