



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

This is a series of bi-weekly columns by Bob Heske @ Heske Horror, creator of [The Night Projectionist](#) and [Cold Blooded Chillers](#), featuring interviews and insights from indie comic artists, writers, creators, distributors and visionaries.

10 Questions with Amy Trapp @ Mira Digital Publishing

When you are a graphic novel creator, one of the best friends you hold dearly is your digital printer. Like a film director relies on his actors, you too rely heartily on your printer to make your product look good. Early in my publisher career, I had a run-in with a well-known digital print-on-demand (POD) vendor. Apparently I complained too much about the delay in delivery and the high cost of shipping and handling fees, and it touched a nerve. In a curt, concise email they threatened to cut the cord and let me walk. I ate my words until I found a better fit – and that company is [Mira Digital Publishing](#). Low cost, high service. They are the only POD vendor I know that you can actually call rather than wait in the queue for an email response. It's been a brief courtship, but so far – a marriage made in graphic novel heaven.



You too can experience digital bliss. “Read all about it” in my one-on-one interview with Amy Trapp, Sales & Marketing Director at Mira Digital Publishing ...

Q1: Tell us about Mira Digital Publishing – what's your elevator pitch?

(MIRA:) Mira is a full-service company in the digital publishing industry that constantly strives to provide our customers with the highest value and quality for CD, web, book publishing and support services. It was founded in 1989 by Jim McKelvey (a computer scientist and avid entrepreneur) and targeted the tradeshow industry. Mira launched “paper shredder” which allowed tradeshows and association clients to provide their marketing and text in an electronic format – CDs primarily, thereby eliminating a lot of costs associated with printing. Since that time we have expanded our services tremendously to include technology for scholarly conferences as well as digital, short-run printing for the self-published author market.



Q2: I discovered you by word of mouth; a referral from another indie comic publisher. What percentage of your business are trade paperbacks? How do you manage to keep your print costs so reasonable and your print quality so high?

(MIRA:) Trade paperbacks comprise approximately 20% of Mira's annual business (and this number seems to be growing quickly). Because we have focused on the conference and association market almost exclusively for 20 years, we understand the need for high-quality work for a reasonable investment.

In 2007 Mira made a strategic decision to start investing in our digital printing capabilities. We had been printing on a small scale, primarily for our association clients, but in early 2007 a closer look was taken at our current supply and demand. At first, we contacted the self-publishing market to simply decrease our excess capacity, but it didn't take us long to realize that this market had HUGE potential. In two years time we have increased our printing capacity and products close to 400%. In doing this, we have saved money because we can buy better and smarter, and we pass on that savings.

Q3: You're a "green" company, and yet you're a printer. Isn't that an oxymoron? What do you do to help reduce your clients' carbon footprint?

(MIRA:) Luckily, the print industry has really turned the corner on "green printing." It was almost overnight that white papers were being published and print conferences were being organized to help educate and promote the actual printers. There are a number of ways in which Mira can work with a client to reduce their carbon footprint, from the paper being used to the quantities being printed (digital vs. offset or web) and the transportation method used for delivery and fulfillment.

Mira is constantly looking into measures that can help save money and resources, and increase efficiency – and that savings is then passed along to the customer. Some examples of how Mira has made improvements include:

- Mira recycles all paper and board waste;
- Mira purchases paper from sustainable forest/resources; and
- Mira has implemented production workflow improvements to increase internal efficiencies and measurably reduce waste.

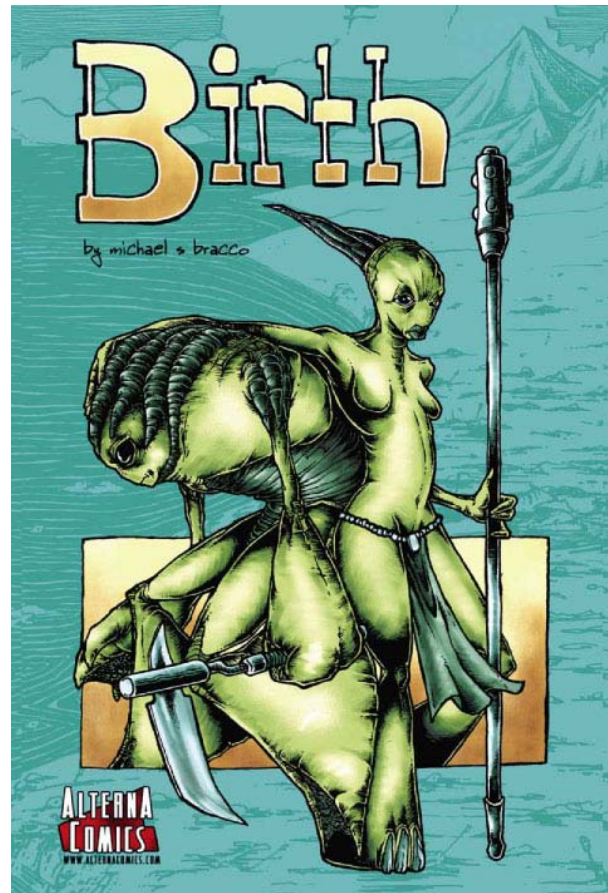
Q4: Can you walk us through the job submission process? What steps should a new comic creator take to send you a job and make the process easy and smooth for everyone involved?

(MIRA:) We work with authors at each step of the process. Typically the first time we work with a client, they have a manuscript/book that is nearly complete and they are researching printing options. OR, the author has been dissatisfied using another printer and they are looking for a new solution for the next run of books. The sales representative will work with the client to answer all of their questions and determine the level of

assistance they might need to complete the print project. Once they have chosen to work with Mira, a project manager is assigned who works with them each step of the way. The Mira project manager acts as the liaison between the internal design and production team and client to ensure that deadlines are met and that the finished books are delivered on time and according to specifications.

A few ways to help reduce the comic creators' cost, and possibly improve the overall experience, include:

1. Create your file in the size you wish to see it in print. For example, don't send a word file set to 8.5" x 11" and then ask that your book be printed 6" X 9", because this can increase your cost and timeline.
2. It is usually best if you can provide a PDF and the original source file. This allows our design team to make small corrections (bleed, etc.) to ensure that the finished printed book meets your needs and specifications. This also can mean a quicker turn-around time.
3. Let us know if you've printed before and if it was using a digital, offset or web printer. Understand that if you have worked with an offset printer in the past, that some of the specs and pricing will be different for a digital printer. We do our best to help our clients understand possible differences.



Q5: What I liked about Mira is the responsive customer service. Is that a core part of your business philosophy? Why are you able to respond so quickly to customers when other printers seem to be so ... well, non-responsive?

(MIRA:) I'm glad to hear that you found our customer service to be responsive. In the time I've worked at Mira, I have found that one of the common reasons that our customers come back year after year (and project after project) is because of the level of customer service and our attention to detail. It is absolutely part of our company's philosophy, but there are several other reasons that contribute to our level of service: an overall sense of pride in our work; and a strong desire and focus to excel in what we do.

It's not unheard of for the CFO to stay late and help laminate covers of a book to ensure that we get the books delivered on time. Everyone pitches in because we have our eye on

long-term success and overall customer satisfaction. It's probably cheesy, but one of my favorite mottos is "there's never a traffic jam on the extra mile." I try to remember that each and every day.

Q6: It seems to be a scary time for the publishing biz. How is Mira doing? What are you doing during these hard-pressed financial times of "Adapt or Die!"?

(MIRA:) You are absolutely right – printers seem to be dying off at an alarming rate. And honestly, I think a common theme is a lack of innovation or willingness to change. It's a fact that there have been tremendous changes over the past few years and how a company responds to these changes will in the end determine its success. Luckily, Mira has positioned itself as an end-to-end provider in a niche market (conference industry), not to mention the fact that we have built up our internal capabilities to offer a wide array of services:

- Editing
- Typesetting
- Composition and design
- Short-run and large format printing
- CD/DVD production
- Online content tools

As more and more people look for ways to provide a "green" product and to decrease their costs (printing, storage/inventory, etc.), the big volume (offset and web) printers seem unappealing. We have in-house technology capabilities and a focus on cost savings, so there's an ever-present focus on how to improve our current offerings and production workflow. We strive on being proactive and adaptive.

Q7: Any new technology or services planned that you want to tip our readers off to?

(MIRA:) Absolutely, Mira is a technology company. We are always working on new technologies to help our customers. As it relates to the author market, we have been working with a few clients on ebook conversion and are creating an online storefront to improve upon our existing storefront, thereby allowing our customers to better manage their print and marketing efforts.

Q8: Let's get personal. What's your job? What do you do? And what are some of the favorite titles you've seen produced by Mira?

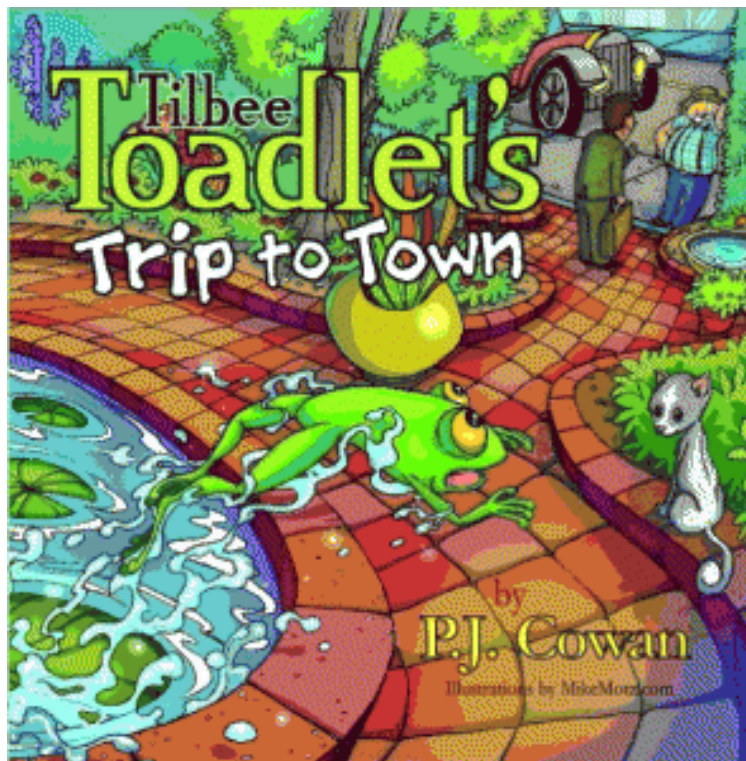
(MIRA:) I am the Sales & Marketing Manager. My primary role is working with our association market, offering online technology and publication services for their events. But I also have had the pleasure of working with some of our great authors from all genres, some of which are indie comic book creators.

We started working with Pete Simeti at [Alterna Comics](#) in 2007 and since then we've had other writers come to us for printing of their graphic novels and comic book titles (like you, Bob!). It's pretty amazing to see the amount of detail that go into their works, and the content can be so different, from one to the next.



However, one of my favorite clients is not a comic book client, but instead she coordinates a program that encourages elementary school children to write. The program is called "*Telling My Story Youth Writing Program.*" The students who participate are in the Title I Reading Program at Northside Intermediate School in Milton, WI. The teachers help identify students for the program and the books get printed and published in their local library. It's amazing to hear the stories of the kids and the proud parents. You can read a little more about the experience by going to Michele's blog, <http://michelearduengo.wordpress.com/2009/06/04/gracious-living-and-youth-writing/>.

Another author that stands out is [PJ Cowan](#), who has written a series of children's books for her grandchildren. I do not know the back story behind the tales, but I like to imagine that they describe a shared adventure and hold some real significance to her family. The illustrations are absolutely amazing and help bring the story to life. Whether it's a toad that is trying to get "his story written" only to find out that his real story can only be written at home with his best friend, a little boy named Finny. Or the little fairy, Miniature (Mini for short), that has a chance to meet some great woodland creatures on her quest to find a giant.



Q9: Do you print floppy comics (6.65" x 10.25" 24-40 pages one-shots) or do you focus strictly on trade paperbacks?

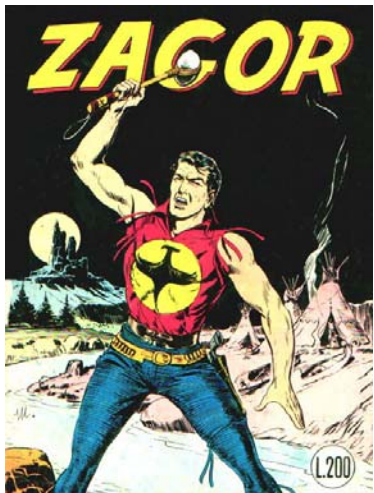
(MIRA:) We focus on the trade paperbacks and not really on the floppy comics. There is a difference in the paper that is used for digital vs. offset, so there are a few limitations there. I hope that we'll have the opportunity to expand our work within the indie comic book market. When this happens, I think there will be some chances to expand, once again, the printed products we can provide our customers.

Q10: What other services do you have that indie comic creators should consider? Finally, last call – please give us your sales phone number, email and marketing website address.

(MIRA:) Mira offers in-house design, editing, composition and typesetting, in addition to print. We would love the opportunity to discuss your projects to determine if we'd be a good printing solution for you. You can reach a member of the sales team by dialing 866.341.9588 ext. 217 (my extension is 207), info@mirasmart.com (mention this column) and our website is www.mirasmart.com. Please note that our online store front is under construction but you can feel free to contact me and I'll get you the information you need.

BONUS QUESTION: *What three comics or graphic novels would you stuff inside a Titanium drum to withstand Domsday and pass on to future iterations of humans?*

(MIRA:) To answer this question, I sought the help and guidance of some of my fellow colleagues here at Mira. There were a few suggestions, such as Silver Surfer and Teenage Mutant Turtles, but the one that struck me the most was from one of my colleagues Alija. I asked Alija to share a little about his experience and the story itself, just in case some of your readers aren't familiar with this particular "hero." So here is his memory of reading comic books in his native home, Bosnia, before coming to America:.



Zagor: "Oftentimes I would read the comic book at night where I would be chased to go to sleep against my own will. I was eight all the way up to possibly 14. The way we kids would operate back in those days 'I have a bag of comics and you have a bag of comics.' We cared about the new and fresh adventures that were waiting for us to be immersed in. This particular one was set in early American/Indian jungle country. It provided for various adventures from fighting soldiers to Indians, and from natural exhibitions ... to human struggle.

The way I remember it, [Zagor] is an action comic with comic relief. He was a strong guy, not a superman, but

someone who has developed a set of morals and he defends those who could not defend themselves. He was a regular Joe who through sheer will lifted himself to legend. Chico [the sidekick] was the farthest thing from hero you could imagine. A rather heavysset but active fellow whose main role was comic relief. Although he would try, Chico oftentimes would not be helpful to our hero Zagor. His signature 'oh-oh' saying was a surefire way that he is in trouble."

Bob Heske 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 self-published his critically acclaimed horror series [Cold Blooded Chillers](#). Bob's trade paperback [Bone Chiller](#) (a "best of" CBC anthology) recently won a Bronze medal in the horror category at the 2009 Independent Publisher Book Awards. He is currently working on an End Times anthology called "2012: Final Prayer." You can email him at info@coldbloodedchillers.com.