

Manga of the People

Manga are leaving the printed page behind to reach new readers all over the world, discovers **Tony McNicol**.

WHAM! KAPOW! WHOOSH! Japanese comics sweep the world. Manga is an internationally successful cultural export, as ubiquitous as karaoke, sushi and Hello Kitty. Sales outside Japan have tripled between 2001 and 2005. In the United States total manga sales reached 220 million dollars in 2007, 10% more than the previous year. Sales of traditional print media have been declining both in the United States and Japan, but manga have been bucking the trend. Some companies have even tapped Internet and cell phone technology to escape the economic and geographical limitations of the printed page.

The Manganovel website was officially launched last October. In the words of its press release, Manganovel is an “online service that allows read-

ers not only to download and read manga in Japanese, but to post and offer for sale their own translations of content.” It is, in effect, a legal version of “scanlation,” a process where manga fans scan comics, translate them and distribute them over the Internet. The project has been funded by Toshiba Corporation in cooperation with MIT in the United States and Keio University in Japan.

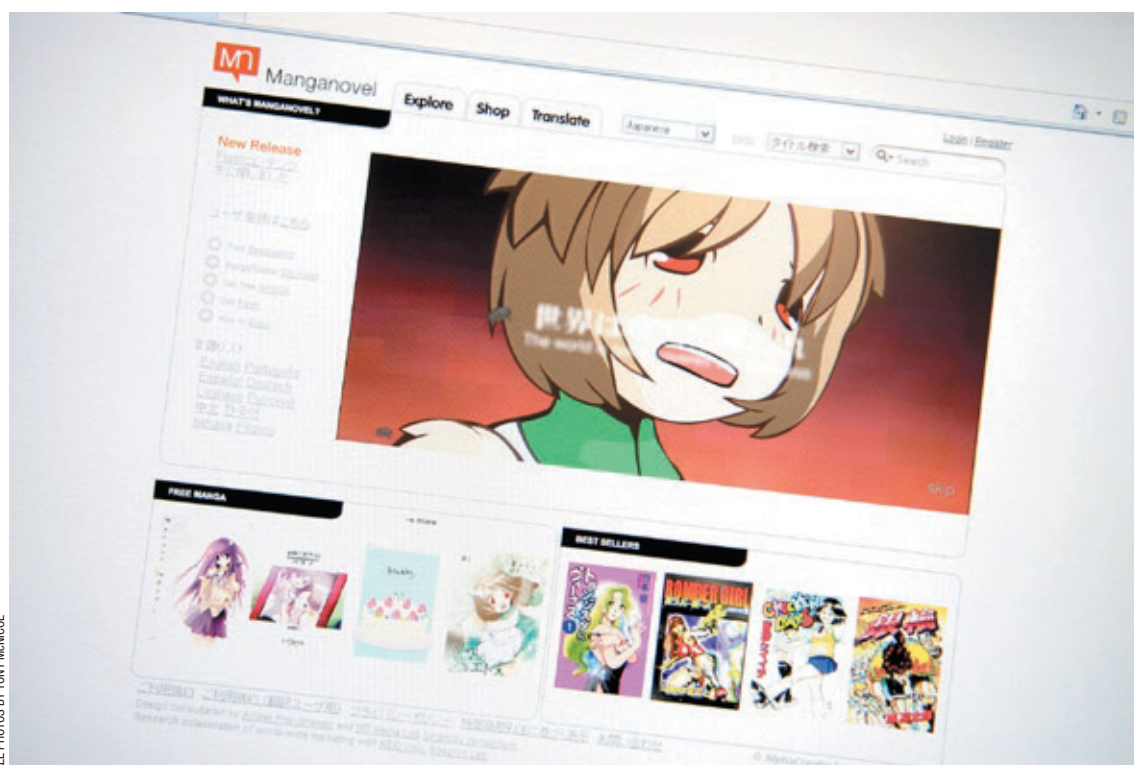
Toshiba’s Katsuhiro Mizuno says the idea behind the project was to target markets poorly served by existing distribution networks. That includes the so-called BRICs countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China). Over 53,000 people have signed up to the service, which has websites in English, Japanese and Spanish viewed by people in 220 countries. The most popular countries for accessing the site are the

Philippines, followed by the United States and Japan.

Mizuno says they aimed to combine the international popularity of manga with the advantages of Web 2.0 Internet. Like other Web 2.0 applications, all the important things happen online; in Manganovel’s case on servers run by the company carrying the comic data. The service uses MQbic digital copyright protection and a special high-speed high-quality manga player, both developed by Toshiba.

Technology and manga have proven to be a good match in Japan. Over the last few years cell phone manga have become hugely successful. A recent report from market researchers Impress R&D estimates the total 2007 electronic book market at 35.5 billion yen (360 million dollars), about twice the previous year. Of that, 22.9 billion yen was cell phone manga, a tenfold increase on 2005. NTT Solmare, which claims to be the largest of Japan’s several hundred cell phone manga publishers, has clocked up some 400 million downloads since 2004. Half were in the last twelve months.

Improvements in technology such as faster downloading, bigger screens



On the Manganovel website, users can buy a manga, try their hand at translating it, then sell their work through the service.



A stack of popular manga in a Tokyo bookstore

and easy to use software laid the groundwork for the boom, says Impress R&D researcher Daisuke Kohno. And he points to another factor: “Up to now the editing departments were very powerful; they didn’t want to release the contents they controlled,” he says. “They thought that if comics were available on cell phones they wouldn’t be able to sell books any more... eventually they realized that wasn’t true.” In recent years most of the main publishers have released manga for cell phones and PCs.

Meanwhile, other companies new to the publishing business have moved into the cell phone comics business as content providers. Somewhat radically for the industry, they have arranged contracts directly with manga artists rather than through manga magazines. There are even manga specially drawn for cell phones. In a neat reversal of the normal publishing process, the most popular cell phone manga are later being put out in print form. “It’s good for manga artists because the number of places they can publish their work has increased,” Kohno adds.

Lost in Scanlation

Manga publishers in the United States are also feeling the winds of technological change. U.S. company Tokyopop is one of the largest publishers of manga in English with 9 million books in print. Now in their eleventh year, they have offices in Hamburg, London, Los Angeles and Tokyo. A decade ago in the United States, no one was translating manga for mainstream bookstores, says CEO

Stuart Levy. The word “manga” wasn’t even known. “We brought the word “manga” into use in the United States,” he says proudly. His company’s first big hit was *Sailor Moon*, a cute manga for six- to ten-year-old girls. They also led the introduction of manga reading right to left, Japanese style. (Before Tokyopop, publishers would print the pages reversed. Readers might well assume that Japanese people were all left-handed).

Levy points out that anime DVD sales in the United States have already plummeted due to illegal downloads. It can take months to produce an official English anime whereas pirate English versions are on the Internet in days or even hours. He expects something similar thing to happen with manga sooner or later.

“Entertainment as a physical package has a very limited lifetime left,” says Levy. “A lot of kids are not buying the manga but are going online to scanlation sites. Why would anyone need to buy my book for 10 dollars?” Tokyopop have been experimenting with manga on PCs but Levy questions if digital manga can bring in enough money to pay for new comics. “Is there a profitable model in the future?” he asks. “I hope we are one of the [companies] who can evolve.”

Manganovel also knows how difficult it is to persuade overseas customers to buy digital manga. On their site the original Japanese manga sell for a similar price to the print versions. If a translation is bought, the amateur translator gets half the money, or the translator can offer it for free. Unfortunately only a handful of users have actually bought or translated manga from the site. Toshiba’s Mizuno notes that they faced stiff competition from illegal scanlations, which after all were free.

Nor did Japanese publishers cooperate the way Manganovel had hoped.

“The priority for manga publishers was traditional print manga,” says Mizuno. “We asked them for worldwide rights, but obviously they didn’t want to give us popular manga because they can sell it to other [print manga] companies.” In the end, Manganovel used “*dojinshi*” amateur manga. At the time of writing the future of the project is very uncertain. “It was a good idea, but not good enough to become a meaningful business venture,” says Mizuno resignedly.

Manga producers can expect a hard time as an already battered publishing industry feels the pinch of the recession. But the good news is that manga are an easier sell overseas than ever. And its “foreignness” is far less of a barrier to new readers than before. “Ultimately, Japan seems less alien to the global audience now,” says Roland Kelts, the author of a recent book on Japanese pop culture in the United



The cell phone manga market in 2007 was an estimated 22.9 billion yen (230 million dollars), a tenfold increase on 2005.

States, *Japanamerica*. And he is at pains to point out that the popularity of manga isn’t some short-lived fad. “Japan isn’t considered ‘hip’ because of a marketing machine,” says Kelts. “[Readers] prefer manga because it is better than anything else available.”

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