

*I will add examples of web comics that are now almost completely lacking in the paper. I'm also still unsure about the headlines, so any possible comments on them are more than welcome! I have some other possible references I might use, but I left them out now because I'm not quite sure how and where I'd put them.*

## **Comics in Digital Environment**

### **Introduction**

Comics have long been influenced by the constraints of paper. There are however more and more comics in digital environment and thus it is necessary to investigate their nature both on print and online. For many artists the Internet is only a way to distribute their comics but there are also comics meant for direct online reading. A self-evident starting point for the investigation is Scott McCloud's *Reinventing Comics*, which can be seen as a sequel for his groundbreaking *Understanding Comics*. In *Reinventing Comics* McCloud proposes possible directions or even revolutions for comics in digital environment.

After briefly presenting McCloud's digital revolutions, I will try to define what comics are. This is important to understand in order to see what has changed if at all. Then I will look at features web comics can have in contrast to print comics. The technology has enabled various changes but mostly comics have changed surprisingly little. The only thing that is clearly different in their nature is the possibility of interactivity in web comics. I use the term web comics in a quite broad sense to cover all comics that are online.

### **Digital Revolutions**

McCloud wrote his book in an interesting phase when comics markets had long been growing but at the late 1990s there became a stop. With *Reinventing Comics* (2000) he tried to predict what could happen in the comics industry and also propose new ways to gain audience and respect. In

*Reinventing Comics* McCloud presents a quite optimistic view on, how the comic field can gain from the Internet.

McCloud (2000, 22) presents three new revolutions that are all “dealing with computers”: Digital Production, Digital Delivery, and Digital Comics. These revolutions are the possible outcomes of how comics can go online. First of all, comics may be produced digitally. McCloud (2000, 138) states that producing comics digitally is almost as old as computers. The computer may be used to make the process of drawing comics more effective, thus the computer may only be used to imitate the print, but there are also various possibilities the computer enables that the ink and paper don’t. McCloud (2000, 140–142) finds it bizarre why the digital technology should only be used to imitate the print but at the same time he is concerned that the contents suffer if the digital tricks become too central in the work.

Secondly, comic artist may use the Web for distributing their comics, but the comics don’t have to be made nor read with digital devices. Mainly McCloud (2000, 184) believes that the Web enables selling comics for reasonable price and gaining audience more efficiently. There are some comics that can be purchased and directly read online. Bigger companies, such as Marvel, sell access to their e-books. I don’t still see that the Internet has secured the financial situation of comic artists. The trend is probably more to show one’s work online for free and the actual sold items are still the print versions.

The most interesting part is McCloud’s ideas of comics that are *meant* for the online environment, thus web comics. I will next concentrate on different aspects on them.

### **Web Comics as an Art Form**

Comics is a special art form as it’s always dual, it contains both text and pictures and plays with their relation. It can also be seen as sequential art as it is formed of sequences (McCloud 1994, 5). Comics are thus sequences of panels that contain illustration or text or both which form a narrative. McCloud also points out that the basic tenet of comics is that moving in time is to move in space (2000, 219). The passing of time is shown concretely with the story moving through panels. The space between the panels, the gutter, is crucial in the narrative, too (McCloud 1994, 60–93). The reader is constantly filling in the gaps with the help of their imagination.

McCloud’s third digital revolution is the development of comics in digital environment (2000, 22). This is seen as the third (inevitable) step in comics going online. Although some of his views are somewhat outdated, he raises some questions and lays down principles that are still valid. McCloud

only uses the term *digital comics* but more recent studies have differentiated between digital comics and web comics in the following manner: digital comics are distributed and screened digitally but not necessarily read online, whereas web comics are read directly online (Dittmar 2012, Bell 2006). Web comics can thus be anything from complex graphic novels to single strips (Bell 2006, 132). Although I'm not sure if this kind of distinction is functional as there are always hybrid forms, I will handle web comics mainly in the sense presented above. I also see the web version of a comic published both online and on print as a web comic.

One of the biggest issues in web comics is the lack of paper. As McCloud (2000, 220) states, the constraints of paper have formed the art form, and thus the artist constantly has to think how to get everything *fit*. On the Web, this limitation doesn't truly exist anymore. Web comics ironically are still using the methods resulting from the constraints of paper. The screen is often treated as one page of a comic book. In the case of comic strips, this doesn't necessarily affect the narrative. But with longer stories, clicking the 'next' button isn't the same as turning the page. According to Dittmar (2012, 88), the reader can decide the development of the story as he/she can decide which 'page' to read next. McCloud (2000, 215) states that the idea of hypertext, that everything is linked but nothing exists in space, is opposite to the basic idea of comic panels being in spatial relationship to each other. The idea of sequences isn't thus the same online as on paper.

The digital environment isn't the same as paper and could enable huge changes for comics. The panels could continue to different directions, the idea of the page could thus be questioned. McCloud (2000, 223) proposes various possibilities how the panels could take any size and shape and could be situated in any possible sequences. In my opinion, this happens quite rarely. Most web comics are still using quite conservative forms.

Darren Wershler discusses how Marvel comics have gone digital. Marvel uses "Smart Panels" system, where reader is encouraged to read comics frame by frame and the singular panel can be zoomed so that it might reveal new layers, such as hidden text. In Wershler's opinion this is a beginning of a web comics aesthetic that differs substantially from the print aesthetic. (Wershler 2011, 132.) If the aesthetic is conditional on the digital tricks, the screen has a huge impact. Different devices may enlarge the comic in a different way and the comics should be compatible with all possible devices and operating systems. Marvel has an iPhone app, ComiXology, which is "the single largest online comic store, and it is the clear market leader in the design and provision of the software layer for comic book reading on mobile devices" (Wershler 2011, 133). Wershler argues that app comics are often just gimmicking with the special features and the improvement in reading experience is ostensible (2011, 134). There may be a phase where the tricks are more

tempting than to consider how they fit to the actual comic. I agree with Wershler that experimenting with the effects can harm the contents. Here we actually have the same dilemma as McCloud (2000, 145–146) had in the case of digital production: experimenting with new tricks often leads to overdoing it at the contents' expense.

Reading comics in an online environment is different than reading paper, as every other reading as well. Liu Ziming (2005, 709–710) argues that reading develops to the direction of screen-based reading behaviour, which includes strategies such as browsing, although there is also clearly seen the preference of paper. Maybe printing out comics from Internet isn't an option as it might be for many other texts. McCloud (2000, 177) wonders if we have to be able to *touch* comics in order to experience them properly, but he himself admits it's not necessary as we can also enjoy e.g. music without touching it. I would though see that the reading experience is much more than just the text and pictures in front of us, whether on print or on screen. Web comics are somehow *less* than comics on print if they just imitate the print and don't invent anything new. Going back to Wershler's (2011) critique of improving reading experience, web comics may have to invent something new that isn't just the attempt to fix the lack of paper. Next I will discuss some features that are substantially different to comics on print and see if they are able to make a vital change to comics, starting with interactivity.

Web comics can be interactive in a completely different way than print comics. Marie-Laure Ryan sees interactivity as the most important property that differs the new (digital) media from the old media. One of the aspects of interactivity is that the user becomes more involved; there is bottom-up input of the user instead of top-down planning of the storyteller or designer. (Ryan 2006, 99.) In the case of web comics this can mean the possibility to choose the order in which the story is read (see p. 3) and the possibility to even affect the narrative. Most web comics, especially if they are in a blog form, enable commenting the comic or single panels. The comments can be anything related or unrelated to the comic or comic artist, but in any case there is a more direct way for the comic artist and audience to encounter. Interactivity can though be much more than just writing comments. The comic artist may link the contents to something external to the comic. Even though the interactivity isn't probably as exploited as it could be, it still is in my opinion the most vital difference between print comics and web comics. Even the possibility of the reader and the artist coming closer each other is something that can't be overlooked. *(I will try to find a good example or examples of this and describe interactivity's importance more)*

In addition to the panel and page issues, web comics can use various other methods that are impossible to print comics. Sound effects or animations may be used to make the comics "come

alive”, but as McCloud (2000, 212) points out, it seems rather bizarre to do this partially; the idea of comics lies their two dimensional nature. There are some examples of web comics where animations are used, such as *Saint for Rent*<sup>1</sup>. In it there are occasionally panels where there is a moving speech bubble or for example water moving. It clearly still remains silent and static in its nature, what is also characteristic of comics (McCloud 2000, 213). Web comics may thus add something new, but with bigger changes there might not be question of comics anymore. It could also be argued that the comics need the constraints of paper to be comics, also in the digital environment. Web comics that have multimedia functions and/or that don’t have panels, are maybe not comics anymore.

*Here I probably add something about sound effects.*

It must be remembered that the comics can be categorized in different ways and most of them have many different kinds of features. Wershler (2011, 128) argues that as there are all the time appearing new types of web comics, “there will be a constant realignment of their various forms in relationship to each other”. It might thus not be relevant to try to establish fixed boundaries or terms. I do think that there are surprisingly few changes in comics in digital form. However, web comics probably change and create new forms. I would though argue that the change can’t be as revolutionary as some may think. The narrative or the technical part may develop so that the comics are more easily read in digital environments but adding constantly new features isn’t possible.

## **Conclusion**

I have here discussed the features web comics have in contrast to print comic, with the help of McCloud’s ideas of digital environment affecting comics. If comics are seen to be sequential, silent, and static in their nature, web comics can’t add endlessly new features that contradict this nature. Web comics with animations and sound can at some point be more multimedia than comics. Adding sound also takes away from the imagination the reader can use while reading comics.

The reliance on paper is still clearly visible, even without the actual paper. In this sense web comics haven’t derived as far from the print comics as they could without losing their idea of being comics. New narrative techniques without the constraints of the page could develop. In my view, interactivity in the sense I have discussed in this paper is a characteristic that is solely possible for web comics.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://saintforrent.com/>. Written and illustrated by RU.

I only touched on the applications, such as ComiXology, that are showing the also in other media visible development from computers to tablets and smartphones. This could be a fruitful topic to discuss. Also for further investigation, it might be relevant to look at how the themes of the comics have developed in digital environments.

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