



Writing Visual Culture

ISSN: 2049-7180

Introduction: Digital Comics

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This edition of *Writing Visual Culture* is focused on the study of digital comics. Comics scholarship is a vibrant and a rapidly maturing field of academic study, but within this field the study of digital comics remains relatively under-theorised. Historically, the form of comics has developed within the constraints of the printed page. It can be found today in a variety of printed formats, ranging from serialised newspaper strips and comic books to larger collections and graphic novels. However, in addition to these paper-based formats, in the last thirty years new digital formats have emerged and steadily gained in popularity.

The earliest digital comics appeared in the 1980s, with titles such as Silhouette Software's *Redhawk* (1986) that mixed the visual narrative of a comic with the gameplay mechanics of an adventure videogame. While *Redhawk* provided the reader with a complex interactive narrative, in graphical terms it was severely restricted by the limited resolution and colour palette available to the early home computers for which it was designed. In the following years, as home computer systems grew in storage capacity and the fidelity of digital display increased, more graphically advanced digital comics began to appear. The popularity of multimedia CD-ROMs in the early 1990s saw several digital comics created to take advantage of the format (McCloud 2000, 208). Some operated as relatively straightforward adaptations of existing print comics while others were more complex affairs that incorporated sound, animated motion and interactivity (209).



In 1993 the ability to display inline images was added to the Mosaic web browser, contributing to a massive surge in popularity for the World Wide Web (Campbell 2006, 15). A new type of digital comic began to appear that was created specifically for consumption and distribution via the web. The increase in popularity of the web through the 1990s provided a mass audience for these new “webcomics” that continued to grow and diversify throughout the rest of the decade. The web allowed creators to reach a large audience of readers without incurring the production and distribution costs associated with traditional print comics (17). Although many creators experimented with different formats and layout of webcomic, by the early 2000s the most common format was that of the regularly updated, creator-owned serial. Instalments in these serials were typically laid out either in recreations of the traditional print comic page, or as single horizontal strips of three to four panels (similar in format to newspaper comic strips).

Apple’s launch of the iPad in 2010 led to the development of a new digital comic format adapted specifically for consumption and distribution via touchscreen-based, tablet computers. Here we arrive at the focus of our first article, Jayms Nichols’ *Comics and Control: Leading the Reading*. Nichols provides an excellent introduction to the popular, tablet-based digital comic format by examining it from the point of view of the reader and the act of reading itself. He begins by underscoring the complexity of the form of comics and the multiple literacies it requires of the reader. By examining the reading processes specific to both print and digital comics, he establishes some of the key similarities and differences between these two formats. Particular focus is given to the role of the page and the page turn in controlling the release of information to the reader and establishing rhythms of reading. The implications of replacing the page with the screen are examined in detail, highlighting in particular the importance of the “navisroll” as a replacement for the page turn. Alternatives to the page are then examined, including McCloud’s ‘infinite canvas’ approach (2000, 222) and more granular methods of ‘panel delivery’ (Goodbrey 2013, 192).

Nichols’ article also highlights the potential for digital mediation to introduce new hybrid elements to the form of comics, such as audible sound, animation, gameplay and interactivity. These threads are picked up in my own contribution to the journal, *The Sound of Digital Comics*. The main focus of this practice-led article is on the role of sound in comics and the ways in which digital mediation can successfully integrate audible sound into the form. It explores the conception of comics as ‘an audiovisual stage on paper’ (Smolderen 2014, 47) in which sounds are ‘imagined rather than perceived’ (Hague 2014, 65). Continuing another thread from Nichols,



the article examines the diegesis of the word balloon and the implications this has for the integration of audible sound. Several webcomic examples of “audible comics” are analysed, with parallels drawn to the use of sound in film and videogames. For its major case study the article focuses on my own piece, *The Empty Kingdom* (Goodbrey 2014), exploring in detail the construction and operation of the responsive soundtrack created for the work.

The hybridisation of comics with sound and motion is further explored in Craig Smith’s article, *Motion Comics: The Emergence of a Hybrid Medium*. Smith examines the hybridity of the animated motion comic within the context of comics’ growing influence on popular film and television. He identifies a range of examples from amateur, fan-made constructions to professional, transmedia productions. These serve to demonstrate both the medium’s growing popularity and the fundamentals of its operation. The article provides a detailed examination of the aesthetic qualities of motion comics and the practices involved in their production. The motion comic version of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s seminal *Watchmen* (1987) serves as a case study for the process of adapting an existing print comic narrative. Contrasted against this is the study of an original motion comic, *CIA: Operation Ajax* (Burwen 2011), which also highlights the potential for incorporating further interactive elements within the form.

The final article in this edition is James Taylor’s *Kick-Ass Version 2.0: The Superhero’s Navigation of Comic Books, Film and Digital Media*. Taylor builds on the contextual themes established by Smith; his paper provides a detailed consideration of the convergence of comics, film and digital media through its analysis of the comic book *Kick Ass* (Millar, Romita and Palmer 2010) and its later cinematic adaptation. The article examines the various ways these converging forms of media are represented and remediated within one another. In this manner the key formal properties of each medium are identified and shifts between immediacy and hypermediacy are highlighted (Bolter and Grusin 2000). Special focus is given to the portrayal and usages of social media and the digital distribution opportunities afforded by the World Wide Web. These are considered both in relation to comics and the concepts of the superhero and super powers as depicted in the narrative of *Kick Ass*.

I will conclude by offering my thanks to the contributors to this edition of *Writing Visual Culture* for all the time and hard work they have poured into their articles. I’d also like to thank our referees for their excellent critique and feedback. An extra-special thankyou goes to Dr Ian Hague for kindly volunteering to step in and organise the blind peer review process on my own



article. Finally, I'd like to thank Writing Visual Culture's editor in chief and leader of the TVAD research group, Dr Grace Lees-Maffei for inviting me to guest edit this edition of the journal and all the invaluable advice and support she has provided along the way.

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