



# **HARROWING**

**A New Product Development Paper**

**for**

**Proletariat Comics, LLC**

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## **Executive Summary**

Harrowing is a new 28-page graphic novella to be produced by Proletariat Comics, LLC. It is a single-issue story that targets adult comic book fans that are tired of superhero stories. Harrowing is intended to meet a serious need in the marketplace: the need for science fiction stories for adult readers. Harrowing will target Hard Core comics fans who are interested in comics by independent producers since most of these readers are adults who have both the money and the inclination to read what Harrowing offers.

Harrowing will compete with other products by virtue of its story and its art as well as its format. Harrowing is a science fiction story, and science fiction is a profitable genre without a lot of competition in the marketplace. Additionally, what science fiction exists in the market is mostly derivative of other, more adolescent-oriented products while Harrowing is intended to appeal to adults since adults make up most of the market. Finally, since Harrowing is a one-shot, readers can consume the entire story in one sitting, and this makes the product more accessible for new readers. The product will be printed in full-color with art that is at least the equal of anything on the market.

Harrowing will be available via several different distribution channels. The primary channel will be through the Direct Market of comic book specialty stores. However, Proletariat Comics will also sell both hard copies and electronic copies on the Internet. Fans who want signed copies of the book will be able to purchase these over the Internet or at book signings for a premium price.

Harrowing will be priced at \$3.95 for 28 pages of sequential art. This is at the upper end of current market norms reflecting the quality approach of Harrowing's value proposition.

Harrowing will gain popularity through extensive use of Internet advertising, targeted print advertising, and an extensive in-store signing campaign. The company will make every effort to connect personally with both retailers and fans to break down the barriers that most consumers have against trying new products. Proletariat will make every effort to support retailers who order the book, and the company will be prepared to handle re-orders based on retailer requests for more product.

## I. Product Description.

### Characteristics:

This paper describes the marketing plan for a single issue illustrated novella called **Harrowing** to be created, produced, and marketed by the emerging micro-press comic company **Proletariat Comics, LLC**. The book itself details the struggles of a middle-aged housewife trying to adapt to life in a futuristic Utopia via the use of a horrific addictive drug, only to discover that the torments of Hell are preferable to the torments of Utopia. The positioning statement for Harrowing shows what the company hopes to achieve with Harrowing:

*To adult comic book fans who prefer Science Fiction, Harrowing is the one-shot graphic novella that will provide the most unique and compelling concept in today's marketplace. After you read Harrowing, you will simply expect more from your science fiction.*

Harrowing is a product that is designed to help Proletariat Comics capture the attention of a specific segment of the comic book marketplace: adult comic fans who are tired of reading adolescent power fantasies. To this end, the product has the following characteristics:

- **Length:** 28-page single-issue story that consumers can read in one sitting lasting approximately 1 hour. This novella format allows for the telling of a complete, complex story without requiring busy readers to make a significant time commitment to that story.
- **Story:** Harrowing is an adult story that will appeal to and challenge adult readers who are hungry for serious content presented in sequential art format.
- **Genre:** As mentioned, Harrowing is a Science Fiction story that deals with social issues in addition to personal ones.
- **Art:** Harrowing has very high quality art that will attract readers who pick up the book to satisfy casual curiosity. It is a comic book that tells its story through the synergy of pictures and words.
- **Coloring:** Harrowing will be full color in order to compete on a level playing field with the best comics on the market.

- **Cover:** The cover for this book will be drawn and colored by two of the hottest emerging talents in the independent comics community.

#### Benefits and Differential Advantages:

In a marketplace that abounds with repetitive ideas, Harrowing will stand out through the quality and novelty of its concept and the execution of its story. Every market is hungry for quality new ideas, and this is particularly true in the comic book marketplace where many of the readers are adults who grew up reading about superheroes but who are now grown and searching for new subject matter in sequential art format. Proletariat Comics created Harrowing for this specific reason. The book provides an adult-oriented story targeted at intelligent, selective readers who want more than just capes and cowls from their comics; it is thought provoking as well as being entertaining. Harrowing presents a story that will challenge even the most sophisticated of readers, and its art is spectacular. Therefore the main challenge for the company exists in informing the marketplace that the product exists and can meet the needs of its would-be readers. In short, Harrowing is a product into which thoughtful adult readers can sink their intellectual teeth.

#### Marketplace Overview:

The genre and length of this particular product were chosen based on both marketing and financial research. The reality is that profitability for the small press comic producer is limited. Successful small press comic companies can expect to sell at maximum 5,000 issues of a single work, and sales of any new series can be expected to decline after the release of the first issue. This occurs because it takes at least a year to build an active following for a monthly sequential book in the comics marketplace, and up until that point of increasing sales, the book's early issues tend to be more popular due to the inherent collectibility of comic-related products. Comic collectors like to own early issues; this increases demand for issues that carry the number "1" and therefore means that any following issue that is not a number "1" will see less demand. Amongst the keys to success for this venture for Proletariat Comics is controlling costs due to the expected demand limitations of the marketplace. For the

first-time small press publisher, producing a single-issue story makes far more sense than producing an initial mini series, given that demand for the series could be expected to decline as the series continues. The micro-presser is therefore better off producing a series of separate products rather than a single product with a multiple issue run, and it is this fact that drove the creation of Harrowing as a one-shot novella.

Proletariat chose the genre for Harrowing based on a simple analysis of the profitability and opportunity in the marketplace. The following chart shows the profitability and saturation of the marketplace for the Top 300 comics distributed by Diamond Comics Distributors<sup>1</sup>, broken down by genre:

Genre	Code	Titles	Total Profit Index	Average Profit Index
Superhero Fiction/Lit.	(SH)	132	6772.5	51.31
Horror	(H)	18	163.48	9.08
Sci Fiction	(X)	12	345.55	28.80
Fantasy	(F)	28	386.13	13.79
Mystery	(M)	2	163.48	12.29
Action	(A)	30	517.91	17.26
Comedy	(C)	29	119.35	4.12

A brief look at this table shows that the Science Fiction genre is on average the second most profitable genre but that the genre itself contains fewer offerings currently than several other competing product types. Thus, despite the fact that the marketplace itself is competitive and fairly crowded,

it is reasonable to try to compete in the marketplace with this type of product.

Proletariat hopes to capitalize on this little known and lesser-understood market reality.

### Competing Products:

Comic books in general compete with a wide variety of entertainment products for customer dollars and time, but one should remember that the entertainment marketplace is not a zero sum game. Thus while it is true that comics compete with television and video games for consumers' attentions, it is also true that products with similar characteristics can actually serve to increase sales for like products. The following types of products compete with comics:

- **Television:** TV has clearly the largest audience in the entertainment industry, but since most television is free, the medium does not steal entertainment dollars from the comic industry. Moreover, there are very few science fiction

<sup>1</sup> Diamond is currently the only truly national distributor for comics. <http://www.diamondcomics.com>.

television shows, and those that do exist are more likely to create interest in Harrowing than to lower by offering alternatives to the product.

- **Video Games:** The video game market is probably the most significant competitor to the comic book market because video games are expensive and time consuming. Customers who play a lot of video games necessarily have less time to read comics, and the medium sucks entertainment dollars as well. Also of note is the fact that science fiction is a popular video game genre.
- **Magazines / Trade Publications:** Magazines such as Science Fiction Quarterly are aimed squarely at the same target audience as Harrowing, but since neither product is terribly expensive or overly time-consuming, there exists the possibility for a mutually productive partnership here.
- **Novels:** Science fiction is also a popular genre for novelists, and novels take both time and money from comics. However, novels are also separate in that they do not typically contain an art component, and so readers may want both novels and comics for this reason.
- **Movies:** An increasing number of movies are based on comics, and this has created a de facto partnership between these industries. Harrowing can use this partnership by targeting fans who have come to comics stores looking for movie-related comics and enticing them to try something new.

## II. Segmentation.

In order to recognize the opportunities inherent in any marketplace, one must be able to break the marketplace down into segments. The comic book market can be broken down as follows:

- Hard Core Comics Fans who are interested in independent comics
- Hard Core Comics Fans who are not interested in independent comics
- Young Adult Fans
- Lapsed Fans
- New or Casual Fans
- Adolescent Girls

Taking a brief look at the various components of this marketplace, one finds:

- **Hard Core Comics Fans who are interested in independent comics:** Hard Core Fans are the fans that routinely visit comics specialty stores to methodically search out their favorite comics. They are often tired of superheroes in general and will frequently try new things, but the majority of these fans hold a fondness for superhero comics that keeps them coming back for more of their favorites. There are perhaps 200,000 total truly Hard Core comic fans in America, and they are mostly males between 18 and 45 years of age. Most are self-described geeks. Of the total population of Hard Core comics fans, approximately two-thirds are interested in comics produced by non-mainstream companies. This group makes up the easiest market segment for Harrowing to appeal to.
- **Hard Core Comics Fans who are not interested in independent comics:** This is the group of Hard Core fans who are not inherently interested in comics created by independent producers. This group is currently shrinking as the costs of printing in the industry shrink and thereby increase the number of companies competing for consumer dollars. An increasing number of companies are coming to be regarded as mainstream.
- **Young Adult Fans:** This group is comprised of younger teenagers between 9 and 16 years of age who are discovering comics for the first time. This group is made up of mostly boys, and it is for this group that most comics are made. This group is naturally interested in adolescent power fantasies, also known as superhero stories. For the most part, Young Adult Fans grow up to become either Hard Core or Lapsed Fans.
- **Lapsed fans:** Lapsed comic fans make up perhaps the largest segment of the comic book market, a market that has been steadily shrinking for almost three decades. These fans are former Young Adult Fans or Hard Core Fans who have given up on comics because they feel too old for the superheroes that dominate the marketplace. These fans like comics but not comic specialty stores, and they remember how much they enjoyed comics but not enough to make them tolerate adolescent stories or poorly executed art. They will try new things, but they will not go out of their way to look for them. Lapsed Fans are mostly males between 25 and 45 years of age.

- **New or Casual Adult Fans:** This is the group of comic fans who has either discovered or re-discovered comics through the recent spate of comic-related movies. Not overly interested in the medium, this group of fans is a recent development made possible by the success of Marvel's comic movies and by the development of the trade paperback in the bookstore market. The vast majority of these fans are male, between the ages of 18 and 35. These fans are different from the others listed here because they will buy comics when they see them, but they will not seek them out. They must be of at least elder adolescent status, or they must be considered to be Young Adult Fans in which case their long-term preference is not yet set. Casual Fans tend to drift out of the market after a brief, targeted infatuation with a specific set of characters.
- **Adolescent Girls:** Adolescent Girls are another recent development in the comic book marketplace. This segment has grown through the success of Japanese manga romance comics imported into the bookstore market, and members of this segment read this specific genre and little else. They are deeply disinterested in other comics, which they consider less cool. Adolescent girls form a distinct segment from Young Adult Fans, even when these Young Adults are female. Adolescent girls are almost exclusively female readers between the ages of 8 and 16. They will seek out specific products, but they will not venture outside of their core interests to try other comic offerings.

Although Lapsed Comic Fans make up a primary market segment for Proletariat Comics in general, the marketing plan for Harrowing focuses primarily on Hard Core Fans who are interested in independent comics. Lapsed Fans are a hoped-for secondary segment. Proletariat chose the Hard Core segment based primarily on the ease of communicating its message to this segment as compared to the other segments. Hard Core fans are most likely to give new products like Harrowing a chance, and they are of an age to be interested in the title itself and to have the money to do try it out. Moreover, while the Lapsed Fan segment is certainly a large and tempting target, it is also the most difficult segment to reach. Lapsed fans have specifically given up on comics and are not looking to give the medium another try

without a very good reason. In truth, these fans represent potential new Hard Core fans, but reaching them is problematic at best.

### **III. Positioning**

The comic book marketplace is a crowded one, but as has already been stated, Proletariat Comics is attacking the Science Fiction genre because it is the least crowded subset of the overall field. In the 1950's and 60's, Science Fiction was perhaps the most popular field for comics to explore, but since the establishment of the Comics Code Authority, the genre has largely died off. Even now that the Code Authority is largely defunct, Science Fiction remains a distinctly underdeveloped subset of the overall marketplace. This has more to do with marketing than with fan preference, however. The two largest players in the comics industry are both closely tied to the success of their superhero properties, so that while they might make an effort to incorporate some Science Fiction elements, the reality is that they are not truly able to explore the richness of the field to the satisfaction of most comics fans.

The largest competitor in Science Fiction comics is Dark Horse Comics. Their licensed property Star Wars is the largest player by far in the genre, and they have also launched a number of other Science Fiction titles with varying degrees of success. Licensed properties such as Alien vs. Predator and Akira have done very well in the marketplace. However, it should be noted that the comics industry is not a zero sum game. The success of a few science fiction titles does not preclude the success of others. Indeed, the success of Star Wars and other licensed properties argues in favor of the popularity of the genre, and the lack of original content indicates a certain degree of opportunity in the marketplace. Other notable science fiction competitors in science fiction comics include Heavy Metal Magazine and Britain's 2000 A.D. Both of these titles are geared towards adult readers and have long histories of success, but both are also different in concept from Harrowing.

Harrowing will succeed by presenting intelligent, thought-provoking content to the largely adult population of Hard Core comics fans reading the current science fiction titles and by presenting this material in a single-issue format. This will differentiate it a great deal from what is already available. With the popular licensed properties, the

subject matter is largely derivative and rarely challenging. This is the norm with any sort of franchise fiction, but that sort of fiction is rarely satisfying over long periods of time. Adult audiences wish to be challenged. Indeed, one might argue that these properties have very effectively whetted the appetites of Science Fiction fans for Harrowing.

On the other hand, Heavy Metal and 2000 A.D. both offer more interesting comparisons. Both of these magazines do stories that are similar in concept and execution to Harrowing. However, these are both short fiction magazines, and their stories tend to last no more than a few pages. Even longer stories are serialized to increase sales over time rather than to simply tell a good story. Harrowing is different than either of these because it is a single graphic novella. It will provide readers with a challenging, adult-oriented story all in one sitting. This approach is extremely rare in comics in general and in science fiction comics in particular. It differentiates this title from what is already on the market.

#### **IV. Place**

Harrowing will compete in two markets via a number of different distribution channels. It will be available primarily through comic book specialty shops via the Direct Market. Diamond Comics Distributors<sup>2</sup> and several other smaller distributors service this market, which caters to core comics audience by providing non-returnable content to comics specialty stores. This is possible because of the sequential, collectable nature of comics; comics specialty stores profit by carrying back-issues at premium prices and so have far less incentive to return unsold issues than regular monthly magazine retailers do. Independent comics creators helped to start this market in the 1970s in order to provide a way for new creators to create new work that was not yet ready for the everyday newsstand, and so the market itself makes a good place for an independent publisher to start out. It is through this market that Harrowing will find the greatest audience, but this market is also the least profitable since the company must pay printing costs, distribution costs, and retail costs in order to compete here. Thus, Proletariat will also market Harrowing in a number of other ways.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.diamondcomics.com>.

One of the best ways for any independent comic creator to get his work seen is by simply traveling to support the title with in-store signings. In this, Proletariat is fortunate because the company is located in the Northeast, one of the most profitable and densely populated comics areas in the United States. At the time that Harrowing is going into the Diamond Previews catalogue, the company will make an effort to call and schedule signings at comic shops throughout the New York-tri-state area and New England. This will have several beneficial effects:

- 1) Build a relationship with retailers that will encourage them to order this and other future products,
- 2) Encourage retailers to order this specific product for this specific signing, and
- 3) Encourage fans to buy the book during the signing, thus increasing the likelihood of re-orders and orders for future products.

Proletariat Comics, LLC will also market this product in two ways on the Internet. First and most profitably, the company will offer the work for sale electronically at a discount to the print cover-price. The company has done this with other titles, and while the results have not been spectacular, the costs are negligible so that every dollar made through electronic sales was pure profit. In short, this distribution method offers another way for fans to try give Harrowing a try, and offering content in this way costs no more while adding some profitability. Additionally, the company will offer two types of printed products online. First, Proletariat will simply sell print copies of Harrowing online to fans at the regular cover price plus shipping. However the company will also sell signed copies of Harrowing online for a premium price for those who become Hard Core fans of the concept. Since in-store signings are already planned, these premium copies can also be offered via the retail market as well, and offering premium books gives the company another way to make the customer experience special, which will help Harrowing stand out in a field crowded with competitors.

## **V. Price**

The comic book marketplace already has well-established price norms, and it is difficult to see an upside in deviating substantially from them. While a 28-page one-shot comic story is not the norm in the marketplace, the 28-page length itself is not

uncommon and would typically command a price between \$3.50 and \$3.95 depending on creator's determination to follow either a quality or a value approach to the market. Since Harrowing is going after a market segment that is both informed and selective (i.e. Hard Core comics fans and lapsed comic fans), it should pursue a quality strategy and thus the higher price point. The book itself is being presented to the market based on the novelty of its subject matter and the power of the story and the art; thus it is a boutique product and should command a boutique price. Moreover, as a new studio Proletariat would risk much by pricing below the norm as this is likely to cause would-be readers to view the company as producing cheap work, and this is emphatically not the case. And even if it were true, that would still not be the image that the company is trying to pursue. Thus Harrowing will be priced at \$3.95 for 28 pages of content.

## **VI. Communication Mix**

The following list details the target audiences for Harrowing as well as how Proletariat Comics plans to reach those audiences:

**Audience:** Hard Core Comic Fans who are already interested in comics by independent creators

**Objective:** Generate word-of-mouth and retail orders

**Vehicles:** Internet and print advertising, Internet message boards, and web site

### **How Proletariat Uses the Vehicles:**

- Internet and print advertising will build awareness of Harrowing and make Hard Core fans curious about learning more about the product. The company will purchase advertising from selected Internet sites and print magazines such as [www.comicbookresources.com](http://www.comicbookresources.com), [www.newsrama.com](http://www.newsrama.com), Equal Footing Magazine, Comics International, and Wizard Magazine. These ads will inform comic fans about the product and provide a way for them to learn more. That provides the company with the opportunity to get its message out to fans.
- Internet message boards provide a low-cost way of building word-of-mouth both by allowing the company to present itself to fans looking for new comic-related things on the Internet but also by providing a means for Proletariat creators to

interact with new would-be fans, thus building customer relationships. This vehicle should generate both interest and excitement for the new product, and market research has shown that interacting with fans is a good way to get them to want to buy comics. This interaction serves to make Harrowing an experience as well as a product.

- Both ads and message board drops will create interest in the project among Hard Core fans who are already looking for new products. The point of these ads is to drive traffic to the web site where fans can then learn more about Harrowing, about Proletariat's creators, and about how to order and purchase the product. The website also builds customer interaction, and it is this interaction, in addition to the product's benefits, that will in turn generate word-of-mouth and retail sales.

**Audience:** Hard Core Comic Fans who are not already interested in comics by independent creators

**Objective:** Generate a willingness to explore and try the product

**Vehicles:** Internet and print advertising, web site, comic review magazines

**How Proletariat Uses the Vehicles:**

- Internet and print advertising that is carried on sites that cover mainstream books and within the mainstream books themselves will build awareness of Harrowing and break down resistance to trying new things. These ads will create familiarity with the product and cause comic fans to want to learn more about Harrowing and Proletariat by giving glimpses of the story and the art and thereby creating curiosity among comics fans not normally interested in new things.
- Again, the point is to drive traffic to the web site and/or to create a desire in normally disinterested fans to know more about this product. An acceptable outcome for this advertising is to get comics fans to ask their local retailers about Harrowing and Proletariat simply for the sake of curiosity. These questions are likely to translate into orders by retailers, and these orders will lead to retail sales. With a cover price of only \$3.95, it is likely that a willingness to learn more will translate into a sale so long as the product is available and easy for customers to buy and so long as those customers already enjoy reading comics.

- Proletariat has already begun writing for selected magazines in an effort to build good will towards the company in general and towards its future products in particular. For example, the President of the company is writing an unpaid series of articles on the business of comics for Equal Footing Magazine in an effort to both increase the company's exposure among naturally disinterested comics fans but also to build a relationship with the magazine's creators. Thus when it is time to market Harrowing, the company can count on positive coverage that will help build real interest in casual comics fans who read Equal Footing to find out more about other parts of the industry.

**Audience:** Comic Specialty Retailers – this is the most critical audience with which Proletariat must connect

**Objective:** Generate wholesale orders

**Vehicles:** Internet and print advertising, phone calls, personal visits/signings, and preview copies

**How Proletariat Uses the Vehicles:**

- As with the other audiences, the point of Internet and print advertising is to primarily build awareness of the product and the company and to break down the natural barriers that exist to trying new things. Once awareness is built, Proletariat will have the opportunity to educate retailers on the virtues of Harrowing. It will do this by sending out courtesy copies of the product to would-be vendors.
- Phone calls and personal visits are the best way to generate orders with retailers. Sole proprietors own most comic book specialty stores, and these sole proprietors want to find new products for their customers, but they want to be assured that the new products are good before they recommend them to their customers. Proletariat must connect and build personal relationships with these retailers, and the best way to do this is by having one of the principles of the company take the time to call or visit and actually get to know retailers and by sending read-ahead copies of the product to the retailers so that they can try it

out before they commit to carrying it. This is a substantial time commitment, but since this is the make-or-break audience, it demands special attention.

- Once the retailer has committed to carrying Harrowing, Proletariat must support that retailer as he is selling it to his customers. This means scheduling as many signings and in-store appearances as possible in order to help move product as well as making further signed, premium copies available. Proletariat must also provide selected high-order retailers with special in-store displays in order to help these retailers set Harrowing apart and make it a special item for their customers.
- It is likely that retailers will under order Harrowing initially. For this reason, Proletariat must be prepared to re-print and re-solicit the issue to take advantage of early successes and meet demand that is likely to surprise the marketplace.
- Proletariat will hire American creators to do the cover for Harrowing because the writer and illustrator are British. This will allow the company to schedule signings in both the U.S. and Britain.

**Audience:** Trade Magazines and Reviewers

**Objective:** Generate positive word-of-mouth and orders from retailers

**Vehicles:** Preview copies of the finished product

**How Proletariat Uses the Vehicles:**

- Proletariat must send out preview copies well in advance to selected comic reviewers and trade magazines. The positive reviews gained in this way will provide both word-of-mouth and enthusiasm in the marketplace as well as helping to allay fears that retailers might have of ordering a new product from a new company.
- The company has already worked to establish relationships with some critical, well-respected reviewers.

**Audience:** Lapsed comic fans

**Objective:** Generate interest in Proletariat as a company that can satisfy their need for intelligent, adult comics

**Vehicles:** Internet and print advertising

### **How Proletariat Uses the Vehicles:**

- Proletariat will run a campaign on selected non-comic websites in order to try to lure former comic fans back into the medium for this one special event. Examples of target sites for this campaign are: [www.MoveOn.Org](http://www.MoveOn.Org) and [www.OpTruth.com](http://www.OpTruth.com). These two sites draw a lot of intelligent adult traffic. From there Proletariat needs to appeal to the former comics fans. OpTruth.com in particular is a good place to advertise since many military members are lapsed comic fans who just need to find something new that they can relate to.
- The print campaign is similar. Magazines such as Science Fiction Quarterly and Dragon Magazine have readerships that are largely made of lapsed comic fans looking for something new to read. Proletariat needs to provide that something new.

### **VI. Summary**

Building a new comic franchise is not easy, but by taking the time to carefully identify a market segment with growth potential, by building a quality book, and by building personal relationships that will ensure that the book gets into stores, Harrowing can be a successful comic book property. Once Harrowing has reached a level of success, Proletariat must be prepared to capitalize and follow up with more products that expand on the basic themes and reputation that Harrowing generates for the company. In comics, success breeds success. The company must plan for this even as it focuses on getting its first product into the marketplace.