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Comics and Human Rights: Thinking About Us – Queer Inclusion in Comics

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[Click here for the introduction to the Comics, Human Rights and Representation Week.](#)



No Straight Lines. Edited by Justin Hall

Comics are a medium with endless possibilities. Illustrations aren't constrained by real world limitations, with grounded and abstract imagery allowing for the delivery of very unique messages. The addition of text — as dialogue, narration, or contextual explanations — furthers the ease with which messages are received by readers. This simultaneous presentation of text and art provides endless opportunities as both a method of storytelling and as a tool to express thoughts and concepts.

People occupying all reaches of the queer spectrum have been making use of the comics medium for decades, telling stories both fictional and anecdotal, and as a vehicle to catalogue history and promote social change. From hand-made booklets once passed out at queer events and bookstores, to the wealth of webcomics now available on the internet, the queer corner of the medium has always been largely do-it-yourself, existing outside of the mainstream comic book industry and self-sustained.

[No Straight Lines](#), an anthology edited by Justin Hall and published in 2012 by Fantagraphics, provides an excellent look at this legacy, collecting queer comics from every post-Stonewall decade. The book starts with strips that appeared in early gay newspapers and magazines, moving through time on the pen strokes of forty years of queer struggle, celebration, and commentary, and culminates in the transition to the internet in the wake of dwindling local venues and the opportunity of reaching larger like-minded audiences.

Webcomics make up a bulk of the queer comics being done today, both in serial storytelling format and as strips. There are [literally dozens](#) of ongoing webcomics starring [LGBTQIA](#) characters or featuring queer themes, and hundreds more have been created and retired over the years as projects come to fruition. While much of this work is done for free, many queer webcomic creators support themselves through donations, or through funding sites like [Patreon](#). A. Stiffler and K. Copeland, for example, are a queer couple who produce two ongoing webcomics as well as an array of short stories, [and their readers collectively provide over \\$400 per comic.](#)



Portside Stories: a Webcomic by Valerie Halla

But even in the digital age, queer comics are hardly restricted to the internet. Queer publishers such as [Northwest Press](#) have been steadily producing comics for years, and [Prism Comics](#) — a nonprofit organization that supports queer comics — even offers a [yearly grant](#) to help creators publish. And in recent years, creators have found plenty of new options for self-publishing, including raising money through [Kickstarter](#), like recent successes [Qu33r](#), [Virgil](#), and [The Young Protectors](#) (which made nearly ten times its \$14,000 goal), and allocating funds from [Patreon](#).



The Comics Code Authority Seal

Queer presence in mainstream comics has a much less consistent history. Though once indirectly forbidden to do so by the [Comics Code Authority](#), the mainstream comic book industry has managed to [thread queer themes and LGBTQIA characters into books for decades](#). While the Code was fully intact such instances were rare and generally ambiguous, but as decades passed the Code's guidelines were loosened, and subsequently rendered obsolete by companies gradually abandoning its use. There are no longer any official restrictions prohibiting the inclusion of queer characters by mainstream comics publishers.

Mainstream comics are largely populated by superhero comics published by the "Big Two" of the industry: Marvel and DC. Both companies operate on "shared universe" storytelling dynamics, meaning that all of their books take place in a single universe and star characters that have been around for decades — and the [vast majority](#) of those characters are white,

