



Uio • University of Oslo

The tools of Webcomics:

The “infinite canvas” and other innovations

Håvard Knutsen Nøding

A 60 pt. Master’s Thesis for English Literature, American and
British Studies

Presented to the Department of Literature, Area Studies and
European Languages

At the University of Oslo

Spring term 2020

Thesis supervisor: Rebecca Scherr

The tools of Webcomics:

The “infinite canvas” and other innovations

Håvard Knutsen Nøding

Copyright Håvard Knutsen Nøding

2020

The tools of Webcomics: The “infinite canvas” and other innovations

Håvard Knutsen Nøding

<https://www.duo.uio.no/>

Print: Reprosentralen, University of Oslo

Abstract

The main focus of this thesis is to introduce and offer insight into the new and innovative ways webcomics build on and diverge from their print counterparts, as well as how these new tools can make telling new kinds of stories and making new kinds of comics possible. I have divided the thesis into three chapters, each with a focus on one aspect of the comics medium which webcomics bring innovations to through a new, medium-specific tool. The first chapter looks at time and motion, and how webcomics change the readers perception of the passage of time in the comic through the use of tools like the “infinite canvas”, as well as others, such as animation. The second chapter discusses composition, and how the fundamental design of the page and the structure of the storytelling is altered through the use of tools like the “infinite canvas”. Finally, the third chapter analyzes how webcomics can sometimes move away from, or outright break the conventional relationship between text and image. In concluding, I will summarize the innovations and highlight the fact that webcomics fundamentally change how comics function in their medium.

Table of contents

Introduction.....	8
1. Chapter 1: Time and Motion.....	25
1. The “infinite canvas”	25
2. XKCD	29
i. “Time”	29
ii. “Click and Drag”	37
iii. “Garden”	41
3. The Order of the Stick	43
4. Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal	46
5. Unsounded	47
6. Chapter conclusion	54
2. Chapter 2: Composition	56
1. The Order of the Stick	59
2. UnDivine	68
3. Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal/XKCD	74
4. Goblins	78
5. Chapter conclusion.....	80
3. Chapter 3: Text-Image relationship	84
1. XKCD	85
i. “Click and Drag”	85
ii. “Hoverboard”	87
iii. “Pixels”	89
2. Unsounded	91
3. Girls With Slingshots	96
4. Daughter of the Lilies	97
5. Chapter conclusion.....	99
Conclusion.....	100
Bibliography.....	102

Introduction

Webcomics operate in a fundamentally different manner than print comics. In spite of this, after Scott McCloud published “Reinventing Comics” in 2000, not much scholarly work has been done on the fundamental technical differences between print comics and webcomics. In this thesis I will attempt to explore these differences. They consist of a series of tools, many unique to the medium of the internet and therefore webcomics. These new tools enable a change in the basic building blocks of comics.

While the study of print comics have started to become more accepted by the mainstream, with a great many works being written about comics like Art Spiegelman’s “Maus” or “The Sandman” by Neil Gaiman, Sam Keith and Mike Dringenberg (and others) as well as countless other comics, not much attention has been paid to webcomics. While some books and papers have been written about the subject, not nearly enough attention has been paid to this potentially groundbreaking new medium.

Webcomics will often look quite a lot like print comics but have one or two things about them which are different from anything print could do. These are things like animation and interactivity, or a very different page layout. This allows the webcomic to change, expand on or enhance the impressions and emotions conveyed by the comic as well as introduce new facets which in print would be impossible. For example, animation introduces changes to the comic in real time, meaning a fundamental disconnection from the way time works in print comics. Interactivity does the same thing, while also connecting the comic to the reader in ways print comics never could. While the reader of a print comic may be what McCloud calls a “silent accomplice” (*Understanding Comics*, p 68), an interactive comic makes the reader involved in the action of a comic in a much more literal sense than if they were to merely read it.

Webcomics can change the perception of time in comics, they can dramatically change the structure and design of the comic, with all the changes that entails, and they can splinter the very basic building blocks of the comic itself and turn into something remarkably different. Webcomics are, in almost every sense, less restrained than print comics. This has the potential to lead to a great deal of interesting and experimental works of art, and as such are worthy of study. The different tools and restrictions of the internet lead to different stories

being possible, stories which would be impossible in print comics. I will be exploring some of these in the thesis, as well as comics which stick more closely to the traditions of the print comic.

The general view of webcomics has traditionally been fairly negative, as perhaps best portrayed by games critic Ben “Yahtzee” Croshaw in his video about the subject (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5t4xS2PqFFA). This view has not been entirely unwarranted, as like with everything else on the internet there is little in the way of quality control. Not everything is of poor quality, though. Some of it is even brilliant. The vast amounts of less than stellar creations have, however, led to webcomics having a bad reputation. However, like with many things on the internet, there is genuine talent also, and many excellent comics have been created. These comics deserve to be examined just as much as print comics and in this thesis I will attempt to do just that.

The History of Webcomics

I believe a brief introduction to the history of webcomics will be useful in order to place the different comics I will be analyzing in the proper context, as well as show how the comics developed and/or settled over time. The comics I will be writing about are taken from a few different periods, but all started after 2000. I have chosen comics from within this period because they are either more technically innovative or firmly embedded in a style than the older webcomics were. In this way I can explore both the new and the old, as well as how they can sometimes blend together in what tools they use and how.

Before I start on the history, however, I believe it is necessary to acknowledge one thing about the literature on the subject. Very little has been written about the history of webcomics. Every source I could find cited one book; “The History of Webcomics” by T. Campbell. Every trail I followed eventually led back to this book. Since the book came out in 2006 it is fairly outdated. The only source I found which added more recent information was an article written by Shaennon Garrity (with some assistance from Campbell) for “The Comics Journal”, but even that only goes until 2011. Therefore, there is little in the way of other viewpoints to consult about the subject and I will have to accept what these people have written. Also, everything I comment on after 2011 is solely based on my own observations.

The history of webcomics can be divided into a few different eras. In her article from The Comics Journal (www.tcj.com), Webcomics creator Shaennon Garrity divides it into five distinct phases. These are; “the stone age” (1985-1992), “the bronze age” (1993-1995), “the singularity” (1996-2000), “the age of shit getting real” (2001-2006), “and the age of this whole app thing” (2007-“present” (2011)). I will be using these phases to explain how webcomics first appeared and how they evolved. There is some disagreement between Campbell and Garrity on where the different phases begin and end, but I will be following Garrity’s outline, as it is the most recent and detailed.

“The stone age” (1985-1992)

In the days before the internet was available to everyone, it was mostly used by college students (mostly in the USA, presumably). Webcomics, according to Shaenon Garrity, appeared very early; “The earliest webcomics predate the World Wide Web and are almost as old as public online file transfer.” (Shaenon Garrity, www.tcj.com). The history of webcomics predates the Web and is as old as the internet itself. The first “webcomics” appeared in the 1980s and were drawn in early internet message boards by using the letters and symbols on the keyboard. At this point the internet was more or less only available to universities, and more specifically the techs working there. The humor reflects this. The first actual “comic” on the internet was constructed of these characters by “a type artist codenamed Eerie” and was called “Inspector Dangerfuck” (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.).

At this time, possibly the first real online comic was created by Eric Monster Millikin. It was a *Wizard of Oz* parody

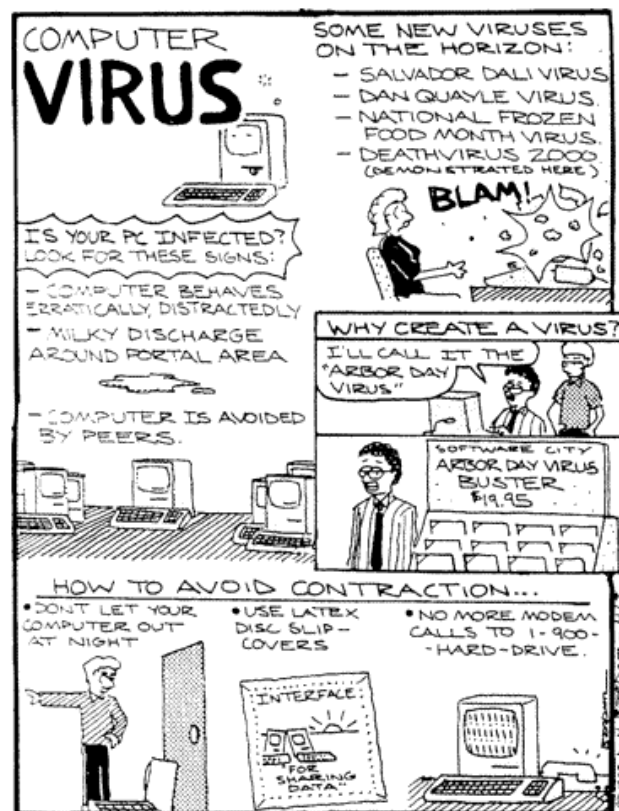


Figure 1 - "Where The Buffalo Roam" by Hans Bjordahl

called “Witches in Stiches”. This was distributed through CompuServe, the first commercial online service in the USA. The second comic was created by Hans Bjordahl at Boulder University and was called “Where The Buffalo Roam”, and was mostly “sharp observations about his college life”.

This comic was posted on the internet

for the first time on April 15, 1992 (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.). This was the first regularly updated comic strip on the internet. It billed itself as; “The Internet’s First Comic Strip”. In 1993 the comic “Doctor Fun” by David Farley became the first comic on the internet to be hosted on its own dedicated website. In these days, almost no one had access to the internet, and those who did usually had to sign up to mailing lists and have webcomics emailed to them (Shaenon Garrity, www.tcj.com). “Doctor Fun” also became the first regular webcomic.

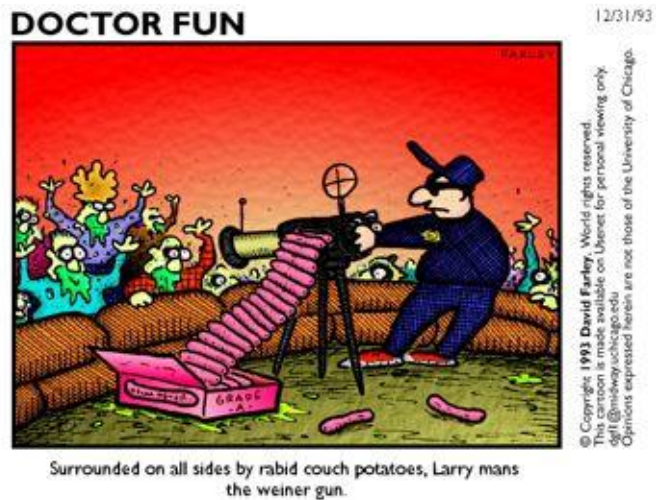


Figure 2 - "Doctor Fun" by David Farley

The introduction of the first easy-to-use web-browser (named Mosaic) made it much easier to publish images online. This was also when the internet was starting to take off, and “web use grew by 341,634% in the course of 1993”. With the introduction of a usable browser, thousands of creators started uploading to the internet (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.). Most of the comics from this time until 1996 died.

As mentioned above, there is some disagreement on when the “stone age” died. In 1997 webcomics were starting to link to each other’s pages, sharing audiences and influencing each other artistically. This was also the time when the idea of the “web comic” started to gain traction. This was also considered an end of the “Stone Age” of webcomics (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.).

“The bronze age” (1993-1995)

With the arrival of the Web, cartoonists began to post comics online more and more frequently. Some of the giants of the webcomics sphere started at this time, some of which are

still around, like “Penny Arcade” by Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik and “PvP” by Scott Kurtz in 1998, both of which made their creators rich. “Penny Arcade” in particular spawned

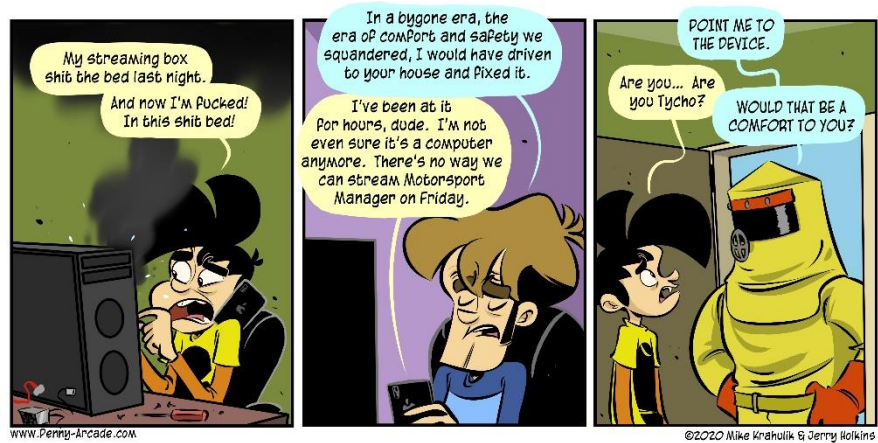


Figure 3 - "Penny Arcade" by Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik

the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) which is one of the world’s largest gaming-related conventions to this day. A slew of other comics started to populate the Web, most of them in the format of black and white newspaper strips. Few of them reached the status of “Penny Arcade” or “PvP”, though. The comics also started to split into a few different genres at this point, most of them gaming or computer related, or other geek-adjacent interests.

Another comic, “Netboy” (also published in 1993) was noticed by publications such as *Wired* and *People* magazine. Netboy was possibly the first webcomic to crash because its servers were overloaded with visitors (6 per second). Some webcomics were already starting to experiment with their form. The creator of Netboy was also the first to publish comics of shapes and sizes which would be impossible in print. This is what McCloud would later call the “infinite canvas”. The most notable of the early experimental webcomics was 1995s *Argon Zark!* by Charlie Parker. This was a highly experimental and technically adept comic, which introduced several innovative tools which I will explore in this paper, such as animation and visual experimentation. It also utilized full color, one of the major advantages of the medium. Several other experimental comics launched at this time, and people were starting to realize the potential of the Web for creating comics. A comic named “Jax & Co” was the first to introduce a “page turning interface” which allowed the reader to read one page of a story at a time. This would be very useful for longer form comics which would follow,

like “Argon Zark” by Charley Parker. Argon Zark would use the resources of the internet to their limits, using



Figure 4- "PvP" by Scott Kurtz

“several programming languages, animated GIFs, the palette of computer monitors and a hyperlink-based “page turning” interface” (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.).

By 1995 the Web was starting to draw in professional cartoonists who were already either in print or were determined to be. There were



Figure 5- "Argon Zark!" by Charlie Parker

several draws for them, for example archival storytelling, which would allow the reader easy access to the entire comic, every strip which had been created, which made possible much more complicated and involved stories. This led to creators who were already established in print comics creating comics for the web as well. At the time, one of the more famous creators of this kind was Scott Adams, the creator of “Dilbert”, who managed to build a sizeable online following. Other cartoonists such as newspaper cartoonist Bill Holbrook would create their own daily Web-strip alongside their newspaper strips. Some of this content could be interacted with by the readership, starting to blur the line between cartoonist and audience. (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.).

The print comic corporations more or less ignored webcomics, with a few exceptions. Most of their contributions were either minimal or died fairly quickly (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.).

“The singularity” (1996-2000)

In the mid-to-late 90s access to the internet was becoming more and more common, and as such the audience for webcomics grew larger and larger. Different kinds of comics were starting to appear, such as slice of life comics and more surreal works. People were also beginning to make money from their creations. “Newspaper-style strips continued to dominate, but now the winning genre was the ongoing serial adventure strip, usually done

with a heavy dollop of geeky comedy” (Shaenon Garrity, www.tcj.com), examples including Pete Abrams’s “Sluggy Freelance” and Jonathan Rosenberg’s “Goats”.

New art styles also started emerging at this time, most notably manga-influenced art such as in comics like “Megatokyo” by Fred Gallagher



Figure 6- "Sluggy Freelance" by Pete Abrams

and Rodney Caston, sprite art, as in comics like “8-Bit Theatre” by Brian Clevinger and clip-art comics like Ryan North’s “Daily Dinosaur Comics”. The introduction of the last two in particular proved to the webcomics community that you did not have to be able to draw in order to create webcomics, and “The barn doors flew open.” (Shaenon Garrity, www.tcj.com).

At this time McCloud also published “Reinventing Comics”, which went a long way towards giving webcomics more legitimacy, and inspiring webcomics-creators to embrace the things which separated webcomics from print comics, such as the “infinite canvas”, which was a term McCloud coined in an MIT speech in 1996 and in his first online comic (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.), and all the other new tools creators had to experiment with; “From here on out, comics and computers were increasingly inseparable.” (Shaenon Garrity, www.tcj.com). McCloud had apparently been paying attention to where the Web was going and knew that something special was about to happen when Mosiac was created. McCloud “spent

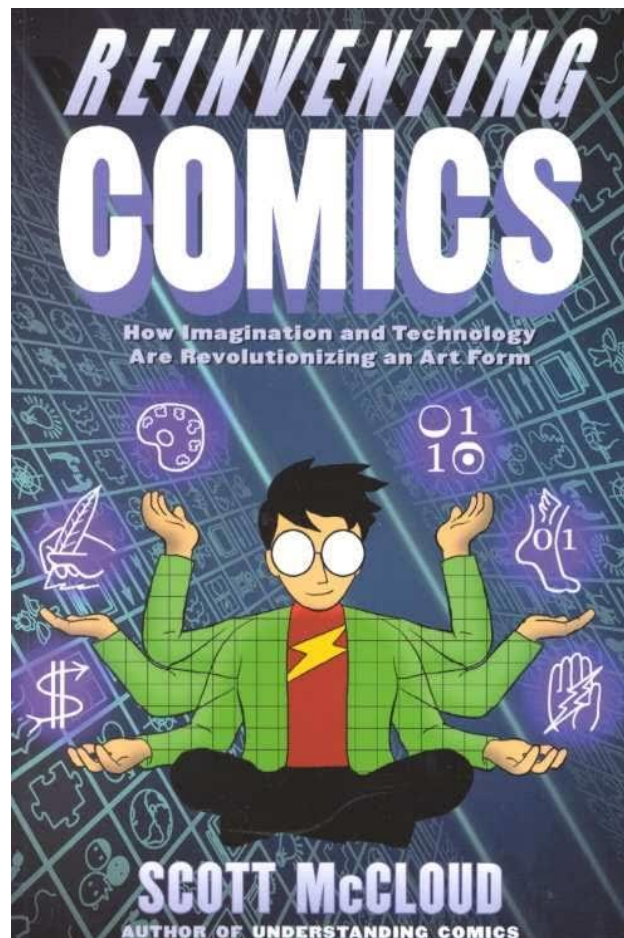


Figure 7- Scott McCloud - "Reinventing Comics"

the next six or seven years telling everyone else” about the potential of webcomics. People like Charley Parker were “fascinated and grateful”. His peers in traditional comics were “nonplussed” (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.). Not all webcomics creators would agree with McCloud and follow where he predicted webcomics would go. “The new generation rejected what McCloud had decided to accept in 2001. At times he may have been *too* visionary.” (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag. Original emphasis).

McCloud also drew a certain amount of fire from webcomic creators because of his statements about the brilliance of micropayments (which were not yet feasible) and judging webcomics which did not make full use of the freedom of the medium as not being “good webcomics” (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.). His dismissal of any kind of online comic which could be reproduced in print excluded many of the most popular webcomics of the time, and made McCloud seem “willfully ignorant”, especially considering how inclusive his definition of comics had been in “Understanding Comics” (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.). His stance on this mellowed after a while, and he spent more time paying attention to what kinds of comics actually appeared on the internet. This more mellow approach and McCloud’s “personal magnetism” “took the edge off all but his harshest critics” (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.). “McCloud remained web comics’ foremost “pure researcher,” inspiring others” (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.). Others would innovate and also focus on actually making webcomics for a living, while McCloud could live off of his other ventures. Along with McCloud a few other webcomic creators would get started and become somewhat famous online. Some even enough to make a living from drawing them.

One of the first webcartoonists to make a living off making comics was Pete Abrams with his comic “Sluggy Freelance”, which began on August 25, 1997. He accomplished this through extraordinarily prolific output, shameless self-promotion (which he had a real knack for), getting his audience to help promote him (in part by creating a lot of in-jokes), and expansive amounts of merchandizing. Around this time webcomics also began to run advertisements on their sites.

Strips like PvP by Scott Kurtz became big in the 2000s and would eventually do things like releasing the comic in print. Penny Arcade would also become big in this period, eventually reaching (at the time of this book) 3.7 million “unique visitors”, becoming the “most popular webcomic in history”. At this point the “gamer comic” was by far the most popular and threatened to strangle the life from many other types of webcomic. This did not last forever though, and they began to decline due to oversaturation. PVP and Penny Arcade

would stand strong, though. Penny Arcade is still a mammoth today, as evidenced by their enormous reader-numbers and the popularity of the “Penny Arcade Expo” or PAX, which has been running since August 2004, which is an enormous nerd-focused gaming convention. The enormous success of these comics proved that there was such a thing as a webcomics field, and that it was in fact possible to be a professional webcartoonist. “Their audience numbers rivaled and eventually surpassed those of print comic books” (*The History of Webcomics*, n.pag.). That being said, most webcartoonists had real trouble making any kind of money off of their work. Several collectives were started, but most struggled to stay up, not to mention pay their contributors.

All throughout this period, from the start of the webcomic to about 2000, most of the comics created were focused on nerd humor. This was referred to as “nerdcore” by some. Generally, webcomics would display an “edgier” and “more dangerous” brand of humor than what would be allowed in print. The creators had no editor, and were answerable only to themselves and their readership, after all. For the most part, this would hold true for webcomics, with child-friendly comic being in the minority.

“The Age of Shit Getting Real” (2001-2006)

With the flood of new webcomics appearing on the Web, inspired to be experimental by both McCloud and the lack of artistic standards or regulation, many new exiting projects started appearing online. In 2002, Cat Garza started “Cuentos de la Frontera”, a collection of Hispanic folk tales and urban legends adapted to explore McCloud’s idea of the online “infinite canvas.” The Web also saw the appearance the graphic novels formatted specifically for the web with the publication of “Nowhere Girl” by Justine Shaw in 2001. The success of this comic sparked a wave of online graphic novels. Long-form comics were also starting to become more and more popular.

Autobiographical comics were starting to appear as well, such as James Kochalka’s “American Elf”, and comics were becoming more controversial with frank depictions of sex and sexuality in comics like Erika Moen’s “DAR: A Super Girly Top Secret Comic Diary” from 2003.

However, arguably the two most important changes at this time was the appearance and solidification of niche comics and the transition of indie comics from small-print to the Web. With the much larger audience provided by the internet, readers could gather into smaller subsections and still be substantial enough in numbers to support their favorite comics. Comics like “xkcd” started as this kind of niche comic in 2005, and eventually grew into one of the most acclaimed and widely read webcomics in the world. This access to a much larger pool of readers was tempting to small-press comics, which were struggling in the print market, and some of them moved over to the Web. This led to great success for some of them, perhaps most notably Phil and Kaja Foglio’s “Girl Genius”. This comic started out in print in 2001, but moved to the Web in 2005, where it became a smash hit. It even won two Hugo Awards. The quality of the webcomics improved along with the increased attention as well, with comics like “xkcd”, and eventually “The Order of the Stick” looking better and better.

One kind of webcomic which never really took off was the superhero



Figure 8- "Nowhere Girl" by Justine Shaw



Figure 9- "Girl Genius" by Phil and Kaja Foglio

comic, probably because that was more or less all the traditional American comic publishers like DC and Marvel would release. Superhero comics also may have had trouble due to the limitations of the web, or of the expected upload schedule. They work less well in brief installments. There was perhaps also a split in what the different audiences were looking for; “Superhero comics of the early 00’s ran on nostalgia and familiar faces, and webcomics of the early 00’s were mostly looking ahead.” (Shaenon Garrity, www.tcj.com).

It did not take very long before webcomics started to be taken at least a little more seriously, even by the more mainstream comics’ media. Already in 2003 Justine Shaw’s “Nowhere Girl” got an Eisner nomination.

In the mid-2000s six ways to make money off of webcomics emerged; advertising, merchandising, print, subscriptions, micropayments, and donations. Most of these still stand true today, with perhaps micropayments being the weakest, with subscriptions close behind. Donations often go through sites like Patreon. Comics like PvP have had amazing success with both print and online versions.

“The Age of This Whole App Thing” (2007-present (2011))

For a while comics then changed back into smaller formats, influenced by things like smart phones and social media. “Graphic novels and ongoing serial strips gave way in popularity to stand-alone jokes that could be e-mailed, Liked and Shared.” (Shaenon Garrity, www.tcj.com). Comics like Nicholas Gurewitch’s “The Perry Bible Fellowship” and “Cyanide and Happiness” by Kris Wilson, Rob DenBleyker, Matt Melvin, and Dave McElfatrick became popular during this time. Webcomics started to migrate onto either their own dedicated websites or specialize themselves for social media and similar formats. This marks something of a separation in the realm of webcomics, where the longer form comics



Figure 10 - "The Perry Bible Fellowship" by Nicholas Gurewitch

created their own dedicated websites, and the social media comics started mutating into memes. This separation continues in part to this day.

After 2011

In the years since the shift towards shorter meme-like webcomics, the “market” has shifted back towards long-form comics somewhat. At least in the sense that there seems to be more of them than of the shorter comics on websites which cater to webcomic-readers. Sites like Hiveworks and Webtoons will gather webcomics of at least passable quality (perhaps Hiveworks more so than Webtoons) and present readers with a vetted selection of comics. These sites will typically focus more on the long-form comics than on the meme-comics, probably

because they (the long-form comics) are much more financially stable and provide a more long-term benefit to the website. Another reason why long-form webcomics and meme-comics are not found in the same place is probably because they are treated as separate things. Meme-comics are viewed as memes and webcomics as comics, with some middle ground in comics like “SMBC” and “Cyanide and Happiness”.

Print comic corporations have taken note of the respectable numbers of people who read webcomics and have tried haphazardly to break into the market, mostly by making their comics available online and through comic-reader-apps, which many of the publishers now have.

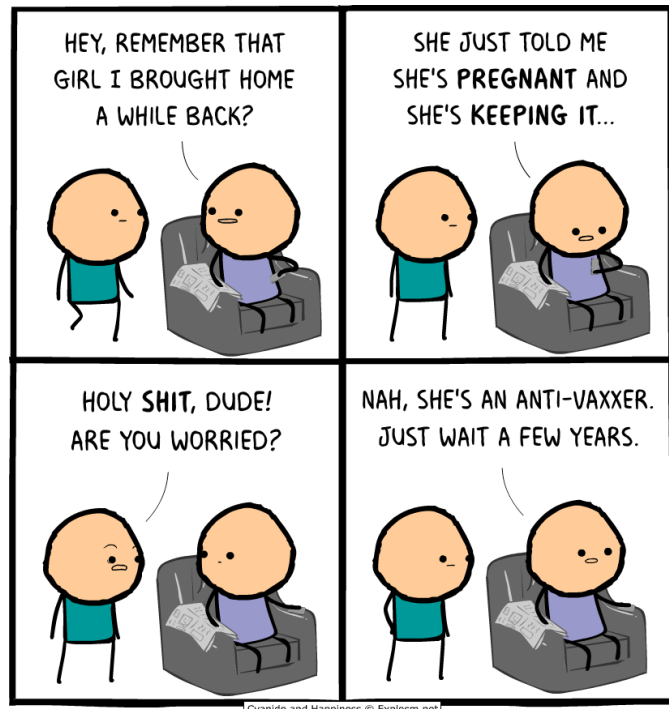


Figure 11- "Cyanide and Happiness" by Kris Wilson, Rob DenBleyker, Matt Melvin and Dave McElfrack

In conclusion, webcomics started out as very short and simple comics, mostly gag-a-day comics with little to no connection or story between them. They also had very little in the way of innovative usage of the tools they had at their disposal. Some of these tools had not even been invented yet. Over time the comics became more and more complex, with longer stories, technical innovations and experimentation as people started to realize the possibilities of this new medium. In this thesis I will explore some comics which have been around since the beginning of the 2000s and which therefore benefited from the new tools which had been developed by their predecessors, while the medium was also still fresh enough to innovate in on their own. I will also explore some newer comics which entered the market as it had already become well established and saturated enough that the creators had to deliver on certain expectations of quality as well as longevity in order to survive. With this selection of the fairly old and the fairly new, all with different approaches to how they create their comics I believe that I will have provided a representative sampling of what webcomics have to offer, and with this backbone of historical context, have given the reader enough information to place the comics in the landscape of webcomics, especially since all the comics I have chosen are still being produced (arguably with the exception of “Girls With Slingshots”).

I have chosen not to write extensively about the kinds of webcomics which behave more like memes, as I do not feel comfortable with trying to draw a line between where the webcomics end and the memes begin. Some short form comics like “SMBC” are fit for sharing on social media, and often is, such as on sites like 9gag. This is the closest I will come to discussing the creation of memes in this paper.

Theory

In this paper I will be relying quite heavily on the works of Scott McCloud and Will Eisner. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, they provide a solid foundation of basic observations on the construction of comics. Many of their points are fundamental enough that they can be either transferred to a discussion on webcomics without losing their relevance, or they provide an excellent point of contrast to point to when webcomics have changed something fundamental in how they function in comparison with print comics. Since much of this thesis

is about analyzing the differences between the basic building blocks of print comics and webcomics, these very fundamental observations are the most important to keep in mind. Secondly, there is very little literature about the technical aspects of webcomics. McCloud's book "Reinventing Comics" is arguably still the most influential work on the subject even though it was published in 2000. The combination of these two factors have led to a somewhat restricted pool of sources to cite from. Some other works have been written on webcomics, and I have attempted to use them wherever they are relevant.

Selection of webcomics

The comics I write about are separated into a few different categories. They mostly fit into three; fantasy adventure, slice of life, and real-life nerd-associated humor. Like I mentioned above, I have chosen these comics because I think they are representative of the kind of webcomics which are the most common at the moment, and because they are representations of many different kinds of webcomics, with differing degrees of experimentation and complexity.

The fantasy adventure comics I discuss are; "The Order of the Stick" by Rich Burlew, "Daughter of the Lilies" by Meg Syverud, "Unsounded" by Ashley Cope and "Goblins" by Tarol (Ellipsis?) Hunt.

The slice of life comics I discuss are; "Girls With Slingshots" by Danielle Corsetto and "Undivine" by Ayme Sotuyo (arguably, is also fantasy)

The real-life nerd-associated humor comics I discuss are; "Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal" by Zach Wiernersmith and "xkcd" by Randall Munroe.

OOTS: "The Order of the Stick" is a fantasy adventure comic following the titular order through their adventures. The story is set in a world heavily inspired by the popular role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. The comic is mostly comedic in tone, but explores dramatic themes as well, especially as the comic has continued to develop.

XKCD: This is "a webcomic of romance, sarcasm, math and language" (xkcd.com/), which also explores other subjects as well, while remaining fairly close to this definition. A comic of quite dense nerd-humor, this webcomic has become one of the most popular

webcomics in the world. Every comic which is uploaded to the website is independent of every other comic.

Daughter of the Lilies: According to the creator, this comic is “largely about the importance of self-worth, the different forms love can take, how it can redeem and empower us, as well as issues relating to anxiety. (There are also unicorns, manticores, ghouls, goblins, cannibalistic elves, dragons, gods, fairies, ghosts, werewolves, demons, angels and so on)” (www.daughterofthelilies.com/about). A fantasy webcomic set in what is possibly a post-apocalyptic future following the main character “Thistle” and the band of mercenaries she works for.

Unsounded: This comic is a fantasy adventure comic which “falls into the Epic Fantasy Adventure genre, with occasional forays into the horrific, the profane and the goofy.” (www.casualvillain.com/Unsounded/about.html). It follows a young thief girl on a mission along with her faithful magic-wielding zombie.

UnDivine: This comic straddles the line between slice of life and fantasy comic. According to the creator the comic “is a dark fantasy comic that deals with revenge, morality, friendship and monsters.” (www.undivinecomic.com/about). It follows the daily life of a high-school senior who sells his soul to a demon so she will help him deal with his problems.

SMBC: “Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal” is a comic which uploads every day and is about anything and everything, from math to philosophy to absurdist humor to complicated dick-jokes. It follows the same format as “xkcd” in that every comic is independent of every other comic which is uploaded.

Girls With Slingshots: This slice of life comic follows the mid-20s main character Hazel and her group of friends through their daily lives. The comic is mainly drama-focused with a great deal of humor mixed in.

Goblins: This is a fantasy adventure comic which “looks at a fantasy game realm from the point of view of the low lever monsters, namely the goblins.” (www.goblinscomic.com/what-is-goblins). Much like *The Order of the Stick* this comic is heavily inspired by the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. It follows a group of goblins as they are driven from their homes by the “heroes” of this world.

While there are many other types of webcomics, they often fall into the same categories as these. As such I have chosen, as mentioned, a selection of webcomics which are representative of the climate as a whole, with the three main blocks being humor, slice of life and fantasy adventure, which all have an endless variety of subdivisions which all blend into each other and create new genres all their own. In this way, they function a great deal like regular comics.

Chapters

The chapters of this thesis are arranged in the order of “time and motion”, then “composition”, then “text-image relationship”. The reason for this is that these three subjects are the most fundamental aspects of comics, and webcomics change all of them. In the chapter on time and motion I will be introducing most of the new tools used by webcomics, since all of them have a very noticeable impact on the experience of time and motion in a comic. These tools will then be explored further by analyzing how they affect the other fundamental aspects of webcomics. This will be done in the chapters on the composition and on the text-image relationship.

In the chapter on time and motion I will more specifically explore how webcomics change the perception of time in comics by introducing the new tools of the medium to the already established art of comics creation. One of the more important new features I will explore is the idea of the “infinite canvas”. I will also touch on things like animation, interactivity and other new tools. The comics I use in this chapter will be; xkcd, The Order of the Stick, Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal and Unsounded.

In the chapter on composition I will explore how the introduction of new methods for creating and designing comics changes the composition of comics. The tools I introduced in the chapter on time and motion will be relevant here as well, especially the “infinite canvas”, as it has a clear and direct impact on the design of the page. I will also touch on the extensive use of color in webcomics. The comics I use in this chapter will be; The Order of the Stick, UnDivine, xkcd, Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal and Goblins.

In the chapter on the text-image relationship in webcomics I will analyze how webcomics splinter the traditional print idea of this relationship and becomes something much

harder to define. The introduction of several new layers of content made possible by the new medium has caused a major upset in this relationship. The comics I will use in this chapter will be; xkcd, Unsounded, Girls With Slingshots and Unsounded.

By going through the chapters in this order I will be gradually increasing the complexity and the abstraction of the changes caused the new medium. The changes to the experience of time and motion are the easiest too see and the effects are the easiest to define, while the effects of changing the composition are more complex and abstract, and the changes to the relationship between text and image are even more so.

Time and Motion.

Time and motion on the Web/Computer

There is a lot of overlap between traditional comics and webcomics when it comes to time and motion, but they are not the same. Webcomics can do most or all the same things as traditional print comics, but also everything offered by the platform they are on, that being the computer, and more specifically the Web. Digital comics differs in their portrayal of time and motion through the usage of several different tools unique to the medium. There are three main innovations brought to webcomics by this medium; the “infinite canvas”, motion and interactivity.¹

The “infinite canvas”

The “infinite canvas” is the first and perhaps most famous of these tools. There are three important aspects to it to explore; how it affects the common webcomics page, how it can be used to create more uncommon pages, and what effect the “infinite” nature of it has on the sense of time and perhaps timelessness in a webcomic.

One of the basic differences between traditional comics and webcomics is the "page" they are read from. Traditional comics are printed on pages which are taller than they are wide, while webcomics are displayed on a screen which is significantly wider than it is tall. Not all webcomics take this into account, but many do. This is in part a problem of composition, how to make the comic look good and read well on a wide screen, but it also has

¹ Sound can also be used. Sound in comics is generally written out as a word or something approximating the real-life sound, and in most webcomics this is how sound works as well. This is “traditional” sound. Webcomics have the option however, of introducing real sound into the comic. Real sound in webcomics is rarely used, however, even though it has several potential applications. The creator can insert sound clips of the speech bubbles being read, sounds being played out, diegetic or non-diegetic music. Using sound in this way has the effect of very clearly showing how much time is passing inside a panel, even more so than the traditional speech bubble. It also takes control away from the reader, leaving them unable to dictate the pace of the action. There are some ways around this, though, like programming the sound to only play at certain times and after certain triggers, like moving the mouse cursor over the image, or scrolling and moving the image into view.

a significant impact on the aspects of time and motion in the comic. For example, webcomics which are constructed in a way where you can see a whole "page" at a time tend to read sideways rather than top-down, like a traditional newspaper-comic. There are some webcomics which present a full comics page which is visible in its entirety without having to scroll, but they are in the minority. This is not very different from the ways it is done in print, but where webcomics differ significantly is when the entire "page" is not visible at the same time. These pages are usually too big to fit on a computer screen and still be legible, so the image goes past the borders on the computer, usually further down. This means that you must move the image in order to read the rest of the comic, and this can have several interesting effects on the aspects of time and motion. First, you get an effect like that of turning the page when you scroll down. New images and information are revealed to the reader. This is very significant in terms of composition, in part because it dictates that the webcomic can hide twists and surprises at the bottom of a page rather than at the top of the next one. This also means that there can be a similar treatment of skips in time and place, and of motion. While a traditional comic might want to wait until the next page to reveal something new or make some major transition, the webcomic can do it at the bottom of the current page because, again, scrolling down serves a similar (but not identical) function to turning the page in a print comic.

Eisner has written about the effects of turning the page. The page functions as a sort of "meta panel" (*Comics and Sequential Art*, p 65), encapsulating everything depicted on it, including all the other panels. The page, however, is not as malleable as the panels themselves, and can therefore be referred to as a "hard frame" (p 65), perhaps more so in print than in webcomics, but the idea still stands. "The page as well as the panel must therefore be addressed as a unit of containment although it, too, is merely a part of the whole comprised by the story itself. This is no less true of comics presented digitally – the sequential artist must take into consideration the use of meta-panels of page, browser, and screen." (65). Turning the page in a print comic is in a way like looking from one panel to the next, or from one meta-panel to the next. The question of time and motion is connected somewhat to the problem of the page. As mentioned above, this is more a question of the composition and pacing of the comic, but it relates to where you insert certain kinds of time skips and motions, and where the creator makes some sort of major change, often in scenery or location, or making some



Figure 12 - McCloud's famous "infinite canvas" from his website scottmcccloud.com

important reveal. “Keep in mind that when the reader turns the page a pause occurs. This permits a change of time, a shift of scene, an opportunity to control the reader’s focus.” (p 65). As mentioned above, this is somewhat different in webcomics, where the page serves a function somewhere between meta-panel and several “pages” at once.

The “infinite canvas” can be used to create much more uncommon comics pages as well. The webcomic is much freer regarding “page” structure than the traditional comic; “The comic can be composed of discreet panels in sequence, multiple series of panels running in parallel, one image with no clearly defined borders but with images fading and overlapping, or any number of other styles and methods.” (*Webcomics*, p 112). McCloud created the term “infinite canvas”, which was a result of his writing about the effect of scrolling (*Reinventing Comics*, p 223). This resulted in what he named an “infinite canvas”, where the page can essentially be as large as the creator wants it to be. In theory this freedom of space could extend in all (two dimensional) directions, letting you navigate the page freely, only seeing certain parts of it at a time. On a computer the page could also be zoomed into, revealing new images as the reader gets closer. This exploration of an image far too large to see the entirety of has a few interesting effects. When you move through the webcomics page you are also moving “deeper” into the comic (*Reinventing Comics*, p 227), and since you may not know how far down it goes you may experience several things as a result. The reader may feel compelled to keep reading, because you cannot stop until you have finished the page (even though you have little idea of how long it is, unlike in print). It can also give the impression of “falling” deeper and deeper into the comic. The more specific effects the use of the larger “infinite canvas” can have depends largely on how it is used and in what context. I will explore a few different ways it can be used later in the chapter, looking at a few specific examples.

The term “infinite canvas” has come to mean something more than this to some;

Sometimes the term is used to describe any type of webcomic that utilizes the particular “formal” possibilities of the Web. [...] Infinite canvas has come to represent – for some webcomics creators – the special formal possibilities offered by creating and reading comics digitally. For some creators, this is an important reason for making webcomics; for other creators, the idea of the infinite canvas moves too far away from what is appealing about comics. (*Webcomics*, p 112).

While it is somewhat ambiguous which of the two options McCloud was talking about in his “Reinventing Comics”, strictly the size of the screen or the possibilities of creation on computers and the web in general, I have chosen to go with what I think is the more likely and popularly accepted option. Therefore, whenever I refer to the “infinite canvas” it is the size of the comics page which I am referring to.

The question of time and timelessness introduced by calling this the “infinite canvas” is an interesting one. The “canvas” can of course never be literally infinite, as that would require infinite computing power. McCloud makes this observation himself in “Reinventing Comics” (p 224). It could be functionally infinite, though, in the sense that no human reader would ever be able to reach the end, either because they run out of patience or lifespan. Creating a comic of such size is of course outside of human capabilities, but it could in theory be done. A comic of functionally infinite size on a canvas which can (almost) always fit more is a comic which is also functionally infinite in time. McCloud makes the observation in “Understanding Comics” that in comics, “time and space are one and the same.” (p 100). Moving through space is moving through time. If there is no end to the space, then there would be no end to the time either. Here the distinction between functionally infinite and literally infinite becomes relevant. You could say that a lot of things are functionally infinite in relation to something else. The life of the universe is “functionally” infinite in relation to the lifespan of a single human, for example. This is different from being literally infinite, as the lifespan of a human is still a measurable percentage of the lifespan of the universe, while it would not be in comparison to a literally infinite amount of time. With infinite time, all measurable amounts of time become practically no time at all. With infinite time, everything is timeless. The reason this is relevant is that while the “infinite canvas” of the internet and the computer can in many ways be made functionally infinite, the name “the infinite canvas” implies a literal infinity, and the implication of the name is in many ways just as interesting as the actuality. The implication, then, of a comic of infinite size is a comic of complete timelessness. As the reader moves through the comic time would arguably pass, but in relation to what? Any amount of time which passes between and inside panels would have to be compared to the time which passes throughout the entirety of the comic because time is in many ways purely experiential. This is a problem for philosophers and theoretical physicists and is beyond the scope of this thesis, but interesting nonetheless. When any measurable amount of time is to be compared to infinity, it is, as mentioned, no time at all.

I will explore how the tools mentioned above, perhaps especially the “infinite canvas” effect a number of webcomics in different ways, and how through them the webcomics can achieve results which would be impossible in print.

Analysis

I have chosen four different webcomics to analyze and will explore how they use their medium to do something new regarding time and motion in comics, and how they change the nature of the stories they tell, as well as enhance the message or emotional impact through the usage of these tools. All the chapters will be structured in this way. The comics I will be looking at in this chapter are; “xkcd” by Randall Munroe, “The Order of the Stick” by Rich Burlew, “Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal” by Zack Wienersmith, and “Unsounded” by Ashley Cope. All of them apart from “Unsounded” utilize the “infinite canvas” in some way.

XKCD

I will be looking at how three different comics from this webcomic, specifically; “Time”, “Click and Drag”, and “Garden”, experiment with the portrayal and experience of time and motion. The webcomic is created by Randall Munroe and it consists of comics which are all independent of each other, but with some recurring characters. “Time”, “Click and Drag” and “Garden” are all examples of these comics.

Time

The comic "Time" (xkcd.com/1190/) is arguably an animation. A very slow animation. It is 3102 frames long, going by at about 1 frame per hour, meaning that it took four months for the entire animation to play, from midnight March 25 to July 26, 2013 (Explain xkcd – Time). After the animation was finished, it started to loop through the last five frames, which it still does to this day. If clicked it also leads to a webpage where you can scroll through the entire story at your leisure.

The comic does three interesting things with time and motion. The first is how slowly it plays. The second is the wildly inconsistent amounts of time which passes from panel to panel (or frame to frame) and the third is the variety of motion in the comic. I also think the comic is somewhere between a comic and an animation, and I will explore this below.

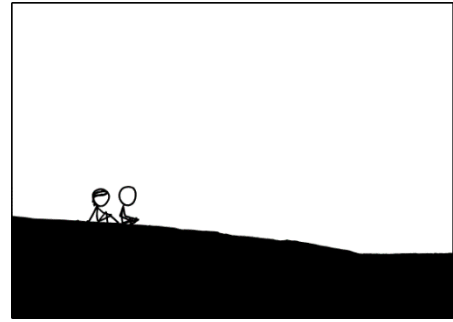


Figure 13 - "Time" frame nr. 1

While the animation itself would take four months to play out, the story told in that animation is spread out over three days and two nights. In the first day the two main characters build a sandcastle and trek a good way up a mountain. Then a night passes (quickly, in terms of frames used). The second day they find people on top of the mountain, talk to them, go back down to warn their people of a coming flood and float for a while on a raft they build. Then the second night passes in literally one frame. They then reach land, go ashore and walk off.

When the story is presented one frame at a time, and one frame an hour, the story seems to take a lot longer than it does "inside" the comic. As mentioned before, the comic takes place over a period of three days and two nights, while it would have taken four months in real time to experience. I would argue that experiencing the comic in this way, especially since it really takes its time and "smells the flowers" as it were, meaning that for the most part the characters are in no particular hurry, makes the reader (or viewer) feel that everything is a much grander, and for the most part very relaxed, undertaking than it would otherwise feel like. This feeling of relaxed grandeur would also help justify the fact that the characters have never been as far up the mountain as one day's walk would take them in their whole lives (presumably, judging by their conversations). This would be more of a hard sell if it played at a faster pace, especially since they seemed to be able to just walk off on a whim. A similar feeling of the comic being a large undertaking, or a quest, is given

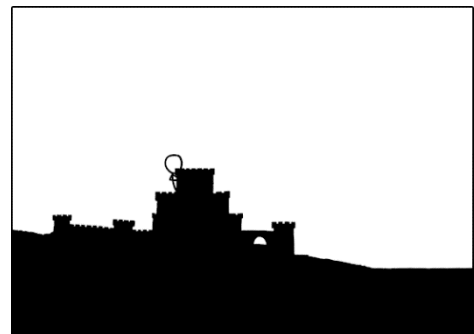


Figure 15 - "Time" frame nr. 100

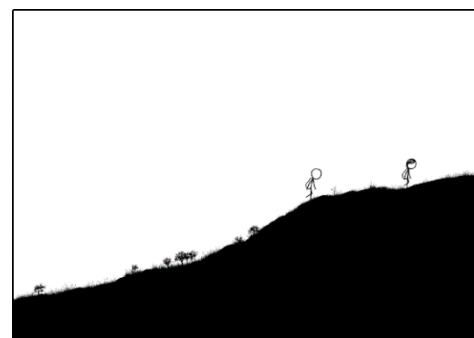


Figure 14 - "Time" frame nr. 1500

to the readership (or the audience) by having the comic last for such a long time. As mentioned, the comic played out over the course of four months. Such a long story, both in terms of panels used and amount of time which passes from beginning to end, helps enforce in the readers mind that what the characters are doing is in fact an adventure. The sensation of this is even stronger than it maybe would be in real life, as the story which takes three days in narrative time, again, takes four months in real time. But again, I believe that this serves to enhance the desired effect, that being the impression and the feeling that what is happening takes a long time, and that there is, for the most part, no rush. The comic could be said to take both three days and four months, simultaneously.

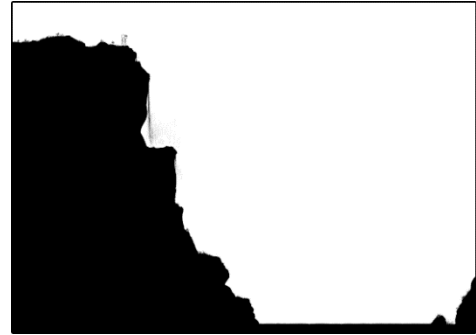


Figure 16 - "Time" frame nr. 1935

The time that passes between and within the panels in the story is wildly inconsistent. At times they imply that only an instant passes, like a traditional moment-to-moment transition, as when they are sitting on the beach in the very beginning, building the sandcastle, or getting attacked by the cat-creature. Then there are frames where people are speaking, which implies more time passing. Then there are sequences which pass in relatively few frames but should take significantly longer than it feels like it does. Both nights pass much faster than they should in relation to the two days bookending it. While this is not unusual in normal comics, the fact that this is playing as an animation makes it more so, even though the animation is very slow. This behavior of time between “frames” is much closer to how it behaves in comics than in animation. The pace of the comic also speeds up noticeably towards the end, when the characters are in a hurry. It does this by having more significant changes from frame to frame as opposed to having the “frame-rate” speed up, and without breaking the visual flow. While it takes the two main characters more than 2500 frames to climb the mountain, it takes them less than 200 to get back down. This is a phenomenon used in both animation (or film in general) and in comics, and is similar to how Eisner described making differences in experienced time by changing the contents, design and spacing of the panels.

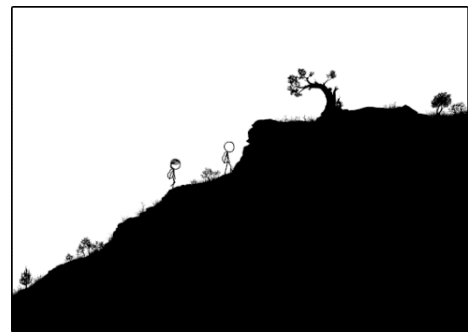


Figure 17 - "Time" frame nr. 2146

The most common device used in comics to convey the passage of time is, as McCloud says, the panel, which acts as a sort of punctuation in the flow of the page. According to Will Eisner; "Once established and set in sequence the block or panel becomes the criterion by which to judge the illusion of time."

(*Comics and Sequential Art*, p 26). Eisner focuses heavily on the usefulness of the panel in conveying the

passing of time between panels and the balloon in doing the same within a single panel.

"These two devices – panel and balloon – when enclosing natural phenomena, are critical to supporting the recognition of time" (p 30). Eisner investigates several ways the composition and shape of the panels can be used to imply different amounts of time passing. The number and size of the panels is important. For example, you can compress time by using a greater number of panels to show certain actions. You could show a person walking up a set of stairs

but do it several different ways. If in one panel you show them at the bottom and in the other you show them at the top, you imply that nothing of significance happened during that time, and there is no tension. However, if you use several smaller panels placed more tightly together you build more tension and imply that something important is happening. By making the

panels smaller and placing them closer together you can make the sequence faster and more intense. The shape of the panel is also important. The example Eisner uses is that of a telephone ringing during a tense scene. Several panels leading up to this have been tight and small, building tension, but when the telephone rings it takes up an entire third of the page. This gives the impression of the telephone ringing for a long time, and it also gives the event significant weight. The sequence also imparts a certain rhythm and flow to the page. "In comics, timing and rhythm, as created by action and framing, are interlocked." (p 30). McCloud is not unaware of this. He describes how the feeling of time can be manipulated by changing the shape and size of the panels. If a panel is larger, or at least longer, it tends to feel like it takes up more time. His example is that of inserting a longer, silent panel into a conversation to indicate a long pause in that conversation. "As unlikely as it sounds, the panel shape can actually make a difference in our perception of time. Even though this long panel



Figure 19 - "Time" frame nr. 2202



Figure 18 - "Time" frame nr. 2228

has the same basic "meaning" as its shorter versions, still it has the feeling of greater length!" (*Understanding Comics*, p 101).

By spending more panels on the characters going up the mountain than on them coming down, we feel that the journey down takes much less time, and in this case, it also feels like they are hurrying, because the narrative says that they are. This sensation is helped by the amount of time which passes between panels on the way down the mountain in contrast to the way up. The



Figure 21 - "Time" frame nr. 2465

story takes things so slowly on the way up in fact, that almost an entire third of the panels pass before the characters even start their journey (frame 970 of 3100). By spending so much time with the characters beforehand, the readers develop a relationship to them, and the magnificent sandcastle they build gives the reader the idea that the rising of the sea-level could in fact be a threat, even though it seems to happen very slowly. At the very least it would be a threat to the sandcastle. As well as establishing the feeling of there being no rush, a feeling echoed by the behavior of the characters, the long section in the beginning also serves to introduce the main threat of the comic, namely the rising sea level. As the frames slowly pass, the sea on the right side of the image slowly gets higher and higher, imperceptibly slowly if you are not watching it happen at many times the speed of the original presentation. The slow encroachment of the ocean both gives the impression that there might not be anything to worry about (it is moving so slowly, after all) and at the same time planting the seed in the back of the reader's mind that this could probably become a problem if it does not stop, which later in the comic turns out to be the case. This seed is also planted in the

minds of the characters, which is why they take the threat of the rising ocean seriously immediately upon learning what a major threat it is. This relaxed atmosphere of the beginning is then contrasted with the more frantic ending described above. The change in pace also reflects the feelings and behavior of the characters. On the way back



Figure 20 - "Time" frame nr. 2576

down the mountain there is no longer any time to stop and "smell the flowers", and so it goes much faster. It still takes a while to get back down, at least in real time, as the frames are still going by at a rate of one every hour, but it is much quicker than the journey up the mountain.

There are a few different kinds of motion in this comic, none of which would be impossible in a normal comic. The need for traditional “closure” as McCloud calls it (*Understanding Comics*, p 63) varies from panel to panel. In the animation-like panels there is little need for it, but in the “special” panels, which function more as traditional comic, there is. A good example would be when the characters are attacked by a cat-creature.

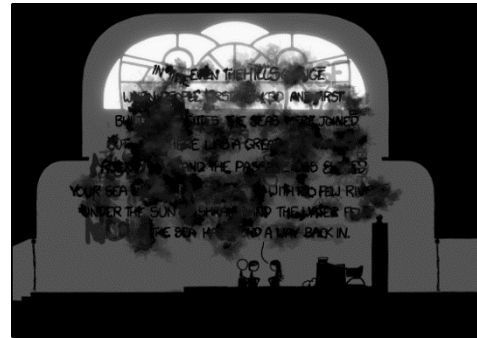


Figure 22 - "Time" frame nr. 2902

Deciding how much time passes within and between each individual panel in this sequence can be difficult, though. Some actions are shown, which the reader can use to infer the length of time which passes, but there is no speech, making it rather more ambiguous. This sequence may in fact not be served all that well by the slow frame-rate, as it is an action sequence, where things are supposed to happen very quickly. Having the comic pass at only one frame per hour undercuts the frantic energy of the scene. The sequence does show some of the only usage of motion lines in the comic. There are some other minor instances, showing bugs and birds flying around, but this is the major one. Most of the motion usually takes place between panels. Apart from the panels with motion lines or dialogue in them, there are few where it is easy to tell how much time passes inside them. According to Eisner, time is “integral to sequential art” (*Comics and Sequential Art*, p 23), but also more or less illusory. We experience it through "the memory of experience" (p 23). This fits rather well with what McCloud says about time in comics. We do not really know how much time passes within a comic panel, but we will often have a vague idea based on our own experience.

The perspective of the image is mostly at a range of what could be called "medium" to “far”, and in two dimensions, with the characters moving from one side of the panel to the other. Most of the time the comic shows the main characters at a fixed distance, but it is anything but rigid when it comes to this perspective. Sometimes the "frame" pulls out significantly to show something from much further away, in order to show the entirety of something much larger (like the whole sandcastle, or a canyon, or a river or a real castle). Also, when the two main characters decide to follow the river for a while, they turn and start walking toward the "camera", which tells us that they are navigating a truly three-dimensional

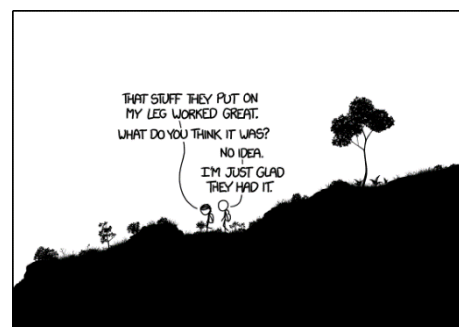


Figure 23 - "Time" frame 2977

space, of which we only have a two-dimensional view. The reason the variety of motion in this comic is interesting is that it is a blend of animation-like motion and motion which belongs in comics. Seeing characters move directly towards the “camera” in comics is fairly rare, much rarer than in film. At times the frames go by with little enough motion from panel to panel to function



Figure 24 - "Time" frame nr. 3046

perfectly as an animation, for example when they are building the sandcastle in the beginning, while at other times it “slows down” considerably, to the point where it would no longer function as an animation, but it will function as a comic, like when they are attacked by the cat creature. During these instances the comic changes from animation to comic, and then it changes back again. This back and forth between the lengths of time presented in and between each panel through speech and motion is a large part of what makes this comic interesting from a time and motion standpoint. This effect is brought sharply into focus on the webpage “Time at your own pace” which can be reached by clicking on the comic panel on the main website. It lets you view the whole comic, all 3102 panels “at your own pace”. To the left of the selection of panels, there is a play button, and an interface where the reader can adjust how quickly the frames should pass (the frame rate) and, importantly, how long it should pause on the “special” frames. The “special” frames are the ones with dialogue or notable actions in them, like the ones where the characters are being attacked by the cat creature. The fact that the “play” function on this webpage makes the distinction between the normal panels and the “special” panels by how quickly they should be played, enforces the idea that the comic functions both as an animation and a comic at the same time, as well as mostly animation at some times or mostly comic at others.

Therefore, I would argue that "Time" functions somewhere between an animation and a comic, because there are sections which lend themselves much more easily to a higher "frame rate" than others. Some sections would function fine as an animation, and others would be unintelligible as anything other than a comic.

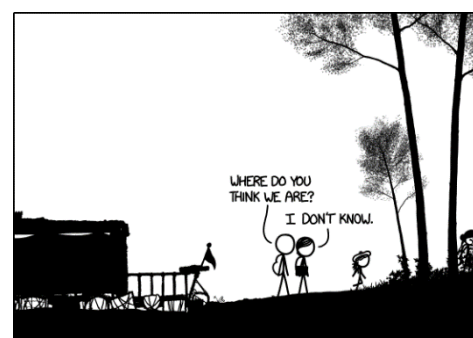


Figure 25 - "Time" frame nr. 3091

I think the comic straddles this in a very interesting way by having the “frame rate” be so slow. It should be noted, however, that several of the sections which lend themselves well to a higher “frame

rate” do not work badly as a comic and may in fact work better as one, or at least as an animation which plays very slowly. The reason for this is that those sections are often the ones which are supposed to take a long time, because they would take a long time in real life. By dedicating more frames with less motion in “the gutter”



Figure 26 - "Time" frame nr. 3102

(*Understanding Comics*, p 66) between them to these

sections, the comic underlines just how long the adventure the main characters are on is taking. This is, again, served doubly by having the upload rate be so slow. I will return to the importance of this “in-between”-ness between two mediums and its relevance to webcomics as a whole at the end of the chapter.

Animation in webcomics is not that unusual. It is the other major tool of time and motion in webcomics, second only to the “infinite canvas”. Animation in webcomics can take a few different forms, which have evolved to deal with the problem of the reader not always looking where the creator wants them to look. They rarely take the form of a “normal” animation of the kind you see in film, where the entire thing plays once and then is done. When the creator does not know when the reader will see the animation, they must find a way to play it in a manner where the reader is more likely to see it, regardless of how fast they read. There are looping animations, which play over and over, functioning like a GIF (whether that is the actual file format varies). Then there are animations which play very slowly, like this comic, where it becomes something different entirely, something between an animation and a comic. A third option is to create an “animation” where the reader must click through each frame themselves. There are many other options for inserting animation into a webcomic, restricted only by what can be done with a webpage. For example, the creator with sufficient coding skill could make a panel which plays an animation when the mouse is over it or insert a panel the reader has to click on to make it play. There is no shortage of options.

This comic utilizes the merging of comic and animation to great effect, creating something which would be difficult and impractical, or even impossible in another medium. The next comic “Click and Drag” will use another tool to achieve similarly unique effects, but it will do it using the “infinite canvas”.

Click and Drag

This comic (xkcd.com/1110/) is essentially an extreme version of what McCloud calls the "infinite canvas". We are given a huge image we can explore in any (two-dimensional) direction we choose. The comic does two interesting things regarding time and motion. First, it is, as mentioned, a very large example of the "infinite canvas". Second, time and motion in the comic arguably functions in two different ways, depending on interpretation.

The huge image you are given free range to explore is placed into context by the two much smaller, much more traditional panels preceding it. They tell you that the world is sad and wonderful, but also unexpectedly big. This sets the tone for the comic, I feel, which is one of excited, awed, exploration. We are supposed to be blown away by just how BIG the image is. We can just keep going and going and there is always something there, something new to find, something unexplored. This is partly the result of the willingness of Munroe to insert a lot of different small details over the entire image (almost), while also leaving just enough space blank for us to marvel at the distances we must scroll to even find something. Munroe keeps the panel we can move around in small enough that we can only really see one "scene", "group", or "event" at a time. This helps us not get overwhelmed by the information on screen and focused on what is in the panel, while letting the implication of how big the "world" is solidify in the back of the reader's mind. I think the point of the comic is to impress upon the reader just how BIG the world, the actual world really is.

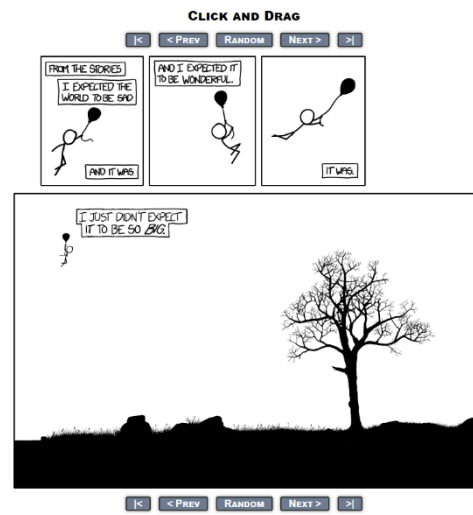


Figure 27 - "Click and Drag" - original screen

The size of the image also gives it a certain timelessness. As discussed in the beginning of the chapter, the term "infinite canvas" has certain timeless connotations. This extraordinarily large example of the use of the "infinite canvas" would certainly invoke that sense of timelessness. This image in particular, since you can explore it in any direction, also makes use of the phenomenon of "bleeding" off the edge of the screen, meaning that since there are no panel borders, and the image goes on for a long while, the reader is left with the sense that there is more to it past what they can see. McCloud explores this in "Understanding Comics" where he makes the argument that certain panels, such as ones which either do not

have panel borders or ones which do not offer any real clues regarding the duration of the action in the panel, have a "timeless quality" (*Understanding Comics*, p 102) to them.



Figure 28 - "Click and Drag" - zoomed out - tree in the middle, tower to the left

They are difficult to pin

down regarding the length of time which passes in the panel. This effect, he argues may also be felt in the panels surrounding the ambiguous one, lending the sequence (or the entire comic) a sense of disconnected timelessness. The effect is compounded further by having the panel "bleed" off the page, meaning having it run off the edge, so that for example you only see two panel borders and the other two, which we assume are there, or at least should be there, are cut off by the edge of the page. "Such images can set the mood or a sense of place for whole scenes through their lingering timeless presence." (p 103). While McCloud described this with regards to traditional print comics, I think the effect has been partially reproduced here.

Unlike McCloud's example of the "infinite canvas", where two people are shown repeatedly, in "one" panel, thereby implying linear temporal action, I would argue that this image essentially works in two ways at once, or that it can be interpreted to operate in either way. The first way is that it shows everything that happens in it simultaneously. It is, after all, one unbroken image, with no panel borders and no clear delineation of where one moment would end and another begin, like you would have with traditional panels. It is difficult to say whether it is the case that it all happens in one moment, as all the "scenes" are independent of one another. Time does pass within each scene, but not much. The amount of time which passes within the frame is only as much as is necessary for all speech to happen and every implied action to take place. The second way it works (or can work) is as a comic with no panel borders, where you can read in any direction you want. "Now" is the starting point, and time passes on its own as you drag your way across the image. This way it would function something like if you were, personally, exploring the space. In this case everything happens in the order and at the pace the viewer experiences it. This option is also possible since, as mentioned, all the "scenes" are independent of each other. This option is very interesting from

a technical comics perspective, as it would be a comic you could, and are encouraged to, read in any direction. McCloud argued for the possibility of this in "Understanding Comics", where he describes how time in comics is different from time in media like film in how what is



Figure 29 - "Click and Drag" - whole image - tower slightly off center

considered "now" is rather more ambiguous. "Now" is presumably the panel you are currently looking at, while the panel you were looking at before is the past and the panel you will look at next is the present. Unlike in media like film, however, the "past" is still very much right before our eyes, as is the future (to a point at least. After all, you can only fit so much on a page). The panel you are looking at is strictly speaking still considered "now", but in a much less constrained sense. After all, unlike in film, you can look at the previous panel again immediately. You could start reading the comic in reverse if you wished. Granted, it may not make much sense if you were to do this, but that is more a result of the craftsmanship of the specific comic you are reading more than a constraint of the comics medium. As a result of this, it is much easier to play with time in comics than in media like film, because all of "time" can be visible at once and can move in any direction on the whim of the reader. This is rarely done, though. McCloud comments on this trend; "This may, in part, be the influence of other media like film and television where the viewer choice has not generally been feasible." He continues; "Comics readers are also conditioned by other media and the "real time" of everyday life to expect a very linear progression. Just a straight line from point A to point B. But is that necessary?" (*Understanding Comics*, p 105-106). In this comic at least, all directions are valid, and there are stories (small ones) to be found everywhere. The message this would send is very similar. When exploring the real world, all directions are valid and there are lots of interesting stories, large and small, to find if you have the patience to look for them. That being said, though, there is one important part of the image which seems to indicate that the "correct" way to read the passage of time in the comic is the second one. At the far right edge of the image, the reader will again discover a person floating with a balloon. This is likely the same person who introduced the comic and is located in the middle of it,

where you start exploring. He looks the same and has the same kind of balloon. They also speak the line; “I wonder where I’ll float next”. This seems to indicate that they are indeed the same person. It would then be strange for them to exist in two places at once simultaneously. The line also implies that this is supposed to be regarded as the “end” of the comic, which would then mean that the right edge is the ending and while the reader is free to explore the image in any direction they see fit, the left-to-right reading convention is still at least partially in effect. However, there is a potential argument against this. At least one other balloon of the same type is floating around apart from the two carrying people, this one without anyone hanging from it. Since more of these balloons exist in the image, it could be that these are two different people. This could be supported by the fact that there are a few other instances of people in similar situations. For example, there are two much larger balloons with baskets hanging from them flying around independently of each other, both of which have people in them, as well as several boats.

I think both interpretations fit well with the message of the comic, which is that the world is massive, and there is always more to discover and experience. More people to meet, more stories to find. According to the website “explainxkcd.com” (a site run by fans);

The fact that we only see a small part of the landscape at once refers to the idea that we cannot in real life comprehend the whole world altogether, but only what is around us and/or in the range of our understanding at the time. The click-and-drag process, in which it is impossible to go as fast as we would want to, also draws a parallel with the fact that exploration is always done gradually, step by step, and trying something (i.e. here dragging in a certain direction) always has a cost. This click-and-drag exploration reproduces the thrill of discovering new horizons, getting lost sometimes, finding unexpected things, seeing beauty, humor, desolation or happiness here and there... (explainxkcd.com)

The two ways of interpreting the way time works in the comic, the ambiguity of it, is something which is hard or impossible to find on print comics. The option of creating a comic which allows the reader multiple ways of experiencing time is something which I think is unique to webcomics. The next comic, “Garden”, will again use the tools of the medium to create an experience impossible in print.

Garden

This comic (xkcd.com/1663/) is interactive, and as such may seem more like a game than a comic at all. There also seems to be little “point” to it, other than to let the garden grow, tend to it, and see what kinds of things will show up in it. Whether it is a comic, a game, an animation, or an “experience” is very much up for debate. The comic does two interesting things with time and motion. The first is that the comic is interactive and requires input from the reader for anything to happen at all, and the second is how much time it takes to grow a proper garden.

There are many ways of making a webcomic interactive. They can be roughly sorted into two categories; interactable elements in the comic itself, and interactable elements around the comic. This comic only has interactable elements in the comic itself. I will explore the other kind of interactable comic later in the chapter.

Comics with interactions as part of the comic itself are usually creations where the reader has some sort of input in what happens inside the comics panels. For example, the reader could be asked to click different sections of the panel, which would reveal different parts of a story, or enter in information which would change the comic in some way. This kind of comic gets quite close to becoming a browser game. The lines can get blurred. Like with introducing animation, the comic becomes something not quite a comic and not quite a game/animation. This in-between-ness will, again, be explored at the end of the chapter. This is essentially what the comic “Garden” is.

The comic lets you create several different lamps. You can then control what color the light coming from the lamps will be and direct the light from the lamps at different parts of the garden. What shows up in the garden depends on the color of the light you choose, and in what combinations. A lot of different things can show up in the garden, including plants, animals, various characters from the normal comic, objects like obelisks and birdbaths, a great number of various kinds of animal, and an assortment of other kinds of objects. The “reader” can also prune the plants by selecting and deleting parts of them. By experimenting with the

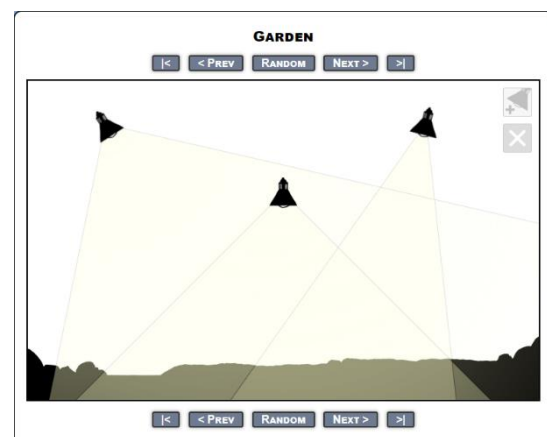


Figure 30 - "Garden" - start screen

different combinations of light, users of the site have created an incredible variety of gardens. There are some legitimate questions of whether this is a game more than a comic, or at least a different kind of digital experience. I would argue that it is not entirely a game and not entirely a comic, like how “Time” is not entirely a comic and not entirely an animation. While the reader starts the “experience” and can influence what happens, there is not a failure state, which



Figure 31 - Garden of username; "Halrandir" - from "explainxkcd.com"

is important. In most, if not all, games there is an implied failure state. You cannot fail with this comic. I would therefore argue that it is closer to an “experience” than to a game. I would also argue that it is not entirely a comic, as there is little active participation in the events apart from managing what is more likely or less likely to appear in the image. There is arguably a story being told, but not much of one. The point seems to be, as the mouse-over text tells us, to relax. Relax and see what happens. The mouse-over text could also be suggesting the reader should not always think so hard. Many of the comics of “xkcd” are very intellectual, and this could be an attempt to create something complex without wanting to overburden the reader with analytical thinking. The meaning behind the text could be that there is no deeper meaning to the comic at all.

Growing a garden takes a long time. How long depends on how full you want it to get. The only way to grow the garden is to turn on the various lights and then sit and wait. The only way for the “comic” to “progress” is for real time, not comic time, to pass. The reader has no impact on how quickly things happen, like in the “Time” comic. The amount of time needed to grow a garden is significant enough that Munroe gives the option of saving your garden, which you can then come back to whenever you want if you want to keep tending to it. There are also more options for different colors than there are available lamps, so if a reader wants to see everything the “comic” has to offer, they need to play it several times.

The combination of the reader being unable to affect the pace of the comic, the pace being so slow, and the comic having to be viewed in an active window, so the reader essentially must sit and watch it, makes the experience of time in this comic glacial. Sitting and watching plants grow and objects appear in “real time” makes for exceptionally slow

viewing. When the animation of the winds starts and things start swaying in the breeze, things start to move faster and slower at the same time, in the sense that things may be moving more, but it is harder to see the progress of the garden.

The elements of time and motion is essential to this comic, just as much as in any other. The reader sets events in motion, and after that they must wait. This is a different kind of time than in regular comics, as the reader has no say over how quickly things move, and things move in “objective” real time, not in the more ambiguous “comics” time. The things which appear (mostly the plants) all sway in the breeze, and some plants grow gradually, while others simply appear, so there is an element of animation to the comic as well.

The Order of the Stick

“The Order of the Stick” (popularly shortened to OOTS) is a fantasy adventure story and for the most part a traditional comic, rarely experimenting by using the tools of the web, with some notable exceptions. The comic essentially has two different kinds of pages. The standard page, and the longer “infinite canvas” page. Since the usage of the different kinds of pages are heavily based in their usefulness to the narrative, I will discuss what happens at a few points in that narrative, and how the usage of the “infinite canvas” serves it.

The standard page in OOTS is like the traditional comics page except for one major difference, which is that the bottom of the page is usually hidden when the reader first views it. As discussed earlier, this functions essentially as a small “infinite canvas” or the turn of a page. The effects of turning the page as explained by Eisner has been explored above, as well as the effects of the “infinite canvas”. The way this comic uses the “infinite canvas” is different from the way it is used in “xkcd”. In “Click and Drag” the canvas stretched in every direction, while this comic uses a more traditional version, where

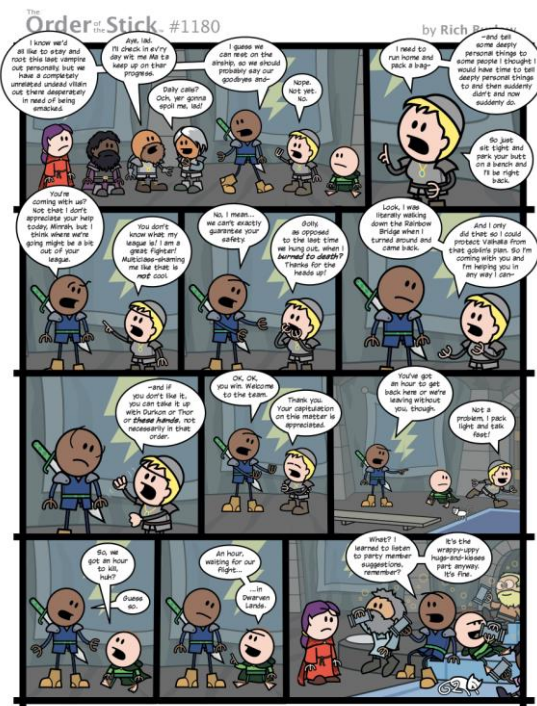


Figure 32 - "OOTs" standard page – p 1180

the reader can only move downward, with jokes or “cliffhangers” for the next page located at the bottom, out of the view of the reader at first. The comic is very story focused, with a strong central narrative which everything is built around, and most of the published pages are composed as traditional comics pages, with a good deal of freedom when it comes to panel size and layout, but nothing that would look out of place in a print comic. When the comic is published on the web, the published "chunks" of comic are even sometimes broken into several pages at a time, while still all being published together, in order to keep the comic print-friendly (which is useful, as the comic is printed in books, chapter by chapter), with the final “page” in the larger “chunk” of pages being the one to most reliably use the “infinite canvas”, or turning the page, effect. This changes sometimes, however, when something narratively important happens. At those times the comic becomes more experimental and uses especially the “infinite canvas” much more liberally.

For example, when the main character of the comic, Roy, falls to his death in the middle of a battle, protecting a city from the main villain (not really having achieved anything against him), the reader is treated to almost an exact copy of McCloud’s "infinite canvas" falling strip (*OOTS*, p 443). Unlike in McCloud's strip, however, where the heroes manage to stop themselves just in time, Roy slams unceremoniously into the ground, mid-sentence, dying immediately. This is an extremely significant story moment for several reasons. Firstly, he is the main character. The story being told is his. He is the one "in charge" of stopping the main villain. Secondly, he is the leader of the Order of the Stick, and it has been repeatedly established that the rest of the Order are useless without his direction. Thirdly, it means that in order to bring him back from the dead (which is very much possible in the comic) the Order must be able to retrieve his body, but since he fell to his death behind enemy lines, they essentially **MUST** win the battle in order to do so. When the Order in fact fails to protect the city and must flee, they are split into two groups, and are unable to meet back up again, with one group having escaped the now conquered city and the other being trapped in that city because they tried to retrieve Roy's body. This gets even worse for the group because the person who can bring Roy back from the dead is in the group which escaped, so now they cannot bring him back, even though they have his body. So now the main character is dead (for a long while at least), the Order are separated, they are without the only person who could keep them cohesive and effective, and the main villain just won an extremely important battle. Roy falling to his death marks a turning point in the comic. Before this, the group had always managed to muddle through to success somehow. There had been close calls, but they had

always succeeded. The good guys had always won. But this is the first time where they not only failed, they did so spectacularly, at a time when they absolutely had to win. The only reason the main villain did not complete his evil scheme then and there was dumb luck, and no thanks to the Order. This kind of shift is more effective if it is presented as a twist. We expect Roy to survive his fall. He is the hero, the main character, and we have seen him survive things like it before. To keep the results of his falling a surprise, Burlew uses the tool of the "infinite canvas" to keep us in suspense the entire time. He even keeps Roy talking until the very end, in order to ensure we are taken unawares. The point is that when the story is about to make a major turn or something very important is about to happen, and it would be made better by utilizing the tools available to the webcomics creator, that is when Burlew uses them. Otherwise he keeps things fairly traditional. Burlew uses the infinite canvas on at least one other occasion, when he wants the reader to be shocked in a different way. While the tool being used is the same, the effect is very different. In the other instance, the reader is shown a gravesite, the size of which recontextualizes everything they and the reader have been told so far (*OOTS*, p 1139). The "infinite canvas" is used to show more and more graves, to the point where they all blend together. What remains the same is that the moment it is being used for is a major shift in the story. In many ways everything changes, both times it is used.

This relates heavily to time and motion, time in the first example and motion in the second. In the case of Roy falling to his death, we experience him falling at roughly the same pace as he does, since he is speaking most of the way down, and we wonder how long he has before he hits the ground. Since he is falling from a great height, he has time for quite a monologue before he hits the ground. As we are scrolling downward, we also experience the downward motion of his fall, in a way. And since the bottom of the page stops at the same time as the web-page does, we experience the sudden stop much like Roy does. While the first instance is used to portray time and motion, the second instance is mostly used to portray space through motion. The image of the graves keeps going and going, much longer than the reader would be expecting, as Burlew rarely uses pages of such length, and the graves are packed thicker and thicker, until they become an indistinguishable mass.



Figure 33 - "OOTS" - Roy falling - p443

Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal

Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal, or SMBC for short, is also fairly traditional when it comes to time and motion in its design. It does, however, make much more liberal use of the "infinite canvas" than "OOTS" and "xkcd" does. Since the comic is a page-a-day work, and the comics are all separate from each other, this is more a case of making use of the greater flexibility of the medium to tell a greater variety of stories, or in this case, jokes. The comic can be divided into two categories, the first being comics which all fit on the screen, and the comics which use the "infinite canvas" to tell much longer jokes. All the comics also have one additional optional joke, which can be found if the reader knows how to look for them. These are the "votey's", or the "red button jokes".

Since the usage of time and motion in the "standard" comics is very traditional, I do not think it necessary to explore them here. They are usually single panel in the vein of "The Far Side" by Gary Larson, or there are few enough panels that they all fit on the screen.

Since the "infinite canvas" strips of "SMBC" are divided into panels, they do not get the same effect as the ones in "OOTS". It is more akin to reading deeper into a story than moving physically downward. In that way it works more like an invisible page count, or something more like a very long tapestry. McCloud has argued for this being comics' original shape, before being confined to the pages of print (*Reinventing Comics*, p 201). In this way the comic can essentially be as long as it wants to, without having to worry about the restrictions of print, which according to McCloud is the more natural and comfortable form for comics. The comic does on occasion use the "infinite canvas" in ways which are even more specific to the medium, like making jokes where the reader must zoom out the image on their screen in order to see a hidden dick joke in the background. When reading the comic normally, the shape is too close and too large to fully take in what it is, which is reflected in the conversation going



Figure 34 - "SMBC" - standard comic

on in front of it. In this way, the reader must move the entire comic in order to make sense of it. This way of using the “infinite canvas” is different from how both “xkcd” and “OOTS” uses it. Unlike in “xkcd” there are panel borders and the reader cannot explore in all directions, only downward. There is also a story with an intended direction, and only one meaningful way of interacting with it. Unlike “OOTS”, on the other hand, the tool is used more liberally and more or less only to expand the size of the daily comic being written (with a few exceptions, like the dick joke mentioned above). There are no deeper meanings behind the usage of the tool, unlike in “OOTS” where, as described above, it is used to enhance important narrative moments. That kind of usage does not work as well in a comic with no overarching narrative. Essentially the use of “infinite canvas” in “SMBC” provides the same or similar effect as turning the page, which has been explored above.

Another way “SMBC” makes use of its medium is with its "votey's", or "red-button-comics" where the creator makes an additional, quick, single panel comic which you must click a button at the bottom of the comic in order to read. This extra panel often makes some extra joke related to the main comic, or it recontextualizes it, putting it in another light. Since this is an optional side comic, and the reader must take extra action in order to read it, it does not really count as part of the main comic, and in most cases, it functions as an extra "normal" panel which happens to be hidden. Whether this influences the experience of time and motion in the comic is debatable. It does make the comic slightly interactive though, in a way which I will explore further in the analysis of the next comic.



Figure 35 - "SMBC" - "infinite canvas" page

Unsounded

The "Unsounded" webcomic is another fantasy adventure comic, and it experiments a great deal with its medium. The comic makes use of animation, interactivity, and a kind of motion I have not found in any other webcomic, and which would be impossible to reproduce

in print. While the main comics page is only subjected to animation and arguably interactivity, the rest of the website surrounding the page experiments with all three tools.

The standard page in “Unsounded” is as close to the traditional print page as it can get. The whole page fits on the screen, with no scrolling necessary. The comic makes no use of the “infinite canvas” mechanic whatsoever. The most common experimentation the comic does to change the feeling of time and motion is changing the background around the comics page, effectively turning the whole webpage into a meta-panel as explored above. When the narrative moves from one place to another the background of the webpage often changes alongside the comics page, in effect becoming an extended background of the comics page. In this way the mise en page expands to include the background of the webpage, as well as the other parts of the website in other sections. Traditional comics can also achieve an effect like this by changing the borders around the pages, so it is hardly revolutionary, but this is a more extreme version.

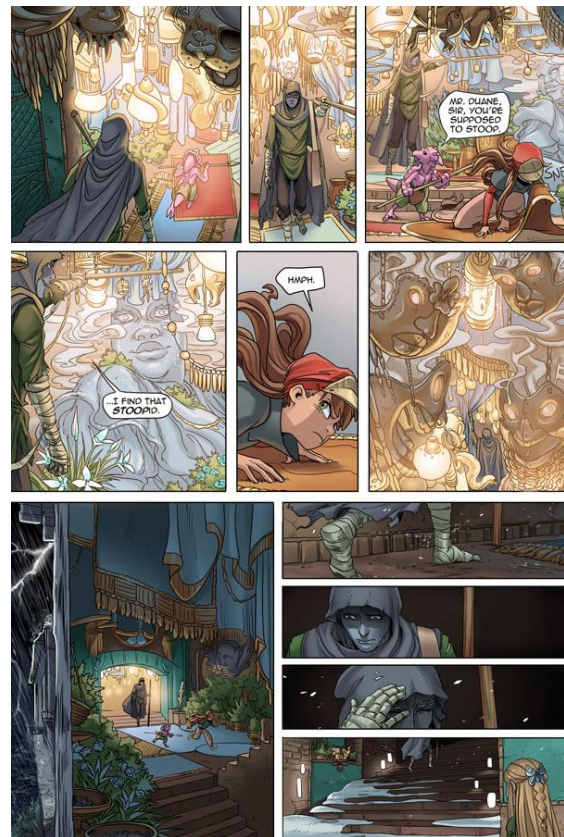


Figure 36 - "Unsounded" - standard page - webpage not pictured

The second most common way the comic experiments with its medium is through animation. On page 39 of chapter 14 for example, the entire main comics page turns 90 degrees and becomes much smaller, essentially just two panels. While staying on the same page, the reader can click through a sequence which is essentially a musical number with several pieces of animation as two of the characters are singing. The pieces of animation are not extensive, no more than what seems like a simple GIF overlaid on the page, and the effect they have on the story is not obvious, but still potent, in a way. The point of the singing and the music is to distract the other characters present and lull them into a false sense of security. It works, not just on them, but on the reader as well. The animation and the change in image-size helps in this regard. I believe that likening the sequence to an animated musical number (as in a Disney film) makes a lot of sense here. It feels like a fun little aside. It is supposed to,

for not just the reader, but also the audience in the comic. Therefore, when things get ugly and violent in the course of the musical number, it takes the reader (and the characters) by surprise. The change in size, and the page turning on its side helps the reader distance the sequence from the rest of the comic, again, making the reader think of it as a fun aside.



Figure 37 - "Unsounded" p 39 chapter 14 - Page turns on its side, guitar playing animated

Other ways animation is used include having sections of the comics page move in order to reveal other, new sections, having a person disappear from one section of the page and appear in another, and having speech bubbles appear and disappear as the reader looks at the page. These animations and the ones discussed above are all small loops over which the reader has no control. The second way the comic uses animation is not like this. In fact, it may be something different to animation entirely. The second method is by uploading several versions of the same page and having the reader click through them one "frame" at a time. In this way the "animation" only plays once, and the reader has total control over how when and how quickly it happens. Both kinds of animation are mostly used when something special is happening in the narrative, similar to how the "infinite canvas" is used in "OOTS", but much more liberally.

The ways this comic uses animation is different from how "xkcd" uses it, at least in the comic "Time". In "Time" the animation functioned more like an animated film. The reader (or viewer) could only see one panel at a time and had no power over whether things would happen, or how quickly. The "xkcd" animation played itself out entirely independently of whether anyone was watching it or not. The animation in "Unsounded", however is not like this. As mentioned, the animations are inserted into more traditional comics pages for the most part and serve the function of portraying things which would be possible to portray without animation, but uses the animation to enhance the experience, or to help convey or establish a particular feeling. The two different ways the comic is animated show this. The faster looping animation, which plays without input from the reader, conveys surprise and speed, or a magical unfolding of a scene, or they bring the scene or sequence to life in some way. They portray things which are supposed to feel exciting and surprising. Meanwhile, the

slower one-click-at-a-time animations portray moments which are supposed to have more weight to them, both from the point of view of the characters as well as the reader. If a scene is haunting or nightmarish to a character, then the slower animation is often used to enhance that feeling. The slower animation is used when it is desirable for a moment to really sink in, instead of being a flashy surprise.

Then there are the less obvious ways to portray time and motion in webcomics. “Unsounded” does this in part by becoming interactive. This, however, is a different kind of interactivity from “xkcd” and “Garden”. This is interactivity surrounding the comic itself, without ever touching the main comics page. Comics with interactable elements around the comic does this mainly through clickable links. This tool was discovered very early on and was used extensively by one of the earlier webcomics, “Traced”. These links will then lead the reader to different places which are relevant to the comic and the story of the current page. This gives the webcomic; “the ability to make immediate connections to stories or information.” (*Webcomics*, p 103). These links will then lead to other parts of the webpage (or other webpages entirely) which will continue the story, add optional elements to it, or recontextualize it in some way. The printed equivalent might be something like a comic with optional fold-out sections. This can have interesting effects on the experience of time and motion in the comic, depending on the chosen function. For example, it could serve as an optional “meanwhile” effect, where the comic shows something happening somewhere else which is separated from the main comic by being on a different webpage. In this comic the pages the links lead to can serve as extensions of the world of the comic while not strictly being a part of the story most of the time. The interactable elements around the comic need not be clickable links, though. They can also be smaller interactable elements around the webpage which the reader can click on (or interact with in some other way) to reveal something new, like in “SMBC”, mentioned above.

The kind of motion I have not found elsewhere is heavily related to interactivity. In one sequence, starting on page 96 of chapter 14, the comic does something I would argue relates to time and motion, but is different enough that it could fit in other categories as well. The setup in the story for what happens is relevant to how it effects the comic mechanically, so I will briefly explain what is happening. The setup is that a powerful curse is about to be unleashed on one of the characters. The nature of the curse is that everyone of a certain group

will hate this person with an all-consuming passion. It will literally be the only thing they are able to think about and feel, until he or they are dead. In a very real sense, the entire world will revolve around this person, for the ones affected. This is reflected mechanically in the comic and in the structure of the entire webpage. What I mean by this is that several things happen before the curse reaches the "actual page" of the comic. First, the text of the "tab", at the top of the webpage, which presents the comic, changes. Up until this point it has presented the name of the comic, the name of the current chapter, and the page number you are currently on. When it

reaches page number 96, though, it changes. It now reads; "What does his blood taste like?". Over the arrow you click to move to the next page, as well as over the link to the index, appears alt-text (or mouse-over text), which assures the reader that it is all right to hate this person. These changes continue for the next few pages, presenting new text for each page, and the alt-text spreads to most of the click-able links on the page, as well as over the main comics page. On page 98 the links which would take the reader to other parts of the website, or to a dedicated wiki for the comic are crossed out with red lines. If clicked on from this page onward, they will take the reader somewhere else, specifically to pages which are either a corruption of the previous page, or a new page dedicated to building hatred for the character which is about to be cursed. The "corrupted" links lead for example to the wiki, to a page dedicated to telling the reader to hate the character, and to "kill him before he kills you!". On page 99 the "tab" text changes to "ETALARCHE" in all capital letters, which is the name of the curse. At this point the alt text is all either this or the name of the character, all in capital letters. On page 100 we see the curse take effect within the main comics page. The people around the character start to visibly react. Along with this, the background of the webpage starts to flicker back and forth between what was previously there and two red flesh-like columns covered with eyes and with his name carved into them. On page 101 this new background takes over completely, and at this point the curse is in full effect. I would argue that this very much falls under "Time and Motion". It just does so in a way which is impossible to replicate in print, in a way which is

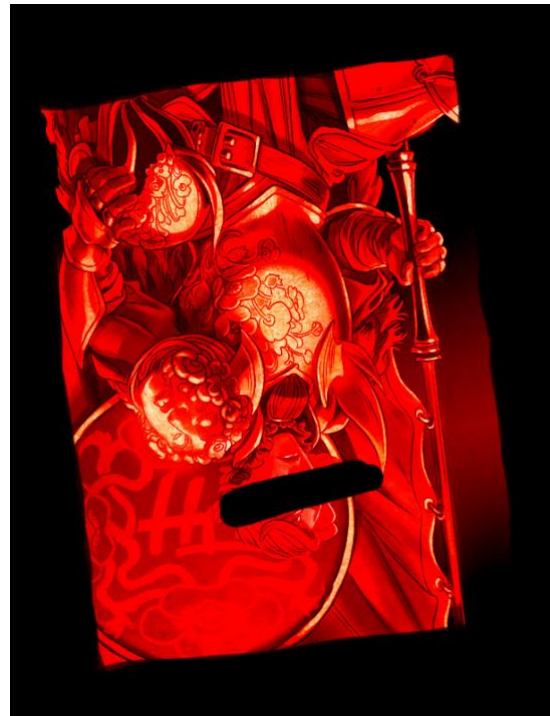


Figure 38 - "Unsounded" - corrupted link leads here

wholly unique to the webcomics medium. The curse slowly, page by page, works its way into the comic, suffusing not just the main page, but the entire website, including all the other pages which are linked to, it infiltrates from the "outside", starting with the edges and easy to reach sections, namely the "tab" text and the alt-text, before inserting its own alt-text where there was none previously. Then it "corrupts" the links to other places and takes over the main comic and the background. It moves slowly through the comic, representing how it moves slowly through the world towards the character being cursed and those around him. The reader can tell it takes some time for the curse to do this because the progress is, as mentioned, gradual, spread over several pages, with the changes starting on page 96 and being complete on page 101. The changes are also given extra weight as this kind of change has not happened in the comic previously.

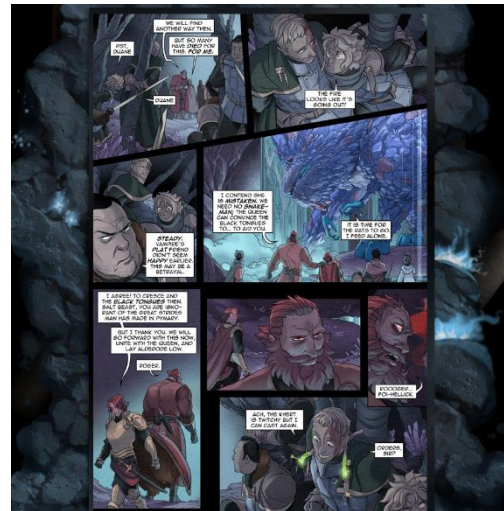


Figure 39 - "Unsounded" – chapter 14, p 100

The effect this has on the reader (if the reader notices) is the feeling that something is about to go horribly wrong. The reader would presumably be knowledgeable enough about the tropes of the fantasy genre to know roughly what these changes mean. This knowledge then builds tension in the reader. The fact that nothing seems wrong in the main comics page merely underscores this tension. It is the veritable ticking bomb under the table. While much of the comic can be reproduced in print (which it has been), this is something print cannot do. It should be noted, however that the main comic works perfectly well on its own. At one point,



Figure 40 - "Unsounded" - same page, background flickers back and forth

another character claims that he knows the curse is about to reach them. This then works as its own tension-builder, but at that point the curse has already started to infiltrate the website, so the build is longer (and, I think, more effective) if read online, in its original format.

The comic could be said to be somewhat interactive in these sections where the reader has access to optional material which they must perform additional actions to view. The comic never reaches the levels of interactivity which would turn it into something closer to a game, like “Garden”, but there are additional optional materials, parts of the comic the reader can miss, unless they notice and perform the necessary actions to view them. While “Garden” is built entirely around the idea of interactivity, “Unsounded” uses it to enhance a main narrative. “XKCD” does not have an overarching narrative and so can devote one of its comics, all of which are independent of each other, to explore the idea of an interactive comic.

Conclusion

Time and motion in webcomics are influenced by the extra tools they have at hand. Through things like the “infinite canvas” and animation, as well as interactivity, they can offer new experiences to the reader, experiences which would be impossible in print. The “infinite canvas” has the potential to remove the boundaries of the traditional comics page, letting the creator tell stories which could be read in any direction, like “Click and Drag”. It could even help remove the expectation of the comics page entirely, letting stories of new interesting formats be created, like one long uninterrupted image, similar to the old historical tapestries. The “infinite canvas” also makes it easier to surprise the reader by hiding the real size of the page they are reading, letting twists like the ones in “OOTS” happen, where the entire comic can unexpectedly shift in another direction. The custom of letting the reader only view one page at a time will also hide how much of the story is left, giving even more chances for surprises.

By introducing animation into comics, the creators also introduce real time. The reader no longer has control over how quickly they want things to occur in the comic, the creator of the comic has taken that control. How much is taken varies greatly, from the quick animations of “Unsounded” to the long, slow one-frame-an-hour animation of “Time”. This kind of slow animation can stretch or slow down time by taking control of the pace, forcing the reader to slow down as well. This is prevalent in both “Time” and “Garden” comics. By slowing the comic down like this, it becomes easier to promote certain moods or emotions, which would be impossible to promote if the reader would merely speed through. By forcing the reader to stop, and in the case of these two comics, slow down and relax, they can give the reader an

experience they would never be able to receive from print. This reveals the potential for slower, more contemplative comics (faster and more action-packed comics would also be possible, but harder to create, or at least to keep from becoming pure animation). It is important, though, not to lose the comics part of this amalgamation. “Time” works as well as it does because it gets the benefits of both comics and animation. It does this by having its very slow frame rate, but that might be necessary with the format it has. “Unsound” avoids this problem for the most part by only replacing parts of any page with an animation.

In fact, the in-between-ness of webcomics and other mediums might be its greatest strength. The ability to introduce aspects from other mediums like animation and interactivity broadens the possibilities for what kinds of stories can be told. Webcomics (at least some of them) are an amalgamation of several different mediums, with the comic being the main contributor. The creator does take some amount of control out of the hands of the reader, most notably, as mentioned, the power to decide how quickly things will happen, but most webcomics which introduce this kind of animation and interactivity provide some way of ensuring the reader does not miss out on what the animation was supposed to show, such as having it play slowly, or having it loop.

Composition

Composition is an important aspect of comics. It includes and influences art style and general design, how the comic is structured on the level of individual pages and as whole issues. Composition decides whether a comic is pleasant to read or to look at, or whether the comic makes any sense at all. Poor composition can kill a comic for the readers, whether they are able to explain why or not. After a short explanation of the importance of composition in comics and some of the differences between composition in webcomics relative to print, I will explore how a few different webcomics experiment with how they are composed, focusing in particular on the “infinite canvas” and how it changes the structure of the page, not just visually but also narratively. I will also go into how certain webcomics will use the tools provided by the medium to let the reader experience the comic in entirely new ways, and how this in turn impacts the composition of the comic.

The composition of a page deals with the design of the page, what it looks like, how it functions. A page must be not only pleasing to the eye, it also must make sense and be easy to read (unless the difficulty is the point). The images should be presented in a manner so the reader can easily follow the course of events, their eyes should be able to track the order of the panels without confusion or ambiguity (again, unless that is the point). This also applies to things like speech bubbles. If the composition (as in placement) of the bubbles are off, it becomes significantly harder to figure out who is saying what, and in what order. This will also cause confusion. For example, a speech bubble should, in general, be located near the speaker, and a small tail should extrude from the bubble, pointing to them. If the bubbles are poorly placed, who says what can become ambiguous, even with the help of the tails, especially if they end up crossing each other. Poor placement of bubbles can also ruin the overall composition of the image, making it unpleasant to look at, as well as confusing. In this manner, the composition of the speech bubbles is an important part of the composition of the image. After all, the bubble will cover part of the image, and so must be considered when designing both the image and the text. This is in part why comics favor short bursts of text spread over more panels rather than one long text in a single speech bubble.

The composition of the panels has a great deal of impact on how the comics page is experienced. If the panels are neatly divided and properly placed, it provides an easy and relaxing reading experience. The reader needs to spend as little energy as possible to follow

along with the action. The page is also, as I described in the last chapter, a unit in its own right, made up of panels which form the meta-panel of the whole page. This means that the panels must be arranged in a way which makes the page look and function like a unit. This means, for example, that the first image on the page must logically follow from the last panel on the last page, that each panel must follow easy to understand steps from one to the other, and the last panel on the page must set up the first panel on the following page. This follows from page to page, until the unit of the issue (in print) is finished. Managing to design each page so that everything which has to be on it is there, and no more, is a difficult task, especially when the creator has to plan the story beats around the pages themselves. As described in the previous chapter, larger beats and movements happen during page-turns, and so the creator of a comic has to plan the pages so can this happens. In print this will often mean that the design of each set of double pages can be designed together. It is a matter of maintaining proper pacing and interest curves. Composition also deals with the placement and design of the “gutter”, which, according to McCloud and as I explored in the last chapter;

“plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics.”

(*Understanding Comics*, p 66).

Composition in comics is intrinsically tied to time and motion. The design and placement of the panels influence how they are experienced, which I explored in the previous chapter. Since such a vital component of the reading experience is controlled by the composition of the comic, the composition is vital to get right. Composition should be able to not only tell the reader how to read a page, but also give strong clues as to what is going on in



Figure 41 - "Watchmen" - page 1 – classic print composition

any given page, as well as give clues as to where in the story the reader is. For example, the end of a story (issue or chapter, the end of a larger unit) is designed differently from the beginning. The beginning of a story in comics functions much like it would in film, with an introducing establishing shot to set the scene without drowning the reader with too much information too quickly. The environment is established before the particulars of characters or story. The ending of a story will often then do something similar, with a (usually) larger final panel which will either solidify the ending of the story or establish the hook for the next part. This panel is also similar in function to how film (usually) end. These similarities are useful to keep in mind, as both comics and film are visual mediums, and so follow many of the same rules. This final panel would then be the final shot of a film or episode, which, again, will solidify the ending or establish the hook for the next one.

In terms of composition, webcomics are different from print comics. One major way they are different is in how the pages are designed. In webcomics, the single page has to carry more weight on its own, since they are usually presented one page at a time, with sometimes significant periods of time between each page. Therefore, each webcomics page must to a greater extent function as an independent unit. You can see this in print comics as well, of course, with each page being a meta-panel which must function independently as well as alongside all the other pages, but I would argue that the pages must be more so in webcomics. There is perhaps more of a focus in webcomics on the single page and less on the larger section of a chapter (or issue) of a print comic. This might be because webcomics are generally not presented as chapters, but as one page at a time, for the entire run of the comic. At least this is the case (usually) when they are put up online for the first time. The creator could cut them into chapters later, but from page to page, the transition is not as noticeable as the transition from issue to issue would be in print. Webcomics like “Goblins”, which I will explore below, function like this, where there is no particularly noticeable difference between the pages during transitions between chapters compared to between normal pages. There are, of course, many similarities between composition in print comics and in webcomics. Most webcomics follow the lead of print with regards to page shape and (generally) size, with some notable exceptions, which I will explore below. The relationship between the panels on the page function in the same way, where they have to follow logically from panel to panel, and, as I will also explore below, from page to page. Since webcomics tend to, as mentioned, publish one page at a time, this has a noticeable impact on the composition of many comics, while others function equally well in either medium. Some comics, however, completely

break from the traditions of print, and, unlike many of the other comics I will discuss, would not function in the print medium at all, largely because of experimental use of the tools provided by the internet. Most of the comics I will examine in this chapter will be of the variety which would, and do, function in print, with some examination of the ones which do not. Many of the innovations utilized in these comics are possible through a specific tool, the “infinite canvas”, which I explained and explored in the previous chapter on time and motion.

In this chapter I will examine how different webcomics change their composition and design through and because of tools unique to the internet, most importantly the “infinite canvas”, while also exploring the freedoms and restrictions unique to webcomics.

The Order of the Stick

In “The Order of the Stick” the use of the “infinite canvas” is integral to the design of the comic. As I described in the chapter on time and motion, the comic uses this tool to some

extent in every page but saves the more expansive use for important story beats. In the chapter on time and motion I described what the effects of the use of the “infinite canvas” can have on the reading experience, and so in this chapter I will focus more heavily on the practical effects and changes it brings to the normal pages of the comic. The comic is originally published as a webcomic, but after the end of every chapter Burlew compiles that chapter into a book which is then published in print.

The comic structures itself around the idea of the two different

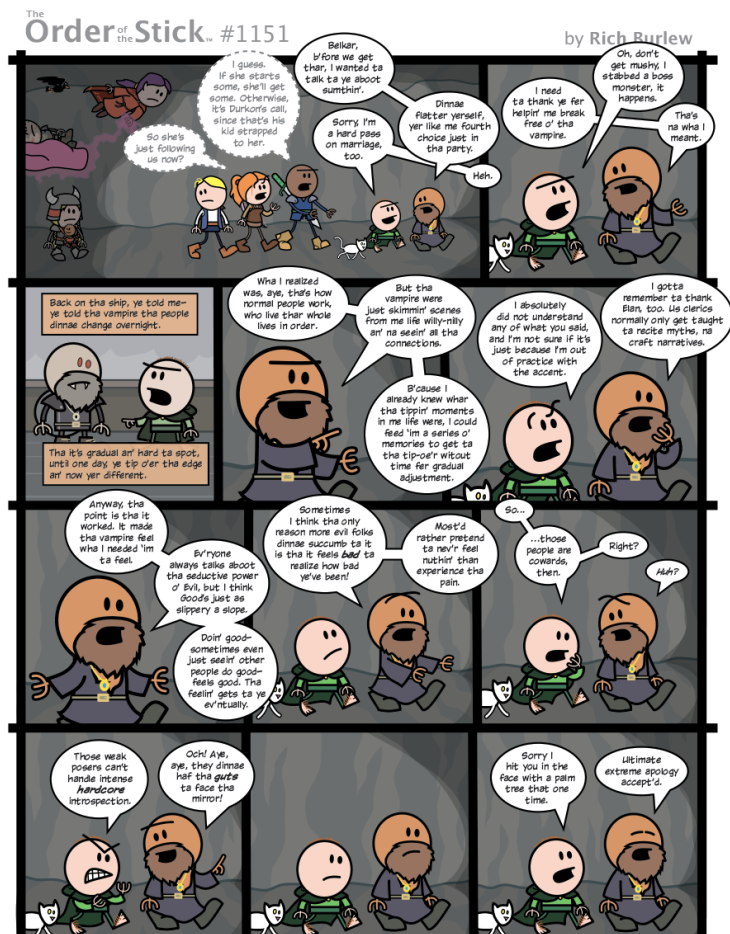


Figure 42 - "OOTS" - single print page on one internet page

pages; the book page and the internet page. The internet page is what gets posted to the website with every upload and contains at least one book page. Usually it is divided into several individual book pages. The reason Burlew does this is simply to achieve good flow and utilize the “infinite canvas” without making it harder for himself to translate the comic into print. The book pages are then, as mentioned, shorter sections of the webcomic. While the book pages are not divided arbitrarily and without thought to page flow and pacing, they are less individually strong, or at least less structured than the internet page. They function more like a print page, which makes sense, since that is essentially what they are. This can then get turned on its head and used against the reader when there is an important story beat which makes particular use of the “infinite canvas”, like the ones I described in the chapter on time and motion. In particular the moment where the character Durkon sees all the graves of previous worlds. Unlike the page where Roy falls to his death, which changes the width of the page as well as the length, this page retains the same ratio until the last book page. On the page where Roy falls, the reader immediately knows that something is different about his page without even having to scroll down, since, as mentioned, the width of the page has changed. But on the page where the graves are revealed this is not the case. The ratio remains the same, and so the reader is caught unawares by the momentous importance of what will happen. The impact is even greater since the moment is initially treated as something which is sad but known, and fairly unimportant, something already solidly established earlier on in the comic. This is done by having the grave be shown at the top of the internet page. While the panel dedicated to it is large, taking up almost



Figure 43 - Two print pages in one internet page

half the book page, there is nothing all that impactful about it. The gravestone is large but simple. At the end of the book page, however, another grave is pointed out to us, which causes confusion in the reader and the characters. Up until now we have only been informed of one world having been destroyed. The following book page then reveals more and more graves, and as the reader scrolls down, expecting the page to end, like almost all the pages before this one has, the page keeps going for far longer than it usually does, showing more and more graves, and the final panel of the page is huge, with nothing but an amorphous, grey mass of gravestones. This change in panel design is an important one. The panel is, according to McCloud and Eisner “comics most important icon!” (*Understanding Comics*, p 98). The page is made up of panels and the comic is made up of pages, and everything that happens in a comic (at least a traditional comic) happens in some kind of panel (even if it is the page as a meta-panel as described by Eisner). The design and shape of the panel is important; “Panel shapes vary considerably though, and while differences of shape don’t affect the specific meanings of those panels vis-à-vis time, they can affect the reading experience.” (*Understanding Comics*, p 99). Eisner makes the argument in his book that the shape of the panel can in fact influence what the panel means (*Comics and Sequential Art*, p 44). The surprising size of the final panel means something different than the preceding ones, in that its design is deliberately intended to evoke a different emotion than the others. In this case the emotion would be a mixture of awe, horror and stunned surprise, which is only enhanced by the subversion of expectation, since the much larger panel breaks with the established pattern.

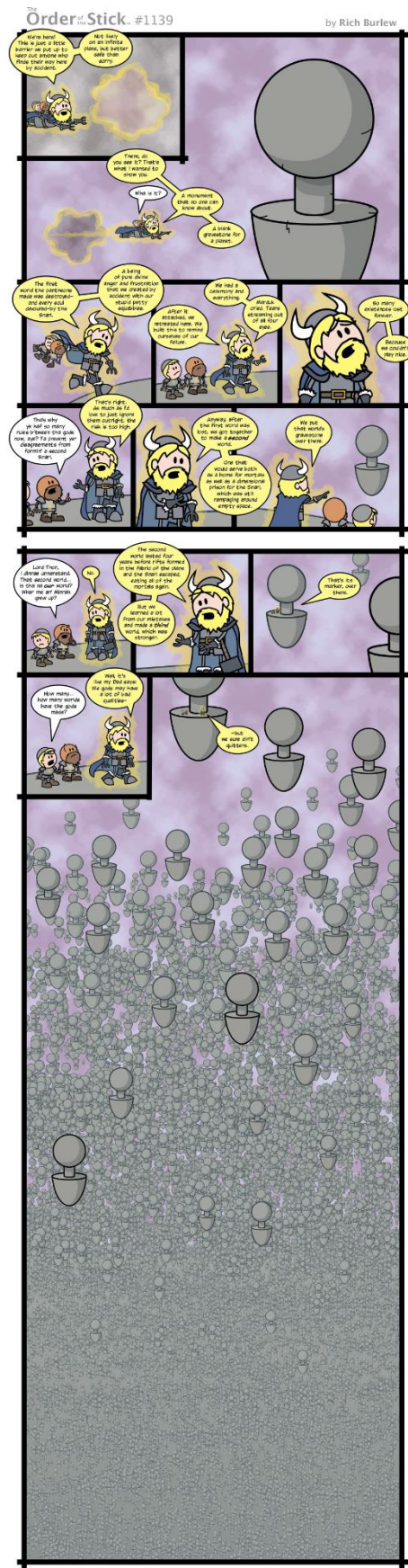


Figure 44 - "OOTS" - Second major use of "infinite canvas"

This amalgamation of the design for the medium of print and the medium of the internet is an interesting example of straddling the line between the mediums. It makes use of the freedom of the internet and the predictable structure of print comics. The composition of comics is, after all, heavily related to what “page” they are on. The printed page of a traditional comic book is much more restrictive than what can be done on the internet, while the potential of the internet comics is similar to what McCloud describes as the “original” comics, or at least historical relics and artworks which he sees as comics. These works were much freer than a printed comics page, in that they were not restricted to a predetermined and quite small canvas. The examples McCloud uses are; “...decorating the walls of a painted tomb – spiraling in bas-relief up a stone column – parading across a 230-foot tapestry – or zigzagging across an accordion-folded painted deerskin...” (*Reinventing Comics*, p 201). All these things are impossible to do in print, but they are much more possible on the internet, where size and shape is no issue (or at least less of one. The forms and shapes are still converted from 3D to 2D, so you cannot view them in quite the same ways). For “OOTS” to make use of both toolsets in the ways that it does is quite novel.

In webcomics, “pages” are usually portrayed as what is on the screen, or the specific webpage the reader is on. This does not work in quite the same way as looking at a real printed page, as it is harder to fit a lot of information onto the digital one without it becoming unintelligible, as a result of the lower resolution. “To compensate for the low resolution and screen shape, each page has roughly the same amount of visual information as a half page of printed comics” (*Reinventing Comics*, p 214). This observation has remained fairly accurate, with most webcomics opting for a more zoomed in look of a page, which the reader then has to scroll down to see the rest of, with some exceptions, like “Unsounded”. The separation of pages and images also influences the design of the whole comic, according to McCloud. “Hypertext relies on the principle that nothing exists in space. Everything is either here, not here, or connected to here – while in the temporal map of comics, every element of the work has a spatial relationship to every other element at all times.” (*Reinventing Comics*, p 215). McCloud does point out that this is not necessarily a problem. If it works, it works.

Printing changed the design of comics through restricting them to the page they would be printed on. There was no longer infinite three-dimensional space to create in, but a restrictive (as in small), flat piece of paper. This changed how comics were read, as they now had to follow the traditions of reading print, which in the west was left to right and down. A whole work could not fit on a single unbroken surface anymore, if it was too large.

Webcomics can break the mold of print, according to McCloud, if the creator can “...recognize that the monitor which so often acts as a page – may also act as a window.” (*Reinventing Comics*, p 222). This is mostly in reference to the idea of the “infinite canvas” and how the image “behind” the screen can be much larger than the screen itself. It need not restrict itself to the smaller frame like in print. The comic would then work more like a large image in the real world, where the reader can still only read a part of it at a time but can move in any direction and find the image continuing unbroken. In the real world the reader would presumably be able to step back and get a view of the whole image without being able to read what is on it. This could then be replicated in webcomics by having the reader be able to zoom in and out, getting closer and further away from the image. In this way webcomics are closer to the older creations and can therefore be much freer in their design. “In a digital environment there’s no reason a 500-panel story can’t be told vertically” (which is close to what “Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal” sometimes does) “- or horizontally like a great graphic skyline. We could indulge our left-to-right and up-to-down habits from beginning to end in a giant descending staircase – or pack it all into a slowly revolving cube.” (*Reinventing Comics*, p 223). While “OOTS” may not be the most experimental webcomic regarding the possibilities of the internet, it straddles the line between the traditions of print and the freedom offered by the tools of the internet to create a comic which draws and benefits from both worlds. That being said, restricting itself to only exploring the “infinite canvas” in one direction does not make full use of the freedom of the internet either. It means the design of the comic is very much restricted in the kinds of movements it can portray, with prominence given to vertical movement over horizontal movement, as argued by Eisner; “[Horizontal stripe] bends the telling to a horizontal format. Vertical action effects are inhibited. [Vertical comic] restricts the teller to a vertical field. It affects graphic storytelling by narrowing the flow of imagery.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 8). “OOTS”, then, is both served well by its more restrictive design choices, being able to surprise the readers with the occasional longer page as well as having the option of printing physical copies of the comic, while also limiting its access to the enormous freedom of design the tools of the internet offers.

As mentioned above, “OOTS” using larger examples of the “infinite canvas” turns the usual pattern on its head. The pages normally follow the pattern of a few book pages (or sometimes one) of a standardized size, with the whole internet page functioning as a “meta page”, with its own little arc. Each book page can also have its own little arc, akin to, or more

so than, the construction of print pages. The pages in “OOTTS”, and many other webcomics (especially those featuring a lot of jokes) have the following structure; introduce the scene and what is happening, the middle, where most of the action happens (both literally in the case of fight scenes and figuratively in the case of dialogue scenes), and the end, where there is usually some kind of joke. The joke is seldom all that important to the main narrative but serves to give a feeling of closure to the scene. A significant event, which serves as a cliffhanger for the next page, or a twist, will often serve the same purpose, of giving closure to the page. Like in print comics, the latter two options, the significant event and the twist, serve to prepare, and build excitement for, the next page. These serve essentially the same purpose, as it is common to hint at the next page at the end of the previous one, especially if there is a page turn. I would argue again, though, that these tend to be weightier in webcomics, in part because the page has to carry more weight on its own (because the wait for the next page is longer), and because the comic usually operates without chapter breaks, so it needs to spread its heavier transitions more evenly throughout the narrative. I will show this structure with an example.

Page 1189, the last page of its chapter, has three book pages. The internet page starts with two longtime allies of the main characters, who are currently spying on the main villain, being informed that the main characters are on their way there. They are then ambushed by unknown assailants, which do not appear to work for the villain, they get knocked unconscious and carried off as the assailants talk about being resigned to being wiped from existence. The internet page has its own arc with a beginning, middle, and conclusion. The conclusion is also more dramatic than the usual page as it is also the conclusion of the chapter. The reader does not know this is the last page until they have scrolled all the way down to the bottom, though, making it a surprise. This would be harder to accomplish in print, since the reader would be able to tell how many pages were left, unless the comic was printed in a much larger compendium, which would mitigate the problem slightly, but not entirely. Each book page then has its own little mini arc within the major arc of the internet page (which is within the larger arc of the sequence, within the chapter, within the story). The first page starts with the two characters being informed of the approach of the main characters. The middle of the page is them then discussing this briefly while spying on the main villain before being attacked by invisible assailants. The end of the page is then them on guard, looking for the attackers. The next page then starts with the two groups initiating conversation, with a spike in tension when one of the characters falls unconscious from

poison after the initial strike. The last remaining character then speaks with the assailants for a while, with a new spike in tension when we are informed that without an antidote, the poisoned character will die shortly. The page then ends with the second character surrendering to save the life of the first. The third and last page then starts with the second character also being poisoned and falling unconscious, the middle is the both of them being carried off, and the conclusion is the assailants talking about how they expect to be wiped from existence.

Each page, and each level of page, has its own little three act structure, which is enabled and reinforced by the unique composition of the webcomics page. As mentioned above, each page of a webcomic must stand on its own in a way that print comics do not and introducing a sequence of smaller arcs like this helps to keep the reading experience interesting. Each page (both internet and book) has a beginning, which refers back to the previous page, helping to retain a sense of continuity, a middle, with its own drama, and a conclusion, which establishes a new status quo while hinting at the page to come.

Most of the pages are like this, and in “OOTS” at least it is very visible. Not all webcomics do this, presumably, and the ones that do are not always so easy to spot and define, but it is a storytelling tool which is very useful in a medium where a long time can pass between the release of new pages, and in the case of “OOTS”, it is enabled and reinforced by the tools specific to the medium, mostly the “infinite canvas”.

Earlier in the chapter I mentioned that internet comics, unlike print comics, probably give less attention to how the pages of the chapter (or just the comic) play off

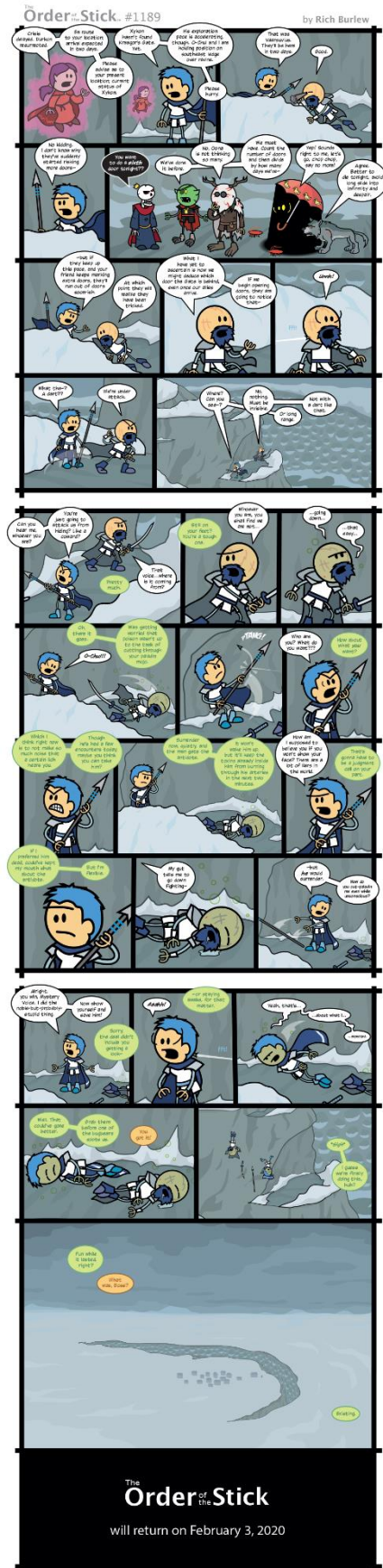


Figure 45 - "OOTS" page 1189 - three print pages on one internet page and the end of the chapter

each other. This is usually a result of the reader only being able to see one page at a time, and so the creator is not as incentivized to take the interaction between pages into account. While print books have to take the difference between the double-spread and the page turn into account, webcomics do not, although, it could be argued that the difference between the book page and the internet page of “OOTS” function in a way similar to the double-spread and the page turn. I would argue, however, that this is then mitigated by the reader only being able to see less than one book-page at a time because of the “infinite canvas”.

There is a great disparity between how webcomics handle chapter transitions. In the case of “OOTS”, there is heavy emphasis on giving each chapter a definitive starting point and end point. This is not the case with all webcomics, as I will explore further below. At the end of every chapter in “OOTS”, there is an establishing shot of the new location. This panel is, as establishing shot panels tend to be, larger and drawn at a greater distance from the characters than the usual panels. This helps to set the stage for the story, establish theme and mood, and provide something like a narrative palate-cleanser to prepare the reader for a new chapter. At the end of every chapter is an announcement (in the online version) that the last page of the chapter is the last page. Along with this the final panel of a chapter tends to end either with a grand reveal of some sort, like a much more impactful version of a regular page, or a large “fade-out” panel, which helps to provide some sense of closure to what has just occurred. Often the comic does both. The comic does its best to keep each chapter distinct from the others in order to keep the chain of events clear in the minds of the readership. Since the story is long and fairly convoluted, things could get confusing very quickly if this was not done.

Another comic which does not have clear transitions between chapters is, as mentioned above, “Goblins”, which I will explore later in the chapter. In this desire to keep every chapter memorable and distinct, Burlew uses tools which would function perfectly in print as well, such as designing each chapter to have its own easily recognizable color palette. The first chapter is a little all over the place, since it was written before Burlew had much of a plan. The second chapter is dominated by blues, as it mostly takes place in a place called “Azure City”. The third chapter is blue

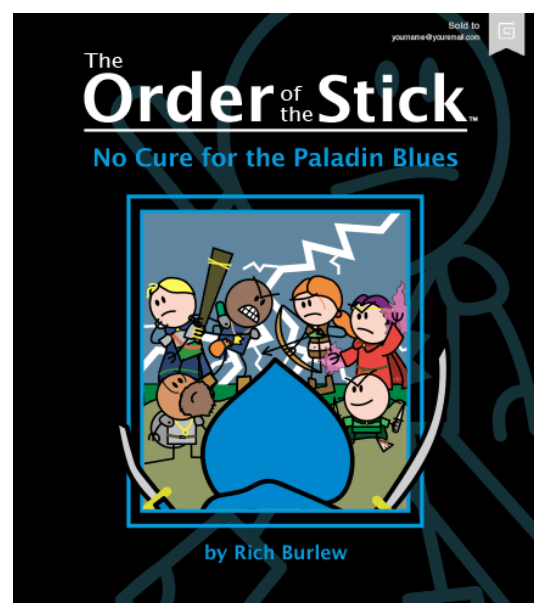


Figure 46 - "OOTS" - Chapter 2 book cover

and orange, as “Azure City” is attacked by orange-skinned monsters. The fourth chapter is dark blues, blacks and pinks, as well as white, as the city has been conquered by the villains, and Roy is dead and wandering around in the afterlife. The fifth chapter is orange, brown and red, as the characters are questing in a huge desert, and the sixth chapter is gray, blue and white, as it takes place in the mountains. Color helps distinguish the chapters from each other, and sets the tone, but this also applies to print, and is therefore less of a focus in this paper. This significant change in design between chapters is made easy through Burlew’s simple but memorable and impactful art style. Eisner describes the phenomenon in comics of simplicity being, in many cases, more useful than complexity; “In comics, images are generally impressionistic. Usually, they are rendered with economy in order to facilitate their usefulness as a language. Because experience precedes analysis, the intellectual digestive process is accelerated by the imagery provided by comics.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 9). “OOTS” is served very well by this phenomenon. The art style of a comic can convey different kinds of emotion. Things like shapes, colors and lines are all influential in this regard. Different symbols come to mean different things when we have lived with them for a while. Even backgrounds can be used to convey the emotions of characters, which McCloud understands very well; “Even when there is little or no distortion of the characters in a given scene, a distorted or expressionistic background will usually affect our “reading” of characters inner states.” (*Understanding Comics*, p 132). This is sometimes seen in webcomics, for example when the backgrounds change in “Usounded”, reflecting the emotions of the characters on the page, like sequence described in the previous chapter, of the characters in the comic being affected

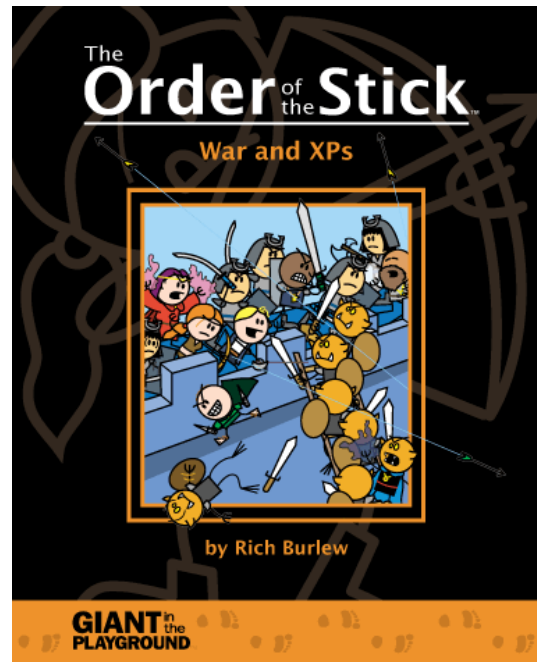


Figure 47 - "OOTS" - Chapter 3 book cover



Figure 48 - "OOTS" - Chapter 4 book cover

by a curse. The characters are overtaken by this sinister new emotion, and the background flickers back and forth between the normal one and the one implying an unnatural hatred and rage, before settling on the latter one. This change, and the visible flickering and movement back and forth before settling on the sinister new background, causes a reaction in the reader, making the experience more unsettling than if the background had simply changed from one to the other immediately. This effect is understood and described by McCloud; “Certain patterns can produce an almost physiological effect in the viewer.” (*Understanding Comics*, p 132). The images do not necessarily have to be moving for this effect to manifest, though. Eisner points out that a similar effect can be achieved with a tilted image of a train car (*Comics and Sequential Art*, p 63). “Unsounded” also achieves this effect with the image of a tornado moving the letters of the background in “Unsounded”. While the goal may be to impart these feelings to the reader, the hope is then that the readers will transfer them to the characters, which, according to McCloud, they often will; “But for some reason, readers will ascribe those feelings, not to themselves, but to the characters they identify with.” (*Understanding Comics*, p 132). The point of the sequence in “Unsounded” may be, though, to portray a more subjective feeling than the train car and the tornado. While Burlew does not experiment a great deal with this in “OOTS”, he uses changes in color and general design to manipulate the perceived emotional states of the characters, and, since the comic has a very meta sense of humor, the characters will sometimes point this out to each other. An example of this happening is the scenes where the Order are all hypnotized in the desert. The whole color scheme changes to reflect the emotional states of the characters as they fall deeper into the hypnosis and their emotions are changed against their will. Since the color schemes are so different between this sequence and the normal plot the change back to normal becomes quite jarring, which underlines how strong the identity of the color design of each chapter is, and how subtle the

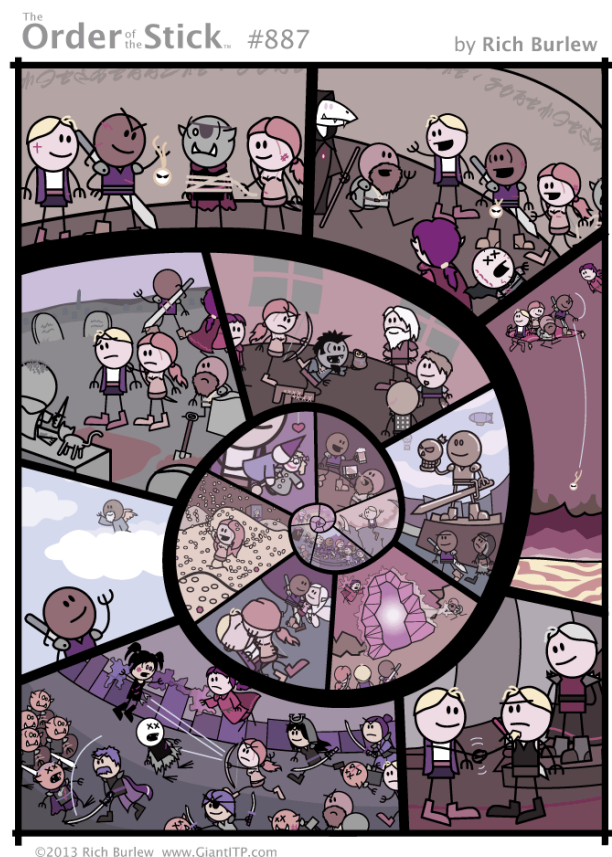


Figure 49 - "OOTS" - Characters being hypnotized

change into the other color scheme was, which reflects the subtlety of the hypnosis magic affecting the characters.

Though Burlew tries to design his chapters in pleasing ways that make narrative sense, he also makes use of the “infinite canvas” to keep the exact end of a chapter hidden from the viewer until the very last page. The announcement at the end of the chapter is presented as part of the page, and since it is at the very bottom of the image the reader will not see it until they read that far down. This surprise can be achieved much more easily in webcomics than in print comics, first because the reader has no way of knowing how far away then end is unless the creator tells them (there is, after all, no physical copy in the readers’ hands), and because the creator can hide the announcement out of the immediate view of the reader. The composition of the internet page ensures that the reader will likely not see the announcement until they are at the end of the page, as it is all the way at the bottom, or as far down as it can be without being separate from the main page.

These points obviously only apply to comics with an overarching plot, or at least comics where the pages relate to each other. In many other webcomics, like “xkcd” and “SMBC”, the individual pages are independent of each other. Since the pages can behave independently like this, their structure is much freer. Many of them follow the structure of beginning, middle, and end, especially the joke ones since jokes work off the same (or a similar) structure, but many of them are freer and more experimental. An example of this would be “Click and Drag” from “xkcd”.

UnDivine

“UnDivine” is a modern, urban fantasy webcomic about a high school boy who sells his soul to a demon. The demon then starts following him around in human form. It is created by Ayme Sotuyo, who migrated from print comics (most notably “Lumberjanes”) to create webcomics instead. The comic is published as a webcomic first, and then in print later, similarly to “OOTS”.

This webcomic is composed more like a print comic than “OOTS” is. It still takes some advantage of the “infinite canvas”, but to a much lesser degree. Unlike in “OOTS”, but like most other webcomics, the comic is updated at a pace of one page per upload, with no distinction being made between the internet version of a page and the printed version of the page. As such, the minimal use of the “infinite canvas” probably goes unnoticed in the print version, and the comic is composed presumably with this in mind. Eisner defines the comic book format like this; “The classic “comic book” format. Usually it measures about 7x10 inches in an upright form. It offers a wide range of image deployment and panel layout. It conforms to a commonly accepted reading discipline” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 8). Whether the printed version of the comic adheres to this layout is not that important, but Sotuyo, coming from print comics, presumably has more experience with creating and composing for that medium, and therefore relies on these skills to a greater degree than Burlew does with “OOTS”. She also utilizes the tools of webcomics to work around some of the problems of print, such as the creator being dependent on the reader’s cooperation to a certain extent, which, according to Eisner, is one of the major problems of the medium; “[The] problem with a print medium like comics is the reader can easily see how it comes out! So reader interest must be attained by content.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 51). Webcomics can more easily avoid this.

A good example of how this comic uses the “infinite canvas” in the composition of its pages is the very first two pages of the comic. The first one is mostly white, with one small speech bubble in the middle of the page, and a cutout of what we will learn on the next page is a fairly large statue of a smiling angel. The reader will first see only the white and the speech bubble. The speech is someone

“And let it be known, not one soul will go astray under me.”



Figure 50 - "UnDivine" - page 1

quoting a religious text. This, combined with the pure white background, immediately sets the tone of the comic. Where the comic takes place is presumably a very religious place, or at least the comic will deal with religion quite a bit. It will later turn out that the comic is set in a heavily theistic (or even theocratic) society on a fictional Caribbean island, so it helps establish this fact immediately. As the reader then scrolls down, they will see this cutout of a statue, showing only the lower half of the face and the outstretched arms. There are a few pigeons on it. This image is outwardly friendly, but also menacing, almost threatening when taken together with the religious monologue going on. The image establishes unease. It does this by only showing this cutout of the full statue and,



Figure 51 - "UnDivine" - page 2

very importantly, leaving out the eyes. The reader only sees a smiling mouth and outstretched arms. The next image then seemingly undercuts this by having the reader immediately see the religious monologue continue, speaking now about love, and the full statue is revealed, showing the smiling, apparently benevolent angel, in bright daylight, in a park, in front of several grand, church-like buildings, which will turn out to be a school. The reader will then scroll down to see the name of the deity on the plinth; “La Davinidad”, as well as what appears to be a student sitting at its base. These two pages do an excellent job of setting the tone of the comic and informing the reader of several important plot points right away, and it uses the “infinite canvas” to both deliver this information in a deliberate sequence, as well as keeping the reader from being overwhelmed by it at any time. This is crucial in regard to retaining control of the reader. Eisner writes; “In comics, reader control is attained in two stages – attention and retention. Attention is accomplished by provocative and attractive imagery. Retention is achieved by the logical and intelligible arrangement of the images.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 51). The sequence goes; establish religious

themes, imply seemingly benevolent deity with probably a significantly darker agenda than what is presented to the congregation, undercut this implication to sow doubt in the reader, establish the setting of the school and the name of the deity. This is then all done in two pages, featuring only three short sentences. The rest is visual information. Being able to cut the delivery of information into smaller and more easily manageable and controlled sections like this is much easier to do in the medium of webcomics than in print. In print the creator cannot control what the reader will see first, at least to a much lesser extent, and in what order they will then see the rest of the page. This is an extremely helpful tool regarding the composition of comics, as controlling the eye of the reader is essential



Figure 52 - "UnDivine" - page 3 - continuity upheld through narration

for the reading experience, according to Eisner (*Comics and Sequential Art*, p 40). The rest of the comics pages are then composed quite like printed pages, but arguably in two sections, or halves. The first being what the reader will see (and therefore presumably read) first, and the second half (lower on the page) being what they will see next. Dividing the pages up like this makes it easier to create a narrative within it, almost as if they were two pages instead of one. This is similar to how the pages function in "OOTS". This also has the effect of being able to fit more on each page without the page then becoming too cluttered.

The tool of the "infinite canvas" and the option of hiding parts of the page from the reader mitigates what Eisner sees as one of the greatest problems in print comics. "In comics, because the reader is in control of the acquisition, it is more difficult to surprise, shock or retain his interest. Sometimes a comics storyteller may try to use the turning of a page to achieve a surprise. But unless the reader is disciplined (does not skip ahead), he can elude the storyteller's grasp and "see what happens next". Aside from unexpected turns in the thread of

a story, surprising the reader on a visual level remains a major problem.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 52). This is, as mentioned above, much less of a problem in webcomics, as the creator of the webcomic has much greater control over what the reader is able to see at any given time, because the amount of new information available to the reader at any given time is so small, as the comic is published one page at a time (for the most part). While the reader can circumvent this if there is a sizable archive of comics ahead of where they currently are in the story, it is much more difficult to find a specific place further ahead without being able to skim (or at least look at) the pages in between, and doing so quickly is harder in webcomics than in print. It takes more effort of the part of the reader, and sufficient effort will often kill the urge to skip ahead. Some of the problem remains, though, and the solutions found in print still apply to an extent. “In comics, the solution is to *surprise the character* [original emphasis] with whom the reader is involved.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 52). Webcomics do not need to rely as much on this as print does, however.

Unlike “OOTTS”, “UnDivine” has experimented with splash pages to introduce a new chapter. It only happened once, though, so perhaps Sotuyo decided they were unnecessary. Otherwise, the chapters end with



Figure 53 - "UnDivine" - Splash page for chapter 2



Figure 54 - "UnDivine" - End of chapter 2

a finalizing page which is composed differently than the ordinary pages. For example, the end of chapter 2 has a page composed like a mirrored version of the first page of the comic, where there is a panel at the top of the page, then a large white space, and then a small panel which recontextualizes the first panel and sets up the coming conflicts of the next chapter. The large white space between the panels is used similarly to how it was used in the introduction of the comic, where the first panel sets the mood, and the second undercuts it. In the case of the introduction, though, the mood was set by narration, and not a true panel. The final page of the second chapter implies a happy ending. The main character has avoided a severe punishment he assumed was unavoidable, and things are generally looking up for him. Then the next, smaller panel at the bottom of the page shows blood leaking out of the corner of his mouth. This indicates the start of his more noticeable transformation after selling his soul. The white space helps sell the turnabout in fortune represented on the page. The reader can only see the first optimistic panel at first and has to scroll down in order to see the next one, which undercuts the optimism of the first.

The next chapter then starts with just an establishing shot of the new location, unlike the previous chapter, which had a whole splash page and an introductory title. The two chapters are separated by a sequence of reader questions, which Sotuyo then answers, but this is more to fill time while Sotuyo takes a brief break and to provide a mental separation between the chapters, like what a front page or splash page would provide. Starting the new chapter with an establishing shot instead of a splash page is more usual in the realm of webcomics in contrast to print. This is probably in part because there is no physical copy, and so it needs no introduction, at least not in the same way as a print comic book would. This is the same way as "OOTS" introduces its new chapters.

The establishing shot of the next chapter, in this case chapter 3, functions like an amalgamation of the traditions of print and of the established norm of the comic. It has a



Figure 55 - "UnDivine" - Chapter 3 page 1

large panel on top, featuring an image introducing the new location with some narration to introduce the current events and conflicts. This panel is all the reader sees before scrolling down. When doing so the reader then sees what functions like a secondary establishing shot, showing the characters of the comic at a distance, establishing who is there and what is going on. In print comics, the establishing shot would usually be much smaller in order to fit more panels on the page (since space is a premium in print), or it would take a whole page in order to be properly impressive. The webcomic takes what in print might be either half a page if the establishing shot was smaller, or one and a half pages, if the establishing shot was larger. This works much better in webcomics than it would in print, because of the tool of hiding parts of the page beneath the edge of the screen. A way of seeing how much better it works as a webcomic is by comparing how the page looks on the website with how it looks as a whole image. When the reader sees the page on the website, they see only the large establishing shot, which lets that panel take prominence on the page. This gives the reader the experience of seeing a full-page establishing shot. They can then scroll down to see the secondary panel, which introduces the characters, like a sub-establishing shot. This works well online, where the reader can see only one full panel at a time, which separates them in the reader's mind, but it works less well when the reader can see the whole image. In that case, as you can see by the image provided, the page looks out of balance. You would rarely see pages like this in print comics, with one large panel at the top and one smaller (but still large) panel immediately beneath it, especially with no gutter (apart from the thin black line) separating them. When viewed like this, the page almost looks bad. This makes sense, though, as the page is not meant to be viewed like this. It is meant to be seen one section at a time. While the page will later be printed, it is common for pages designed like this to be cut into separate pieces, which is what "OOTS" does with its larger "infinite canvas" pages. By using pages designed like this as well as pages which work equally well in both formats, this webcomic straddles the line between the two options in a way which is strengthened by the medium. "OOTS" does the same, with its normal pages being divided into printable sections, as explored above, and the occasional larger page, which will then be cut into sections for print.

SMBC/XKCD

“SMBC” (Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal) by creator Zack Wiensmith does not do a lot different regarding composition than the previous two examples. The difference is mostly three-fold. Firstly, the comic has no rigid base structure it must follow, seeing as it is a sequence of daily comics, all of which are independent of the others. Secondly, it includes the extra red-button comic (or votey) at the end of the main comic. Thirdly, the comic very occasionally makes use of the technical aspects of the medium, having the reader manipulate the image on their



Figure 57 - "SMBC" - Common format

screen to reveal a joke. The freedom afforded the comic by the first point is much greater than anything you would find in a daily print publication, such as newspaper-comics. “SMBS” has the freedom of the internet to experiment with and does so by having no firm guidelines for what its comics look like. In this way it is quite similar to the comic “xkcd”. Therefore, the comic features everything from single panel comics reminiscent of “The Far Side” by Gary Larson, to long stories making heavy use of the “infinite canvas”, to a surprising amount of graph jokes. The most innovative use related specifically to the internet in probably the extensive use of the “infinite canvas”. Wiensmith uses it a great deal, but only to create longer comics, usually only in the form of a long, vertical sequence of panels, essentially creating one long comics page, subdivided into what is visible on the screen at any time. This approach is less systematic than what can be seen in “OOTS” and to a lesser extent “UnDivine”, as there is little in the way of structured use.



Figure 56 - "SMBC" - Votey for the above image

The second way “SMBC” utilizes the internet for composition is, as mentioned, through the red-button panels. These are an extra, optional panel which can be viewed by clicking a red button beneath every comic. The panel is usually some form of addendum, comment, or other continuation of the relevant comic. The extra panel is usually in black and white, unlike the main comic, which adds to the idea that it is an optional little “secret” which the main comic functions perfectly well without. Many times, it functions more like an extra joke which is only tangentially related to the main comic.

The third way “SMBC” innovates is by tricking the reader’s eyes into not seeing the joke before Wienersmith wants them to. For example, once he created a joke where the only way to truly get it was to zoom out your computer-screen. The image the reader was presented with was far too close to see the massive dick in the background. This makes innovative use of the medium and the technical challenges of the thing we are using to read the comic. The “infinite canvas” takes explicit advantage of the fact that the reader is unable to see the whole comic at once, and in the case of this comic, Wienersmith makes doubly use of the “infinite canvas”, firstly by hiding the instructions for the reveal at the bottom of a fairly long comic, and secondly by making the dick in the background so large that it merely becomes a part of the background, which the reader will usually not question, even if it seems a little abstract.

“xkcd” is very similar to “SMBC” in composition, excepting the comics where Munroe experiments significantly with the medium, like in the comic “Time” or “Click and Drag”. In “Time” the composition mostly deals with maintaining continuity and showing progression, while in “Click and Drag” the composition is mostly concerned with introducing the elements of the image in a good way, avoiding a feeling of clutter or a lack of things to find. In composing “Click and

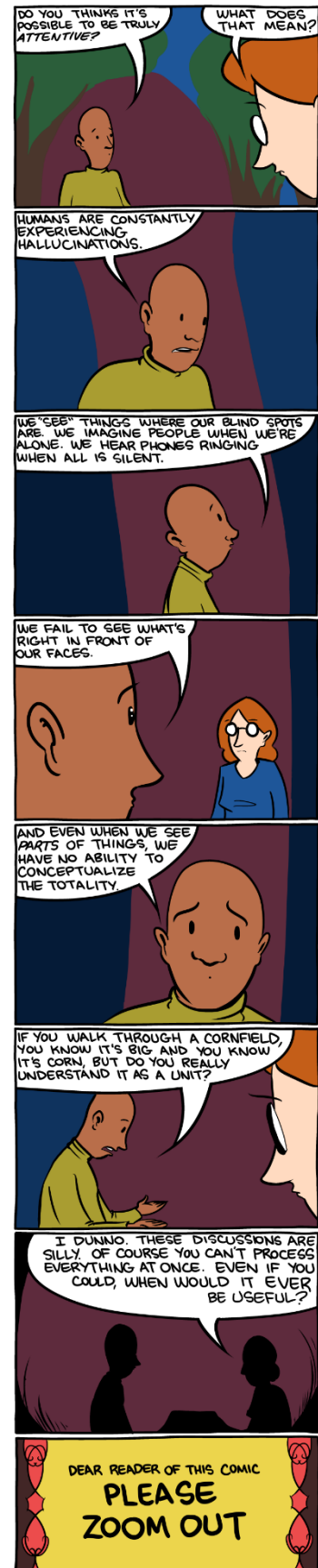


Figure 58 - "SMBC" - Innovative use of zoom – published: 2013-10-18

Drag” an important decision to make would be how large to make the “window” the reader would move around. The characters and objects had to be visible and the

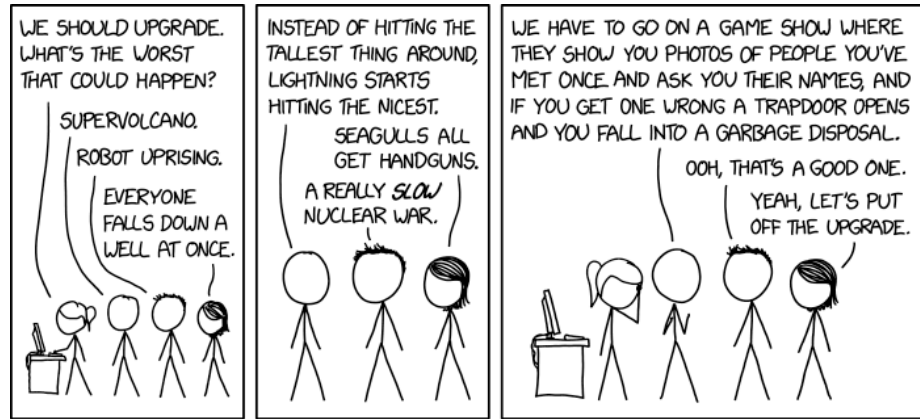


Figure 59 - "xkcd" - Common format

writing readable while remaining consistent with the design of the normal comic, but not so large that the things in the image become impossible to recognize because the reader is too close. The comic is zoomed out slightly further than the normal “xkcd” comic, presumably in order to impart the feeling that the comic is not about any particular scene the reader may come across, but about all of them, as well as the other aspects mentioned. In this comic in particular, composition also has an impact on time and motion. In a medium where space and time are more or less the same, as explored in the previous chapter, composition is closely linked to time and motion. How the creator composes a page directs how the reader experiences the time and motion of that page. By playing with the composition, the creator can play with the experience of time. McCloud comments on this; “In comics, composition follows a very different set of rules than in most graphic arts. By introducing time into the equation, comics artists are arranging the page in ways not always conducive to traditional picture making. Here, the composition of the picture is joined by the composition of the change, the composition of the drama – and the composition of memory.”

(*Understanding Comics*, p 115). An example of this is the direction the comic is supposed to be read. How the panels are arranged are a matter of composition, but it directly influences the experience of time. I explored this in my time and motion chapter and so will not do so here.

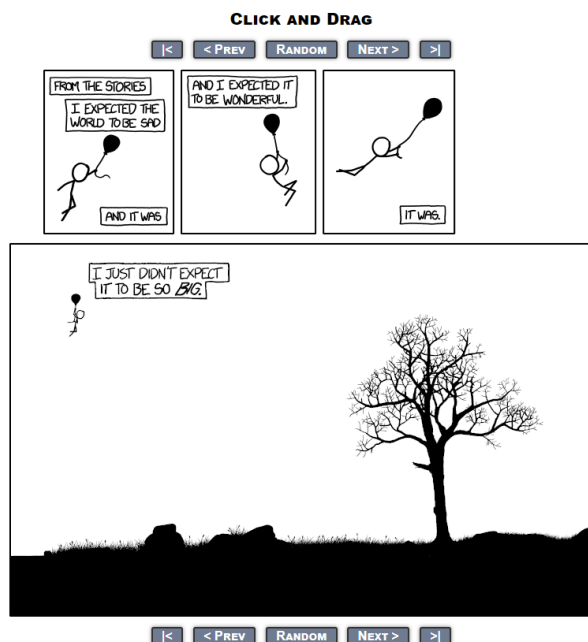


Figure 60 - "xkcd" - "Click and Drag"

The design and composition of a webcomic is also affected by the idea of interactivity. An example would be the comic “Garden”. The internet can be a deeply interactive “place”, and the comics made there can reflect that. McCloud was one of the earlier comic theorists to take notice of its capabilities; “Whether by choosing a path, revealing a hidden window or zooming in on a detail, there are countless ways to interact with sequential art in a digital environment.” (*Reinventing Comics*, p 229). Where the creator chooses to place parts of the comic and what they choose to place there can be just as important to the webcomic as how the panels are arranged on the page of a traditional print comic. The design can be arguably even more meaningful because the kind of action which must be taken to reach this content can have meaning in itself. What the reader does, how they do it, what the context of the action is and what surrounds the choice are all elements which can play a part in creating a new reading experience unlike anything found in print. An example of this could be in the comic “Unsounded” where the “next” arrow is replaced by the outstretched hand of one of the characters. The reader must “take the characters hand” in a sense for the story to continue. McCloud thinks that this interactivity is essential in webcomics; “Most importantly, the mere act of “reading” – moving through – digital comics should be a deeply interactive process. Comics is a still life; mute, unmoving and passive in and of itself – but the act of reading comics – even through the technology you hold in your hands – is anything but. Comics in a digital environment will remain a still life – but a still life we explore dynamically.” (*Reinventing Comics*, p 229). Another example of how the reading of a comic, and how you read that comic, can have meaning in itself is in “Click and Drag”, where the action of clicking and dragging the view across the huge image over and over again in order to find everything there is to see represents the cost of real exploration, both in effort and in time, as explored in the chapter on time and motion.

Unlike comics like “OOTS”, “Undivine”, and to a certain extent “SMBC”, there are comics from “xkcd” which could never be put into print. Examples of this are the ones I have explored already, comics like “Click and Drag” or “Garden”. These comics would not work in any other medium, at least not without expending ridiculous effort, which is a sign of them making great use of the tools unique to that medium.

Goblins

“Goblins” is another fantasy adventure webcomic, similar in many ways to “OOTS”, as they are both based on the pen and paper role playing game “Dungeons and Dragons”. In terms of composition, “Goblins” is quite rigid. Every page (with some rare exceptions) are divided into three horizontal sections, which are then divided into various numbers of panels. This page structure is very common in print comics, perhaps even one of the most classic structures in western comics. As such, it is perhaps the webcomic which is closest to print comics out of the ones I use as examples. The content of the pages is structured somewhat like



Figure 61 - "Goblins" - Normal page

other webcomics. Like many others, for example “OOTS”, the pages of “Goblins” are arguably too large to be shown in their entirety on a screen (depending on the size of the screen), and as such have the use of the “infinite canvas”. The comic does utilize this

somewhat, perhaps to the same degree, or a little less, as the pages of “OOTS” where there is only one “print” page per “internet” page. In the same way, the comic can, and often does, structure its pages to have their own small arc, and hides twists and reveals beneath what the reader would be able to initially see. In the same way as “OOTS” and many other webcomics, “Goblins” designs its pages to function as individual units in a larger narrative, which is again, different to how print comics design their pages, where each double page may have a similar function.

Unlike other webcomics like “OOTS” or “UnDivine”, “Goblins” does not make any

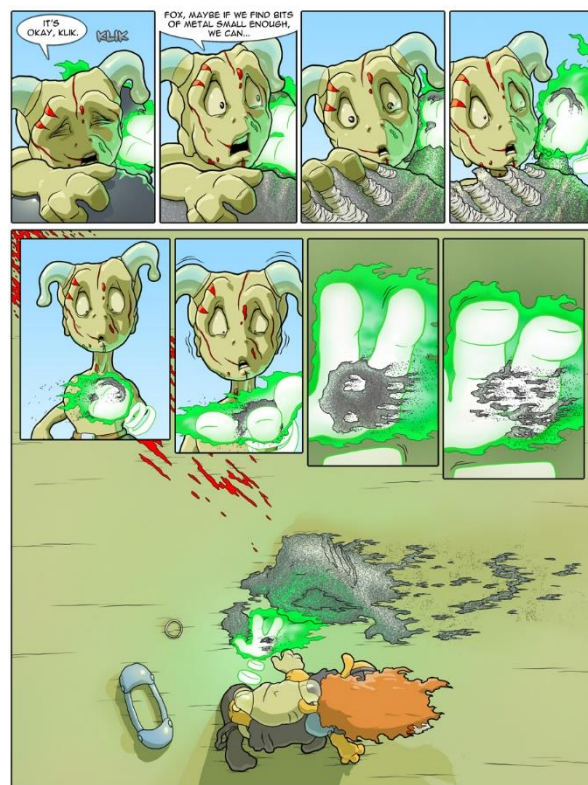


Figure 62 - "Goblins" - End of a chapter

significant distinction between where one chapter ends, and another begins. While comics like “OOTTS” has an end panel (similar to an establishing panel, but at the end of a chapter), an end-of-chapter announcement and an establishing panel at the start of the next chapter, and “UnDivine” has its fade-out pages and establishing panels, “Goblins” makes do with, at most, small ending and establishing panels at the end of and beginning of chapters. The reason for this is, presumably, to create a sense of continuity, of the comic being one long, uninterrupted story. While “OOTTS” deliberately tries to separate its story into easily recognizable sections to create clear emotional and narrative breaks, “Goblins” avoids this, eschewing more established methods of structuring the story, and instead letting the arcs separate themselves where it feels natural. While this makes for an occasionally confusing and meandering storyline, it also feels closer to real life, in a sense. Real life is not neatly divided into separate stories, and like real life, the comic sprawls outward, and the characters have to make the best of things. This is not to say that there is no plot, or that events happen without reason of context, they just bleed into each other so naturally that it can be difficult to pinpoint where one section of a story ends and another begins sometimes. This kind of structure would be much harder to implement in print comics, where, by their very nature, they have to be divided into neat blocks (like issues), while webcomics usually upload one page at a time, in perpetuity, and “Goblins” has done so for 15 years.

Conclusion

The major difference between the composition of webcomics and print comics is what the creator decides the reader should see at any one time. While this is similar to how the design of pages function in print, it is different in the manner that the reader can see more by simply scrolling down the webpage. This tool is introduced in large part due to the freedom offered webcomics regarding the size of the comic page the creator wants to upload. This freedom and how it is used changes the design of the page in sometimes significant ways, as well as creates a difference between what is uploaded to the internet and what may be printed in physical copies later. This can be seen in webcomics like “OOTTS” and “UnDivine”, as described above.

The difference between the size of the uploaded image and the screen the reader views the comic on influences this somewhat, as the effect of hiding plot at the bottom of the page arguably becomes stronger the less of the screen the reader can see, and perhaps more

importantly weaker if the screen is large enough to see what is intended to remain unseen. While the image scales to the screen to a certain extent, the amount of the image which is visible to the reader is not as firmly in the grasp of the creator of webcomics, unlike in print. The creator of print comics have no way of controlling which pages the reader sees first, which is an amount of control afforded to the webcomics creator, but the webcomics creator can only have so much say over how much of any one image the reader can see at any one time. This is usually more control than the creator of print comics has, though, as they always have to work within the constraints of a standardized page. Both sides have freedoms and constraints which are similar and different to their counterparts in the other medium.

There are other issues of composition brought about by the “infinite canvas” than this. For example in the comic “Click and Drag” Munroe has to design his comic around the idea and the image he then creates, to where the reader can and will see the things Munroe wants them to see while also being able to explore the image on their own without necessarily being guided anywhere. The guide in the image is usually the ground, or any other line which leads in a direction the reader has yet to explore, like one of the many holes in the ground, or one of the towers scattered around the image. There are also many things the reader would be unable to find by merely following these lines, like the airplanes in the sky, or the glowing jellyfish under the ground. The most important design aspect of the comic in this case is the distance between events and the “camera” and the size of the “window” the reader is looking through.

These kinds of compositional tricks and challenges are not found in print comics, and are probably unique to webcomics, as they are a unique amalgamation of the medium of print comics and the new and groundbreaking tools of the internet. Eisner is aware of the flexibility offered by the tools of the internet, but he believes that creators of webcomics have stuck to print comic rhythms; “Webcomics (a term for comics displayed on the internet) provide the storyteller with more flexibility in the control of the reader, but so far comics storytellers have largely retained print rhythms when working digitally.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 70). I both agree and disagree with this last part, as described elsewhere. The structure, rhythm and role of the page has changed in webcomics. While Eisner does say “so far” in the book, which was published in 2008, leaving the field open for further change, I believe that change was already happening. The webcomics “OOTS” had already been going for five years at this point and had started to experiment with the design and rhythms of its pages, working its way closer to its current incarnation. How that comic experiments with the rhythm of its pages, I have already explored above. The comic “xkcd”, one of the most

experimental comics I have ever seen, was started in 2005, and while it would not become as innovative for a while yet, it was already pushing boundaries. The existence of these webcomics at the time of Eisner’s writing, and the innovative ways they explore the possibilities of their medium to, among other things, change the rhythm of their work, I would argue prove Eisner wrong in this regard. While I would agree that most webcomics in many ways have stuck with the traditions of print, including a similar rhythm (and I acknowledge that Eisner also specified that he meant “largely”), I believe that the webcomics at the time of his writing were more innovative and experimental than he may have given them credit for.

In addition to the alternatives presented in this chapter, webcomics can also be presented in other ways. If a comic is presented as one long horizontal stripe which the reader then has to scroll through would function more like a tapestry, but not quite. The difference between the comic and a tapestry would be that there is a harder border for how much of it you can see at a time. In this case the screen becomes more like a window as McCloud pointed out (*Reinventing Comics*, p 222), and the reader can only view a fragment of the comic at a time. You could argue that the segment the reader is currently looking at could function as a page, but that the pages also bleed heavily into each other, and that there is rarely (depending on the specific design of the comic) a hard border between events. There would presumably still be some way of distinguishing one event from the next, which would make it a comic instead of one large image. This could for example be panel lines disguised as pieces of the image (like a tree or similar), or just the reappearance of recognizable characters (like what maybe happens at the very right side of “Click and Drag”). In this case the comic might look like one long continuous image apart from the fact that the

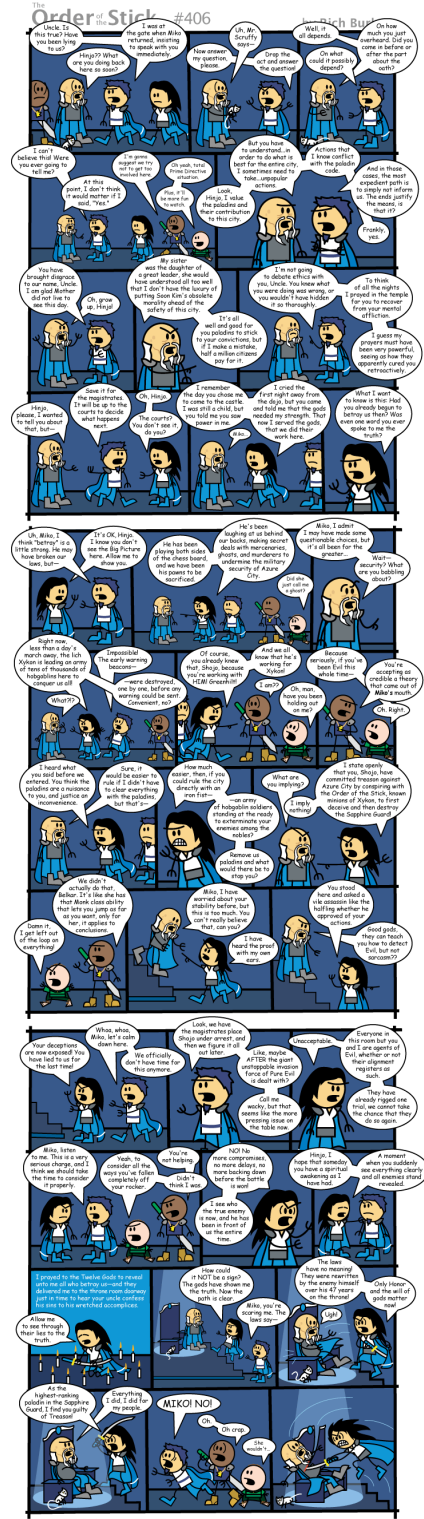


Figure 63 - "OOTs" - Innovative use of "infinite canvas" in 2007 – p 406

same characters appear over and over in different positions. This is merely a more extreme version of something which is already used in print comics occasionally.

Presenting the comic as a horizontal stripe rather than a vertical one, such as in “OOTS” or “SMBC”, may have a different impact on the reading experience. Reading downward can give the impression, as described in the chapter on time and motion, of delving deeper into the story by continuing ever downward or give an almost physical feeling of downward movement as in the case of Roy falling to his death in “OOTS”. The type of experience is dependent on what is on the “page”. Reading horizontally may have a similar effect but in another direction. So, in the case of providing a feeling of moving deeper into a narrative by having the reader scroll downward, the creator could give them the feeling of moving along a path by having the reader scroll sideways. Horizontal movement like this may even provide a greater sense of movement or progression, as we live in a world which is for the most part experienced horizontally, and so the arguments for an enhanced experience through downward movement would also apply to horizontal movement.

Within webcomics there is also a separation between the comics which could conceivably be changed into print, such as “OOTS” and “UnDivine”, and comics which could not, such as many of the comics from “xkcd” or “SMBC”. The reasons why have been explored in greater depth elsewhere, but briefly the difference lies in the experiences of time and motion as well as the general composition of the comics. While (most of) the pages of “OOTS” are specifically designed with print in mind, the comics I have explored from “xkcd” and in some ways “SMBC” are the complete opposite, with interactive elements and animation introducing real time into the comics as opposed to comics time, and using composition and the “infinite canvas” to introduce ambiguity as to how the comic is even supposed to be read, in what direction or what order, as well as producing pages of such wildly varying designs that they would never fit into a printed issue alongside one another. The tools of the internet can make webcomics so different they cannot be printed.

Text-image relationship

The relationship between text and image is often a complicated one. It is the backbone of comics, what everything revolves around. It is what makes the medium. They must almost always work together in order to create something different than either could on their own. In this chapter I will give a brief introduction to the relationship between text and image in comics in general and then explore how webcomics build on and change this.

The combination of the mediums of text and image has generally been looked down on, as McCloud points out; “Traditional thinking has long held that truly great works of art and literature are only possible when the two are kept at arm’s length.” (*Understanding Comics*, p 140). This has not been helped by the comic book industries willingness to accept this as true; “Words and pictures are as popular as ever, but this widespread feeling that the combination is somehow base and simplistic has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.” (p 141). This view has changed somewhat since, and the combination of words and images can be used to create new and interesting works of art. Comics blend the use of words and images in a way that other mediums do not. Because of this, neither the pictures or the words will always work by themselves, or at least not as intended. Depending on the individual comic, the words and images depend on each other for meaning, and are intertwined to such an extent that it would be difficult to extract much meaning from them separately. It would be like watching a movie without the sound.

McCloud and Eisner both spend a lot of time emphasizing the fact that in comics words and images have to work together. The creator(s) cannot simply focus on learning the two skills separately and assume that because they have mastered them individually it will work well in the comics medium. The words and the images have to play well off each other and fit well together. “In comics at its best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading. When both partners try to lead, the competition can subvert the overall goals – though a little playful competition can sometimes produce enjoyable results.” (*Understanding Comics*, p 156). Words and images can carry more weight in different ways, and by doing so can free up the other to do other creative things. “When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area.” (*Understanding Comics*, p 157). “On the other hand, if the words lock in the “meaning” of a sequence, then the pictures can really take off.” (*Understanding Comics*, p 159). Eisner adds that; “Writing is

commonly perceived as confined to the manipulation of words. [...] The dialogue supports the imagery – both are in service to the story. They combine and emerge as a seamless whole. The ideal writing process occurs when the writer and the artist are the same person. This, in effect, shortens the distance between the idea and its translation.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 113). Here, Eisner essentially agrees with McCloud, in that words and images have to work together to form a cohesive whole, and that closer the vision of the writer and the artist are to each other, the better for the comic, which means that one person performing both roles would arguably always be best. This is very common in webcomics, unlike in much of print.

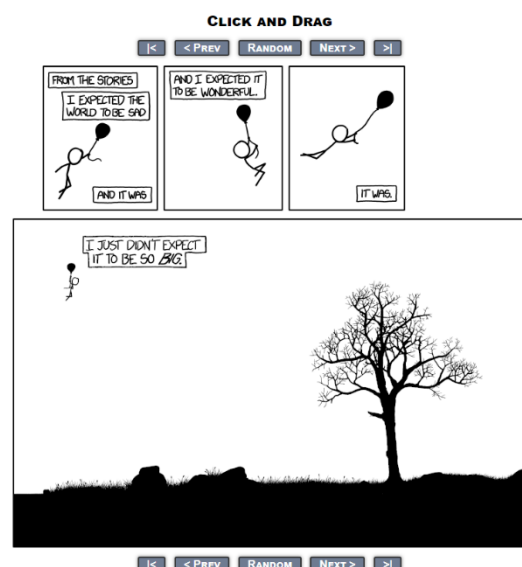
XKCD

Click and Drag

The comic “Click and Drag”, which I have explored in the other chapters as well, is an interesting example of the new relationship between text and image. As the comic is an excellent example of the “infinite canvas”, it is a useful in examining the changes to the relationship.

Comics are, according to Eisner, essentially the combination of writing and images in sequence, i.e. “sequential art”. ““Writing” for comics can be defined as the conception of an idea, the arrangement of image elements and the construction of the sequence of the narration and the composing of dialogue. It is at once a part and the whole of the medium.” (*Comics and Sequential Art* p 127). Since, according to

Eisner, the text and image of a comic are intrinsically linked, the relationship between them is a complicated one. They influence each other. I have mentioned briefly elsewhere that the size of the portions of text are greatly constrained by the medium. Too much text can ruin a comics page. A comic can, however, function without any text at all, which seems to lend credence to Eisner’s claim that the image is the more important of the



two. “In sequential art the two functions are irrevocably interwoven. Sequential art is the act of weaving a fabric. [...] When the two are mixed, the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages.” (*Comics and Sequential Art* p 127). The relationship between text and image in print comics seem similar to their relationship in webcomics, or at least the function the text serves alongside the image. In a way, though, the functions of the text have been expanded in many of the same ways that the functions of the image have been. The images have become larger and more layered and so has the text, in the sense that it has followed the images off the screen and into the “infinite canvas”. For example, the text in “Click and Drag” is affixed to the image and must be explored by the reader in the same way as that image. As Eisner said, they are still welded together. The text has also become more technically layered, for example through the use of alt-text or animation.

Since the reader is only able to view the comic one small section of the “Click and Drag” comic at a time, they are unable to see all the text as well. In this case the relationship between the text and the image remains fairly intact in a sense but is instead one layer removed from the reader. The comic makes use of McCloud’s idea that the computer monitor is less a frame than a window, which I have explored earlier. In a sense the comic functions as a very large piece of paper which the reader can only view through a small hole, which they can then move around as they please. As explored in the other chapters, this means that the comic can be read in any direction and in any order without sacrificing any of what makes it special. This means that everything which happens in the comic is independent of everything else, including the text. Since none of the text is essential for understanding the comic, as well as any particular scene, it loses its some of its function as a conveyor of essential meaning. Even though there are comics which can function without words, most comics would become meaningless without them. In comics where the art is meaningless without the text, and the text is explained in part by the art, the two halves are considered interdependent. In the creation of comics, the text often comes first, and directs the art. In this way the text would have primacy and not the art. So, in the planning stage the text is the most important, and on the page the art is the most important. Since the writing is so important to the planning of the comic, Eisner argues that the best way to make comics is to have the writer and the artist be the same person; “...one must then immediately acknowledge that in a perfect (or pure) configuration the writer and the artist should be embodied in the same person. The writing (or the writer) must be in control to the very end. I wrote about the importance of planning out the

story in the chapter on composition. The artist can also be considered to be “writing” when they compose the structure of the images, such as leaving a panel with no words to create a pause in the conversation or action. Eisner writes; “In practice, the creator, given or having conceived the idea, sets about to develop it with words and imagery into a unified whole. It is here that the graphic elements ascend to dominance. For the end product is, after all, to be read as a total visual. It is this “mix” that is, in the final analysis, the ultimate test of the success and quality of the sequential art effort.” (*Comics and Sequential Art* p 132). Eisner here reiterates that comics (or sequential art) is, at the base level, a cooperative effort, as “mix” of text and images. The text remains a part of the image in this comic, unlike in some others which I will explore, and its role remains in line with the role of the image. They both convey essential meaning, and together they make up the comic, but since this comic functions differently from print comics, in the sense that the reader does not have to see more than a fraction of the whole comic in order to get the intended experience, the image and the text become less essential in their specific instances while remaining generally essential for the comic. What I mean by that is that no particular section of the comic is absolutely required for the rest of the comic to function, but the combination of text and image is still what makes up the whole comic and is essential for the comic to function. This is different from how things work in print comics, where, as I mentioned in the chapter on composition, space is at a premium, and the creators of the comics cannot waste space on unimportant things. This move away from the importance of specific parts of text or image and toward a generalization of importance is much easier to accomplish in webcomics, especially through the use of the “infinite canvas”. This generalization could be accomplished in other ways, such as through a network of links or hidden panels, like the votey’s in “SMBC”, which, as explored elsewhere, are not an essential part of the reading experience. There are other examples of comics from “xkcd” which explores this phenomenon, such as the comic “Hoverboard”.

Hoverboard

The comic “Hoverboard” is in many ways similar to “Click and Drag”. They are both explorations of the “infinite canvas”, they both show the reader a section of a much larger image which the reader is then free to move around, and the contents of the image are in many ways independent of each other. “Hoverboard” differs from “Click and Drag”, though, in that

this comic is a collecting game. The reader is given the “task” (entirely optional) of traversing the image looking for golden coins, which can then be returned to the starting location in exchange for points. This gives the comic an added layer of interactivity which “Click and Drag” not have. What this means regarding the relationship between the image and the text of the comic is debatable. At the base level the comic functions very similarly to “Click and Drag”, but with the two added factors of an extra portion of text giving instructions and congratulations to the reader/player regarding their performance in playing the “game”, and an added incentive to explore the whole image in order to look for gold coins.

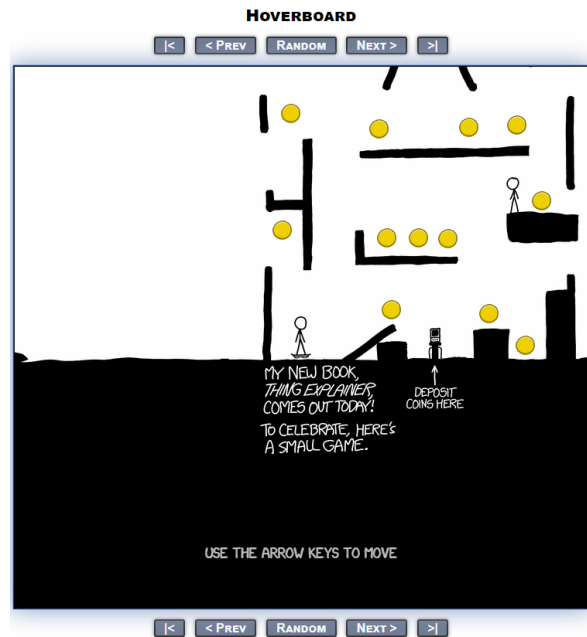


Figure 64 - "Hoverboard" - Start screen

The comic is somewhat more interconnected than “Click and Drag” since in several “scenes” in the comic the characters are acknowledging or reacting to something which occurs “off screen”, giving the reader/player hints as to where they can move in order to find additional content. In this case the interactivity has affected the design of the comic, as the scenes are less independent of each other. Since this independence was what led to a more general importance of words and images, instead of the very specific importance in print comics, this brings the comic at least somewhat closer to print comics, since there are sections of the comic which does not function as intended without the other parts of the image. For example, there is a man climbing the “Washington Monument” who reacts to the spaceships above him. The reader cannot see this spaceship unless they make the effort to reach it. This connects the scene of the two people climbing the monument to the spaceships, while also providing the reader/player with direction on where they can go next. This interconnectedness would also remove some of the ambiguity of time and motion which featured heavily in the chapter on time and motion in the section discussing “Click and Drag”.

Above, I mentioned that Eisner wrote that the artist and the writer should preferably be the same person. I would add that

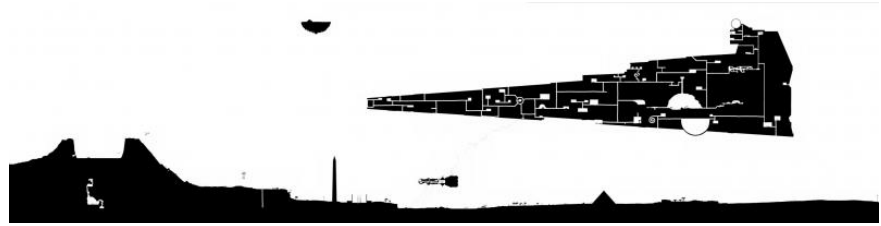


Figure 65 - "Hoverboard" - Full Image

this would be best as long as the creator actually can write and draw well enough. Especially write, because I find it much easier to forgive sub-par art than bad writing. This seems to fit in with the general mood of internet comics, where the readership is much more willing to forgive bad art as long as they like the writing. You can see this in the success of "xkcd" and "Smbc". While the art in neither comic is really that bad (especially in "xkcd" at times), that is not what the readership shows up for. In those comics the writing is the important thing. This is emphasized by the existence of the alt-text and the votey. In the case of the alt-text the focus is entirely on the words, but as they relate to the comic, and in the case of the votey the words take center stage and the art is usually extremely simplistic, if present at all. Many of the votey's are only words, making them essentially a secondary alt-text.

Pixels

In this comic the reader is given the instruction to scroll the mouse wheel in order to zoom in on the image. As the reader does this, every pixel is transformed into its own image. The original image is not really made up of a lot of different smaller images, but the smaller images are morphed in as the reader scrolls closer. This is a clear example of one of the possibilities McCloud explored in *Reinventing Comics*, where the reader "falls" deeper into the comic as they scroll further and further into it, which I have explored elsewhere, mostly in the chapter on time and motion.

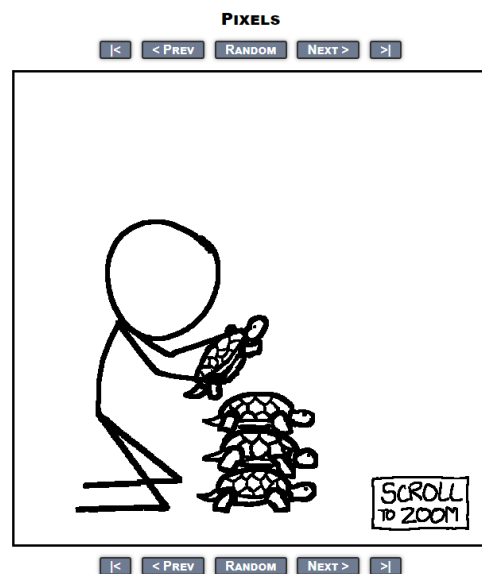


Figure 66 - "Pixels" - Start screen

The relationship between text and image in this comic is an interesting one. Every pixel in the image is a part of the image one layer up, as well as its own separate panel, with its own image and text. This means that every panel in the comic is both text and image simultaneously, and since the reader can presumably keep scrolling forever (or close to it), this blended relationship will also keep going forever. Eisner writes about the text and the image being two halves of the whole, and together they make up the comic. The text is a part of the image, in most ways literally. In the case of this comic, this relationship is even more literal, since every pixel of every panel is its own panel.

While some webcomics have text and image layered upward, like the alt-text and the votey's from "SMBC", this comic layers them downward. The reader must dive deeper into the image in order to find new panels. While all the panels which are revealed seem to be independent of each other, and a lot of them are repetitions, new panels with new images and text are revealed all the time. There is no easy way to know how far down the reader can scroll before no new panels are revealed, and so the comic could conceivably go on forever. In fact, it is possible that there is no bottom layer, which is hinted at by the alt-text, which says; "It's turtles all the way down". This is a reference to an old idiom of "turtles all the way down" which refers to infinite recursion. Therefore, there may not really be an end to the comic. It may be an infinite construction made from a finite number of parts. It should, therefore, be possible to see all the different panels as long as the reader was willing to scroll for long enough, without ever reaching the "end" of the comic.

There may be some connection between panels, even though they generally appear independently. Some of them seem to fit together into small narratives, which the reader is mostly left to piece together themselves. In this way the comic becomes partly a puzzle-game,



Figure 67 - "Pixels" - Zoomed in on the top turtle

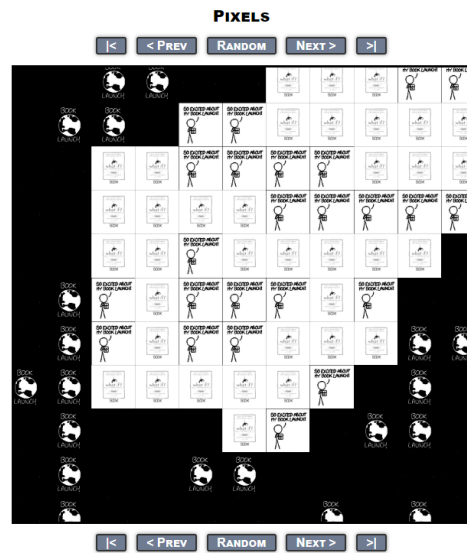


Figure 68 - "Pixels" - Zoomed further in on the turtle

where the reader is left with the task of piecing together the panels of the different narratives after finding them.

Unsounded

This comic experiments with the relationship between text and image in several different ways. Firstly, by introducing animation into the comic, having sections containing additional images and text be revealed by moving segments, or having additional segments inserted into the comic

“on top of” the original page. Secondly, by inserting text into parts of the webpage where there would normally not be any, and thirdly, by adding and changing links to additional material, usually other webpages. All of these aspects of the comic were partially explored in the chapter on time and motion.

In comics, the creator of the comic has to convey meaning to the reader using two tools; text and image. A lot of direct meaning-making through image comes from the “acting” of the characters, their postures and facial expressions, which then combines with what they are saying to convey meaning. Eisner writes about the importance of understanding how different gestures convey

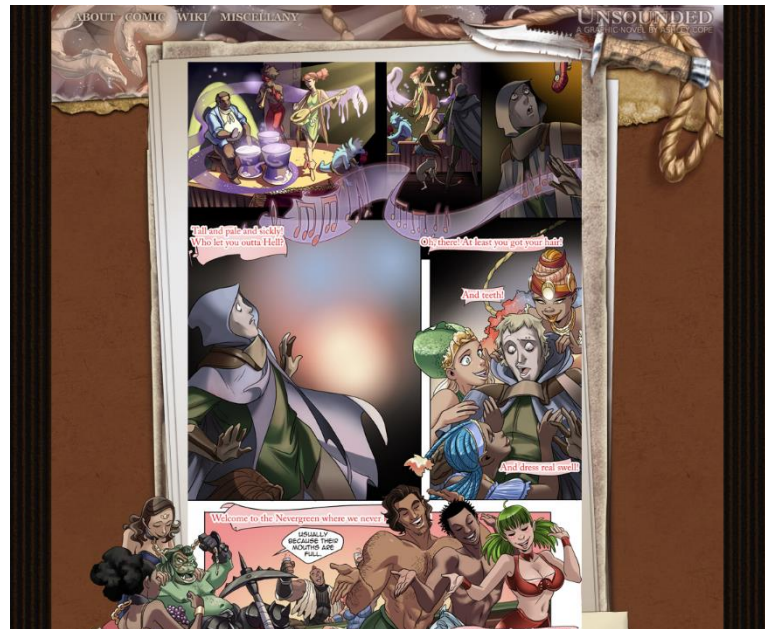


Figure 69 - "Unsounded" - chapter 9, p 9

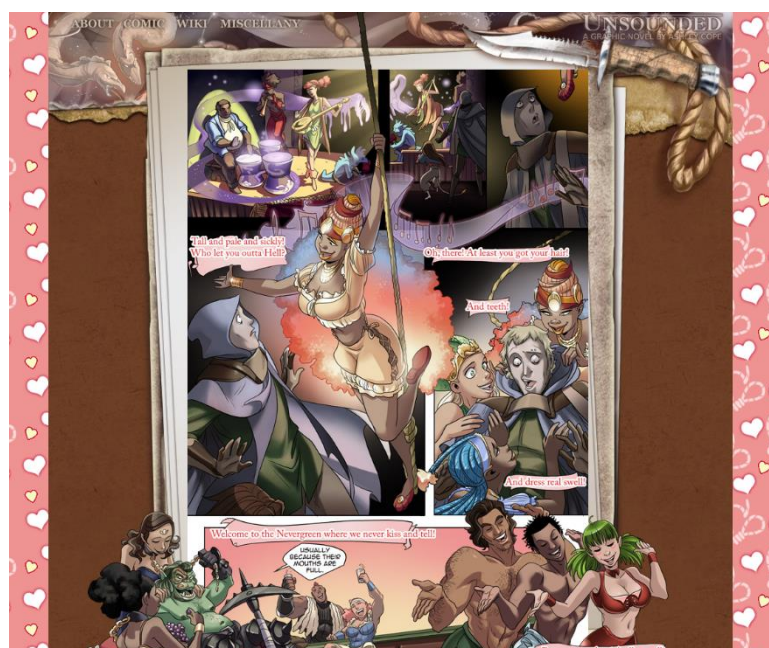


Figure 70 - Transitions into this

different meanings. “In comic book art, the artist must draw upon personal observations and an inventory of gestures, common and comprehensible to the reader. In effect, the artist must work from a “dictionary” of human gestures.” (*Comics and Sequential Art* p 104). Eisner also argues that; “In comics, body posture and gesture occupy a position of primacy over text. The manner in which these images are employed modifies and defines the intended meaning of the words. They can, by their relevance to the reader’s own experience, invoke a nuance of emotion and give auditory inflection to the voice of the speaker.” (*Comics and Sequential Art* p 106). What this essentially means, is that the face and body of the speaker in a comic will change the meaning of the words which are spoken, i.e. the writing. If, for example, someone smiles smugly while apologizing, the reader will know that the character is not being genuine. Body language informs the text. And, like Eisner writes, how someone says something is, in many ways, more important than what they are saying. The face is, of course, the most important part of the body in this regard, as that is where humans read most emotions. Eisner writes; “The surface of the face is, as someone once put it, “a window to the mind”. It is familiar terrain to most humans. Its role in communication is to register emotion.” (*Comics and Sequential Art* p 114). The rest of the body is



Figure 72 - "Unsounded" - chapter 12, p 54



Figure 71 - Transitions into this

also important, of course, and the cooperation of the face and body can enhance a story a great deal, informing the text. Eisner argues, however, that the more complex the writing, the greater the difficulty for the artist in this regard; “The employment of body posture and facial expression (both having equal attention) is a major undertaking and an area of frequent failure. Properly and skillfully done, it can carry the narrative without resorting to unnecessary props or scenery. The use of expressive anatomy in the absence of words is less demanding because the latitude for the art is wider. Where the words have a depth of meaning and nuance, the task is more difficult.” (*Comics and Sequential Art* p 114). Essentially, the fewer words there are, the greater the freedom offered to the artist. This is still the case in webcomics, and “Unsounded” uses the tools of its medium to enhance the impact.



Figure 73 - "Unsounded" - chapter 12, p 57

The introduction of animation into the comic has the effect of turning what used to be one image with one layer into an amalgamation of different images, or at least one main image with several sub-images, with more at least two layers, depending on the amount of movement in each page. The main layer is the main section of the page, or the meta-panel and the sub-layers are the sections of the page which are inserted, removed, moved elsewhere or changed. Moving the text into a separate layer from the image creates distance between them, both in



Figure 74 - Transitions into this

technical terms as well as in the minds of the reader. While the page is a static image there is a certain sense of it being a whole, finished work. This is lost to a certain extent when the page has elements which appear and disappear, or in the minds of the readers move into and off of the page. It is no longer a permanent, unchanging, immutable work, but a cooperative effort between layers to produce a different result. When only the text is moved in and out of the page, this separation becomes even more clear, as the text is no longer an intrinsic part of the image, at least in the minds of the reader. When it can be removed, it is no longer essential, and text and image tend to occupy different sections in the reader's mind. Animating the text appearing and disappearing makes this separation much clearer in the minds of the reader, as well as creating a separation in technical terms that was not there before.

The comic inserts text into parts of the webpage where there would normally be none, especially in print. This includes alt-text (which many webcomics have, but not all), but also other kinds of text, such as text in the background of the webpage, outside of the main comics page. The comic has also experimented with inserting text into the webpage tab at the top of the browser, which is very unusual. Like with the alt-text found in comics like “xkcd” or “SMBC”, it is non-essential. The comic would function perfectly fine without it, but it does add extra depth. I explored the emotional effect of adding alt-text into the comic in ways which are abnormal in the chapter on time and motion. Like with other kinds of alt-text, this is separated from the main comic, isolated into a layer of its own. It serves a different purpose in this comic than in comics like “xkcd” or “SMBC” in that it is not intended to provide an additional joke or different perspective on the comic, but to directly enhance the main narrative. It is intended to serve as a tool for building tension, similarly to how the backgrounds can be used (or borders around the page in print comics) to induce or enhance a certain emotion or general mood. The comic will also insert text into this background, which serves in many ways the same purpose as the alt-text and the text in the web-page tab.

The comic also makes clever use of links to enhance its main narrative. The pages linked to are not essential parts of that narrative, and many readers may never even notice it is there, but changing the destination of the clickable links around the main comics page according to the events of the narrative has a similar effect as the alt-text and the backgrounds, in that it serves to build a mood. Unlike with alt-text, though, it can do so in many other ways than with just text. It can also use images, or a combination of the two, which it does to great effect. This text and the images are related to the comic and each other in arguably more tangential ways than the text and images of the main comic, as the reader

actively has to look for and find them, and they are, again, not essential parts of the narrative. The introduction of additional webpages with direct connections to the text and images of the main comic create one more layer, even further removed from the main page, separating the “essence” of the comic even further. Whether this serves as fracturing the comic into an unnecessarily complex web of connections, many of which are not essential but serve to build and enhance the message of the comic, bloating the comic and reducing the amount of discipline needed to create great art or giving the creator some much needed freedom to experiment with the relationships between the different aspects of their works it up for debate. Either way, the relationship between text and image has become much more layered and complex in webcomics as opposed to print, where text and image were in most important ways one and the same.

Digital comics could, in a way, disconnect text from the images. Or at least distance them somewhat. In print comics the text is usually literally part of the image, inextricably connected to it. In digital comics, it may not always be so simple. There is often text on the screen, which is similar, or even exactly like, the text in print, a part of the image. But there are many other kinds of text which connect to the rest of the comic in different ways, while not being part of the image. This disconnection from the image gives the text a certain degree of freedom, and lets the reader explore the text in ways which is not possible in print. McCloud explores this idea, mostly regarding comics as a whole, but I believe that the text of webcomics are a subsection of that and so his arguments about webcomics as a whole still hold true for the text specifically. McCloud writes; “Just as documents filled with ideas and images are linked throughout the Web, inviting us to explore them in any order – so too can individual panels be linked in an interactive matrix of narrative choices. Any comic on the Web is in hypertext’s backyard, it makes sense to adjust comics to fit its new environment. Hypertext is, after all, a powerful and progressive force in information design – an idea that strives to match the agility of human thought – in ways the technology of print never could.” (*Reinventing Comics*, p 214-215). The point I am making here is that there can be a matrix of different text surrounding the webcomic. This text can be an essential part of the reading experience or just additional tidbits for the ones who know where to look (the latter one is the most common). It can be a part of the story, helping to build or establish something, like in *Unsounded*, or completely separate from it. This text can function like a bubble diagram, with text sprouting off of the main comic in many different directions at the same time. This is enhanced by the inclusion of links, which while something different from text, the links can

lead to additional content. In some ways it is no more distanced from the comic than alt-text or the votey from SMBC, since an action is still needed to access it. Links are mostly different because they take the reader away from the main comic and can lead to much more than just more text.

In some ways the location of the text could have an impact on the feeling of movement though the comic. In this way the text would become almost part of the image again, whether it was hidden from the reader until discovered or not, since it would then directly relate to it, or at least to something distinctly visual, instead of something mostly abstract, which is the nature of writing.

Girls with Slingshots

“Girls with Slingshots” is a slice-of-life comic portraying the main character Hazel and her group of



Figure 75 - "Girls with Slingshots" - p 1315

friends. It is one of a few webcomics which is published in a very traditional strip format while also utilizing alt-text. Similar to comics like “xkcd” or “SMBC” it is mainly used to make additional jokes or observations on the current strip. Other than this the text centered around the strip itself behaves exactly like print, with the text and the images combined into the same layer, as described above. The comic does one new thing though, which some other webcomics do, which is introduce a section below the comic for the creator to post additional content. This section functions in many ways like the alt-text, where the creator will insert some additional joke or observation, but it is also used for general information, some comment about the process of creating that particular page, the process of making the comic, and interaction with the readership. While this type of text may often seem too far removed from the comic to be relevant to the topic, it very often is not. This section serves in many

ways as a combination of alt-text, a votey (from “SMBC”) and an announcement board. As such it is about as connected to the main comic as either of these other tools.

“There is a major structural difference between newspaper storytelling strips and comic books. In comic books, stories come to a definitive conclusion, a tradition that began when the early comic books advertised that each story was complete. A book is free-standing, whereas newspapers are connected to the pattern of daily life.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 132). This is in some ways like how webcomics work and is especially true for comics like “Girls with Slingshots”, which is designed much like a newspaper strip, but with a stronger narrative. They can keep going at a steady pace for years and years before ending, and the “distance” between pages is no greater than what the reader can still follow. The length of time between the newspaper strips and the publication of a new webcomics page can be drastically different, though.



Figure 76 - Section under p 1315 (re-uploaded version)

Daughter of the Lilies

This is another medieval fantasy webcomic (but not based on Dungeons and Dragons, at least not openly), portraying the lives and adventures of a small band of mercenaries. It is one of a few webcomics of this kind, where each page is constructed like a fairly normal comics page (like “Goblins” or “UnDivine”), which also makes regular use



Figure 77 - "Daughter of the Lilies" – chapter 2, p 6

of alt-text and the section below the comic for additional content. Few other webcomics of this kind do this. “Unsounded” does sometimes utilize alt-text, as I have explored elsewhere, but only for narrative purposes. The comic “Daughter of the Lilies” uses its alt-text similarly to how “SMBC” or “Girls with Slingshots” uses theirs, for making jokes about or observations on the current page. The comic also uses its extra section to make similar comments, as well as posting small extra comics, making announcements regarding the comic or anything else the creator wants to write about. It uses these tools exactly like “Girls with Slingshots” does, while being a completely different comic, proving that these are general tools, not constrained to any particular genre of comic, and both of these comics prove that these tools still function when applied to narrative-driven comics as well as comedic individual comics like “SMBC”.

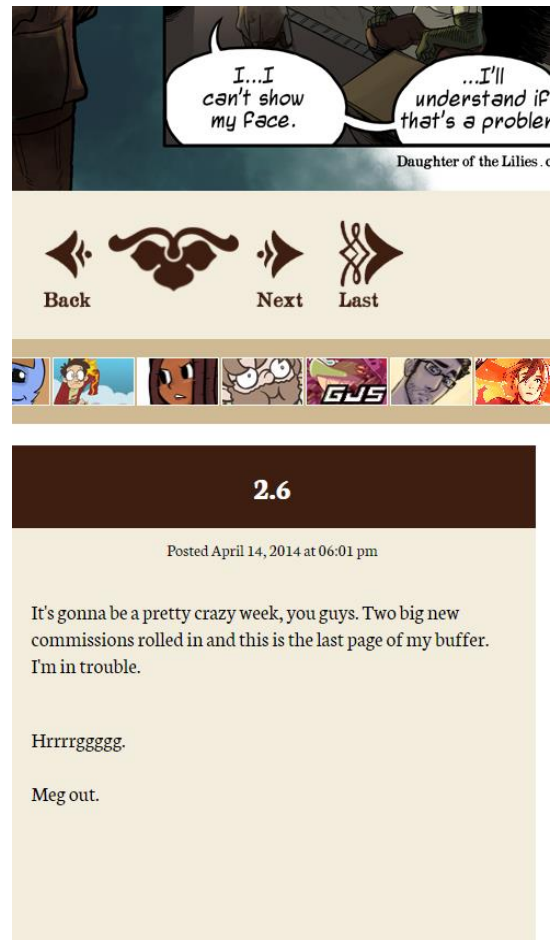


Figure 78 - Section under chapter 2, p 6

The writing in comics is often “simpler” than in prose; “For example, writing for film of comics is economical, eschews literary style, and does not need descriptive passages that evoke images by analogous prose.” (*Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, p 114). I think that the writing is “simpler” in another way as well. In comics it is important to limit the amount of words, much more so than in prose, in large part because of the restraint of limited space, both on the page and in the comic (in print at least). If a character says too much it becomes boring much easier in comics than in prose. In a book, if a character wants to go on a long monologue, they can, if it is written well. But in a comic, this is harder to achieve. The creator cannot overload a single page with too much writing (though there can be a lot, as shown in “OOTTS”) because it will make the page boring and imbalanced, and they cannot just create as many panels as they want because of the constraints of space. In print this constraint is in the number of pages and the size of those pages, while in webcomics the constraint is mainly in the size of the page and the patience of the reader. The creator of a webcomic can create a huge page to fit the whole monologue into (as is sometimes done in “OOTTS”), but

this is hard to do in a webcomic which has locked itself into a format. The webcomics creator cannot dedicate many pages to a monologue either, because it becomes difficult to maintain a sense of cohesion from page to page since the wait can be so long, and to maintain interest in the reader. It is difficult to stay interested in a conversation which starts and stops every few days, and it becomes easy to forget what has been said previously, unless the reader goes back to read the previous parts of the comic just to refresh, which can become tiresome after a while. This simplicity of language and conversation is easy to see in “Daughter of the Lilies”. Unlike in webcomics like “OOTS” which sometimes has conversations lasting for many pages, each page dense with text, this comic never has conversations that long or intricate. In this way it follows print more closely than comics like “OOTS”.

Conclusion

The major difference in the relationship between text and image in webcomics in contrast to in print is the introduction of several new potential layers. These layers can be occupied by text, image or both. In comics like xkcd’s “pixels” we can see that text and image are the same thing, but not in the same manner as they are in print. Instead they are both melded together, each made up of the other and stacked on top on each other in a bottomless well of text-image hybridization. In many other webcomics we can see the introduction of tools like the alt-text and others like it, many of them serving similar functions while occupying slightly different spheres in the webpage. And finally, we can see, in comics like “Unsounded”, that text and image can be pulled further apart, not entirely removed from one another, but reaching a greater separation than they ever could in print. This is achieved through animation, inserting and removing parts of the image as the reader is viewing the page. The result is that what in print is a much more clear and solid relationship (while still being complex) becomes, in webcomics, a cloud of scattered content attached to the core of the comic, the main page. The relationship has become much more amorphous and difficult to define, with almost anything related to the comic being connected to it in some way or another, and with the comic itself melting into an at times almost unrecognizable mass of text and image.

Final thoughts

As this thesis has attempted to show, webcomics have innovated several tools. These tools have then been used to create something entirely new, separate from print comics. In the chapter on time and motion I showed how webcomics can introduce ambiguity in temporality as well as which direction the reader is supposed to go in comics like “Click and Drag”, how they can transform into something similar but not identical to animation in comics like “Time” or video games in comics like “Garden”. Some tools have been embraced more widely than others, such as the “infinite canvas”, which in comics like “The Order of the Stick” can serve to give the reader an impression of physical movement, or narrative movement in the case of comics like “Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal”. Other comics, like “Unsounded” will embrace a different facet of the new technical possibilities afforded the creator of webcomics by having movement take place outside of the main comics page, thereby making the entire website and everything on it, as well as all the links leading elsewhere, part of the narrative.

In the chapter on composition I have shown how tools such as the “infinite canvas” have an impact on other things in addition to the experience of time and motion by showing how webcomics can embrace the idea of a page without practical two-dimensional limits. Most webcomics go half-way, such as “The Order of the Stick” and how it divides its pages into two different kinds while following the same underlying structure regardless of the length of the posted content. Comics like “UnDivine” will keep its basic print-like pages but transforming it into something closer to one-and-a-half page simply by obscuring the bottom half from the readers view. Comics like “Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal” will experiment with composition by hiding optional panels for the reader to find on their own, or designing pages with jokes where the reader has to zoom out, which is a joke that can only make sense in the medium of the computer and the internet. “Click and Drag” from “xkcd” will stretch the possibilities of composition by having a page too large for everything to relate to everything else, making everything splinter into many different disconnected scenes. Other webcomics will make use of the fact that on the internet there is no need to separate sections of a story into chapters, and so comics like “Goblins” will make its entire story something closer to an unbroken narrative with little in the way of clear delineation between where sections start and stop.

In the chapter on text-image relationship I explored how webcomics shatter the traditional print idea of how this relationship is supposed to work, with text becoming images becoming text again into infinity in comics like “Pixels” by “xkcd”. In other comics text becomes disconnected from the main comics page through the use of alt-text, images become detached from the main page through the use of the “votey” in “Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal”. In comics like “Unsounded” text, image and main page shatter into many different layers, with animation moving text into and out of the main page, alt-text is found everywhere on the website, and plot-relevant information is hidden away behind links to other websites which change without even necessarily attracting the attention of the reader. Other comics still, like “Girls With Slingshots” and “Daughter of the Lilies” will break down the barriers even further by introducing direct communication between the creator and the readership through comment-sections and creator-commentary which can blur the line between alt-text and aside directed at the reader.

Webcomics are an entirely different creature than print comics. This can be seen in the many possibilities for webcomics to change the fundamental building blocks which print comics rest on into something different for themselves to use. The combination of tools provided by computers and those provided by and invented for the internet, sometimes specifically for webcomics, has the power to lead webcomics in entirely their own direction, separate from their print counterparts. While not many webcomics have embraced the more experimental nature of the medium (the most experimental ones in this paper being “xkcd” and “Unsounded”), the options are there, and a not insignificant number of comics are starting to take advantage of them. As I have shown in this thesis, webcomics operate in a fundamentally different manner than print comics. In fact, they do so regardless of how close they try to stick to their print counterparts, though some webcomics deviate further than others. By their very nature webcomics are electronic while print comics are not. Just this difference and all the implications arising from it, many of which I have explored in this thesis, serve to irreversibly separate the webcomic from the print comic.

Bibliography

Abrams, Pete. *Sluggy Freelance*. sluggy.com. (1997-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[sluggy.com/]

Batinic, Josip. "Enhanced Webcomics: An Exploration of the Hybrid Form of Comics on the Digital Medium." *Image & Narrative* Vol 17, nr. 5 (2016) pp. 81-90.

Bjordahl, Hans. *Where the Buffalo Roam*. Shadowculture.com. (1987-1995), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020. [www.shadowculture.com/wtbr/]

Burlew, Rich. *The Order of the Stick*. giantitp.com. Giant in the Playground. (2003-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020. [www.giantitp.com/]

Campbell, T. *The History of Webcomics*. Antarctic Press. 2006. Print

Cope, Ashley. "About." *Unsounded*. Casualvillain.com. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[www.casualvillain.com/Unsounded/about.html]

---. *Unsounded*. casualvillain.com. (2010-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[www.casualvillain.com/]

Corsetto, Danielle. "About." *Girls With Slingshots*. Girlswithslingshots.com. Web. 11. May. 2020. [www.girlswithslingshots.com/about]

---. *Girls With Slingshots*. Girlswithslingshots.com. (2004-2015), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[www.girlswithslingshots.com/]

Croshaw, Ben. "Zero Punctuation: Webcomics." *The Escapist*. Youtube.com. 21. Jul. 2011.

Web, film. 11 May 2020. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5t4xS2PqFFA]

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practises From the Legendary Cartoonist*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York. London. 2008. Print

---. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York. London. 2008. Print

Ellis, Warren. "The Shape of the New Webcomics." warrenellis.com. 30. May 2012. Web. 11. May 2020. [www.warrenellis.com/the-shape-of-the-new-webcomics/]

Farley, David. *Doctor Fun*. Web.archive.org. (1993-2006), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020. [web.archive.org/web/20171102183222/http://www.ibiblio.org:80/Dave/drfun.html]

Foglio, Phil & Kaja Foglio. *Girl Genius*. girlgeniusonline.com. (2001-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020. [www.girlgeniusonline.com/]

Garrity, Shaenon. "The History of Webcomics." *The Comics Journal* (2011): n.pag. Web. 11. May 2020. [www.tcj.com/the-history-of-webcomics/]

Gurewitch, Nicholas. *The Perry Bible Fellowship*. pbfcomics.com. (2001-), -, n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020. [pbfcomics.com/]

Halsband, Megan, Stephanie Grimm. "Panel Problems: Issues and Opportunities for Webcomics Archives." *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 37 no.2 (Fall 2018): 119-140.

Holkins, Jerry & Mike Kraulik. *Penny Arcade*. penny-arcade.com (1998-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020. [www.penny-arcade.com/]

Hunt, Tarol. "What-is-goblins." *Goblins*. Goblinscomic.com. Web. 11. May. 2020. [www.goblinscomic.com/what-is-goblins]

---. *Goblins*. goblinscomic.com. (2005-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[www.goblinscomic.com/]

Kogel, Dennis. *Rethinking Webcomics: Webcomics as a Screen Based Medium*. MA Thesis.

U of Jyväskylä, 2013. JYX Digital Repository. Web. 11. May 2020.

Kukkonen, Karin. *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*. WileyBlackwell. West Sussex. 2013.

Print

Kurtz, Scott. *PvP*. pvponline.com. (1998-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020. [pvponline.com/]

McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics: The Evolution of an Art Form*. HarperCollins. New

York, 2000. Print

---. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. HarperCollins. New York, 1993. Print

Martin, Côme. “With, Against or Beyond Print? Digital Comics in Search of a Specific Status.” *The Comics Grid: Journal of comics scholarship* (sep. 2017) n.pag. Web. 13. May 2020

Misemer, Leah. “A Historical Approach to Webcomics: Digital Authorship in the Early 2000s.” *The Comics Grid: Journal of comics scholarship* (jun. 2019) n.pag. Web. 13. May 2020

Moore, Alan & Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. New York. DC Comics. 2014.

Munroe, Randall. “About.” *XKCD*. xkcd.com. Web. 11. May. 2020. [xkcd.com/about/]

---. *XKCD*. xkcd.com. (2005-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020. [xkcd.com/]

Parker, Charlie. *Argon Zark!* zark.com. (1995-2008), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[www.zark.com/]

Shaw, Justine. *Nowhere Girl*. nowheregirl.com. (2001-2010), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[www.nowheregirl.com/]

Sotuyo, Ayme. "About." *[Un]Divine*. Undivine.com. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[www.undivinecomic.com/about]

---. *UnDivine*. Undivinecomic.com. (2016-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[www.undivinecomic.com/]

Syverud, Meg. "About." *Daughter of the Lilies*. Daughterofthelilies.com. Web. 11. May.

2020. [www.daughterofthelilies.com/about]

---. *Daughter of the Lilies*. daughterofthelilies.com. (2013-), n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020.

[www.daughterofthelilies.com/]

Walters, Maria. "What's up with Webcomics? Visual and Technological Advances in Comics." *Interface: The Journal of Education, Community and Values* Vol. 9 (2009): n.pag. Web. 11. May. 2020

Wienersmith, Zach. *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal*. smbc-comics.com. (2002-), n.pag.

Web. 11. May. 2020. [www.smbc-comics.com/]

"alt attribute". *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. 11. May 2020

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alt_attribute]

Wilson, Kris., et al. *Cyanide and Happiness*. explosm.net. (2005-), -, n.pag. Web. 11. May.

2020. [explosm.net/]

Withrow, Steven & John Barber. *Webcomics: Tools and Techniques for digital cartooning*.

The Ilex Press Limited. East Sussex. 2005. Print.