
DIGITAL COMICS

By Jakob F. Dittmar





INTRODUCTION

Digital comics can easily transgress on the definition of comics as mostly “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (McCloud 1993, 9) as they may contain moving images, be accompanied by audio tracks, or even are narratives in true multimedia, i.e. utilize an interdependency of media to tell a story (e.g. Burwen 2011). This Forum text discusses digital comics (web comics and download comics) and how their formats and inclusion of other media has consequences not only for their composition, but also their reception. Recent scholarship on digital comics has discussed in detail the consequences of digital formats on the trade and distribution of comics (see Bell 2006; Yuan 2011, 297), and therefore these aspects are omitted here. But the consequences of digital publishing on the narrative aspects of comics, for example, on the pacing of storytelling and the reading experience, have hardly been covered.

My aim is to describe the currently existing formats in digital comics and start the discussion of their imprint on dramaturgy, storytelling techniques and traditions, as the formats do of course influence the reading process. Also, it has to be asked whether the established definitions of comics are fitting for the various forms of digital and web comics or whether we are witnessing the establishment of a new literary form, which is neither film nor comics nor audio storytelling.

FORMATS OF DIGITAL COMICS

In *Reinventing Comics*, Scott McCloud shows possible developments of comics regarding their distribution and marketing that would allow – at least in the US – a bypass of the dominant publishers. He also presents possible forms of internet comics that are no longer printed onto paper but are read directly on-screen and thus no longer depend on limitations of pages, paper size, etc., that are crucial for comic narrations in other media (McCloud 2000). These new possibilities define another medium different from established comics due to their form: Digital comics are part of tertiary media, as one needs tools and technical equipment to produce, distribute, receive, and also to read them (cf. Beth and Pross 1976). Specifically, computer-based forms of comics that allow for readers’ choices in the development of narration (i.e. interactivity) can even be considered quaternary media, as they usually switch easily (and often) between push and pull aspects of the medium (readers have to choose actively to be able to read further) (cf. Dittmar 2011).

In the context of digital comics, McCloud argues for a complete departure from comics as we know them since they are not a print-product and – in some cases at least – not even printable,



but only available as a digital product, only readable with compatible machines. Its content, therefore, no longer offers the narrative structure of comics as we know them, since the sequence of images on virtual surfaces could be placed next to each other in limitless rows; McCloud coined the term “infinite canvas” for these technically borderless formats (for an example see fig. 1). The lack of any printed page leads to an end of conventional narrations and dramaturgical necessities. The build-up of tensions, the positioning of climaxes and anti-climaxes, in storytelling follow our experiences of printed media; they are developed to make the reader want to turn pages to read on. The established formats of paper have influenced the pacing of narratives told on them. In printed comics, the build-up of excitement or suspense towards the end of the page is an established method to make the reader want to turn the page and open up new images. It is a way to stress stages of the narration. Each image is part of the development of moods and occurrences in the comic. Digital comics can follow these conventions or break them by introducing different pacing of story-arches that would not fit on manageable printed formats (everything that is bigger than a broadsheet newspaper or comes in odd shapes which are difficult to open, etc.).

In comics, the images not only work individually but also in combination: Each new page is a new experience of the images in combination and individually alike: the whole page works as a meta-panel (or meta-image) that consists of all its individual images and combination of their designs (in accordance with definitions in film, one can call this effect “mise-en-page”). Decisions about the number of images, their placement and style, are crucial for the storytelling of each comic. The design of each image, in reference to the other images' dominating graphic elements, gives the author control over the design of each full page; for example, sometimes large signs dominate the entire page and are composed from elements in individual images which only assemble into the large sign in synchronicity.

¹ For a detailed discussion of the synchronical and diachronical reading of comic-pages (and comics) see Groensteen 1999.

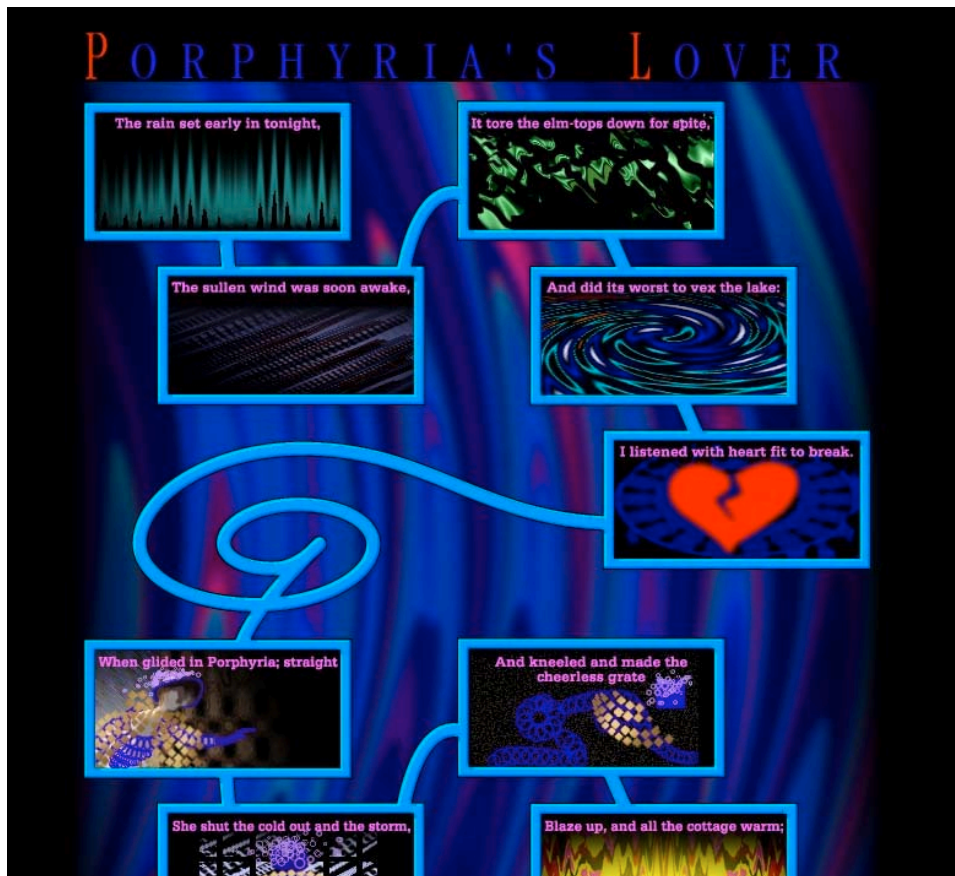


Figure 1. McCloud, Scott, *Porphyria's Lover*, 1998, <http://scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/porphyria/index.html> © Scott McCloud.

DOWNLOAD COMICS AND WEB COMICS

The discussion of digital comics has to differentiate between web comics and digital comics, because all web comics are digital comics, but not all digital comics are web comics. There certainly are various sub-forms of digital comics but to suggest a rule: web comics are those comics that are read directly on the Internet, that is, online. They do not have to be downloaded and might not even be intended to be downloaded. The class of digital comics generally contains web comics (as these are obviously digital); however, according to the currently dominate, and narrow, definition, digital comics are comics that are distributed and screened digitally, but not generally read online.

Web comics are executed and distributed digitally, but often offer content that is not different from printed comic strips – only a few experiment with the options given by the technical possibilities of the medium. Most show a limited sequence of images that are most of the time shown on the same page, juxtaposed with each other: a typical meta-panel that is divided into the



individual images when reading the comic. Some web comics mount the images of the strip or the rows of images the strip consists of onto several sub-pages.² The reader is able to continue reading in a fashion similar to how a printed comic is read; by clicking through to the sub-pages, the reader recreates the switch from line to line and the turning of the pages. While the screen in use limits the visible width of these strips, the format can be defined to fit the strip or individual parts of the narration shown; it no longer depends on paper-size.

Web comics depend – as their name suggests – on access to the Internet. One group of machines useable to read not only digital but also specifically web comics on are the various mobile phones with big screens and internet-connection. What is interesting about so-called smart mobile phones is that they partly allow for turning the image from portrait to landscape format by tilting the device. Obviously, depending on the choice of tilt, the same tool delivers different visual presentations of the same source-material. And of course, the visual results and reading-experiences are markedly different (for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Wershler 2011).

Digital comics depend on computers to process the images onto some screen, but in the case of download comics these machines do not have to be connected to the Internet after the material is downloaded. Theoretically, they can be shown on all standard personal computers, and in some cases on reading tablets and similar computer-driven devices that have been developed to show text and to replace analog printed matter. Of this latter group of reading-devices, not all are able to show moving images, most – for example, the Kindle reader – are supposed to be loaded with specifically formatted files containing the reading-material. These formats are quite restricted in regards to what can be contained. Also, these reading tablets are not built to connect to the Internet themselves, so web comics would not be readable on them. Some can show colored images, some offer only black and white images and text, as they have been developed to show text similar to printed books while using as little energy as possible. More and more comics, which are available in print, become published for these reading-devices, thus turning classic analog comics into digital comics. Some publishers also start to offer extra online and partly downloadable material in addition to digitally re-published comics themselves – like artist's comments, originally omitted images or sequences, background information, etc. – to enhance the attraction of the digital re-publication for collectors and fans (see Ricknäs 2012).

² E.g. most digitally re-published printed comics, like Jamiri's comics on <http://www.jamiri.com>.



STRUCTURING AND PACING THE NARRATION IN DIGITAL FORMATS

The unifying aspect of all digital comics, whether download-only or online-readable, is perhaps simply that they can define their own format. Unrestricted by print, these comics are no longer bound to a uniform page format, even within a narrative that stretches over several (digital) pages. Also, long sequences or whole stories can be put on one page and are read by scrolling over the page in whatever direction possible and/or necessary. But the technical possibilities for this kind of screen-comics are currently quite limited: Individual settings like screen-resolution or the choice of internet-browser lead to very different frame-sizes for the display of digital comics. With a low screen-resolution, to ensure understanding by an average reader/user, the development of plot, etc., has to progress in small steps to show those images close enough to each other to maintain the build-up of the story. Conventional use of cliff-hangers to make readers stay with the story or return to it, or to “turn” pages, has to be used in accordance with these technical settings and might not work any longer with the introduction of the next standard in high-resolution screens. Whether these necessities and possibilities change story-telling to its advantage is questionable, as the basic structures and methods of narrating are not only specific for individual media, but also are related to more general narrative conventions. This makes the full departure of dramaturgies, plots, etc., of digital comics from those known from printed comics unlikely.

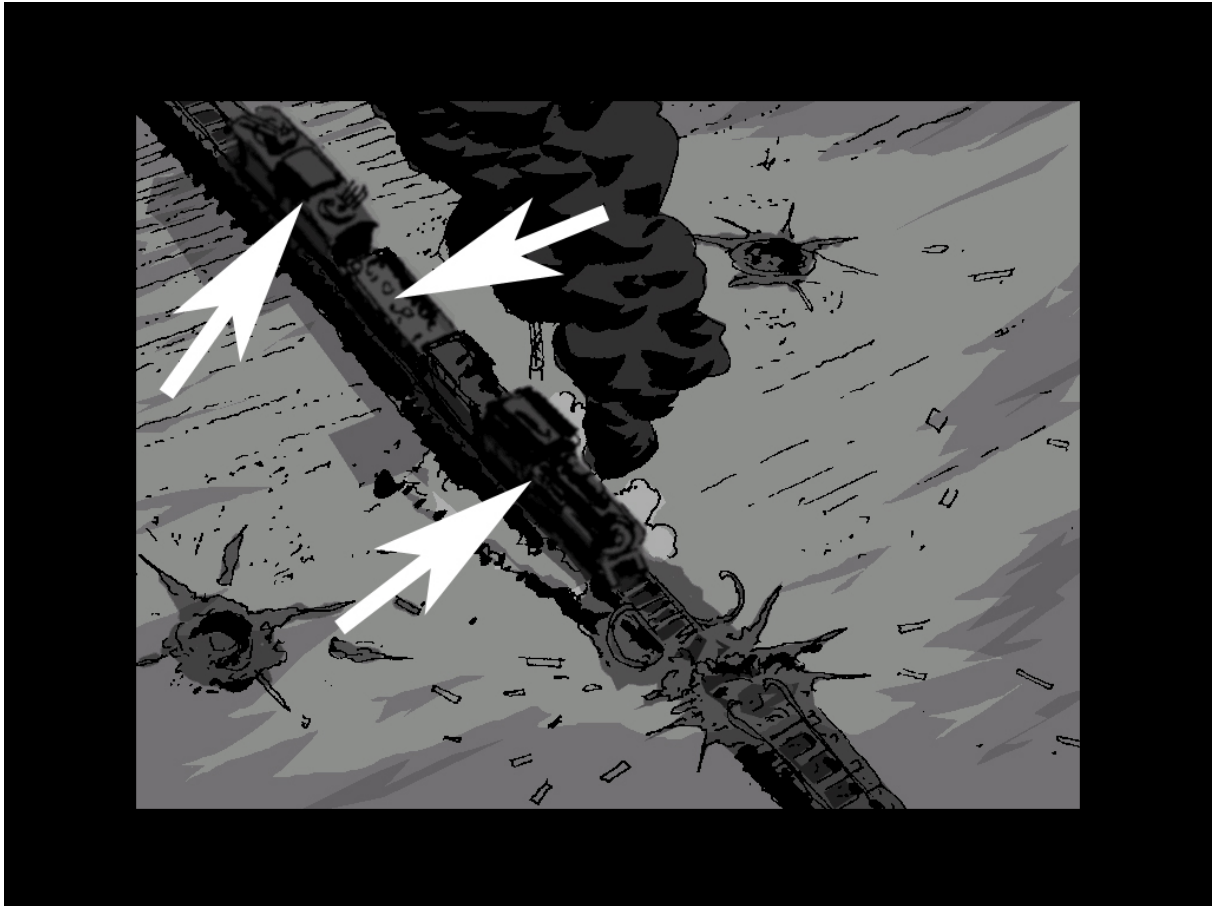


Figure 2. Heuer, Christoph, *Kindergeschichten*, screenshot, 2002. © Christoph Heuer. Different possible narratives starting from this situation are indicated by changes in grey tones when the mouse-pointer is placed on the specific part of the image, in this screenshot indicated by arrows.

It has to be kept in mind that digitally transmitted comics that are shown on-screen but are not supposed to be printed out can use additional layers of narration apart from sequential juxtaposed images and texts, for example, audio material or animated sequences – if the technical platform allows for this. But if these stories contain film- and/or audio-elements, they are no longer comics in accordance with the established definition of this class of media, but animated film or multi-media products. They have to be understood as being another medium. Narrations that only play on computers change the presentational forms and narrative conventions established in printed comics, and also the way they are consumed/read; while readers of printed comics, most of the time, read on their own, digital comics allow for group-readings by mass audiences. This establishes a special medial-form that builds on technical applications for production and reception of content, and at the same time forces the reader – and “user” – to actively decide on the development of the story; without active choice of next page or sequence to be shown, there is no continuation of the story.



For example, Christoph Heuer's *Kindergeschichten* (fig. 2) is built of mostly static images, as known from printed comics, but certain details of the images are animated and accompanied by audio-pieces. A narrator's voice, over a musical soundtrack, comments on each image to construct blocks of the narration and, as a consequence, several parts of the story are given to the reader. To get to the next image, the reader not only has to press a button, but also must choose between several possible narrative tracks that are anchored in the individual images. Different narrations offering distinctly different perspectives on the development of the story are given, but interlink again and again, allowing the reader to trace them piece by piece – and even to retrace them all. The reader controls the development and the speed of the narration's progress, reacting to content and choosing tracks that catch his or her interest. A public screening of this “non-linear novel” is therefore pointless because of the necessity for an individual interaction between the screening device and its user – varying interests cannot be catered to simultaneously. Even if this form of interactive storytelling is quite different from most digital comics available at the moment, the individual reading and decision processes of the reader remains decisive.

NEW FORMS OF STORYTELLING

Picture stories that are not printed allow for the individual interaction with comics that we are used to from their printed relatives. But even when an individual reception is necessary and the individual user is dealing with the story according to his/her own criteria and temporal preferences, the conditions set by, for example, the time-frame of the audio parts, prevents us from labeling these mixed-media forms comics – at least if weight is put on the characteristic that comics are to be read according to individual pacing and interests, and allow for a reading-processes that vary from the sequence of the images themselves (for example, by re-reading earlier or later images). Apart from the freedom to follow or ignore the sequentiality of images, it is decisive that audio-parts have specific lengths that establish the speed in which an image should be read. They dictate reading-speed.

The example of digital comics also shows again that all media, which are used for communication, influence their content and limit the possibility of narrative forms (as McLuhan stated in his famous catch-phrase “the medium is the message”). New and established media trigger the development of specific narrative forms that cater to their particularities. The images of graphic visual stories are hardly ever mounted juxtaposed and sequentially outside the field of print-media (i.e. comics and illustrated books) as each medium applies the concept of narrating with images according to its format's possibilities; for example, films and computer games show their images in time-sequence and not juxtaposed. Animated film and mixed forms that depend on screens and computers obviously do not cater ideally for presenting comics as known from print.



New media always divert from the established forms and lead to new ways of storytelling – without bothering if these may fit the established forms. They define their own dramaturgical limitations, preferences and possibilities and demand for the development of narrative strategies that suit them best. Some will be comics with long juxtaposed or meandering sequences as suggested by McCloud, others will form new kinds of a pictorial medium that may contain comics as one of their narrative elements, and some will present truly multimedial storytelling demanding different forms of activity and participation by the readers, blending prose texts, poems, film and game-elements into the comic. These will be very different from the stories we refer to as digital comics now.



REFERENCES

- Bell, Mark. 2006. "The Salvation of Comics: Digital Prophets and Iconoclasts." *The Review of Communication* 6 (1-2): 131-140.
- Beth, Hanno, and Harry Pross. 1976. *Einführung in die Kommunikationswissenschaft*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Burwen, Daniel. 2011. *Operation Ajax: How the CIA Toppled Democracy in Iran*. Cognito Comics.
- Dittmar, Jakob F. 2011. *Grundlagen der Medienwissenschaft*. Berlin: Technische Universität Berlin.
- Groensteen, Thierry. 1999. *Systeme de la bande dessinée*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Heuer, Christoph. 2001. *Kindergeschichten. Eine Non-lineare novelle*. (CD-Rom) Essen: independent publication.
- McCloud, Scott. 2000. *Reinventing Comics*. New York: Paradox Press.
- Ricknäs, Mikael. 2012. "Marvel Offers Digital Extras for Comic Book Fans." *Computerworld* 46.6: 8.
- Shifman, Limor. 2007. "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Continuity and Change in Internet-based Comic Texts." *International Journal of Communication* 1: 187-209.
- Wershler, Darren. 2011. "Digital Comics, Circulation, and the Importance of Being Eric Sluis." *Cinema Journal* 50 (3): 127-134.
- Yuan, Ting. 2011. "From Ponyo to 'My Garfield Story': Using Digital Comics as an Alternative Pathway to Literary Composition." *Childhood Education* 87 (4): 297-301.