

Omeka and the Working Comic Book Library:

Finding the Right Fit

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Abstract

Content Management Systems were tested against seven selected criteria chosen based on extensive experience working in a comic book reference library. The systems, Drupal, Dspace, Eprints, Omeka, and Mukurtu are open-source and widely used and each offer their own benefits. However, the working comic book library requires specific functions that not all of these programs are able to handle. Ease of use from both user and administration sides, an effective tagging system, the ability to view PDF files without downloading, easy migration of data, the ability to modify applications, the ability to duplicate entries, and an easy way to modify the CSS of the repository were the seven criteria. When tested using these criteria, Omeka ended up being the most effective CMS for the comic book collection, being a familiar structure internally with an easy to understand user interface. The real strength in Omeka came with the ability to modify the program using extensive plugins, especially when paired with the ability to install and uninstall plugins with ease. With this advantage, places where Omeka lacked – inability to customize the application profile and the inability to customize the appearance of the site – were fixed within a matter of minutes. Through careful observation and practice with uploading comic issues and searching through them for specific character instances, it was concluded that Omeka is the best option for a comic book collection.

Omeka and the Working Comic Book Library

Over the course of the semester, five different content management systems (CMS) were observed in relation to their suitability for a working comic book collection. Out of Drupal, Dspace, Eprints, Omeka, and Mukurtu, it was decided that Omeka was the most appropriate to be used for the selected collection. This decision came about after the creation of a set of criteria that needed to be met for an effective system. These criteria included: ease of use from both user and admin sides, an effective tagging system, ability to view .pdfs, ability to export and import data, ability to modify application fields, ability to duplicate an entry, and ease of customization. An application profile was created and comics were uploaded as though being made available for a comic book publishing company to use as a resource. Using the criteria selected and applying real-life experiences to the CMS, Omeka stood out as the most effective CMS for a working comic book collection.

Background

The collection included sixteen comic issues from Marvel, DC Comics, and Archie comics. They took form as large PDF files with the largest file around 40MB, though files even larger are possible in a real-life situation. The collection would be added to by librarians within the company who are familiar with the material and know how to extract information from a comic book. They would understand how to read the indicia, as well as have a familiarity with the characters within the comic. The collection would then be used by people who work in special projects or editors who work with creators. These users are

not here for browsing beyond what they require for their projects, and are busy – so clicking too many links or downloading unneeded files can only lead to frustration and a slowed process.

The application developed for the entry of each item into the CMS was created with these editors and managers in mind. Thought was put into what information would be most important for someone working with the material to know. For the most part, Dublin Core ended up being enough, however there were a few elements added specifically for the comic issues. Figure 1 shows the result of a *Veronica* comic issue entered into the CMS. Title is required and is written with the name of the comic (according to the indicia), the year the comic series was first published, and the issue number. All of this information is important for an editor or a project manager to locate the correct issue required. The language field is also important, as publishing companies may publish their materials in foreign languages. Further, some comics – like *Deadpool (2015) No. 3.1* – are entirely in Spanish.

For this small collection of sixteen comics, format was not as necessary but it was included in the application profile anyway as it would become necessary when a larger volume of material is introduced. In a working comic library, there are more than simply comic issues – books that are soft cover and 20-30 pages in length. There are trade paperbacks – collections of the comic issues, hardcovers, omnibuses, and non-comic materials such as prose books and art books. Knowing the format a title is supposed to be in can help figure out which book is being requested. The publisher, date published, issue number, and series name are, of course, strong identifiers for an issue.

The description, creator, and character sections can help to further identify an issue based on content. Being able to pinpoint a story arc or a character appearance can save an immense amount of time that would be spent sifting through a comic. The tags are intended to come from the creators section and the character section. Especially for the character section, the amount of customizability and management that Omeka allows for tags can prove incredibly useful. The “identifier” section of the application would be reserved for the in-library identification scheme, such as the use of UPC codes.

It was also important for the application to have a place to upload the PDF file of the comic. Ease of browsing the PDF file is important to the ease of searching and retrieving specific issues. To get an idea on how to best show a PDF file and allow for browsing, the Arizona Memory Project was searched and newspaper collections were observed, specifically the *Arizona Sun*. These were very close to the types of entries that would be useful for a comic book collection – PDFs are shown, and an ability to glance at the cover of the newspaper can give you an idea of the content. With comics, simply looking at the cover can be enough for someone to know if it is what is needed or not, so having the ability to browse a large number of these without loading new pages can prove useful.

The *Arizona Sun* archive allowed for an ease of browsing the newspaper issues without needing to download a file. It gave simple but useful metadata and even had a transcript. Though a transcript for a comic book would be difficult and time consuming to provide considering the volume of new material added weekly, it could prove useful. For example, sometimes a specific phrase is needed to update trademarks, and instead of

searching by hand through copies of books which is not always successful, there could be a digital keyword search.

Discussion

Criteria for the ideal CMS was developed over the course of the semester. Personal experience with cataloging comics as well as answering reference questions from library users assisted in prioritizing catalog features. Though none of the options had all criteria initially, through plugins Omeka became a clear choice for the chosen content. First will be the discussion of the criteria as they relate to Omeka, and following will be where the others fell short of meeting these criteria.

The first criterion is the ease of use from both user and admin sides. Especially once the command line is understood, downloading and extracting plugins ends up being a very simple project. The dashboard for Omeka is clean and resembles the dashboard of services such as Wordpress, resulting in a familiarity. In fact, in the article *Using Omeka to Build Digital Collections*, authors Kucsma, Reiss, and Sidman (2010) noted “Omeka’s developers appear to have taken design inspiration from Wordpress.” The user-end of Omeka is simple enough as well, with clearly labeled links and search bars. The ease of use makes it possible for those in a frequently changing temporary position to understand and work despite seeing the program for the first time.

The second criterion is the presence of an effective tagging system. Being able to tag comics and have them come up accordingly in a search result can be an indispensable tool when researching. Omeka displayed a very easy tagging system, and more importantly an easy way to modify the tags in place. This way, mistakes could be corrected according to

an internal controlled vocabulary that has been established. There are plugins to add this controlled vocabulary to the Omeka site as well, which makes this tagging system even more powerful.

The third criterion was an ease in the ability to view and download PDFs. Omeka does not originally come with the ability to view PDFs in an item's page itself like with the *Arizona Sun*. However, in Figure 2 the plugin PDF Embed was used in order to fully view a document within an item's page. This could be incredibly useful when it comes to searching large amounts of comics for specific instances of characters or specific moments.

The fourth criterion is the ability to import and export information. This became important as migration from an older system to this new one using Omeka was being considered. Using the OAI-PMH Harvester, it was possible to import hundreds of articles with Dublin Core metadata. Exporting the data appears to be rather simple itself, as even each page offers a spot for the output options for raw metadata.

The fifth criterion was having the ability to modify the application form to include only the information necessary for each item. At first, this seemed rather difficult with Omeka as there were many fields that were unnecessary in the original Dublin Core set. However, a plugin was found that hid specific fields. Once it was possible to hide the fields that didn't pertain to the comic collection, the application form appeared a lot cleaner and a lot more user-friendly, seen in Figure 3. This created a more streamlined system for entering the data.

The sixth criterion was the ability to duplicate an item. This is incredibly important as it can make the addition of new comics and older, unrecorded comics much easier.

Sometimes when adding multiple comics in a series, such as Young Avengers #3, 4, and 5, not a lot of data changes between each issue. However, the different issues certainly need their own entry. Duplicating the entry and then changing the simple things that need changing can end up saving a lot of time. It is not uncommon for there to be two of each issue as well, and so being able to duplicate an entry can cut time in half.

The seventh criterion was the ability to customize the appearance of the webpage. Again, a plugin was required however once installed the CSS Editor plugin proved to be very powerful. Changing the background, font size, font type, and even adding padding and margins proved to be simple especially when the user already had a simple understanding of CSS.

While the other CMS tested had definite strengths, their weaknesses were just not quite enough to override Omeka's strengths. Drupal, while proving easy enough on the inside to use, faulted when it came to being able to edit the appearance using CSS easily and even the search feature was not as strong as would have hoped. Tags were also difficult as they had to be added in a separate page prior to the comic being cataloged which created some problems. Dspace had a similar problem to Drupal in that the appearance was very difficult to change. There was also the inability to quickly look through PDFs without having to download the entire file, which is not ideal. Eprints made it difficult to catalog the comics the way that was needed to do so, but the biggest downfall was the inability to search for keywords easily. It again was difficult to modify the appearance of the Eprints website. Mukurtu was the least favorite, as it had a complicated application process difficult to refine, and the back end was confusing with many links. Ultimately, even if the

regular version of Omeka didn't have the criteria presented, it was easy enough to find and implement a solid workaround that would not break the program.

Conclusion

Overall, a huge influencing factor in choosing Omeka over the other options is its ease of use. Since it is so similar to widely used programs like Wordpress, it makes it easier for some to work through the features. The addition of plugins and the ease in which there is to activate or deactivate the plugins can be immensely beneficial when setting up a system. As it is right now, it is a very useful system for the target users of the comic book collection. The changes that would be beneficial from here seem to be easy enough to make through further plugins and deeper use of the current ones, such as the CSS editor. It would be nice if the file icons to the right side of the browse items section could be a picture of the comic's cover, which would achieve the goal of ultimate ease when searching for a specific issue. Right now, this system is effective for a comic book collection, and it could be a great asset to the organization and frequent use of a working comic book library.

References

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Appendix

Figure 1. Application Profile End Result for Comic Issues in Omeka

The screenshot shows the Omeka application interface for item #640, "Veronica (2008) No. 202". At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for "Plugins", "Appearance", "Users", "Settings", "Welcome, Super User", and "Log Out". Below the navigation bar, the item title "Item #640: 'Veronica (2008) No. 202'" is displayed next to a search box. A message box indicates "The item 'Veronica (2008) No. 202' was successfully changed!".

The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Dublin Core:** A table of metadata including Title, Language, Format, Description, Creator, Publisher, and Identifier.
- Comic Issue Item Type Metadata:** A table of specific metadata including Date Published, Issue No., Series Name, and Characters.
- Actions:** A vertical stack of buttons for "Edit", "Duplicate", "View Public Page", and "Delete".
- Public/Featured:** A section showing "Public: Yes" and "Featured: Yes".
- Collection:** A section showing the item is part of the "Comic Books" collection.
- Tags:** A list of tags including Archie Andrews, Betty Cooper, Dan Parent, Jughead Jones, Kevin Keller, and Veronica Lodge.
- File Metadata:** A section showing the file "fall13.veronica-202.pdf".
- Output Formats:** A list of output formats including "atom" and "dcmes-xml".

Figure 2. PDF Embed used on a comic book’s metadata page

Hawkeye

Characters
Clint Barton, Kate Bishop, Lucky

Files
Prev I Next

98aca1a55e517cc6f45e8680d42c5186.pdf

Collection
[Comic Books](#)

Tags
[Clint Barton](#), [David Aja](#), [Kate Bishop](#), [Lucky](#), [Matt Fraction](#)

Citation
Matt Fraction (writer), David Aja (artist) "Hawkeye (2012) No. 11" *Comic Books*, accessed Mar 4

Figure 3. Application form with elements organized and some hidden

Plugins Appearance Users Settings Welcome, Super User Log Out

| | | |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Title | A name given to the resource | <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px;"> <p style="text-align: center; background-color: #76923c; color: white; padding: 2px;">Add Item</p> <p style="text-align: center; background-color: #1a3d4d; color: white; padding: 2px;">Cancel</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Public: <input type="checkbox"/> Featured: <input type="checkbox"/></p> <hr/> <p>Collection</p> <p>Select Below ▼</p> </div> |
| Add Input | <input type="text" value="Action Comics (2011) No. 9"/> | |
| | Use HTML <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Language | A language of the resource | |
| Add Input | <input type="text" value="English"/> | |
| | Use HTML <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Format | The file format, physical medium, or dimensions of the resource | |
| Add Input | <input type="text" value="Comic Issue"/> | |
| | Use HTML <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Description | An account of the resource | |
| Add Input | <input type="text" value="It's difficult being Superman. New 52."/> | |
| | Use HTML <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Creator | An entity primarily responsible for making the resource | |
| Add Input | <input type="text" value="Grant Morrison, Gene Ha"/> | |
| | Use HTML <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Publisher | An entity responsible for making the resource available | |

Figure 4. Search Results for the tag “Superman”



Search bar

Browse Items | Browse Collections

BROWSE ITEMS (2 TOTAL)

Browse All | Browse by Tag | Search Items

Tags: Superman

Sort by: [Title](#) | [Creator](#) | [Date Added](#) ▲

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Action Comics (2011) No. 9 | It's difficult being Superman. New 52. Also contains: Executive Power. Tags: Gene Ha , Grant Morrison , Lex Luthor , Lois Lane , New 52 , Superman |  |
| Action Comics (1938) No. 2 | Superman doing things Tags: Lois Lane , Superman |  |

Output Formats
[atom](#), [dcmes-xml](#), [json](#), [omeka-xml](#), [rss2](#)

Comicssss

[Browse Items](#) · [Browse Collections](#)

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