Adult Graphic Novels Readers

A Survey in a Montréal Library

Olivier Charbonneau

Graphic novels have taken the library world by storm. This new format for sequential or narrative art is closer to a book and thus resolves many problems public libraries had with comic books, those flimsy booklets teenagers love so much. Traditional superhero comic book editors have jumped on the bandwagon, and new publishers are heralding a modern, more mature age for comics. For example, the Montréal-based Drawn & Quarterly offers many titles for adult readers (NOT sexually explicit). These new narrative approaches, coupled with a more practical format, have made graphic novels a sure hit in public libraries.

Having been raised in Québec, I was fascinated at how English-language librarians saw the comic book and later reacted to the graphic novel phenomenon. In fact, "*la bande dessinée*" (literally: illustrated strips) are as much a part of Québec public libraries as encyclopaedias or novels. These are full-color, usually glossy-paged hardbound books called "albums" (think Tintin, Astérix, the Smurfs—originally Belgian—and friends). Some institutions even boast collections of more than ten thousand bandes dessinées for children *and* adults. It was certainly the main reason I started using my local library as a teenager, a move that eventually lead me to librarianship.

As my MLIS at the Université de Montréal called for an internship in my final semester, I instantly thought of studying a bandes dessinée collection. Keeping in mind its role in francophone culture, finding an interested library was rather simple. In fact, the Octogone Library, in the LaSalle borough of Montréal, boasts one of the largest collections on the island.

The 73,000 LaSalle residents, of which 25,113 were active users of the library in 2002, accounted for 262,457 visits and 542,289 loans in that same year. At the time of my internship in winter 2003, the adult collection had more than 5,500 titles from French Europe, 600 French, and 75 English manga titles (sequential art from Japan) as well as 650 English-language graphic novels. As the library holds multiple copies of some popular titles, a total of 9,232 documents are available in the adult collection. The adult sequential art collection represents about 5 percent of the overall adult collection, but as a component of our circulation, it accounts for 13 percent of the adult and 11 percent of the overall (adult and children) borrowing.

You might have noticed that I focus on the *adult* bande dessinée collection. There is a separate collection for youth, but initial meetings with the library's management allowed us to zone in on their particular needs. After all, I only had thirty-six working days over four months for my internship, so we had to determine precise goals. We opted to survey the collection's users. The purpose was to identify these patrons' demographic characteristics and to determine their satisfaction with regard to this subcollection.

Survey Format

After much discussion, thought, and preparation, the final survey had twenty-seven questions and fit on two double-sided legal size pages folded in half, to produce an eight-page booklet (each one manually prepared by this humble ex-intern).[1] Banking on my experience in the direct marketing industry from my past life, I used the Recent-Frequent-Money (RFM) model to build my survey. In a nutshell, it asks the three main questions retailers have found to best describe customers: How recent was your last visit? How frequently do you visit us? How much money do you usually spend? (This last point I adapted to "How many bande dessinées do you borrow?") Both French and English versions of the survey were produced, and the latter was reproduced in the appendix of this article.

A large, colorful display filled with questionnaires was left near the collection, and smaller but still colorful displays were strategically placed near the computer lab, reference, and circulation desks. Staff were asked to hand one out when users borrowed a bande dessinée. The survey ran for five weeks (February 13 to March 19, 2003, limited by the internship) and we distributed 450 and received 108 valid forms. Statistical validity is not confirmed, and some subgroups are rather small, but it provides interesting views into the minds of patrons.[2]

The Results

More men and all ages—Sixty-two percent of respondents are men, whereas they account for 40 percent of all library

Olivier Charbonneau is a business librarian at Concordia University. As a tenure track faculty member, he is interested in the entertainment industry, primarily digital copyright concerns, as well as comic books, graphic novels and French *bande dessinée*. He is a member of CLA's and ASTED's copyright committees and is in the midst of coursework for a master's in law. Also, he is the vice president of the Arts on Paper Society, a nonprofit organization based in Montréal that promotes graphic and narrative art.

users. It is largely known that men love sequential art, but it shows that we must not discount female users as well, with a respectable 38 percent of respondents. For both sexes, 38 percent are aged fifteen years and younger; 22 percent are sixteen to twenty-one; 21 percent are twenty-two to thirty-nine; and 19 percent are forty and older! It clearly shows that all ages indulge in sequential art.

Draws motivated users—Fifty-nine percent of those who responded stated that bande dessinée is the main reason they visit the library, while 85 percent of the sample disclose that they use other library services (novels and computer labs being the most popular). So this collection attracts users that fully participate in the institution. On the other hand, 11 percent of those who replied are male users aged twenty-one or younger who would not have otherwise visited the library. In this case, this collection attracts reluctant users that may eventually use other library services.

Stable users—About 75 percent of those who responded have been using the collection for three years or more, while 80 percent visit the library at least every four weeks. Of course, satisfaction surveys usually attract the most motivated cases, so this point is often a fallacy—but it is still interesting to note.

Give them what they want—Users were asked to rank their favorite genres. Here are their preferences, in order: humor, adventure, science fiction, police/spy/political, and fantasy. Other choices were available, but they didn't do nearly as well. In order: superhero, historical, erotic, horror, western, drama/romance, and alternative/underground. This is quite use-ful for collection building and reference.

Youths love manga—Nineteen percent of responders stated that they ONLY read manga (Japanese comics such as Pokémon and Dragon Ball), and they are all younger than thirty! Only about 6 percent of those responding were aged thirty or older and admitted reading both bande dessinée and mangas. This is an important trend: the western world is only now waking up to the manga

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phenomenon. In 1995, 40 percent of all books and magazines sold in Japan were manga![3] Expect more and more manga in English and French in years to come.

Activities for all—Sixty percent would be interested or very interested in participating in a club, in conferences, or other activities. About half would read more if they were recommended documents based on their genre. There seems to be unanswered demand at this level.

Satisfaction—Eighty-nine percent of responders—spanning all demographic characteristics—are either satisfied or very satisfied with the Octogone Library's collection. (Those dissatisfied are unhappy with the size of the English collection.)

Conclusion

Despite major cultural differences between francophone and anglophone sequential art, they both benefit from a devoted fan base. Furthermore, the introduction of the graphic novel format is a clear departure from the classical superhero comic book dogma. This will probably lead to a shift in readership, and public libraries should have the foresight to benefit from this trend.

The data collected from this satisfaction survey provide key indications of the wants of a Québec client base, comfortable with the Franco-Belgian bande dessinée tradition. It clearly shows that this collection is a desired and vibrant part of the Octogone Library. This tool is a definite boon to librarians from all over North America, especially as it attests to the future popularity of English-language graphic novels. In a nutshell, if you are considering creating a graphic novel collection in your library, build it and they will come! ●

REFERENCES

1. Mira Falardeau, *La Bande dessinée au Québec* (Montréal: Editions Boréal, 1994); Sharon L. Baker, "Quality and Demand: The Basis for Fiction Collection Assessment," *Collection Building* 13, nos. 2–3: 65–68; Sophie Ranjard, "Pratiques et attentes des publics des médiathèques: méthodes et techniques d'enquête," *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France* 45, no. 5: 102–107; Marie-Fabienne Fortin, *Le processus de la recherche: de la conception à la réalisation* (Montréal: Décarie Éditeur, 1996).

2. Jacques Ferron, *Comprendre, interpréter et évaluer les sondages* (Montréal: Info-Éditique Ferron, 1994), vi, 218.

3. Paul Gravett, "Telling Tales Through Visuals," *Library Association Record* 99, no. 3 (Mar. 1997): 141.

Appendix: Survey Questions

For a Better Comic Book and Manga Collection

Did you know that your library has one of the most extensive collections of manga, comic books, and graphic novels (bandes dessinées) on the Island of Montréal? It's true, and we're always trying to touch it up for you. Actually, you might have noticed the improved display cases for the manga collection. (Mangas are comic books from Japan, on the rotating display cases)

In keeping with this desire to offer you better service, we ask you to take a few moments of your time to answer this short survey. Be assured that all the details you provide us will be used for statistical purposes and that this survey will remain confidential. Please fill out this survey only once.

Thank you in advance for your time!

Validation

Have you ever borrowed from the Octogone Library . . .

- mangas in French?   yes   no
- mangas in English ?   yes   no
- comic books/graphic novels in French?   yes   no
- comic books/graphic novels in English?   yes   no

If you have answered YES to any of the previous questions, please fill out this survey.

Your Use of the Collection

1. Are the comic book/graphic novel and manga collections the main reason you visit the library?
   (Yes, I visit the library primarily for the comic book/graphic novel and manga collections; No, I visit the library primarily for the other services or collections)
2. How long have you been using the manga or comic book/graphic novel collection?
   (Less than 6 months, 6 months to 1 year, 1–2 years, 3–4 years, 5–9 years, 10 years or more)
3. How long ago was the last time you visited the library to use the comic book/graphic novel or manga collection?
   (this is my first time, less than a week ago, 1–2 weeks ago, 3 weeks ago, 4–6 weeks ago, 7–9 weeks ago, 10–12 weeks ago, 13 weeks or more)
4. On average, how often do you visit the library for the comic book/graphic novel or manga collection?
   (more than once a week, once a week, twice a month, once a month; once every two months; once every three months; once every six months, I don't know)
5. How many comic books/graphic novels or mangas did you borrow when you last visited the library
   (estimate if you are not sure)? (1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, 9–10; I never borrow comic books/graphic novels or mangas, I read them at the library)
6. Once at the library, do you use its other documents or services?
   (Yes, I use its other documents or services, specify_____; No, I visit the library only for its comic books/graphic novels or mangas)
7. Do you use the computer system to find comic books/graphic novels or mangas you want to read?
   (Yes, No, specify _____).

Your Preferences

8. Do you prefer mangas or comic books/graphic novels?
   (mangas; comic books/graphic novels; both)
9. Order the following genre from 1 to 12, where 12 is your favorite genre and 1, the one you like the least.
   (alternative/underground; adventure; drama/romance; erotic; fantasy; historical; horror; humour; police/spy/political; science-fiction; superhero; Western)
10. Do you prefer stories that span many volumes (series) or stories contained in one volume (graphic novels, one-shots)?
    (series, graphic novels, one-shots; both)
11. In which language do you prefer to read comic books/graphic novels or mangas?
    (French; English; both)
12. How interested are you in works detailing artists' lives (biographies, making-of) as well as essays or books about comic book/graphic novel or manga (history of, analysis, papers)?
    (very interested; interested; uninterested; very uninterested)
13. How interested are you in encyclopedias or dictionaries about comic books/graphic novels or mangas?
    (very interested; interested; uninterested; very uninterested)
14. How interested are you in events involving comic books/graphic novels or mangas
    (lectures, conferences, book club)? (very interested; interested; uninterested; very uninterested)
15. Do you buy your own comic books/graphic novels or mangas?
    (Yes, specify the number of books purchased each year: ____; No)
16. Do you receive comic books/graphic novels or mangas as gifts?
    (Yes, specify the number of books received each year: ____; No)

Your Appreciation of the Collection

17. Regarding the comic book/graphic novel and manga collection in general, are you . . .
     (very satisfied; satisfied; unsatisfied; very unsatisfied)?

For the following points, please read the statement and show if it's true or false for French or English mangas as well as for French or English comic books/graphic novels. Specify your choice by circling:
    T, if the statement is TRUE;
    F, if the statement is FALSE ;
    ?, if the statement does not apply or if you do not know.

	Mangas		Comic books/graphic novels	
IN GENERAL,	French	English	French	English
18. The books I want to read are never there	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?
119. I've almost read everything that interests me	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?
20. I feel like all the books are alike	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?
21. I have a hard time finding what I want to read	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?
22. I would read more if I knew which books are good	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?
23. I would read more books if I knew which ones are in the genre I like	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?	T F ?

In Closing

24. What is your age group?
     (Less than 12 years old; 13–15 years old; 16–17 years old; 18–21 years old; 22–25 years old; 26–29 years old; 30–39 years old; 40–49 years old; 50–59 years old; 60 years old and older)
25. What is your gender?
     (Female; Male)
26. Do you live in the LaSalle borough (old city of LaSalle)?
     (Yes; No, specify _____)
27. Do you have suggestions or comments to improve the manga or comic book/graphic novel collection?

PLEASE FILL OUT THIS SURVEY ONLY ONCE
PLEASE HAND IN THIS SURVEY TO ANY LIBRARY EMPLOYEE
Thank you. By answering this survey, you have partaken in the collection's improvement!