

Reading and archiving comics in a digital format

# Holy Comic Cache, Batman!

The renaissance of comics, with their hand-rendered heroes, is thrilling millions at movie theaters and in print. The Comix reader gives you a convenient way to follow your favorite stories on your PC. *By Andreas Kneib*

**W**hen Superman first saw the light of day in 1938, nobody could really guess how powerful electronic computing machines would become. Comics were printed on cheap paper or appeared as strips in the daily newspapers. In today's information society, where hard disks have reached terabyte proportions, a number of tools let you view comics in a web browser. One of the most sophisticated readers is the Comix [1] tool.

## CBZ and CBR

The reader uses the special CBZ (Comic Book ZIP) and CBR (Comic Book RAR) file formats. Basically, both CBZ and CBR are just normal ZIP or RAR archives, which you can unpack at the command line if you have the right tools in place.

As you can see from Listing 1, the `comic.cbz` sample file contains image files called `image_00.jpg`, `image_01.jpg`, `image_02.jpg`, and so on. The trick here is that Comix unpacks the individual images one after another in the background to support uninterrupted reading and browsing, just like in a web browser or a digital book.

## Into the World of Images!

After launching the reader by typing `comix` in a text console, or via your desktop's application menu, the program comes up with a tidy interface, which is currently quite empty. To provide reading material, you will not want to draw and scan your own comic or download illegal copies of comics from file-sharing hosters. Thankfully, don't have to; instead, you can access free stories.

As your first port of call, I would recommend searching the Collins Compendium of Free Online Comic Books [3]. Of course, your favorite search engine will probably turn out some interesting results, too. Your journey could take you, say, to Cory Doctorow's *Futuristic Tales of the Here and Now* [4] or to *Sword of My Mouth* [5].

Once you have found a story that you enjoy and have downloaded it to your computer, you can open it in the reader by selecting *File | Open* in the menu, or pressing the keyboard shortcut `Ctrl + O`. Alternatively, launch Comix in the shell by typing `comix filename` (Figure 1).

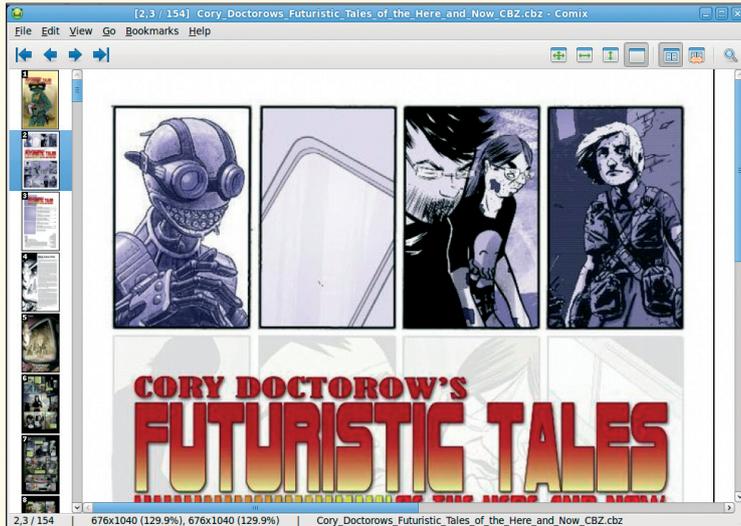
## Where to Find What

The tool's layout is reminiscent of a web browser or a PDF reader, and the learning curve is correspondingly gentle. The header contains the main menu with the *File*, *Edit*, *View*, *Go*, *Bookmarks*, and *Help* entries.

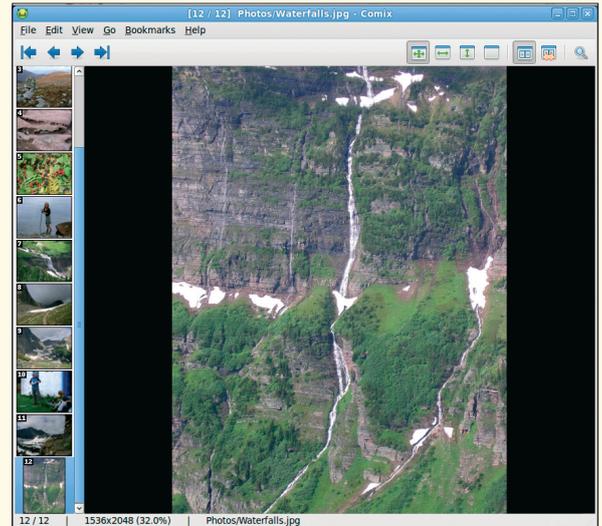
If you have a large collection of comics, you might be interested in the op-

### LISTING 1: CBZ File

```
01 $ unzip comic.cbz
02 Archive:  comic.cbz
03  inflating: image_00.jpg
04  inflating: image_01.jpg
05  inflating: image_02.jpg
06  inflating: image_03.jpg
07  inflating: image_04.jpg
08 [...]
```



**Figure 1:** Launch the Comix reader, and it will present comic stories such as these in a clear-cut interface.



**Figure 2:** Comix will show a page number and a preview for normal images, too.

tions listed below *File | Open library* or *Add to library*. These options let you create and manage preview windows with the title images of selected comics, thus helping you find and open the story you are looking for more quickly.

The File menu also has an *Unpack image* item that lets you save the active comic page as a single image file or view detailed information on the image in *Properties*.

The program configuration is accessible via *Edit | Settings*, where you can define the background color and the start and scroll behavior and preview images – in fact all of the program settings in this window. This section of the program, including the options and switches, is fairly intuitive.

The main View menu provides functions such as full-screen mode, the ability to set the page height and width, a slide show, or a magnifying glass. By pressing Z, you can enable and disable the magnifying glass at any time. The View menu also lets you modify the appearance and handling of the reader via the *Toolbars* item.

## Bookmarks

One of the most important menu items is Bookmarks. Here, you can set and edit bookmarks, just as in a web browser. The last item in the main menubar, Help, is slightly spartan: Instead of taking you to the program's internal online help, it simply shows the hapless user an info box that points to the project website. Having said this, the reader has an intuitive structure, and the lack of a help function might not be too important.

Below the main menu, you will see the navigation and view layers. The arrows for browsing the comic or changing the reading direction for Manga-style comics, are available in the main menu below View and Go, but buttons in the navigation bar make the whole thing so much easier.

In addition to the menus mentioned thus far, the program also has a pop-up menu that appears when you right-click. This takes you to the most important actions, such as opening comic book archives, bookmarks, the library, or the settings window.

The reading area of Comix, which is below the toolbars, is divided into two sections. On the right is the main window with a view of the active comic page; on the left is the preview window with thumbnails of all the pages. This helps you keep track of even large-scale, convoluted stories.

The program still displays page numbers if you use it as a normal image viewer. If you point Comix at the images in the current directory, it will enumerate and display them like the pages of a comic book for you to browse (Figure 2).

## Conclusion

Comics are not just stories with pictures for kids anymore. Now, thanks to dedicated tools like Comix, anybody with a computer can conveniently view and digitize their comics. ■■■

## INSTALLATION

Modern distributions will include the reader in their repositories. On Ubuntu, for example, you simply need to issue the `sudo aptitude install comix` command to install the program. If your flavor of Linux doesn't include the program, you need to visit the project's website.

The *Download* link takes you to the Download page [2], which contains a tarball with the program source code and a comprehensive installation guide. Besides the source code, you also need the PyGTK Python environment, to combine Python with the Gtk interface, and the PIL (Python Imaging Library) library. Additionally, you might need some other packages, such as UnRAR for RAR-compressed comics (.cbr file extension). The installation guide on the Comix website gives you more details.

## INFO

- [1] Comix project homepage: <http://comix.sourceforge.net/>
- [2] Downloading the comic book reader: <http://comix.sourceforge.net/download.html>
- [3] Source of free comics: <http://www.lorencollins.net/freecomix/>
- [4] Cory Doctorow's Futuristic Tales of the Here and Now: <http://www.archive.org/details/CoryDoctorowsFuturisticTalesOfTheHereAndNow>
- [5] Sword of My Mouth: [http://nomediakings.org/press/sword\\_of\\_my\\_mouth\\_1\\_out\\_soon.html](http://nomediakings.org/press/sword_of_my_mouth_1_out_soon.html)