

What Lies Behind the Global Success of Manga?

By JEF Editorial Section

JAPANESE animation is widely recognized as one of the leading content businesses of the country, but it is manga, or Japanese comics licensed for foreign-language publication (graphic novels), that have recently shown dramatic growth in the world market. Especially in the United States, sales of manga have exploded at a remarkable pace; the figure was \$50-60 million in 2002, then climbed to \$90-110 million in 2003.¹

“The biggest jump was between 2002 and 2003; it grew over 100%, more than doubled,” Stuart Levy, who founded the market-leading company TOKYOPOP in 1996 and triggered the boom, explains in our interview. “But in 2003-2004, growth was more about 40% and was slowing some. This year we are only looking at about 20% growth. What is happening is just as same as in any industry, for any consumer product, you have early adaptors and the early adaptors are all now manga readers. The next step is to try to convert casual users and this is going to take some more investment.”

In fact, the graphic novel market is continuing to grow, and several publishing companies have started their own manga lines. Del Rey, an imprint of Random House in partnership with Kodansha, entered the market in May 2004, Penguin Group USA will publish some titles this spring and Hyperion Books for Children, a division of Disney Publishing Worldwide, is also expected to start publishing this year. Established manga publisher VIZ, a joint company of Shogakukan and Shueisha, announced in January that it would merge with ShoPro Entertainment, creating a new venture in San Francisco to promote Japanese manga and animation in North America.

“We have seen a tremendous increase in manga readers over the past five years,” Levy says. “It is very much in relation to the increasing awareness of

anime as well as the popularity of video games, especially among teenagers. When they were younger, four or five years ago, *Pokémon* and *Sailor Moon* first started coming out, so these young people have grown up very comfortable with anime and this kind of design. Manga is the origin of anime and video games so these young people have a natural tendency towards being interested in the content of manga.”

The increasing number of female readers is playing a significant leading role in this boom, and 60% of TOKYOPOP’s buyers are young women. This is noteworthy as traditional American comics are historically unpopular among them. According to Levy, the influence of *Sailor Moon* characters was quite strong.

“In general in America, girls read

much more than boys. But the traditional American comics tend to be dark heroes, evil people and some crazy guys getting into a big fight, which is not really interesting to girls. Girls tend to be more interested in fantasy. And there are a lot of fantasy stories in manga. So if you combine the popularity of *Sailor Moon* and this tendency of young people, manga is perfect for girls. We started to publish stories for readers who are a little bit older after the initial success of *Sailor Moon*, and those who graduated from *Sailor Moon* started reading them.”

The content of manga varies from romance to adventure, history, sports and even politics, succeeding in grabbing a broad range of readers.

There is another factor which has helped to make manga so popular in the



Stuart Levy helped to trigger the global manga boom

Note : 1) Chicago Tribune, Jan. 5, 2005

United States. Instead of comic hobby shops, the main distributor of the ordinary American comic books, which are usually located in off-street areas, Levy chose high-street book chains as the sales channel. This groundbreaking marketing method hit a jackpot, and these big national book chains recorded the largest sales growth in 2003 among the other manga retailers such as independent stores and music/video chains.²

“The hardest thing was,” Levy recalls, “to get the stores to understand that there is a market for manga. Big chains are very conservative – they want the hip product that everyone knows. If you bring them something new, they generally say, ‘No, no, we’re not interested.’ So getting them to try something new was very hard. We had to make many, many presentations about *Sailor Moon* and luckily it was on TV. Once they saw it worked well, we could get them to try another one.”

Since 2004, Levy has expanded its sales channels to mass retailers such as Wal-Mart and SHOPCO. He explains this is needed to develop new readers.

“Now we have found the first group of manga fans, but those early adaptors are the kinds of people that are very proactive, searching for something new. Most of the population just want to wait until something comes to them. Manga is starting to be kind of mainstream but is still niche. So, our next challenge is to go from niche to more mainstream; to find the break-out titles.”

So, what is the attractiveness of Japanese manga in the eyes of American people? Levy thinks it is foremost the design.

“Its very fresh design is significantly more important than any other factors,” he speaks passionately. “The next would, of course, be the characters themselves, and the third would be stories and dialogue. But the design, the look, the visual stimulation of the exciting design style and the talent of the artist are absolutely the most important. Unlike traditional American comics, the lines of manga are much simpler but

very subtle and rich. You find it very simple yet at the same time very complex. This balance, I think, just hits the right emotional chord in the young people.”

Levy sees the base of these distinguishing designs in traditional Japanese paintings, such as those of Hokusai, and praises manga for a beautiful combination of Japanese traditional simple design and American comic expression.

“Hokusai is famous for influencing the European Impressionists, and Japan and the Western world have been influencing each other back and forth for many centuries.”

Levy regards TOKYOPOP as a bridge between the East and the West, and so he introduced the current standard manga format, read from the right to the left, just the same as the Japanese original, to the world.

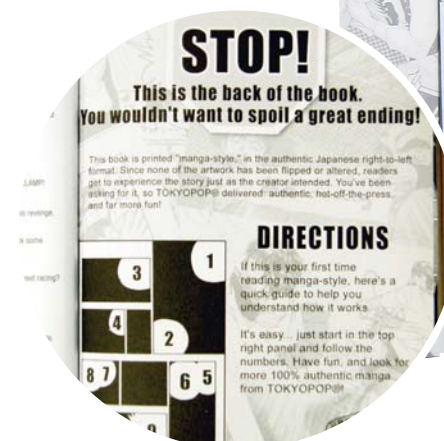
“At first we had to change all the content to go backwards, to left-to-right, because retailers did not want to try the Japanese style. But we really wanted to keep the Japanese style, so that we could keep the sound effects in Japanese. It looks cooler, and also the artists are much happier if we don’t have to change

the graphics. So we came up with a campaign of 100% authentic Manga in the year of 2002.”

With this style, publishers can avoid the trouble of reversing each plate so they can offer a competitive price. Now all manga in America follow this style. For new readers, there is an explanation of how to read the manga on its last page (the first page if it is a regular American book). Some manga even add explanations for the sound effects.

“Most of the readers,” Levy smiles, “cannot understand them but they can get the feeling from the way they are drawn. Even when you are reading in Japanese, you are not really reading the sound effects, are you?”

Now he has gone a step further, diversifying his business into making animat-



A TOKYOPOP bookshelf (right) and explanations for foreign readers



Notes : 2) Publisher's Weekly, Feb. 9, 2004

ed versions of manga, selling DVDs and the merchandising, all very popular marketing styles in the Japanese entertainment business, to make the maximum use of manga content. He also hosts a competition “the Rising Stars of Manga” to search for new comic talent in the United States. “We found that one of the favorite things manga readers like to do besides reading manga is drawing manga. They are not yet very talented but they try and we can encourage this kind of manga culture by providing an opportunity for these young talents to get published under the TOKYOPOP brand. We have held the contest five times so far and the quality keeps getting better and better. This year, we are actually going to publish 5,000 pages of original manga created by young Americans who love Japanese manga. Our business is in diversification from licensing to original creation with the young people who are growing up with Japanese culture.”

As he explains, TOKYOPOP has launched a new series, *Princess Ai*, a joint project of American and Japanese artists to make an original manga. The series is also teaming up with a Japanese animation company to make a TV animation. “This is an exciting co-entertainment for us,” Levy says with enthusiasm.

The Japanese government is beginning to seriously tackle the content business. Although Levy is only used to work with the private sector, and is not sure whether it helps the content business as a whole, he seems to welcome the move. “Usually in America, when the government gets involved, it is a very bad sign as they are causing problems. But Japan has had a much better history of the government helping industry’s efforts, as has been the case with automobiles and consumer electronics. It is interesting to see.”

However, if you view the content business as the national strategy for the industry, addressing the issue of protecting production rights from bootlegging and illegal downloading is inevitable. While there are still some strong opinions that such fanatics have created the

base of the current worldwide Japanese anime/manga boom, Levy does not agree with them at all.

“It is all excuses, this is what the bootleggers say to justify what they do,” Levy states flatly. “In reality they are just taking away the profits from the creators. For all entertainment businesses, protecting rights is a big problem and right now there is no easy answer. I think the best thing is to try to provide value that is hard to copy, and we are lucky to have books because right now books still cannot be duplicated digitally. But music and animation are hard to protect so this is an issue for everybody.”

Another concern is the rise of Asian content with strong official support for their domestic content industries. It has long been pointed out that Japanese animation skills are flowing out to these countries. Levy thinks, though, that the situation is not so critical.

“It is more apparent in animation than manga, because animation takes a team and there is a lot of manual work. This manual work is outsourced to South Korea, lately to China and India, where the labor costs are lower. But the creative control is maintained by Japanese creators. Now South Korea is actually starting to get more active in trying to become very creative and their economy has faced some challenging times, some of them are getting pretty good, but they still have to learn and get more experience.”

Some view the current worldwide manga market explosion as just “a bubble,” and while manga distributors eye Europe and Australia as the next big markets, the sales figures in the United States indicate the market is becoming more selective. Actually it is reported

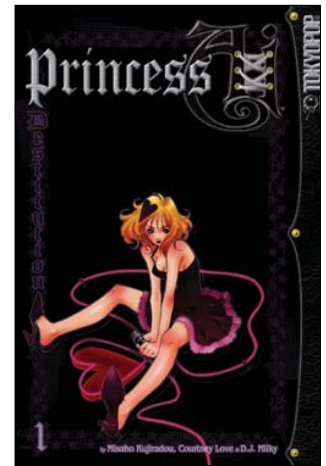


Photo: TOKYOPOP Inc.

A new series: “Princess Ai”

that some smaller publishers have been facing tough times since last year and a shakeout has begun.³ On another front, new talent from Asian countries as well as the US will continue to emerge. That means even though Japanese content still keeps its edge, as Levy says, we can not just sit on its reputation and early success. He adds a suggestion that there should be some ups and downs in this market.

“Some of the Japanese content will be extremely successful worldwide, but just like other businesses, many things fail. So, there will be some hits and some failures, and the people in the business, the entertainment companies, should not just think about making quick money in the short term. You have to have a long-term perspective.”

Levy declares he believes in Japanese content and its power to influence the creation of Western content. As he mentions, manga could be one of the most fascinating cultures in the world. We Japanese of course, can be proud of it, but at the same time, it is also significantly important to search for new possibilities and get new ideas which were created by foreign talent. It will be best to put ideas together from our manga culture and the US and Asian new power, like “the East and the West mixing back and forth working with each other” in Levy’s words, then manga’s future will be as bright as ever. **JS**

3) ICv2 News, Feb. 4, 2005.