Feds sue 6 websites for offering free comic books

May 28 2010, By SUZETTE LABOY , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Six websites run by a Florida man violated federal copyright laws by allowing visitors to view Batman and other comic books for free without permission from the publishers or authors, government lawyers charge in a federal lawsuit.

ComicBooksFree.com, HTMLcomics.com, and PlayboyMonthly.com were among the domain names run by Gregory Steven Hart doing business as Database Engineers Inc. located in Tampa, according to the lawsuit filed Thursday in Tampa federal court.

"We have taken civil action to shut down the websites and take custody of the website domains," said Steve Cole, the spokesman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Tampa.

A phone message was left Friday by The Associated Press with the company. An attorney for Hart was not named in the lawsuit, nor was a phone number listed for Hart. His company's websites appeared to be no longer working Friday.

The FBI began investigating Hart in 2009. The site HTMLcomics.com provided a large number of copyrighted comic books and Hart was operating the site without the permission of either the publishers or authors who own the copyrights to those materials, the lawsuit says.

The publishers sent Hart letters demanding that he cease and desist distribution of copyrighted material, but Hart refused. By June 2009,

HTMLcomics.com claimed to host over 100,000 issues.

In Nov. 2009, Hart was contacted by the attorneys for Marvel Comics Group, which own Spiderman and X-Men comics. He told them he designed the website, and although he did not personally own the comics being displayed, he received digital image files from people who scanned the comics and posted them on his website, the lawsuit says.

According to the lawsuit, Hart advised the attorneys that if no company agreed to a revenue-sharing arrangement, he would continue to operate the site without charging users to view the comics.

HTMLcomics.com received between 400,000 and 500,000 hits per day. The monthly cost to subscribe to Marvel's service is $10.

Among the comic books available on the sites were: Astonishing X-Men, The Simpsons, Dilbert, Peanuts, Batman, Superman, Watchmen and Mad Magazine.

Hart established HTMLmagazines.com, which made available for viewing copies of various magazines including Maxim and Playboy. Federal agents searched his home in April 2010, seizing records including a cease and desist letter, hard drives, computers and DVDs with copyright-protected images.

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