Writing Visual Culture
ISSN: 2049-7180

Comics and Control: Leading the Reading

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ABSTRACT

In an age of easily accessible digital technologies the mainstream comic book form is undergoing a series of transformative changes as it is more and more frequently adapted to the screen. The nature of this adaptation seeks to use functionality offered by the digital environment to change the form of comics and accommodate a wider range of storytelling media. The interactive digital environment of gestural controlled touch screen devices offers a wealth of new possibilities in both the reading and creation of comics in the modern age. Animation and sound, for example, can be used by the author to control the pace at which the reader receives information and story elements. Likewise the lack of the physical page can allow for more types of transition from one panel, or set of panels, to the next.

However, this focus on the control given to the author by new media storytelling implies that outside of the digital environment the reader is always in control. In fact, this is not the case. The use of page layouts and the turning of the page can be used to control what elements are revealed when and which parts of the story can be seen juxtaposed next to which other parts. This paper will compare and contrast the control methods of the digital and print forms to outline the sets of rules that we use to further understand the reading processes of comics and digital comics. The aim of the paper will be to identify specific methods by which the creator can control the pace of reading in both digital and print media.

INTRODUCING DIGITAL COMICS

With the emergence and widespread adoption of digital technologies such as tablets and smartphones giving people the opportunity to access media artefacts at any time via the internet, there is a cultural shift in how information is being found and consumed. With a tendency towards delivering content digitally alongside or instead of traditional paper-based formats, we can see a marked change in the possibilities of what media artefacts can do and how they are presented. With this shift in the way a medium is presented to us we see a change in how we consume it and read its content. Whilst this is true of a number of media forms it is of particular interest in comics where, with the mass adoption of digital downloads from online stores, there are a wealth of different forms that the comic is beginning to take.

Even outside of the digital environment, comics is already a complicated form which requires us to have knowledge of and participate in several different reading skills. We must be able to read not only text and image but also a number of other types of information presented to us in different ways such as comic specific elements like word balloons, panel borders and different types of frames. Most importantly we must be able to swap back and forth between the different cognitive skills associated with these forms constantly throughout our reading process.

An artefact which asks us to use this combination of different types of reading skills is known as requiring multiple literacies, which are defined by Purcell-Gates as "the many and varied ways that people read and write in their lives" (2002, 376). The use of these multiple literacies makes comics reading an advanced and involving process which requires a combination of reading skills. Many comics theorists recognise this to be the case as Lavin sums up nicely when, in reference to Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, he states that "both suggest that the perception of sequential art requires more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone" (1998, 32).

READING MULTIPLE LITERACIES IN COMICS

It is this collection of multiple reading processes that we must consider when we produce comics for the digital environment. There are a number of format specific reading processes that

must be observed when we read comics in their various forms. It is these reading processes that this paper will discuss with a focus on the differences and similarities of print based comics and the various forms of emergent digital comics.

Traditional paper based comics use multiple literacy devices which must be read by the audience so that the story can be understood. These can then be referred to as the multiple literacies of comics and include text, image and comic vocabulary (comic specific elements which are defined further later) literacy readings. Each of these parts has its own set of reading rules and conventions which we must be able to interpret and understand individually before we can understand the comic as a whole.

Text reading requires us to understand letters in order to be able to form words, which when put together become sentences. We then have to know the meaning of those words and sentences and apply a grammar system to them in order to understand their meaning in context next to one another. When reading a continuous prose novel this is what we do and it makes up a singular literacy. Similarly, in image reading we perform a number of specific reading actions like those that allow us to understand the letters and words of text. Of course our reading methods here require a different collection of attributes and skills to give our picture a meaning or a *reading.* That is an important definition to make; when we read something we give it meaning. In image reading we must understand the figure and the ground and be able to tell which is which, and further from that what action, if any, the figure might be performing. Our eye movement here is also different to that of text in that it is not necessarily predetermined by our culture as it is in our reading of text. That is to say, it isn't always left to right and may start in the centre and work its way out or a number of other alternatives based on the reader's experience and the author's intent.

In comics we must perform these text and image reading skills and be able to switch from one set to the other and back again throughout our reading, constantly relating what we have read in the image to what we have read in the text and vice versa. Whilst these two commonly used and understood sets of literacies make up a part of the reading, comics also include a third set of reading codes and conventions native to comics. These relate specifically to the reading of comic vocabulary elements. The term comic vocabulary used here refers to the comics specific elements which contribute to the meaning of what is written or drawn elsewhere in the page. These comic vocabulary elements include panels, frames, the gutter and word balloons, which

are a part of the comics' language and inform the meaning of the text within. They also include a comic's "meta-rastic indices" (Nichols 2013, 304), which are the visual cues within the comic that indicate the intended reading path to the reader and inform our reading movement through the narrative.

Fig.1. Speech Balloon.

Fig.2. Thought Balloon.

The word balloon is a good example of the ways in which these multiple literacies work together to form a singular reading of comics as they combine elements from each of the three primary literacies that make up comics reading as a whole. Firstly you have the text which is contained within the image element of the balloon and then in turn the balloon has its own comic vocabulary meaning depending on its visuals. These meanings then reflect on the meaning of the text. For example, in [Fig. 1] the balloon represents speech which both gives the text the reading or *meaning* of spoken, diegetic words and the image of the balloon itself as being non-diegetic and not existing visually as part of the story world. All three literacy elements are read and understood together as one cohesive thing representing the words being spoken. When we look at [Fig. 2] however, the comic vocabulary element of the balloon is different and this changes the meaning of the text. In this case the balloon, and therefore the text, represents thought which gives us a different reading and understanding of the content.

Word balloons come in a variety of different types and each of these types gives a different meaning to the reading. So if you have a traditional balloon like [Fig. 1] it has a different meaning to the balloon in [Fig. 2], even though the text content is the same. This is all part of the visual language of comics and is detailed by Will Eisner in his book *Comics and Sequential Art* (Eisner 2003).

Word balloons are just one of the ways which the multiple literacies of comics work together to build their own unique form and there are many more that I won't detail here. However this

serves as an example of just how complex the reading process of comics is, even before we begin to add the reading skills associated with media presented on screen.

The digital environment of the screen has its own set of multiple literacies and allows for a massive collection of multimodal media readings in one delivery medium. When information is delivered on the screen we are able to read not only the text and image of print but also sound, video, ludic and interactive elements depending on the source. These elements do not all have to appear together in one place but they can do in many cases and each has its own set of literacy skills associated with it. When reading a web page for example it is likely that there are both text and image elements involved as well as embedded videos with sound and interactive links for navigation. Each of these parts has its own reading rules associated with it, and forms a complex set of multiple literacies required for reading on screen. When we combine this set of literacies with the already complex reading of comics, we can further complicate the reading processes needed to understand the narrative being told. However, the addition of these digital elements leads to a number of new possibilities for comics as a form that are not available in their paper based formats. One such change is in the ways that authors can deliver information to the reader.

THE READING RHYTHM OF PRINT COMICS

Before we look any further into how comics work in the digital form and what the environment of the screen can allow authors and readers to experience, it is important that we understand and outline how the print form of comics works. Comics have always evolved alongside the media of the time and print comics are no exception to this rule. Today comic books exist as part of the codex book form and this form brings with it its own set of reading rules and behaviours. In terms of form, the codex is the word used to refer to a number of leafs of paper bound together along one side to form pages. It is these pages which are the defining feature of the print comics we know today.

In [Fig. 3] you can see a single sequence of a paged comic book and the order in which we read the sequence based on the meta-rastic indices. As discussed earlier, these are the rules that govern the order in which we read the panels using the three primary multiple literacies of comics; text, image and comic vocabulary. What is important about this sequence is that the order in which the reader experiences the events in this page sequence cannot be controlled by

the author. Even if the author intends it to be read in the way shown by the arrows they have no control over whether the reader looks at the entire page before the first individual panel in the sequence. Or to the last panel first, before reading the entire sequence. This makes it very hard to control the release of information in the story. However that is not to say that the author has no control over the reading process of the comic book as a whole. By using the codex form itself, the release of information to the reader can be managed. For this reason comic books are very often written to the turn of the page. By this I mean that the comic book uses the turn of the page as a narrative device in a number of ways to enhance or control the narrative experience of the reader.

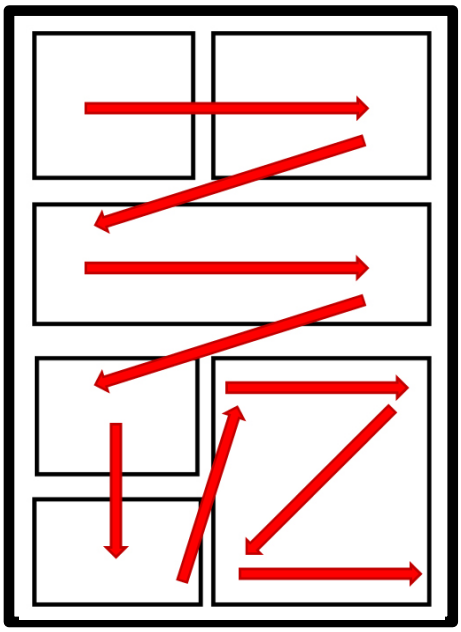

Fig.3. Reading the Page.

The page itself can be used as a type of framing device for the panels within it. Referred to as a "hyperframe" by Groensteen (2007), the page has a relationship with all the other panels and hyperframes surrounding it throughout the book. This relationship comes with its own set of reading processes. The author can use the relationship between the hyperframes to distance information, for example changing the location inside the world of the narrative when the page is turned and thus enhancing the feeling of having moved from one place to another. Alternatively, information can be held back to create a desired narrative effect. Perhaps the author wants to shock the reader and so holds back the surprising element of the narrative to reveal it on a page turn, thus preventing the reader from reading the surprise element before the set up. This could

also be done with jokes, revealing the punch line only after the page is turned. Or in horror, using the entire sequence of panels on one page to build the tension and then revealing the horrific event on the next. It can even be used simply to add extra impact to the unexpected appearance of splash pages or panels in the following hyperframe. These are just some of the ways creators use the page turn for narrative effect and it has become one of the primary ways for authors and artists to control the experience of the reader.

The page turn also plays a part in another important narrative control method for authors, and particularly artists, which is what Paul Atkinson refers to as the "visual rhythms that inform the reading movement" (Atkinson 2012). The visual rhythm is a significant part of reading comics and refers to the rate at which we move from panel to panel and the time we spend paused in contemplation of the content within them. The control of this reading pace or rhythm is primarily created using different combinations of the three core multiple literacies of comics, but it can also use the turn of the page for extra emphasis. How much time is spent looking at and contemplating each panel depends on the content of said panel, but there is a constant driving force in comics which leads the reader from one panel to the next and makes them want to move on. However, when a reader reaches the end of the gross sequence of the page they are likely to pause to consider the meaning of the entire hyperframe as a whole before moving on with the narrative. The turn of the page helps to facilitate this contemplation process by offering a moment where no more information is presented.

It is evident that the form of the codex book is an important part of the control offered to the author and dictates some of the narrative devices that are used to tell the stories of comics in the ways we most commonly know them. It is of no surprise then that many comics in the digital environment try to mimic this turning of the page in the same way and often simply repurpose comic books for the screen rather than reinventing them.

THE CONTENT OF DIGITAL COMICS

The importance of the page in the print comic is something that cannot be overlooked when discussing how we read comics digitally. The page and the hyperframe it contains offer a large number of narrative devices to the author and a primary way of controlling the reading pace and rhythm of the story. In digital comics the page is replaced by a screen. This screen can come in many different types and sizes, from the small screen of the smartphone display to the much

larger display of the computer monitor. However, one format where comics have best been able to retain their original page layout, is on touch screen tablet displays. Ten inch screens like the ones found on the *Apple iPad* and *Samsung Galaxy* tablets offer a similar size and shape to the standard 2:3 ratio of the American comic book page. This allows for similar layouts to be used and therefore similar narrative devices. The similarity has facilitated easy re-purposing of traditional print comics to screen and in turn has contributed to a transitional period in which mainstream comics have been able to exist for consumption both digitally and in print forms with little difference between the two.

However, the screen does not have physical pages that you can turn or flick through. We can't navigate from one hyperframe to the next in the same way as print, meaning that an alternative needs to be used. The most commonly used options for mimicking a page turn on a digital touch screen like those found on a tablet are either tapping or swiping the surface of the display. These actions can be referred to as "naviscrolls" (Nichols 2013, 308). The naviscroll is similar to the page turn in that, once learned, it requires little cognitive thought and does not break the audience from the flow of the reading sequence. This is an essential part of what makes comics work well as a form of storytelling, so it is important that this redundancy translates over to the digital space along with the page-by-page view of the comic being digitised. The naviscroll is a very important part of the reading process of comics on screen. Whether it is a swipe which 'feels' like turning a page or a tap to continue, it is the action that allows us to experience the comic in a similar way to that of the codex book. With the naviscroll action taking the place of the page turn and the screen being of a similar size to that of the printed page, the same narrative devices can be used by authors and artists in the digital format.

The digital environment of the screen also offers a wealth of other options to the comics form. However these may change both the reading processes and the narrative devices available to readers and authors. Screens offer a number of multimedia possibilities which can be integrated with the already existing literacies transferred from the print comic form. Each of these new media elements comes with its own set of reading rules and literacies which must be learned by the reader if they are to be understood as part of the comic.

One of the key differences between the print environment and the digital one is that the digital hyperframe is not restrained by the physical size and shape of the page and can therefore be of almost any shape or size the author desires. If we consider the screen not as a page with a

fixed dimension but instead, as McCloud suggests in *Reinventing Comics*, as a window through which we view the content, we can then begin to change the strict rules by which the layout of the content and therefore the narrative devices have been built (McCloud 2002, 222). McCloud also suggests that this type of comic, containing only one hyperframe, can be referred to as having an infinite canvas. However, as the infinite canvas has only one hyperframe, it is difficult to produce the same narrative results as when navigating traditional print comics. What can be used instead is what can be referred to as the expanded canvas. A comic using the expanded canvas concept might use multiple hyperframes shown independently of one another in the same way that pages in a print comic operate. Except here each hyperframe may be of a different shape and size and expand beyond screen area, requiring us to move the window of the screen to view the full narrative before moving to the next hyperframe. The practice of using extended canvases is most commonly found on browser based webcomics such as *Dresden Codak* (Diaz 2014).

The multimedia nature of the screen offers a huge wealth of things that can be added to the panels of a comic. These have been used to varying degrees of success in digital comics designed specifically for the screen, a majority of which are experimental in nature and available via the internet as webcomics. The multimedia aspects of the screen also allow for digital comics to include non-static elements of video or animation. Some digital comics use animation within panels for short looped actions that add a sense of motion or life to the frames, whilst others use animation more heavily to provide timing of the transitions from panel to panel. When looking at this from the perspective of rhythm and author control as we did with the page turn, animated elements offer something that the printed pages cannot; an explicit sense of time and movement. In a digital comic which uses animation to dictate when the current panel disappears and the next panel appears, the management of reading time is taken from the reader and given to the author. This allows for a much tighter control of suspense and the revealing of narrative points.

The reading literacies of this type of comic have a large amount in common with those of film, where we do not control at which pace we absorb information. It can even be argued that in some cases, like motion comics, the format actually more closely resembles animation than it does comics. However, other forms of digital comic integrate the motion of animation in such a way that it does not interfere with the already established literacies and instead becomes an additive process which can enhance the reading experience. Webcomics like *When I Am King*

by Demian5 (2001) use simple loops of animation well in creating comics which still allow the reading rhythm and reflection time to be determined by the reader.

Digital display devices also often have built in speakers which offer creators the option to add sound to the visuals of the comic. Similarly to video or animation, sound is inherently temporal in nature and can be used in a number of ways which effect the time perceived in the comic. For example, if a character's dialogue is represented using sound created by a voice actor, the speech of that panel will often dictate the length of time that the moment depicted in that panel lasts. Another way of using sound in comics is for background music or ambient sound to play during the display of a certain hyperframe. This sound is read in the same way it is in a film, with sound designed to build tension or convey a variety of emotions through the use of particular scores, sound effects, tempos or tones. Sound might also be used to enhance visual onomatopoeia, through loops of sound effects or in a variety of other ways to enhance the narrative experience.

These are all ways that the digital environment can add to the multiple literacies of our reading of comics and expand on the already existing comics experience. One way of using some of these digitally exclusive elements is the development of "panel delivery" (Goodbrey 2013, 192) comics.

DIGITAL NATIVE GUIDED VIEW COMICS

Panel delivery comics are a type of digital comic which have changeable content controlled by the reader. Changeable content refers to objects or images displayed on the screen which are changed, updated or animated in some way when progressing through the narrative. For example, speech balloons can appear or change when the naviscroll is performed. This allows for a conversation to occur between characters in a way previously left to large, cumbersome blocks of text or multiple repeated images with varying text elements. Other changeable content elements include characters appearing in the panel, the change from cause to effect as an action is performed or frames and panels appearing in juxtaposition to show the next part of the sequence. These can be used much like the turn of the page to hold back information, create suspense or deliver surprises. The number of panels on screen and what happens within them can be left entirely up to the author and is not limited by the size of a fixed page as it is in print comics. It also gives the author much more control over the release of information to the reader

without taking away control of the reading rhythm of the narrative. Coupled with the use of animated panels, the author can also add the sense of movement and dynamic action that animation allows whilst still keeping the format recognisable as comics.

Changeable content is something that is being used more commonly by mainstream, larger comics companies such as Marvel and DC. Digital-only comics like *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Bendis and Oeming 2013) and *Batman 66* (Parker and Case 2013) represent a marked shift in the ways comics are produced for the screen. The panel delivery form of these comics is a way of using the unfixed nature of the screen to show comics in a format that is specific to the screen but is still recognisably comics. It requires us to perform some altered reading tasks, like the ones detailed in this paper, further adding to the multiple literacies that we must possess and the number of reading acts we must perform and understand. However it also allows for an evolution of the form in a world where multimodal reading is becoming a much more normal activity. If used properly it can benefit both readers and authors with a richer set of presentation and delivery options, thereby giving a more varied reading experience. The author also gains more control over the number of panels he or she wishes to show and when to reveal important narrative information, whilst also leaving the control of the reading speed up to the reader.

With the shift towards content being accessed digitally on portable display devices and an increased demand for media artefacts to be available for consumption on screens, we can see a change in the forms that comics take. With this change comes new opportunities to take advantage of the multimedia capabilities of these devices and an evolution in the ways we read comics on a day-to-day basis. These changes are still happening and digital comics have not yet developed a standardised form on screens. However with the new options for narrative devices and controls offered to creators by the digital environment, we are likely to see digital comics become more divergent from their print parents as they continue to grow and change.

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