

## **The Publishing Gauntlet – Part Eight**

This is the eighth in a series of articles detailing the ups and downs involved in launching a new comic series. Behind the press releases and public faces are a host of pitfalls and strange moments that crop up before a comic shows up in stores.

This October, Udon is launching an epic fantasy comic called *Exalted*, based on a hugely successful role-playing game of the same name published by White Wolf, the second biggest RPG publisher in the industry. The comic we're doing is based in the world White Wolf has created, but we're making the series completely accessible to new readers who just want to kick back and read a great fantasy story.

I wanted to write the final article in this series just after San Diego Comic-Con. The reality has obviously been quite a bit different. The con season pounded my brain and has kept me running around like a chicken with my head cut off. Now that Wizardworld Chicago has wrapped up I can finally breathe and get my thoughts down.

The response to the *Exalted* issue zero has been fantastic so far. The fans are pleased with the sneak peek and retailers are impressed with the production values on the book. It's been a lot to juggle, but the work is looking great. We should be completely sold out of the zero issue by the time the con season is over, dovetailing perfectly into the October release of issue #1.

All signs point to the fact that meeting retailers face to face and giving them a free copy of issue #0 made a big difference. Unlike a tiny cover image in the Previews catalogue, the lush mini-story, interviews and artwork gave them a much better idea of the quality we're shooting for with the series. We even made up little inserts to put in the comics I gave out. It had the solicitation text and order code for the first issue.

This is a crucial handful of weeks where retailers decide on their order numbers for October. *Exalted* issue #1 is in the latest issue of *Diamond Previews*. All the things we've been doing to showcase the comic has lead us to this point.

If retailers don't know that there are fans looking to purchase *Exalted*, they may lowball their orders or not order the series at all. It's hard to judge a new series with just a little blurb and a cover image, especially when there's no gigantic name attached to the creative team.

In the end, those orders will be the lifeblood that determines how far we can take this. Once those numbers come in we find out what the value of our work really is to the outlets that sell the product. Needless to say, my stomach is in terrible knots about it and will probably stay that way until we hear what the final numbers are.

I've been encouraging *Exalted* and manga fans to not only buy the book, but to ask for it to be set aside each month for them. I want fans to guarantee themselves a copy and make a very strong statement to their local store about its worth. I'm hoping that it's the kind of

word of mouth cycle that will push the book's sales from 'good' to 'great'. When an owner sees in-store demand for a product, let alone one that's out of the superhero mainstream, they may look a little closer at it and champion the book to their customers even more.

While all of this is happening, various other elements have to be juggled. The cover to issue #3 is underway for solicitation ads while issue #2 line art is being tackled and coloring and lettering on issue #1 is wrapped up. At the same time I'm in touch with the artists providing us with line art for the 4 page back-up stories we're using to showcase the history of the Exalted world. All that mixed with the last few convention appearances we're doing and managing other non-comic projects for Udon... I never imagined it would be this hectic. Life at the Udon studio is currently like a whirlwind. Every so often I mentally stand back and am a bit in awe at how many things are happening all at once.

I don't think people realize sometimes how many elements come together to make a strong comic book. I can only imagine that working with the Big Two would be even crazier, balancing the wants and needs of huge company trademarks with a creative idea. Even with all those hassles, comics are still one of the most direct entertainment mediums available, one that can be pulled together by a handful of dedicated people yet reach a much wider audience. That's something we shouldn't take for granted.

Once orders are in and issue #1 ships, I'll follow up with a report detailing whether we hit our sales mark or not and what happens next in either case. In the meantime, I hope when you see the issue on the stands of your local comic shop you give it a flip through and see how it all came together for us. I think we've made a book that can stand shoulder to shoulder with anything else coming out from the big boys.

Here's the Diamond ordering information for issue #1:  
AUG053243 F EXALTED #1 REG ED  
AUG053244 J EXALTED #1 POWER FOIL CVR ED

Thanks to White Wolf, Erik Ko and Matt Brady for allowing me to try something different with these articles.