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The Potential of the Online Comic as a Medium

Introduction

The medium of comics is a much maligned and misunderstood art. In this dissertation I will seek to draw an outline of what I believe to be the unique beauty of the comic as a medium. Once an understanding of comics as a medium (as opposed to the often used misnomer of comics as a genre) has been established, I will seek to examine and define the ways in which the individual virtues of the comic medium can best be preserved and enhanced in a digital context.

The online comic is a medium in its infancy, still in the process of finding its feet. I will attempt to identify the major issues that producers of online comics face, and attempt to draw conclusions as to the best way forward for the medium. In attempting to map out the potential of online comics as a medium, there are two main areas to be considered. The translation from a printed form to a digital form offers many possibilities and raises many issues. The matter of distribution and reception of a comic online is also multifaceted. The implications for creators, readers and the industry of online delivery are not yet fully known, but are liable to be far-reaching in the long term. Rather than make a perfunctory examination of two such vast areas, I have chosen to concentrate on the translation of comics from a printed to a digital form. My examination of this area will cover three main issues.

Firstly, I will endeavour to outline what constitutes a comic. I will identify the primary factors in what defines a comic, and examine the boundaries of the resulting definition.

Following on from this, there will be an examination of how digitisation and production and presentation can augment a comic, and how this affects the definition and range of what can be called a comic.

Another major issue facing online comics is that of interaction. There will be an examination of the implications of introducing interaction into any narrative medium, with particular reference to online comics.

Based on my conclusions regarding the nature of comics and the opportunities that online comics present, I intend to conclude by proposing a way in which online comics can move forward to best realise the potential which exists.

What is a Comic?

The medium of comics often finds itself in the awkward position of being labelled a genre. It is fair to say that the popular perception of what constitutes comics: men in tights with superhuman powers, evil geniuses, talking animals etc, certainly constitute a genre or genres. Such an understanding of comics can safely be used with little fear that your use of the word 'comics' will be misinterpreted, and will remain largely unchallenged by comparison to the majority of comics. However, in terms of describing what defines a comic, this view is less helpful. The commonly held view of comics only takes into consideration the dominant genres of the medium. Comics in their fullest (and most accurate) sense are a medium in their own right. The question is, what characteristics define a work as a comic?

An initial attempt to describe what a comic is might be 'pictures and text used in combination to produce a narrative'. This is certainly true, but is it an accurate enough description? If one were to remove the soundtrack from a film with subtitles, would the end result be a comic? No. Would it, then, be sufficient to define a comic as a narrative consisting of a series of static images and text? This sounds better, however, that does not really move us away from the subtitled film, as (technically speaking) films consist of a series of static images displayed in (rapid) succession. This may seem to be a pedantic distinction, however, in order to understand how the medium of comics may function digitally; it is first necessary to ascertain how it functions at all.

In addressing this issue, Carrier states that he is "unwilling to dismiss [comics] as a second-hand version of movies"¹ on the basis that the two function in a fundamentally different manner. Scott McCloud, in his book *Reinventing Comics*, offers some wisdom on the subject:

¹ Carrier, David, *The Aesthetics of comics*, p.50.

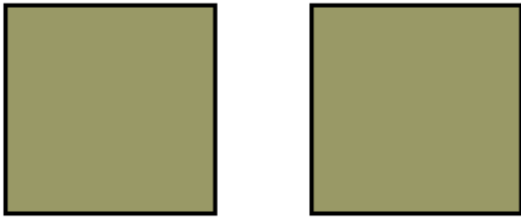


Figure A.

What *is* comics?... ...If I told you that figure A *wasn't* comics and figure B *was*, would you believe me?

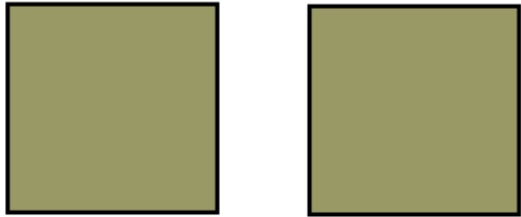


Figure B.

Suppose I told you that figure A was a picture of *two squares* and figure B was a picture of *one square*, shown at *one moment*, then the *next*?²

McCloud's point is that the essence of comics lies in the use of space to express time, and that it is the reader who translates the physical space between panels on a page into spaces of time within a narrative in their head. Thus the temporal dynamic of the narrative relies upon the input of the reader in order to function. In other words, in a comic it is the reader who moves the narrative forward, as opposed to in a film, where the creator controls the pace. This is an interesting point, and one that effectively distinguishes comics from other media.

The ability of the reader to control the pace at which you advance through a narrative is not unique to comics; the same is true of a traditional novel. However, the nature and extent of this control differs considerably. In the context of a novel there is very little for the reader to control in terms of pace. They can make a decision as to whether to read another chapter now, or go to sleep and read the next chapter on the bus the following morning, but they can exert very little control over the level at which the narrative can be read. The traditional novel offers no provision for levels of detail; every word needs to be read.

A comic does not consist only of words; there are also pictures. The old adage 'a picture is worth a thousand words' may be a tired cliché, but it is not without its wisdom. In relation to comics, it may be truer to say 'a picture is worth a thousand words, or less'. Thus, a frame of comic may contain a thousand words worth of information relating to the story, but it is up to the reader how much of this they take the time to extract. They may wish to study each frame and explore all possible significances, or they may wish to skim quickly through each frame, pausing only briefly to glean the bare minimum of narrative information. In this way, the reader controls the levels of granularity at which they wish to read the comic.

² McCloud, S. *Reinventing Comics*, p.206.

It now becomes clearer what the individual virtue of comics might be; the comic combines the narrative function of the film and the novel with the contemplative function of fine art. This combination of attributes gives comics a unique aesthetic that borrows from, but operates distinctly differently from, other media. Bearing in mind the nature of comics, how will these virtues operate in a digital environment?

Digital Augmentation

What are the main differences between traditional and online comics? The possibilities offered by the digital presentation of comics are many and varied. The nature of an online comic can differ from the traditional form in three main ways: the integration of new media into the work, the format in which this is presented, and the level and type of interaction which takes place between the reader and the work. I will address the issue on interaction separately. Here I will address the issues of additional media and alternative formats.

Additional media

Perhaps the most common addition to a comic when producing an online version is to animate elements of the story. With tools such as Macromedia's Flash and Director applications, a stunning variety of animated effects can be achieved. Such additions to an online comic will certainly set it apart from its paper counterparts and earn it the status of 'multimedia'. However, I consider that in most instances, the use of animation in an online comic is motivated more by the 'wow' factor and the 'because we can' rationale than by a considered aesthetic judgement aimed at enriching the work.

In terms of presenting the action of the story, I would argue that it makes sense to either entirely animate the story (in which case the work ceases to be a comic and becomes a cartoon), or to use animation extremely sparingly, or not at all. Once is introduced into a work, a convention is established and a level of expectation is created in the mind of the audience. This expectation can then be subverted by using animation sparingly and, or upheld by consistent use of animation.

An important point for consideration is: at what point do digital additions to a comic transform it from being an enhanced comic to being a poor imitation of a cartoon? A good example of the pitfalls into which an online comic can fall is the *Star Wars Episode I* shockwave flash comic that I found at:

<http://www.starwars.com/eu/feature/19990501/comic.html>³

What I watched was the first instalment of a series of online comic versions of the *Star Wars Episode I: the Phantom Menace*. The online comic version fails in a number of ways. Firstly, there is the animation and pacing. The animation consists of comic book style drawings animated in a stilted manner. The effect of this is that of a bad cartoon. The story is a condensed version of the film, so the pacing of the scenes has a hurried, perfunctory, feel. The soundtrack also is a cut down version of the film's, which, because of the streaming nature of the delivery, synchronises poorly with onscreen action. Another major problem is the lack of user controls. There is no provision made for pausing the sequence or coming back to it at a given point, the sequence must always be viewed from the beginning every time. This lack of user control puts it at a disadvantage against any other medium with the exception of a cinema screening, which it is a watered down version of in every other respect.

³ Star Wars official website, LucasFilm Ltd., 19th July 2001, <<http://www.starwars.com/eu/feature/19990501/comic.html>>.

It is perhaps a little unfair to judge an online comic which has the daunting task of reproducing one of the most highly produced films ever, and was doubtless produced on a mere fraction of the budget of the film itself. It does however offer some important lessons.

The questions that should be asked when translating a work from one medium to another are:

- Of the various aspects of the work I am emulating, which can and cannot be reproduced in the medium in which I am working?
- What can my medium offer the work in addition to what is present in the original version?

The *Episode 1* online comic elaborates on the original film format by placing multiple frames on the screen at once, each containing different scenes, providing some interesting juxtapositions of situation and settings, a familiar and effective comic book technique. Other than this, the online comic version makes little use of the medium, the lack of any user control being a particular shame.

My main criticism however is that it ploughs headlong into the folly of gleefully adding all the augmentations possible to a comic by adding sound and animation, which add little value to the work, while disregarding most of what makes a comic enjoyable and unique. Despite (or more truthfully, because of) all the digital bells and whistles, which are added, the overall effect is that of a very poor cartoon version of the film. This is a clear indication that while the addition of animated sequence to an online comic will make for an impressive spectacle, it does not necessarily add value to the work, and in fact it may actually be damaging to the integrity of the medium.

The other form of additional media often added to online comics is sound. The question of the use of sound in online comics is an interesting one. Sound is an entirely alien medium to traditional comics, for obvious technical reasons. The power of digital presentation means that online comics can have soundtracks. Soundtracks can perform a number of functions within a narrative. The question is: what value would a soundtrack add to a comic?

Sound can be used in conjunction with images to convey events that are part of the *mise en scène*, or to convey unseen events (gunshots, something falling over, etc.). Comics have developed their own ocular language to express aural events visually. Such visualisation of sound I find to be an extremely expressive dimension to comics when done well, and would consider it a shame to dispense with such a rich language in favour of straight reproduction of sound.

Sound is also used to convey dialogue, both by characters within the frame, external to the frame but within the narrative, and also entirely external narrators. Again, I feel that while it would certainly be impressive to have your comic talk to you, this would be a replacement of function, not an addition.

Finally, sound is also used emotively, usually in the form of music, to evoke moods and atmospheres. It is this function of a soundtrack as an emotional indicator for which comics have no equivalent or substitute. It is also the only function of sound

that helps, rather than hinders the contemplative quality of comics. However, this is only true if music is used in a fairly loose manner. As I have mentioned earlier, part of the appeal of comics is that the reader drives the pace of the story. For a soundtrack to work in this context, it can only realistically be used to create a mood for the comic environment as whole, or significant sections of it. To attempt to tailor the soundtrack for specific pages, frames or events would prove disruptive to the reader's own flow. However, sound is the most primary of senses, and undoubtedly the most emotively powerful. As such it can set the emotional tone of work quickly and effectively.

On balance, I would say that while adding a soundtrack to an online comic would no doubt transform the work, it would not necessarily improve it, however, the use of sound is most likely to succeed if used sparingly and in a general manner.

Format

The medium of online comics opens up many possibilities in terms of format and layout. The basic restriction of the page is replaced by the restriction of the screen. Within this basic framework, however, much is possible.

McCloud suggests creating a 'story-scape' that the reader can zoom into and navigate their way around⁴. He envisions building comics of all shapes and sizes, which are in effect 'temporal maps' of a narrative. In this way the user's screen would be, instead of a fixed frame, rather a window onto a world. This is an appealing notion, however it should also be noted that comic creators have often turned the restriction of the page into a virtue. Having a fixed page order and size means that creators know the exact format and context in which a given page will be viewed. This allows artists to plan compositions in great detail. If the viewable area of a work is variable, then compositional considerations must change accordingly. This means that compositions have to be designed to be viewed from a variety of viewpoints. This is not necessarily a negative point, but an example of the created problems generated by greater freedom of format.

In addition to the perceived shape of an online comic, there is also the issue of how the story moves forward. It has already been established that one of the principles of what defines a comic is the idea of space representing time. Given that the digital medium is not physical in any meaningful sense, how does this notion translate to the virtual spaces represented on screen? The short answer is that it doesn't. The question then is, what is the significance of spatial transitions in comics, and how can this be reproduced in online comics?

The significance of these spatial transitions is that the reader makes them and the pacing of the transitions is not forced by the medium. In other words, the reader's eye moves across the composition of a page as it wishes, and the page is turned when the reader so desires. In a digital environment, the form that the progression through the narrative takes is more open. However, while not literally physical, these paths can still be of a spatial nature, depending on the form of the comic. If the comic is of a specific 'shape', then there will naturally be the impression of

⁴ McCloud, S. *Reinventing Comics*, pp.222-9.

progressing (for instance) 'along', 'into', or 'up' the storyline. Alternatively, there may be no spatial element or 'shape' to the narrative. In this case, how would the transitions be made? The most likely answer to this is that the work would become more filmic, as the work would divide up into the equivalent of scenes and shots, with transitions in between. Provided that the user retained control of triggering transitions, the essence of the contemplative narrative would remain.

The notion of the reader being in the driving seat with regard to the progress of the narrative is central to the way in which a comic operates. In this sense, the comic might be considered an interactive art form. In the next section I will further examine the issue of interaction as it relates to narrative, and the possibilities for development that online comics offer in this area.

Interaction in Fiction

In order to identify the key issues of interactivity as they relate to online comics in particular, I will firstly examine the subject of interactive fiction in general. The definition of *interaction* is "reciprocal action or influence"⁵. In computing terms, the issue of *interaction* between human and computer has always been a thorny one. This is hardly surprising, as establishing a reciprocal relationship with a machine is not an easy thing to do. Somewhere along the difficult history of human-computer interaction, the idea of interactivity seems to have been wrongly distilled down to the issue of control.

Certainly this seems to be how *interaction* is understood in the context of its current status as a new media buzzword. This is all very well in the context of producing an information website where the purpose of the site is to enable the user to find the information they require as quickly and easily as possible (though deceptively hard to achieve). However, when applied to creative works, whose intended purpose is altogether more varied and less defined, the issue of control is far more complex.

In the case of an informational work, the user usually has a fairly well defined idea of what it is they wish to get out of their interaction with the work. As a result, they are not usually too concerned with *how* they achieve their goal. In the case of a reader approaching a comic, the opposite is true: the important question is not 'did you find out what you wanted?' but 'what did you learn from the experience?' This is to say that the value of fiction is not measured in definable outcomes, but on the quality of experience that it gives.

In the case of the information website, the user has a defined goal, but not a defined path. In the case of a comic, the objectives are less clear, but the way forward is clearly laid out before the reader. A common pitfall of interactive fiction is that it provides neither an obvious pathway nor clearly defined objectives. Without either of these, the reader finds it difficult to proceed. This is a common pitfall of post-modernism, which often mistakes guiding lights for prison camp searchlights. Clearly some form of framework is needed, around which the receiver can build their experience.

I consider that the key issue of interaction in fiction is not that of *control*, but of *dialogue*. Dialogue between the work and the audience is absolutely vital to the functioning of any work as an *artwork* (indeed, I would argue that this is as good a basis as any on which to define what is art; however that can of worms can be left alone here). Part of the joy in an artwork is personal interpretation and debating its meaning with others.

The receiver of any medium must interpret and infer because a medium is just that, a middleman between originator and receiver. In the case of an element whose meaning is not absolutely explicit to the receiver, the receiver must decide what to do. The basic choices are: *enquire*, *interpret* or *ignore*. In the case of most media (face-to-face story-telling being one notable exception) the option of enquiry is non-existent. It is generally supposed that the power of digital delivery should be able to

⁵ Thompson, D., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, p. 709.

enhance the experience of the receiver of a work by making enquiry a more realistic option. It is this desire to make available to the receiver a viable line of enquiry that evokes such excitement about interactive fiction.

A common instinct when trying to introduce interactivity into a narrative is to think of it as a game. It is in this way that the 'rules and objectives' framework of a game is introduced. This is an understandable approach, but, to my mind, damaging to the cause of creating interactive fiction. The way in which games and fiction work are entirely different, and to try and marry the two is liable to end in disaster.

The dynamic of a game is such that participants are given a goal that they have to achieve within a framework of rules and conventions. The dynamic of a story is that of an individual or group to present a narrative to an audience, usually through a medium such as the theatre, the written word, etc. The aims of either activity are variable, however both broadly aim to entertain and educate. In the context of a game, it is usually expected that participants are familiar with the rules and objectives of a game before taking part. New players then learn how best to proceed within the conventions of the game in question. In the context of a narrative, prior knowledge of conventions is less important, as the structure is such that little initiative is required on the part of the reader; their path is marked out before them.

The role of the creator of a narrative is to lay a path for the reader to follow. The stringency with which this path is defined may be relaxed, but such direction must exist, else the fabric of the narrative disappears. Whatever erosion of control and the reception process take place, there can never be a total escape from the essential nature of author as producer and reader as receiver. The two states are the fundamental building blocks upon which the expression through media is based.

To supply your audience with the literary equivalent of a blank canvas, brushes and ready-mixed palette may be very *post-modern*, but it is also most definitely a failure on the part of the originator to produce an adequate source of stimulus. In other words, if too much of the creative process is handed over to the audience, then there is nothing to react to, and interaction is not increased but destroyed.

Pearce addresses this issue in terms of character. She describes character as "the soul of drama"⁶. She contends that the bulk of a creator's energies when generating a story are devoted to the generation of characters. She points out that much development is required to define a character to the point where the author can know what the character's reaction to any given situation would be, and it is these decisions that define a character. Pearce sees this as a paradox and asks:

If a character is defined by the decisions he or she makes, what happens when that character is acted upon by a player?⁷

This illustrates a key difference between a game and a story, which is that a game relates only to the character of its players, whereas a story seeks to generate and explore characters other than those of the creator and reader. In order to do this, the author of a work needs to retain control over causality within a narrative.

⁶ Pearce, Celia, *The Interactive Book*, p. 119

⁷ Pearce, Celia, *The Interactive Book*, p. 119.

The essential problem is that the narrative is often viewed as dictatorial, something from which the reader needs to be freed. The solution is to loosen narrative constraints, the idea being that this enables the reader to engage in the process of creating a story. It is sometimes supposed that the notion of navigable narratives erodes the possibility of a shared experience between readers – if every reader decides their own path through a story to create their own meta-story (distinct sets of narrative elements, determined by the route the reader navigates through the narrative), then the shared experience is lost. However, interactive narratives do not erode the possibility of a shared experience, but merely expose the essentially separate but related nature of different readers' experience of *any* story.

In the process of reading any narrative, the reader seeks to complete their understanding of the story, and in doing so they create their own meta-story. It should be pointed out that 'meta-story' in this sense pertains to the reader's unique conception of the same story that they have generated in their own mind, as distinct from the 'meta-story' referred to above, where the actual structure and content differs between readers.

It is precisely this difference in interpretation between readers that allows a shared experience. If the meaning of an artefact is transparent, then there are no grounds for a dialogue between readers. People do not hotly debate their interpretations of a fire exit sign. The sign is designed to be explicit. Readers of the sign may be fairly confident of having a shared understanding of the sign's meaning, but this scarcely amounts to much of an experience. It is the journey of discovery to arrive at one's own understanding of a text, and sharing your journey with others who have navigated their own route through the same text, which is the appeal of fiction.

I would suggest that the idea of maximising the sense of a personalised journey through a text is best served not by offering readers different paths to walk, but by allowing them more freedom with regard to the attention they pay to the scenery along the way. A common compliment paid to an artwork is that it 'operates on many levels' or that it has 'hidden depths'. Such works are multi-layered, and each reader of the work chooses the level at which they wish to engage with the work. It is this quality that I believe can be expanded upon by interactive fiction in general and online comics in particular.

As Murray puts it:

The capacity to represent enormous quantities of information in digital form translates into an artist's potential to offer a wealth of detail to represent the world with both scope and particularity.⁸

In order to foster greater interactivity in fiction, the reader needs *greater* input from the author, not less. It then becomes the function of the reader to take as much detail as they desire at any given point in the narrative, according to their level of interest. Therefore interactivity is introduced in terms of user control over the granularity of the work.

⁸ Murray, Janet H., *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in Cyberspace*, p.84.

It is within precisely this model of interactivity that online comics could excel. Imagine a comic strip whose illustrations contain narrative information, and also elements that pertain to more than just the story line. This comic can then be read on several levels, depending on the reader's level of interest and inquisition. Imagine further that the reader in some way can interrogate the illustrations of the strip. Certain elements of the illustrations or the words could be selected by the reader (by clicking on them, for instance) for further enquiry. This would allow the reader to control the depth in which they received a narrative, and allow them to 'ask' questions where they felt necessary. This would also allow the creator greater freedom of narrative. It would no longer be necessary to contrive an explanation of a character's background when introducing them. Such information could be made available to the curious reader, without it having to be awkwardly shoehorned into the dialogue. I would suggest that it is in this manner, rather than the model of a narrative/game hybrid, that can best heighten the sense of dialogue between reader and work through interactivity.

Conclusion

A common theme of multimedia theory seems to be that we are relentlessly headed towards a situation where all media will merge to create of one hyper-real super media that will supersede all other media. I consider this theory to be fundamentally flawed. Even supposing that total immersion virtual reality is one day realised, this super media would not be appropriate in all circumstances. Perfection is a purely hypothetical idea. Nature operates by virtue of diversity and complimentary opposites. I would suggest that particularity and diversity are just as important within media as in the natural world. It is this concept of difference and of individual virtue that I believe to be central to any discussion of the potential of online comics as a medium.

I believe that the most important and unique quality of a comic is the way in which it combines the contemplative nature of the still image with the power of narrative. It is this aspect that lends itself to the production of multi-layered works which can be read both on a quick, simple level, and also contemplated and mused on to reveal other levels.

Online comics have the power to take this dimension of variable granularity a step further. When contemplating a painting, a viewer conducts an internal dialogue with themselves in regard to the possible meanings of aspects of the painting. The more ambitious examples of comic art achieve the same thing. Online comics present the possibility of having that dialogue, not only in the privacy of one's skull, but also with the work itself. The mode of interaction that I proposed earlier strikes me as a more valuable way in which to introduce interactivity into online comics than trying to create an amalgamation of a narrative and a game, the dynamics of which I consider to be incompatible.

I have advised caution with regard to introducing additional media into an online comic. This is not to say that animation and sound should never be used, but rather that a decision should be made as to whether to produce an online comic; which seeks to preserve and enhance the virtues of a comic; or alternatively to use the full power of multimedia to create an animated story. I do not consider the latter course to be in any way inferior, the results could be potentially excellent, but also rather too different to be helpfully described as a comic.

Within the constraints of what *can* be described as a comic, I believe that there is the potential for many diverse and valuable works to be created. The basic format of words and pictures can be modelled in many ways. The key to success for any online comic will be that the power of digital media is used to enhance, rather than replace the strengths of the medium.

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