

I will use way more sources in the final version of the paper, it won't be this fixed on McCloud. This should now give some impression of the structure of the paper, although there are many aspects still missing.

Comics in Digital Environment – the Question of Web Comics

Introduction

Comics have long been influenced by the constraints of paper. They have however also found their way to digital environment. For some comic artists the Internet is only a way to distribute their work but more and more artists are publishing their comics directly online. In *Reinventing Comics* (2000), Scott McCloud proposes possible directions or even revolutions for comics in digital environment. I will here present his ideas of web comics and see how or if they have come true in the last 14 years. I first briefly present McCloud's ideas of the digital revolutions. Then I define what comics is as an art form, which is crucial for understanding how they can be transferred to online environment. I also present what some other researches have said about digital or web comics. I also give some examples of web comics and see what special features there are in contrast to print comics. Finally I will come back to McCloud's ideas and see how his ideas have or haven't come true in the past years.

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 Internet will benefit the comics field.

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 ways the

comics can go online. First of all, comics may be produced digitally. 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. (*I will discuss the first two revolutions more profoundly.*) 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.

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. It can be even questioned if there is something that can be called digital or web comics. Dittmar (2012, 85) differentiates between web comics and digital comics: digital comics are distributed and screened digitally but not necessarily read online, whereas web comics are read directly online. In my view this distinction is in principal functional, but it might be hard to categorize all online comics to just to the other category. The variety of terms used for comics in digital environments shows us that the field is quite new and although there is definitely something happening all the time, no clear change or transition to web comics has yet happened.¹ (*I will add some more definitions here*)

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, the artist constantly has to think about 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

¹ I use the term web comics in a broad sense for all comics appearing online. Also the form *webcomics* is used regularly.

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 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. *(I will give some examples of comic blogs and serial web comics)*

(Here I discuss the affects of the screen or the different devices on the comics and then the interactive nature of web comics)

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. There are some examples of web comics where animations are used, such as *Saint for Rent*². 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). 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.

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 is all the time appearing new types of digital 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.

² <http://saintforrent.com/>. Written and illustrated by RU.

Conclusion

Despite the possibilities web comics could have on Internet, few comic artists have experimented with new narrative techniques or technical possibilities. Internet still seems to be mostly a way to distribute the comics.

For a further investigation, it might be relevant to look at how the themes of the comics have developed in digital environments.

References

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