

From Comic To Hypercomic

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Abstract

The medium of comics is undergoing a period of transition as the predominant mode of creation, distribution and consumption shifts from print to digital display. Digital comic pioneers have explored many of the new possibilities offered by the inherent interactivity and multimodality of the medium. It is from out of this period of experimentation and innovation that the hybrid medium of hypercomics has emerged.

A hypercomic combines the juxtaposition-based visual language of a comic with the multicursal narrative structure of a hyperfiction. It is a form that foregrounds the importance of reader interaction, with the choices made by the reader influencing elements such as the sequence events are encountered in a story, the outcome of events or the point of view through which events are seen.

This paper traces the emergence of the hypercomic medium from its conceptual roots in the work of Ted Nelson. It considers the paper-based and videogame precursors that have influenced the form's development and led to its eventual blossoming as an offshoot of the nascent webcomic scene. The paper also serves to contextualise my own work as a hypercomics practitioner and to examine some of the off-shoots from the medium into physical, gallery-based art installations.

Key Words: Hypercomics, hypertext, hypermedia, webcomics, digital comics, interactive narratives.

A hypercomic can be defined as a comic with a multicursal narrative structure. Cursality is the apprehension that there are multiple paths in addition to the one followed.¹ It draws on concepts of the maze. A unicursal maze has only one path, no matter how convoluted, while a multicursal maze has many different possible pathways to navigate. Multiple paths through a narrative mean a choice must be made by the reader as to which path to follow. As such, a multicursal narrative foregrounds the importance of reader's choice. In a hypercomic, the choices made by the reader may determine the sequence in which events are encountered, the outcome of events or the point of view through which events are seen.

Hypercomics are a form of hyperfiction or cybertext and as such exhibit many of the formal properties associated with these media, as identified by Aarseth.² They are ergodic in nature, meaning that the reader's experience of the work will

often be locally unique based on the specific pathway taken and choices made in navigating the comic. This process of navigation requires a non-trivial effort on behalf of the reader. Rather than simply turn the page to progress through the story, progression comes about as a consequence of intention, deliberate choice or inadvertent action on behalf of the reader. The experience of reading a hypercomic can often engender a sense of tmesis. This is the sense of have skipped over or missed something and relates to the reader's apprehension that their own path through the narrative is one of many different potential pathways.³

Hypercomics have their conceptual roots in the 1970s as an offshoot of Ted Nelson's ideas of hypertext and hypermedia. Nelson himself was the first to coin the term 'hyper-comic' in his 1970 paper, *No More Teacher's Dirty Looks*. This paper went on to form part of Nelson's famous conjoined work on hypermedia, *Computer Lib / Dream Machines*.⁴ It is here that he describes a possible screen-based educational hypercomic that:

branches on the student's request. For instance, different characters could be used to explain things in different ways, with the student able to choose which type of explanation he wanted at a specific time.⁵

Nelson's focus was on the potential use of the medium as an educational tool but the fundamentals of a hypercomic are clearly laid down as a comic that branches into different pathways based on reader's choice. Nelson's concept of a hypercomic is clearly that of a screen-based, digital medium although it would be a while before computer and interface technology would catch up to this idea.

Rather than educational tools, some of the earliest significant examples of hypercomics come from the gaming world. *Dice Man*⁶ was a five issue *2000AD* spinoff written and edited by Pat Mills in 1986. It combined the comics medium with the game rules of choose-your-own-adventure game-books that were popular at the time. In each story existing characters from *2000AD* were placed under the control of the reader, who was instructed to identify themselves directly as the character. The reader could then make key choices for the character, eventually resulting in one of a range of possible outcomes for each story. In this way *Dice Man* functions an ergodic text and serves as an example of a paper hypercomic.

The first screen-based hypercomic also appeared in 1986. *Redhawk*⁷ was a videogame published for the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC. Similarly to *Dice Man*, *Redhawk* mixed the tropes of adventure games with those of comics. The videogame used a verb system common to text-based and early graphic adventure games of the time. By typing instructions the player could

control the actions of the game's titular superhero protagonist. As the game is played, a constantly updating comic strip is created across the screen. This strip illustrates the results of the player's choices and the interaction between Redhawk and the world around him. While visually crude by modern standards, the free-roaming gameplay of *Redhawk* and generative nature of the comic make for an impressively deep hypercomic reading experience.

Despite these early successes hypercomics remained, as comics theorist Scott McCloud notes, largely 'the territory of games and strange little experiments.'⁸ When McCloud published his seminal work, *Understanding Comics*,⁹ he observed that 'the idea that the reader might choose a direction [in a comic] is still considered exotic.'¹⁰ Although significantly, McCloud also went on to state that viewer participation was a major issue that comics would need to address in defining their role in the new century.¹¹

Indeed, the early 90s saw the beginnings of a major change for the consumption and distribution of comics with the arrival of image display on the World Wide Web. The addition of the ability to display images to the Mosaic web browser contributed to a massive surge in popularity for the World Wide Web, with web use growing by a factor of 341,634% over the course of 1993.¹² It also led to the emergence of the first webcomics - comics created specifically for display and distribution via the web.¹³ These early webcomics chiefly embraced the screen as display device and ignored the hypermedia potential of the web's underlying structure.

The first true hypercomic created specifically for the web came a few years later in 1996. *Club Salsa*¹⁴ was a 24 part hypercomic intended to promote web developer Wall Data's SALSA software. The work was created as a collaboration between the renowned comics illustrator Dave McKean and designer and programmer Chris Miller. The comic embraced the hyperlinked nature of the web to tell the story of a murder mystery set in a strange cyberpunk club where patrons could experience virtual reality via the consumption of specially tailored chillies. In terms of the reader's experience of the story, McKean described the work as 'a big jig-saw puzzle, with useful information mixed with random elements and dead-ends and all-out entertainment.'¹⁵ As such, the work embraced its hypercomic nature, offering the reader a multicursal maze of narrative to explore and interrogate.

As the web grew in popularity through the 1990s, so the medium of webcomics expanded and matured, bolstered by a rapidly expanding community of new comic creators and readers.¹⁶ A dominant model for webcomics gradually began to emerge, similar in format (if not in content) to that of the daily newspaper comic

strip. But even as this format began to take hold, so too did a new wave of webcomic creators emerge who were determined to push at the boundaries of the fledgling medium.¹⁷ This movement to explore the new potential of the web for the comics form was championed by Scott McCloud in his book, *Reinventing Comics*.¹⁸ McCloud declared that:

the page is an artefact of print, no more intrinsic to comics than staples or India ink. Once released from that box, some will take the shape of the box with them but gradually, comics creators will stretch their limbs and start to explore.¹⁹

Reinventing Comics acted as a rallying cry for the new wave of online experimenters and McCloud became both an unofficial spokesperson for the movement and a key curator of the growing scene.

Two of the earliest, web-based hypercomics produced during this period were Jason Shiga's *Meanwhile*²⁰ and Antony Johnston and Ben Templesmith's *After Days Of Passion*.²¹ Although originally created for print, Shiga released a web adaptation of *Meanwhile* that took advantage of the hyperlinked nature of the web. The somewhat awkward process of negotiating the print edition's multiple tabbed pages became streamlined via the use of hyperlinks, making navigation through the comic's complex branching narrative significantly more straight-forward. In contrast *After Days Of Passion* was conceived from the beginning for the web, with Johnston describing the work as 'a collage piece, with no arbitrary narrative structure, inviting the reader to piece together parts of the puzzle themselves, through fragments and shreds of the whole.'²² Hypercomic creator Neal Von Flue recalls the particular influence of *After Days Of Passion* on his own work:

It was such a simple and effective implementation of a hyperlinked narrative... ...the reader was allowed to move though at their own pace and in their own fashion. Re-reading it became a joy, as the order in which you ingested the story changed, and the separate events coloured each other differently when rearranged, making the dynamics of the whole piece shift.²³

My own work as a comics practitioner began as part of this growing experimental scene, with my first major work being the hypercomic *Sixgun*.²⁴ At its core, *Sixgun* was an attempt at resolving the conflict between the spatially based medium of comics and the non-spatial relationships between linked 'lexia'²⁵ that are typical of most web-based hyperfiction. Significantly, the piece introduced the concept of panels that would operate as hyperlinks but also remain as constants

across the two pages being linked so as to reinforce the spatial relationship between lexia.

After *Sixgun* my work took a slightly different direction as I began to explore the potential for hypercomics to make use of the *Infinite Canvas* - an idea originally proposed by Scott McCloud in *Reinventing Comics*. At the heart of the *Infinite Canvas* sits McCloud's belief that 'the monitor which so often acts as a page may also act as a window'²⁶ onto a much larger arrangement of comics panels. McCloud developed this concept further, suggesting the idea that the shape and layout of stories could now directly reflect their content²⁷ and pacing²⁸ (McCloud 2000b), rather than be locked to the shape and rhythm of the page.

In his history of webcomics, T Campbell provides a useful description of the *Infinite Canvas* experience.

Narrative comic strips and comic books usually featured cliff-hangers, emotional incentives to turn the page or tune in next time. Infinite-canvas work, more often, relied on an uninterrupted flow, a matrix of spatial relations that pulled the reader from first frame to last. If you were used to taking comics four or six panels at a time, consuming 100 at a gulp was a heady rush.²⁹

To aid the reader's navigation through the increasingly complex layouts opened up to comics by the *Infinite Canvas*, McCloud introduced the idea of the trail - a line connecting all the panels in the narrative which the reader can then easily follow through the story.³⁰ The idea that this trail could perhaps branch, introducing a choice to the reader and multiple pathways into the narrative opened up the concept to provide the basis for a new form of hypercomic.

McCloud completed his own experiment in *Infinite Canvas* hypercomics in 2001. *Choose Your Own Carl*³¹ was based on a character introduced in *Understanding Comics* and featured the branching misadventures of its unlucky protagonist. The multiple branches of the comic were created over a two year period as a result of reader suggestions supplied via McCloud's website. Although in keeping with the pattern established by the original Carl story, every branch ended with Carl's death and subsequent gravestone.

Another early *Infinite Canvas* hypercomic was Neal Von Flue's *The Jerk*.³² Von Flue described one of his goals in creating the piece as being 'to find a clean way to join... ..two seemingly disparate stories into one reading experience.'³³ The comic combined a scrolling canvas structure with a branching underlay of animated

digressions as well as hyperlinked elements of textual meta-commentary. For Von Flue, hypercomics can be defined as medium that 'blends visual storytelling with any of the unique formal properties of computer technology.'³⁴ The varied mix of different web media successfully employed in *The Jerk* provides a good example of this particular outlook on the medium.

My own significant contribution to the *Infinite Canvas* form came with *Doodleflak*,³⁵ which was the first such comic to employ a zooming interface. This technique allowed for the spatial map of the whole hypercomic to be viewed at one level and then for individual segments of the comic to be zoomed in to and read. This was a significant development within the field, with previous *Infinite Canvas* work only allowing readers to move through the narrative at the reading level. The addition of the zoom allowed the reader to experience the entire comic as a single shape and brought to the fore ideas first proposed by McCloud in *Reinventing Comics*.³⁶

At the same time that branching *Infinite Canvas* comics were being explored on the screen, a parallel exploration of the form was taking place in physical space. Swedish artist Lars Arrhenius' piece *The Man Without Qualities*³⁷ has clear visual similarities with McCloud's *Carl*, even ending several of its paths with the central character's grave. But Arrhenius's work exchanged the electronic canvas for the walls of the gallery, wrapping the pathways of his hypercomic narrative around the corners and doorways of the room. A year later Arrhenius created another similar gallery hypercomic, *A-Z*³⁸ that used a folded-out London A-Z map as the basis for its multicursal narrative.

Arrhenius work was a key influence in the creation of another major hypercomic work, *PoCom*.³⁹ *PoCom* began as the brain child of Paul Gravette, Brad Brooks and Tom Gauld and featured a collaboration between eighteen cartoonists to create a hypercomic for the wall of the Institute Of Contemporary Art as part of the inaugural ComICA festival in 2003. The collaborative nature of the comic and formal constraints under which it was created drew on the ideas of *Oubapo*, the comic-based offshoot of the French literary movement *Oulipo*. The original piece measured seventeen meters long and, in terms of scope and complexity, was one of the more ambitious hypercomic projects that had thus far been attempted.

I took an initial role in *PoCom* as one the collaborating cartoonists, but I was also later given the difficult task of adapting a version of the comic for consumption via the web.⁴⁰ To achieve this I built on my existing hypercomic work and used Flash to create a zooming *Infinite Canvas* delivery system that I dubbed *The Tarquin Engine*.⁴¹ *The Tarquin Engine* proved important both in terms of

comics production and reader experience. From a creator's point of view, the engine was coded so as to allow complex, zooming *Infinite Canvas* comics to be created using a straightforward drag and drop process in Flash. This greatly simplified the technical aspects of my working method, allowing me to create a whole series of *Infinite Canvas* hypercomics in which I was able to focus more on aesthetic and narrative concerns.

The engine also made it possible for other comic creators without a knowledge of coding to produce zooming *Infinite Canvas* comics. One of the first cartoonists to try out the engine was McCloud who used it to create the improvised hypercomic, *Mimi's Last Coffee*.⁴² After some more refinement and experimentation I eventually put a version of the engine on sale in 2005. During the time I spent developing the engine, parallel development was also taking place on a piece of software dubbed simply *Infinite Canvas*.⁴³ The Mac-based software was developed by Markus Müller at Vienna's University of Technology and offered creators another useful set of tools for creating zooming *Infinite Canvas* comics. Both the *Infinite Canvas* software and *The Tarquin Engine* helped to address important usability issues of *Infinite Canvas* comics, such as the awkwardness of scrolling browser windows in different directions and the increased sense of tmesis felt by readers losing track of their position within a narrative.

As my own comics practice progressed I became increasingly interested in exploring the physical installation side of hypercomics that *PoCom* had introduced to me. This culminated in 2010 in the form of a major gallery exhibition of hypercomic installations at the Pumphouse Gallery in London. Entitled 'Hypercomics: the shape of comics to come' the exhibition was curated by Paul Gravette and featured the work of four artists - Warren Pleace, Adam Dant, Dave McKean and myself. Perhaps most impressive was McKean's contribution, *The Rut*,⁴⁴ which used the gallery space to present a criss-crossing multiple view-point narrative incorporating sculptural elements alongside traditional comics panels.

My own work, entitled *The Archivist*,⁴⁵ was created initially as a spatial installation but designed in such a way as to allow for adaptation for the screen and in print. For me it served to highlight and contrast the qualities of these three media and allowed me to develop my thinking on how each one changed the reader's experience of the hypercomics form. The exhibition was well received critically, receiving five stars in *Time Out*⁴⁶ and positive reviews amongst the comics press.⁴⁷ As such it contributed significantly towards raising the profile of the hypercomics form amongst both the general public and the wider comics community.

So, where now and where next for hypercomics? In recent years there have been big shifts in the comic industries around the rise of portable digital display devices. For comics based around traditional page dimensions the biggest shift has come with the emergence of pad computers, spearheaded in popular culture by the iPad but soon followed by a wealth of Android and Windows based devices. There are already several companies pushing comics content to pads and all the major US comic companies have moved to take advantage of the new platform. As a result, we currently have a comics industry and a readership increasingly ready to embrace paperless comics. Freed from the constraints of the printed page and the physical limitations of the PC screen, the wider comics community is once again starting to ask what else the medium of comics might be capable of. With the wealth of experimental work that constitutes the history of their form, hypercomics remain uniquely situated as a medium in which to explore the potential of these new platforms.

Notes

- ¹ Peacock, Alan. 'Towards an aesthetic of the interactive'. 2005. Viewed 6 August, 2012, <<http://www.soundtoys.net/journals/towards-an-aesthetic-of/>>.
- ² Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives On Ergodic Literature*. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997).
- ³ Peacock, 'Towards an aesthetic of the interactive'.
- ⁴ Nelson, Ted. 'Computer Lib / Dream Machines', in *The New Media Reader*. ed. Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 301-338
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 316.
- ⁶ Mills, Pat, ed., *Dice Man*, issues one to five. (London: Fleetway, 1986).
- ⁷ Silhouette Software. *Redhawk*. (Australia: Melbourne House, 1986).
- ⁸ McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 106.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 106.
- ¹² Campbell, T. *A History Of Webcomics*. (San Antonio: Antarctic Press, 2006), 15.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁴ McKean, Dave and Miller, Chris. 'Club Salsa'. 1996. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://web.archive.org/web/20040204214932/http://209.221.152.197/story/>> .
- ¹⁵ 'Club SALSA delivers first cyber-serial for the World Wide Web; Ultra-hip Club SALSA from Wall Data features bi-weekly drama from The New Yorker

illustrator Dave McKean at www.salsa.walldata.com'. Viewed 6 August, 2012, <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EIN/is_1996_Feb_5/ai_17914389/>.

¹⁶ Campbell, *History Of Webcomics*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸ McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics*. (New York: Paradox Press, 2000).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁰ Shiga, Jason. 'Meanwhile'. 2000. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://www.shigabooks.com/interactive/meanwhile/01.html>> .

²¹ Johnston, Antony and Templesmith, Ben. 'After Days Of Passion'. 2001. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://www.opi8.com/sequence/afterdays/>>.

²² Johnston, Antony. 'Antony Johnston: After Days Of Passion'. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://www.antonyjohnston.com/titles/passion/>>.

²³ Von Flue, Neal, e-mail message to author, 18 July 2012.

²⁴ Goodbrey, Daniel. 'Sixgun: Tales From An Unfolded Earth'. 2001. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://e-merl.com/sixgun.htm>>.

²⁵ Landow, George. *Hypertext 2.0*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

²⁶ McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, 222.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ McCloud, Scott. 'I Can't Stop Thinking! #4'. 2000. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/icst/icst-4/icst-4.html>>.

²⁹ Campbell, *History Of Webcomics*, 115.

³⁰ McCloud, 'I Can't Stop Thinking! #4'.

³¹ McCloud, Scott. 'Choose Your Own Carl'. 2001. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/carl/3b/cyoc.html>>.

³² Von Flue, Neal. 'The Jerk'. 2002. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://web.archive.org/web/20030811130812/http://ape-law.com/hypercomics/thejerk/index.htm>>.

³³ Von Flue, e-mail message to author.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Goodbrey, Daniel. 'Doodleflak'. 2002. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://e-merl.com/flak.htm>>.

³⁶ McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, 228.

³⁷ Arrhenius, Lars. *The Man Without Qualities*. Comic installation, 2001.

³⁸ Arrhenius, Lars. *A-Z*. Comic installation, 2002.

³⁹ Brooks, Brad, Gauld, Tom, Gravette, Paul et al. *PoCom*. Comic installation, 2003.

⁴⁰ Goodbrey, Daniel. 'PoCom-UK-001'. 2003. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://e-merl.com/pocom.htm>>.

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- ⁴¹ Goodbrey, Daniel. 'The Tarquin Engine'. 2005. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://www.webcomicsnation.com/tarquin/>> .
- ⁴² McCloud, Scott. 'Mimi's Last Coffee'. 2004. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://www.scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/mi/mi-26/mi-26.html>>.
- ⁴³ Müller, Markus. *Infinite Canvas*. (University of Technology Vienna: Vienna, 2004).
- ⁴⁴ McKean, Dave. *The Rut*. Comic installation, 2010.
- ⁴⁵ Goodbrey, Daniel. 'The Archivist'. 2010. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://e-merl.com/archivist/>>.
- ⁴⁶ Charlesworth, JJ. 'Hypercomics: The Shapes of Comics to Come', *Time Out*, September 10 2010. Viewed 6 August 2012, <<http://www.timeout.com/london/art/event/81984/hypercomics-the-shapes-of-comics-to-come>>.
- ⁴⁷ Round, Julia, 'Hypercomics: The Shape of Comics to Come, Pump House Gallery, London, 12 August - 26 September 2010', *Studies in Comics*. 2.2 (2011): 378–380.

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