

# Vintage Australian Comic Books on CD-ROM: Suggestions and Activities

This is a free publication available from the Stitson Education website. It accompanies the disc, *Vintage Australian Comic Books on CD-ROM*. Also see the Stitson Education site for other downloadable items to accompany the CD-ROM.

## Introduction

The disc contains its own website made up of twelve Australian comic books produced by Frew Publications between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. These have been scanned, cleaned and visually enhanced for the computer screen. The titles on the CD-ROM are *The Phantom Ranger*, *The Shadow* and *Sir Falcon*. Notes about the original comics and the production of the website are included on the disc.

## Suggestions and activities

The following ideas may be altered, added to, or adapted to suit your interests and available resources in any way you wish.

### Games

1. On the Stitson Education website there is a crossword puzzle you can download for each of the twelve comics on the CD-ROM. But you may also want to produce your own wordfinder puzzles for at least one of the comics. You could do this by hand, by ruling up a grid on poster paper and adding the letters and clues, and perhaps even adding some coloured headings and illustrations around the puzzle, based on the contents of the comic. If you know how to use a computer word-processing program, or a web-creation program, another method may be to create a file containing a table-grid with visible borders around each square, or cell, where you will type the wordfinder letters. Save the file, print it out, and find out if your friends can complete the puzzle within a certain time limit.
2. Using the story events, settings and characters from one or more of the twelve comics on the CD-ROM, work in pairs or small groups to plan and build a board or

card game. For example, you could make a snakes and ladders game, placed with a dice, where obstacles are encountered along the journey from start to finish, and where characters or special items such as keys or swords offer assistance to help you along your way.

3. Organise a quiz panel game in which participants playing for teams are asked questions by a compere about the content of the comics on the CD-ROM, or on any extra research the group or class may have carried out about Australian comic books in general. A video could be taken of the contest. You may also include a compere's assistant to introduce each player to the audience, to promote advertised products and make special announcements or award prizes (such as Smarties).

### Posters, maps, calendars

4. Construct large, illustrated posters about the three main comic book characters featured on the CD-ROM. An alternative to this may be to carry out research on the general history of the rise and fall of the Australian comics industry (and the related influence in Australia of the American industry) and convert your findings into wall posters, magazine items or even website pages for display on your school's intranet.
5. Construct wall poster maps of the journeys taken to other lands by the main characters. For example, invent the route and plot the incidents and events along the way of the Shadow's journey to Barania (Shadow, Series 1, No.20), or Sir Falcon's adventures to the edge of the Antarctic (Sir Falcon No.2). You may imagine and add special features to the map not included in the story.
6. In groups plan and put together a calendar, with each page representing one month of the year. The

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calendar will feature your own illustrations of the characters and places featured in the comic books, and perhaps some brief written notes or commentary. You may even want to design and illustrate your own comic book cover, either making it look like a cover from the period (late 1940s to early 1960s, with pre-decimal currency prices), or a modern-day production. Other kinds of illustrations may include police/sheriff Wanted posters.

### Writing and illustrating stories

7. Before attempting any of the other activities presented in this section, first you may want to discuss in a group the features that make a comic book hero or heroine, helper, victim, on-looker and villain. Should the heroes and heroines in comic books be powerful and victorious all the time, or would it be more interesting, and allow for a wide range of different kinds of stories, if they were vulnerable? Would we like to know more about their private lives, their fears and doubts, their past? Put simply, should we know more about the Phantom Ranger, Sir Falcon or the Shadow than we are told? In some of the activities that follow, you may want to build these ideas into your own stories. (Also see the section, below, on Serious Themes.)

8. You may prefer to work in pairs or small groups for this activity. Select any one of the twelve comics on the CD-ROM and carefully read through it, looking for the most important plot points in the story — points where a decision is made, or a situation occurs, where there could be a range of alternatives. Write down the story's plot points, then for each one, add a list of possible and acceptable alternatives. Then try to re-write the story in your own way, using your alternative plot points. Your new story may include other characters that weren't originally in the story, and additional locations. (The story should make sense to a reader — don't add sudden and unexpected alien abductions to another planet!)

9. Discuss as a group the requirements for adapting a written story, or a comic book story, to both a radio presentation and a film (or video) presentation. For radio you are confined entirely to sound — spoken words, sound effects and music. Your script would need to demonstrate all three. You may want to discuss some specific examples from the comics, and how they could be adapted — or whether they could be adapted at all. For a film production you would also be able to include descriptions for the film director as to what the locations or settings should be, and maybe what types of camera shots to use at any point in the story-line (such as long, medium and close-up, and high or low angle shots etc). Some research may be required to find out more about the requirements for radio and film story-telling.

10. Following on from the previous discussion, select a sequence from one of the comic books on the CD-ROM

and re-write it in a completely different format: as a script either for a radio or film production. You may even wish to adapt the entire comic. If so, your group may work together to produce, perform and record a radio play (perhaps broken up into short serial episodes), which may be placed onto the school's intranet and played back as a sound file.

11. Select a character from any one of the comics on the CD-ROM and imagine that they are writing a letter to a friend or relative, or writing personal diary extracts, about their experiences. Write the letter or diary in their own words and style.

12. Write your own Phantom Ranger, Shadow or Sir Falcon short story. If you want to do this in comic book form, you may want to work in pairs, as writer-illustrators. Working in pairs may also be suitable for writing the story as a film script with a storyboard.

13. In pairs or small groups plan and produce a "mockumentary", or pretend-documentary, about the life and activities of one or more of the main characters featured on the CD-ROM. This could be presented as a website, a magazine article, a TV production or a recorded radio program. Depending on your chosen medium it may include interviews, photographs and other illustrations, and enacted video clips.

14. On the Stitson Education website there are four comic book panels, blown up to a larger-than-normal size, that some of you may want to download and colour in. Using the scenes depicted in these panels as a starting-point for ideas, write your own adventure story. You may prefer to discuss in class possible ideas for story events and plots, settings, characters and themes. As you can see from each panel illustration, not all of the scenes include any one of the three main characters on the CD-ROM — you may write a story that doesn't contain them at all.

### Serious themes

15. Comics have generally been branded simplistic and stereotyped, drawing on stock plots and character-types. What is a stereotype? How can you recognise it? Are the comics on the CD-ROM composed of stereotypes? Do stereotypes fulfill a positive role for readers and audiences? Can comics be educational yet still manage to entertain? Is it possible for comics to present stories in ways that other methods of story-telling cannot? (Look, for example, at the way comics "cut" from one time sequence or location to another.) In discussing some of these issues, refer to popular TV programs for comparison and contrast to the comics on the CD-ROM. Should we accept or criticise the apparent lack of reality or common-sense logic in these comics (such as the type of costume worn by Sir Falcon)?

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16. Discuss whether you find the comics on the CD-ROM sexist or racist, both in terms of story events and situations, dialogue, character-presentation, and visual depiction as illustrated by the art-work. Are they violent? Do they contain unwholesome or negative cultural and social values for young audiences? Do they reflect the attitudes of the era in which they were originally produced? Are comics different today, or similar to those from many decades ago?

### Basic English — general ideas for teachers

17. Although many of the word clues for the crossword puzzles on the Stitson Education website also function as comprehension exercises, teachers may want to prepare a set of standard comprehension exercises for each of the twelve comic books featured on the CD-ROM. Types of questions would include character motivation. Why does Character X want to carry out a particular act? What is the effect of carrying out this act? What is the relationship between one character and another? How would you interpret a character's behaviour or response to a situation. For example, is she brave, is he cowardly? Explain, with an example. From a panel or a sequence of panels describe a character's facial expressions and body gestures. Other exercises may be

to describe in written sentences or paragraphs the details of a panel illustration, the location or environment in which any sequence of the story takes place, or the kind of object depicted, such as an aeroplane, firearm, ship, or mode of dress of the characters.

18. Teachers may also want to make up word lists (or have students make them) from the twelve comics on the CD-ROM, asking students to find dictionary definitions of them, or to convert words from one form of usage, such as nouns to adjectives, or from an active to a passive voice, with examples written in full sentences. Other examples: synonyms, antonyms, anagrams; re-writing dialogue in another variation to maintain the same sense; joining sentences together or splitting them up.

### Concluding note

Further ideas about comic books in the classroom may be found in, and adapted from, the following items, also written by Roger Stitson.

"Cartoons and Comics", in *Agora* (journal of History Teachers Association of Victoria), Volume 40, No.3, 2005.

"Reading Old Comics", in *Metro* (journal of Australian Teachers of Media), No.66, 1985.

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