



IndieCreator: Insights from a Newbie Comic Creator & Other Industry Pros

This is the first in a series of bi-weekly columns about the travels and travails within indie comics by Bob Heske @ Heske Horror, creator of [The Night Projectionist](#) and [Cold Blooded Chillers](#). The first column focuses on my introduction to comics; the follow-up will be a primer on how to create a DIY horror comic series. To keep it fresh, I'll also interview other artists, bloggers, publishers, printers, LCS owners, and Web distributors.

Creating Indie Horror on a Shoestring Budget

It happened about a year ago. It was Free Comic Book Saturday when I ambled into a local comic book store and noticed flocks of fans scooping up comic freebies and armfuls of discount OGNs. My eyeballs scanned the long line at the cash register and that's when I had my epiphany: "Dang! I'm gonna give this comic thing a try."

Naturally, I neglected to tell my wife who had just delivered our second daughter (note: I don't recommend this strategy if you have an unforgiving spouse who is already suspicious of your tawdry night habits). I Googled during lunch hours and in the wee evening hours to research how to get this venture out of my head and onto the page. Four months later I was ripping open a FedEx envelope from Ka-Blam and admiring my first digital print-on-demand comic.

What follows are the steps from point A (my epiphany) to point B (the finished "product").

Step 1: Make Sure You Have Plenty of Stories to Tell

The first step is simple: Story, story, story. Make sure you have enough creative bullets that are concise, compelling, and entertaining. One story or one interesting character is not enough to sustain a ravenous comic book audience. You need to keep feeding the beast.

Step 2: Find Your Comic Book Niche

I'd written several film shorts in multiple genres: animation, comedy, drama, sci fi, suspense/thriller, etc. But when it came to comics, what I remembered from my youth were the Creepy and Eerie comics that contained standalone horror shorts with evil twists. Wonderfully macabre stuff!

Horror is a very saturated market – particularly zombies and vampires (trust me, as the author of a vampire series I know first-hand how hard it is to please hard-core horror

fans). I opted for a sub-genre that I'd seen more and more in movies – something I tabbed “Suburban Horror” with evil deeds performed by people as the miscreants and monsters.

Hence my indie horror series was born:

COLD BLOODED CHILLERS
Tales of suburban murder and malice

Step 3: Create Your Own Brand

Two years ago you could assemble a pitch book and submit your concept to comic publishers. Nowadays many publishers want to see entire books completed – that's several, not just one – to even be considered.



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Like it or not, the industry is pushing many of us to become our own publishers – at least for the first few issues. As a newbie indie publisher, I needed a name and a logo. Since my last name begins with an “H” and I like alliteration, I chose **Heske Horror**.

I had to find someone to create the logo for me, so I went to [iFreelance](#) and posted an ad. I got about 25 hits, and a few angry designers griping about my lowball \$100 logo budget. I soon found a person who was not only a designer but also was expert on pre-flight services (more on this later). I provided input on 3 concepts and chose the logo on the right.

Unlike Creepy and Eerie, I decided not to invent a signature character like Uncle Creepy and Cousin Eerie (or the Crpyt Keeper for “Tales from the Crpyt”). Too much money.

Once I had my name and branding done, the next step was to ...

Step 4: Find a Printer

Whoa! You're probably thinking “Isn't that putting the cart before the horse? Don't you need to get the artists and the work completed first?”

Nope. And here's why. There aren't too many “print-on-demand” digital printers who specialize in comics. So, you need to find out who you want to do your printing and get their print specs so your artists can prep the pages accordingly.

Here are the two comic printers I use:

- [Ka-blam](#) – Great production quality, good pricing for floppies with no-setup fee, plus [IndyPlanet](#) – an online website where they post your comic for online sales. Ka-blam is also introducing [ComicsMonkey](#) – a sister site providing print-on-demand comics distribution for direct market comics. ComicsMonkey offers a new avenue for indie creators who were shut out of Diamond Previews in lieu of Diamond’s higher sales thresholds for first issues. (As a result, 99% of indie comic creators now can’t get their multiple-issue series listed in Diamond’s monthly retail catalog because they can’t meet the insurmountable sales quota.)
- [Comixpress](#) – Same high quality as Ka-blam with a nominal setup fee (roughly \$20, depending on your book specs). Comixpress also offers a retail website to sell your books but, in my opinion, it is less slick than IndyPlanet and the other indie creators listed on this site aren’t up to par. Comixpress is also working on a retail distribution service which it will be launching later this year.

To reap additional print savings, I leave my back cover blank to post Ka-blam & Comixpress ads (you’ll save roughly \$0.40-\$0.50 per book). The print specs posted on both sites and are very straightforward. Finished size is 6.625” x 10.25” (the standard comic book size); Ka-blam takes TIF files whereas Comixpress takes a variety of file types (note: TIFs provide higher print resolution).

Once you FTP the files to Ka-blam or Comixpress, you get a proof and, upon approval, you are ready to have your comic book uploaded onto their retail websites. Before that can happen, you’ll need to send a brief description of your comic book and some sample page JPGs. The entire process takes 4-5 weeks from submission to “live on the Web.”

Caveat – While the production staffs on both services are excellent, the customer service is a tad slow. I’ve had customers wait a month to get their comics, and the added S&H and postage costs make the price tag too steep for some comic buyers’ wallets.

Another option is [Lulu](#) who also has a Lulu marketplace and a variety of other services such as the ability to buy ISBNs (an internationally recognized identification code that appears on retail comics along with a bar code). I can’t vouch for Lulu personally, but many creators I’ve talked to swear by the quality of their work.

Ka-Blam, Comixpress and Lulu can also produce a trade paperback or original graphic novel. But the best printer I’ve found in terms of a tradeoff between price and quality for printing graphic novels is [Mira Digital Publishing](#).

‘Nuff said about printers. Now it’s time to get those artists!

Step 5: Find Artists

Where does one find artists, you ask? Working in marketing, I decided to ask graphic designers. “Try the art schools – students are always hungry to beef up their portfolios.”

I focused on a few of the bigger art schools and here was the typical response I got from program administrators:

...Many of my students are already doing lucrative freelance jobs for clients like The New Yorker, The Wu-Tang Clan, The Police, book publishers, and more. I'll ask around but feel you might not get much of a response.

Fortunately, through a tip from a comic creator (Chad Jones, former Editor at Studio 407), I joined [comicspace](#) and

EUREKA!

... this one site has been my golden source for finding artists, letterists, and even websites to submit comics for review (more on this strategy later).

The process is as simple as 1-2-3:

- 1) You join comicspace and set up your page;
- 2) You do a search for artists in your genre (I searched using the key word combination “horror, noir”); and
- 3) You “befriend” the artists whose online galleries impress you the most via email and see if they’d like to work on your project.



Page layout from "Her First Day Alone" (Cold Blooded Chillers #02, Artist Monty Borrer)

The key to connecting with artists is providing a simple one-page “work for hire” form outlining the scope of work, deliverables, specs, and payment terms. I paid an entertainment lawyer \$200 to help me draft my work-for-hire template form.

You'll want to focus on two types of artists – those who do cover art and those who do sequential art. For sequential artwork, try to get artists who do it all – layouts, finished pencils, inking and lettering. If you can afford to do color, great; however, chances are you will be limited to b&w inside pages for your indie comic.

Step 5a: Don't Be Afraid to Fire Artists Who Don't Deliver

OK, this isn't really a step, but it is something worth mentioning.

I had to terminate three artists whom I hired to work on issues one and two. They either didn't have the appropriate style or never delivered on time (mostly the latter). That's why it pays to hire a lawyer to get a good "work for hire" agreement.

The good news is that most artists are very good – and when you find one that you like, you can go back to this person for projects in the future. Reward good work!

One other tip – Don't give an artist more than one project at a time. For my anthology series all the stories were written by myself so I needed different artistic styles to provide added diversity to my horror tales. Also, by giving an artist a shorter story, they are able to get it done quicker and are more open to the lower pay scale you will inevitably have to offer them. And yes, you'll need to pay for their services – and it is well worth it. The amount of work that goes into creating a comic book page – the layout, the finished pencils, inking and lettering – is immense. Just remember: You're on a shoestring budget so don't overpay because the overwhelming odds are that you will have a tax loss to write off (and explain to your spouses) come April 15th.

Step 6: Get a Good Letterist

This step is only necessary if your artist can't spell and doesn't do lettering. Some of my favorite artists just don't do it, so in this case you need to go back to comicspace and do a search for letterists. Negotiate a rate (about \$15-25 per page based on 1-2 rounds of minor edits). You will need to make sure your letterist follows the same specs as the artist, based on whatever printer you are using (see Step 4: Find a Printer).



If you are creating an anthology like [Cold Blooded Chillers](#), be sure to have the artist or letterist create a title box with credits in the first panel as shown in this panel from “False Pretenses” expertly drawn by Zeu (*Charlatan, Project Elohim, Infiniteens*), one of the fastest and finest indie illustrators known to mankind (with lettering on this story by the proficient Alain Norte).

Step 7: Have a Designer Pre-flight Your Artist Files



Working on a horror anthology, I worked with artists and letterists from around the globe. Sure, I gave them the specs and even had my designer provide a template for them all to follow. Inevitably, each artist will do things a bit differently.

Therefore it is absolutely-positively essential to find a person with pre-flight experience who is conscientious and affordable. A good place to search online is (again) at [iFreelance.com](#). Set your budget at @ \$5 per pre-flighted page or negotiate a flat rate of \$125-\$150. You may even want to have Ka-blam or Comixpress send TWO PROOFS the first time you produce a comic – one to you and the other to your pre-flight designer.

Again, to produce a high-quality book you need to do the upfront attention-to-detail work to make sure the TIF files or hi-res PDF that you send to the printer is prepped correctly.

DON'T SKIMP ON THIS STEP!!

Step 8: Promote the Crap out of Your Comic Book

OK, so you've put together your comic, approved the proof and had it posted on either IndyPlanet, Comixpress or Lulu's marketplace (or all of the above is fine too). Now you need to let the world know about your masterpiece.

Here are 7 ways to get it done:

1. Create Your Own Website – You should start building your promotional website while you are creating your 1st comic. I use [Network Solutions](#) because they provide a total package for buying a domain and creating a DIY website – plus their service

includes FTP capabilities, multiple mailboxes, and a crack customer service team who are ready day or night to help out in a crunch. One option to consider is creating a blog encapsulating your journey in creating and launching your venture to build some pre-hype on the Internet.

2. Offer Your Comic (and Yourself) for Reviews and Interviews – Each day I scan the public bulletins on comicspace to see if anyone announces that their comic has been reviewed or that they were interviewed by so-and-so and whatcha-ma-callit website. Then I go click the link for the review and contact the reviewer/interviewer directly to see if they would be willing to read my work. If they say “yes,” you will need to send either a PDF or print copy. I’ve gotten about 25-30 reviews and interviews with this approach.

3. Attend Comic Cons – In today’s tough economy, it’s hard to rationalize spending money on attending comic cons. But the fact is that is where the fans are at, and it is your best opportunity to get in front of them and to be noticed. Plus, many states have their own comic cons. To keep costs down, I only attend Boston Comic Con which is an hour’s drive away.

4. Participate in Free Comic Book Day – Free Comic Book Day is the first Saturday in May. Most local comic book shops welcome the opportunity to showcase local artists who doodle sketches and sell their wares. This year I got myself invited to That’s Entertainment (New England’s largest comic book store) as a comic creator and writer. I gave out free bookmarks with my website address and offered some discounts to encourage sales. It was a blast and I noticed a bump on my website traffic when I got home.

5. Advertise with Banner Ads and Banner Exchanges – One cheap alternative for banner advertising is [Project Wonderful](#). It’s a great model that allegedly eliminates “click fraud” and enables you to do a key word (and other metrics) search among hundreds of websites to find the best fit for your ad. You bid on the space and the good news is it won’t cost you an arm and a leg. Plus, Project Wonderful has some decent reports that let you track your results. To use it you need to create a banner ad (various size specs are shown on the website), sign up, and deposit as little as \$10-15 into your account. Another free banner exchange service I use is [GenreBanners.com](#) which I have signed up for under the horror category. Here’s how it works (ripped from their website): *Simply join the exchange and place your personalized linking code into your site. When you display banners on your website, you will earn credits for your banner being shown on other websites. You will only exchange banners with other members in your category.*

6. Get Your Comics Out There Digitally – I’m a traditionalist as much as the next geek, or “guy.” But the world is changing and the tectonic comic plates are shifting under our toes. Two sites you need to get on board with are [MyEbook](#) and [DriveThruComics](#). **MyEbook** is a free site that lets you create e-comics (with a kick-ass, easy-to-use web tool) – you can show the whole comic for free or do a preview like I do and then link to your website. Plus, you can easily insert multi-media files such as audio commentary or YouTube clips of anyone who has reviewed your comic book. MyEbook is in beta phase

now but will be releasing two new exciting platforms that let you carry ads in your webcomic to generate revenue and will be building a creator retail site to boot.

DriveThruComics is a nifty site that lets you upload PDFs of your comics that fans can preview and buy at a reduced cost. It's a cheaper alternative than print and is gaining a wider fan base of comic fans who like to read from their computer. DriveThruComics also has some cool marketing programs that can help spotlight your comic book such as a monthly newsletter and weekly comic spotlights on the home page including "Pick of the Week," "Free Product Trial," "Featured Product," and "Staff Favorites."

7. Join Social Networks – The two that I use are [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#). LinkedIn is more of a professional networking site; however, you can join professional comic book groups to get the word out and introduce yourself to a captive comic audience. Another resource that I like a lot is [HeavyInk](#) which is a discount-price portal for over a hundred comic creators and thousands of major and indie titles. I strongly suggest that you join HeavyInk and sell some books on their site (just make sure you bump up your cover price as HeavyInk takes a cut and sells your titles at a 20% discount off retail).

How Much Does It Cost to Create Your Own Comic?

If you are a writer and can't draw the stories, it costs a lot more. But it is still cheaper than making short films. I produced 3 floppy comics (36-40 pages per issue) and a 140-page trade paperback for @ \$10,000. This included creating my logo, website, doing some banner ads and giving away about 20-30 books for review. So plan on \$2,000 to \$2,500 per comic book – although if you collaborate with an artist who'll agree to take payment on the back-end (after you recoup up-front production costs) then you can produce a comic book for \$300 to \$500.

My sales haven't been very good, but I did get a lot of recognition and recently learned that my trade paperback BONE CHILLER received a medal in the horror category in the prestigious [Independent Publisher Book Awards](#) (known as the IPPY awards). Even my wife has forgiven me!

Lastly, before you dive into your comic creation journey, be sure to check out other indie comics to see how they're put together. One "shoestring budget" way to do this is to visit [DriveThruComics](#) to download \$0.72 PDFs which you can keep and refer to (just don't re-use any artwork or you will roast in the fires of Hell!).

In the next column, I'll begin interviewing other industry creators and pros who will share their experiences and insights. Until then, keep creating and pursuing your dream.

Yours cruelly,

R.M. Heske
HESKE HORROR

Comic Favorite “Pickups” from Chad Jones

Chad Jones is a freelance writer, editor, art director and graphic designer. He’s done work for Studio 407 and Bluewater Productions. He’s edited such books as *Hybrid* and *The Night Projectionist*, and is the writer for the upcoming series *Netherworld* and *Sturm & Drang*. Here are three comic books that Chad picked up and recommends to our readers:

Flash Rebirth #1. Barry Allen returns the DCU after twenty years at the hand of one of the best writers working in the medium, Geoff Johns. I’ve always had a soft spot in my heart for the character and the concept. When I was a kid, my cousins had a fairly extensive stack of Flash comics, and that’s where I first discovered the Scarlet Speedster. So this is me getting back in touch with why I first began to read comics.

No Hero #1. Ah, Warren Ellis. Even when he’s not good, he’s still worth reading. Jury’s still out on this series, but it’s very interesting. A world where the only superheroes are created by pharmaceuticals developed in the sixties, and under the sole control of a private corporation. A new recruit joins the team just as someone starts to bring the organization down. The art in this, by Juan Jose Ryp, is awesome. It reminds of Geof Darrow.

Incognito #1 Okay, I’m a sucker for superhero books, and I kind of apologize for all of these being superhero choices. But ... I like what I like, so there. It’s always fun for me when I come across a new take on the genre. Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips tell us of a small-time villain in the witness protection program unable to adjust to civilian life. Its dark, its noir and its effing great.



Bob Heske is a screenwriter and graphic novelist with [IMDB](#) film credits, multiple short and feature screenplay options. Bob is creator of [The Night Projectionist](#), a vampire horror series by publisher [Studio 407](#) with film rights optioned by [Myriad Pictures](#). Through his Heske Horror shingle, Bob has self-published his critically acclaimed horror series [Cold Blooded Chillers](#) and [Bone Chiller](#) trade paperback. Bob’s works are available online at ComixPress, IndyPlanet, HeavyInk, SmallZone and DriveThruComics. Email him at info@coldbloodedchillers.com.