

Choose the Format of Your Destructor

Design Choices for Comic Creators in Print & Digital Media

Daniel Merlin Goodbrey

Today, the form of comics is consumed and distributed in multiple formats across both print and digital media. For a comic creator, this variety of formats and media necessitates several important design decisions when creating a new comic. Choosing to focus on only a single format can allow a creator to exploit fully the specific qualities of that format, but it can also limit the potential readership of the resultant comic. Choosing to create a comic that operates well across multiple formats can lead to a wider potential readership, but it also places increased limits on the layout and design of that comic.

This chapter seeks to unpack the design decisions facing comic creators in the digital age and examines the repercussions inherent in each choice. It will consider the important choices when creating a print comic that will allow it to adapt well to being read in digital formats. It will examine different approaches to creating digital comics and how these may favour or disadvantage their adaption to print media. As part of this examination, this chapter will also explore the range of additional choices offered by digital media for the incorporation of animation, audible sound, multicursality, and gameplay.

To examine a range of different comic formats, it is useful first to give some consideration to the commonalities these formats share. The common set of characteristics by which comics operate when read can be described as the form of comics. While there has been

some debate as to the exact nature and relative importance of each of these characteristics (McCloud 1993; Groensteen 2007; Hatfield 2009; Miodrag 2013), the following list provides a useful starting point for this chapter:

1. Space as time. Comics use arrangements of images in space to represent arrangements of moments or events in time.
2. Simultaneous juxtaposition of images. Comics place images in spatial juxtaposition to each other, such that two or more images may be viewed simultaneously by the reader.
3. Closure between images. The reader of a comic derives time, meaning, and motion out of sequences of static, juxtaposed images through the process of closure.
4. Spatial networks. Sequences of images form part of a larger spatial network of narrative and aesthetic interrelations that exists between all the elements in a comic.
5. Reader control of pacing. The pace at which the reader absorbs the information in a comic is controlled by the reader and determined by the pace at which they read and navigate the comic.
6. Tablodic images. The images in comics exhibit qualities of the tableau, in that they are deliberately composed, framed, and illustrated to represent key moments of narrative meaning.
7. Word and image blending. Although sometimes wordless, comics typically use a blend of words and images in spatial juxtaposition to convey meaning to the reader (Goodbrey 2017, 162-163).

These seven characteristics are a conceptual division of what is a tightly interconnected set of overlapping processes. They are not intended to serve as an exhaustive list, but instead to provide a useful way to describe and discuss the form of comics. While the initial development of the form took place within printed media, today all seven of these characteristics may also be observed in operation in many examples of digital comics. It is, however, important to note that not all comics will necessarily display all seven characteristics. Different formats of print and digital comics may place each characteristic into greater or lesser emphasis, and some examples may omit certain characteristics altogether.

In a typical comic book or graphic novel, whether paper-based or digitally mediated, all seven key characteristics of the form can be seen in operation. However, these formats also include examples of “mute” comics (Groensteen 2007, 14) that feature no written words and, as such, operate without the characteristic of word and image blending. In some digital formats, the incorporation of animation or sound into the comic can challenge the reader’s control of pacing and conflict with the establishment of fictional time through spatial arrangements of panels. In strip-based formats, such as newspaper strips or daily webcomics, all seven characteristics can again be observed, although the role of the spatial network may be somewhat more limited. In contrast, for single-panel newspaper cartoons or webcomics, only the characteristics of reader control of pacing, tabloid images, and word and image blending may operate.

Outside of commonalities and differences in their use of the form of comics, there are several other factors that contribute to distinctions between different formats. A format is usually tied to its medium of consumption, with similar paper-based and digital formats still exhibiting certain distinct qualities that set them apart. A format will usually have a specific range of approaches to panel layout associated with it, often tied closely to a typical set of industry-

defined page or screen dimensions and, in multi-page formats, a commonly used page count. Individual formats will also often have publication schedules and distribution channels with which they are closely associated. A combination of all of the above factors can mean that, from the point of view of a comic creator, different formats may involve very different creation, production, and distribution costs and timeframes. Another major concern for a comic creator when considering different formats is that of audience.

The comics industry does not consist of one overarching audience of comic readers, but instead a series of smaller, overlapping audiences often closely associated with specific formats of comics. While some readers may consume comics across a wider variety of different formats, other readers may only ever read comics in their favoured format. For example, the audience of readers that regularly consume online-only, weekly webcomic serials may only rarely visit a specialist comic shop to purchase a monthly comic book or graphic novel. It therefore follows that if a comic creator chooses to release their comic as first a serialised webcomic and then later a printed graphic novel, these two versions of the comic can potentially reach two separate audiences of readers. When a comic creator chooses to work in a particular comic format, she is also choosing to create work for a specific audience of readers.

Choosing a Format

A comic may be the work of a single creator, who fulfils all the creation and production roles needed to complete a finished comic. Alternatively, it may be the work of a team of creators, each fulfilling a separate role (such as writer, penciller, inker, colourist, letterer) and collaborating together to produce a finished comic. Whether the work of an individual or a team,

one of the key decisions made when planning the creation of a new comic is the choice of that comic's format. Sometimes this choice is made at the beginning of the design process and influences all the other design decisions that come later in the process. Perhaps more commonly, this choice is actually the result of a series of smaller choices and design preferences that arise during the development and creation of a comic's artwork and narrative.

For a comic creator, such choices may not necessarily all be conscious decisions, but instead arise as part of an organic, instinctual process that leads the creator towards a format that feels like a good fit for the story she wants to tell. When a conscious decision is made concerning format, it may be led by artistic and creative concerns—a desire on behalf of the creator to explore the possibilities offered by the specific characteristics of a given format. Alternatively, decisions may come because of business-related factors, such as the potential costs associated with the production and distribution of a given format. In areas of the comic industry that operate chiefly on a work-for-hire basis, decisions around format are typically business-led and made by the company who publishes the comic rather than the creators, who are hired to work within the format restrictions established by the publisher.

The specific priorities of comic creators and the extent to which their decisions are based on either artistic or business concerns will often shift and evolve over the course of their careers. To provide a clear focus for the discussion in this chapter, choice of format will be examined primarily from the point of view of an early-career comic creator working independently from any major work-for-hire publisher. For simplicity's sake, it will be assumed that this creator is solely responsible for all design, writing, and illustration duties associated with the creation and production of the comic. In setting out to develop a new comic project, such a creator might

usefully consider taking one of two possible opposing approaches to their choice of comic format: Format Specific or Format Flexible.

In choosing to work with a Format Specific approach, the creator considers only a single format when creating her comic. By focusing exclusively on one format, it becomes easier for the creator to exploit fully the specific qualities of that format. However, in terms of potential readership, it also limits the creator to the channels of distribution and consumption directly associated with the chosen format. This restricts the size of the potential readership to those people who would typically seek out and read this format of comic. While this can be a negative for the creator, it can also act to create a more engaged audience who responds favourably to the idea that the comic they are reading has been made “just for them,” rather than a wider audience. The major downside of a Format Specific approach is that, should a creator later decide that she would like to widen the comic’s potential audience, adapting the completed comic to other formats can require significant amounts of extra work. The resulting adapted comic may also run the risk of delivering an unsatisfactory reading experience when compared to the original text, or come across radically differently from the way the creator originally intended the work to be read.

In contrast, a creator who adopts a Format Flexible approach sets out early in the design process to create a comic that will work effectively across two or more different formats. The obvious gain of this approach is the much wider potential audience that can be reached by making the comic available across multiple different formats and their associated avenues of distribution and consumption. This advantage is often of particular value to new and early career creators who have yet to establish a regular following for their work. Traded off against this is the loss of the creator’s ability to make specific use of the unique qualities of any one comic

format. Another downside is that each targeted format can result in an additional set of layout, design, and storytelling constraints to work around. Creators who take a Format Flexible approach often have a primary format that provides the focus for their design, but they must still consider how the comic will read in other formats. Failure to do this can result in problems similar to those seen in adaptations of Format Specific works, with some formats of the comic delivering an unsatisfying or awkward reading experience.

To examine the choices facing an early-career creator in more detail, the next sections of the chapter will consider two hypothetical examples of comic creation. The first will follow a Format Flexible approach to creating a graphic novel for consumption via both print and digital media. The second will follow a Format Specific approach to creating a digital comic for consumption via a tablet computer, such as the iPad.

Format Flexible

In this example, our creator's primary aim is to create a graphic novel in a typical American format suitable for distribution via the direct market of specialist comic book stores. She intends to tell a complete, self-contained narrative around 120 pages long (a common length for stories told in this format). When the graphic novel is complete, she will either self-publish it or find a small publisher willing to publish and distribute the book on her behalf. To help further establish and grow the potential audience for their work, the creator decides first to release the graphic novel in a serialised webcomic format. Rather than wait until the whole graphic novel is finished, serialisation allows individual pages or sequences of pages to be shown online as they are completed. In addition to web-based serialisation, the creator decides to self-publish the story

as a five issue comic book series. These issues will be targeted towards small press and indie comic audiences and distributed primarily at the various comic conventions the creator attends while working towards completing the graphic novel. Aiming to reach as wide a spread of different audiences as possible, the creator also plans to make the five individual issues available to be read via a digital comic service, such as *Comixology*.

Having identified the graphic novel as the primary format, the creator decides the layout of the comic will use portrait-oriented pages. This is considered the standard orientation for all of her chosen formats, except the webcomic, for which a landscape-oriented page can provide a better fit to the typical dimensions of a computer screen (McCloud 2000a 214). Despite this advantage of landscape orientation, portrait-oriented pages are a common compromise found in many webcomics that follow a Format Flexible approach. Other features of the graphic novel format can be more problematic. A splash page in which a single panel takes up an entire page may provide a particularly dramatic moment in a graphic novel but can feel like an unsatisfyingly “short” installment in a webcomic. A double-page-spread that provides a dynamic change of layout in a print comic can be very difficult to read in a satisfying way when displayed digitally on an iPad (Nichols 2013).

A Format Flexible approach means that such limitations must be carefully planned for when laying out the comic’s pages. Another issue for the creator to consider is that of font size. Text that reads clearly on the printed page may become difficult to read on the slightly smaller screen of an iPad. An easy solution is to use a larger font size that will read clearly across all formats, although this can have implications for the number of words that will fit in a word balloon and the number (and placement) of balloons on the page. As comic creators often “write to the balloon” and adjust dialogue to fit the amount of space available in a balloon or panel,

even a seemingly slight change like this can have a significant impact on the design and creation of a comic.

Although the graphic novel remains the primary format, the creator must also consider the serial nature of the other chosen formats. As she intends first to publish the story as a five issue comic book series, she begins to think of the graphic novel as consisting of five chapters. Every chapter will need to operate effectively as a single issue, drawing the reader into the events of each episode of the story, and then enticing the reader to purchase the next issue in the series. The story will be further serialised as a webcomic, updating each week in regularly published single-page installments. Much of the initial audience for the comic will experience the story in this format, getting to read only one or two new pages each week. This places an emphasis on making each page of the comic feel like a satisfying chunk of narrative in its own right. For the creator, this can become something of a balancing act, as making a comic that works particularly well in single-page instalments can mean the story no longer flows as well when collected together in longer, multi-page sequences.

Such balancing between the needs and limitations of different formats is a common feature of the Format Flexible approach. The creator must consider how multiple different audiences will engage with the work. Although she is aiming towards eventually publishing the story as a graphic novel, much of the audience who consumes the comic may never encounter the work in that final format. Successful use of a Format Flexible approach relies on making clear decisions as to when to preference the primary format and when to consider and incorporate the limitations of other targeted formats into the overall comic's design.

Format Specific

In this second example, the creator instead opts to take a Format Specific approach with the aim of creating a digital comic designed specifically to be read on a tablet computer, such as the iPad. Following from this choice of platform, a range of further choices open up around which format the creator will use and which opportunities offered by the digital medium she will seek to exploit. The first such choice facing the creator is how she wants to deal with the concept of the “page.” The creator could choose to group the panels that make up the comic into static digital “pages.” This would mean the comic would operate and be read in an analogous manner to a paper-based comic. Alternatively, she could choose to take a “panel delivery” approach (Goodbrey 59). This would retain the idea of page-like grouping of panels but individually control the appearance of each panel on the screen, allowing pages to be built up or altered one panel at a time.

In contrast to these page-based approaches, the creator could instead opt to use an “infinite canvas” format (McCloud 222). Rather than using page-like groupings on panels, infinite canvas comics treat the screen as a window onto a much larger network of panels. The reader can navigate her way through this network by controlling the position of the viewing window. In such layouts, wide variations in the amount of space between panels can be used by the creator for deliberate narrative or thematic effect (McCloud 2000b). Infinite canvas comics also allow for a greater variety of panel shapes and sizes, including panels that are larger than the dimensions of the screen. These larger panels require the reader to move the position of her viewing window to view the entirety of the panel, allowing for a gradual reveal of the panel’s contents.

The creator ultimately decides that she wants to make specific use of these features in the layout of her panels and so adopts an infinite canvas approach in the creation of the comic. This choice leads directly to the next design decision that must be made; by what method will the reader interact with the tablet computer to control the position of her viewing window and navigate through the spatial network of the comic? A tablet's touchscreen allows a variety of different possible interactions. The reader could, for example, tap the screen to cause the window to shift its position automatically to centre on a selected panel. Instead, she could use a gestural control, such as a swipe, to reposition the focus of the window, or a pinch to zoom in or out on the arrangement of panels in the spatial network. Outside of the touchscreen, the tablet's orientation in space can also be used as part of the navigation interface. Tilting the tablet left, right, forward, or back could potentially cause the position of the window to shift in an associated direction.

The creator must also decide whether she wants to choose only a single method of interaction for the reader, or to include a variety of methods of interaction that may vary in line with specific events or moments in the narrative. In considering the structure of the narrative itself, the creator has the option of using either a unicursal or multicursal approach (Peacock 2005). A unicursal narrative presents the reader with only a single pathway to navigate through the comic from beginning to end. A multicursal narrative provides the reader with multiple different pathways that require her to make a choice about how to progress or what may happen next in the narrative. The resulting 'hypercomic' (Goodbrey 2013, 291) can involve complex networks of narrative for the reader to explore that can result in an engaging and immersive narrative experience. On the negative side, this complexity can lead to confusion for the reader, who may find herself lost in the maze of different choices.

In our example, the creator decides to avoid creating potential confusion for the reader by picking a gestural swipe as the single method of interaction. To further simplify the reading process, she opts to create a unicursal narrative that allows for navigation on only the vertical access, creating what is essentially a long vertical scroll of panels for the reader to navigate through. Having settled on this layout, next the creator must decide about whether or not to incorporate animation and sound into the comic. Short loops of animation or sound can be used to enhance the atmosphere in a panel or scene. However, too much animation and sound can disrupt the reading process and take too much control of the comic's pacing away from the reader. After due consideration, the creator decides to make occasional use of animated loops within some comic panels, investing the extra time to animate these herself as part of the production of the comic's artwork. She then opts to collaborate with a sound designer to create a modular soundtrack consisting of loops of sound that are triggered to play when a particular panel becomes the focus of the window. This provides the comic with a responsive soundtrack that adapts to the reader's current position in the narrative (Hague 2014, 76).

At this stage, the comic contains features that could make it difficult to adapt to another digital format and very difficult to adapt to any print-based format. Yet, there are still several further format-specific qualities the creator could seek to exploit. She could for example introduce hybrid videogame elements to create a "game comic" (Goodbrey 2017, 123) that would incorporate elements of gameplay into the comic's narrative. Or she could look to incorporate locative or generative elements into the narrative. These could potentially cause the comic to change depending on where in the world it is read, the time of day it is read, or based on information gathered by the tablet computer's on-board camera. However, these areas all draw on skills that the creator does not possess, and so she would be required to seek further

collaborators to continue the development of the comic. Such collaborations have the potential to further extend the production time of the comic and introduce significant additional economic costs. To avoid these issues, the creator decides not to pursue any further avenues of digital hybridisation.

Much like the Format Flexible example, the creation of a successful Format Specific digital comic is a balancing act. While the creator may be seeking to exploit the unique opportunities offered by the digital medium, too many additional features can overwhelm the reader and distract from the core comic-reading experience. The more technical complexity is added to the comic, the more it may also become necessary to grow the team of creators to incorporate additional skillsets, such as coding, animation, or sound design. Embracing all the capabilities of a specific digital platform can create an experience unique to that device, which can, in turn, serve to attract a significant audience to the resulting comic. However, it can also limit the audience to only those who have access to that specific device. Furthermore, if the software or hardware the creator has relied upon becomes obsolete at some point in the future, the comic she has created may no longer be able to reach any audience without significant extra work to adapt it to a new platform.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an examination of the process of comic creation through the lens of format selection and associated design decisions. Format has been examined both in terms of variations in the underlying form of comics and as result of a range of media-influenced and industry-defined qualities, such as panel layout, page dimensions, page count, distribution

method, and publication schedule. The link between format and audience has also been made explicit, with different formats identified as potentially attracting different audiences of comic readers. Two primary approaches to creator's selection of format have then been identified: Format Specific and Format Flexible.

In a Format Specific approach, the creator focuses on a single format and designs her comic to make the best possible use of the qualities of this format, while accepting the limits this places on the potential audience. In a Format Flexible approach, the creator designs her comic to work across multiple formats, reaching a potentially wider audience of readers but limiting the ability to use the unique qualities of any one format. In presenting examples of these approaches in use based on the priorities of an early-career comic creator, an insight has been provided into different strategies of comic creation for both print and digital media. In this way, the chapter has served to highlight the range of repercussions that can result from format choice and the complexity of related design decisions this choice involves.

Works Cited

- Goodbrey, Daniel. "From Comic to Hypercomic." In Evans, Jonathan C. and Giddens, Thomas. eds. *Cultural Excavation and Formal Expression in the Graphic Novel*. Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013.
- Goodbrey, Daniel. "Distortions in Spacetime: Emergent Narrative Practices in Comics' Transition from Print to Screen." In Pearson, Roberta. and Smith, Anthony. Eds. *Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age: Exploring Screen Narratives*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Goodbrey, Daniel. "The Impact of Digital Mediation and Hybridisation on the Form of Comics."

Diss. University of Hertfordshire, 2017. Print.

Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Trans. Beaty, Bart. and Nguyen, Nick.). University

Press of Mississippi, 2007.

Hague, Ian. *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels*.

Routledge, 2014.

Hatfield, Charles. "An Art of Tensions." In Heer, Jeet. and Worcester, Kent. eds. *A Comic*

Studies Reader. University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Harper Perennial, 1993.

McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics*. New York: Paradox Press, 2000a.

McCloud, Scott. *I Can't Stop Thinking! #4*. Available at: [http://scottmccloud.com/1-](http://scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/icst/icst-4/icst-4.html)

[webcomics/icst/icst-4/icst-4.html](http://scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/icst/icst-4/icst-4.html) [Accessed 20 December 2017], 2000b.

Miodrag, Hannah. *Comics and Language*. University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

Nichols, Jayms. "Digital Pages: Reading, Comics and Screens." In Evans, Jonathan C. and

Giddens, Thomas. Eds. *Cultural Excavation and Formal Expression in the Graphic Novel*. Inter-

Disciplinary Press, 2013

Peacock, Alan. *Towards an aesthetic of the interactive*. Available at:

<http://www.soundtoys.net/journals/towards-an-aesthetic-of> [Accessed 20 December

2017], 2005.