4-2019

Comics in the Evolving Media Landscape

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Author's Note

The following pages are the written transcripts of the Comic Corner: Comics in the Evolving Media Landscape video series, intended as an educational examination of the comic industry.

In order to view this project as it was intended, please proceed to the following webpages.

Video Links

Playlist Link:
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmXWY5lqIhONwZZF3pEdzf2pHLsig5bcP

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Episode 1 Script: Introduction

Welcome to the Comic Corner!

Comics and their characters have been beloved for decades—from childhood figures like Charlie Brown to the large cast of superheroes fighting against the forces of evil. Through reboots, re-imaginings, and spin-off after spin-off, there's something that keeps us going back to these stories again and again. Some may say it's the childlike wonder, the nostalgia that comes with reading the bright-colored and sometimes silly stories of comics; the same simple joy of reading the funnies in the newspaper.

But times are changing—the Internet has birthed a new digital marketplace, print mediums are feeling the pressure to remain profitable, franchises are more interconnected than ever, and comics—as a medium—have grown up. More and more, comics have grown beyond their genre niche, demanding—and deserving—recognition as a literary medium. From graphic novels, gaining critical acclaim and challenging our expectations of comics, to webcomics, redefining the medium and the market, it's a brave new world of comic creation.

And we're going to try and make some sense of it all. Hello, everyone. I am Sarah Russell, and I'm going to be your host. In this series, we'll give an overview of the U.S. comic industry and examine how both the industry and comics are changing. We'll begin with a brief history of comics and graphic novels; discuss the importance of visual literacy in understanding comics; examine the current state of the comic industry and its reception; and then explore how the technological innovations of the past three decades has transformed comic consumption and

creation—from transmedia convergence to webcomics. And in the end, we'll take some time to consider these trends, reflect upon their significance, and speculate on where our world may be going next.

Now, before we dive in: we need to start with a disclaimer. The truth is that the comic industry is constantly changing, deeply vast with expansive history, and only growing more complex by the minute. This series is not meant to be a comprehensive examination of every aspect to it. There are many poignant examples, controversies, and evolving innovations that we simply don't have the time delve into with the care and attention that each deserves.

However, I hope that this series can serve as an easy introduction to an evolving industry, a survey course to introduce you to the modern comic world. And in the last episode, we'll reflect on what these changes and innovations mean for consumers, as creators, and ultimately for the future of storytelling.

There's an impossibly rich world of comic reading out there, so let's get into it!

Episode 2 Script: A Brief History of Comics and the Graphic Novel

Welcome everyone to the first full episode of Comic Corner! In this episode, we're going to kick off this series with a brief history of comics in the United States, providing the background context necessary to understand just how revolutionary the past few decades have truly been. We've got a lot of ground to cover, so let's not waste any time.

Humans have been telling stories through art and pictures since essentially the beginning of our history. Cave paintings like those seen in the Lascaux cave in France and the Leang Timpuseng cave in Sulawesi, Indonesia, show that art has been a part of the human existence for tens of thousands of years (Marchant). So, it shouldn't come as a surprise that our modern comics have evolved from a rich history of communicating through pictures—from ancient Egyptian paintings to Roman frescoes to woodcut novels, all telling stories through sequential images.

Now, are those comics? Admittedly, they don't look very similar to our modern conception of what comics look like, but the basic structure—using a series of images to convey narrative progression—is still there. It's honestly hard to define which—if any—of these examples count as the "first" comics, but I'm inclined to say that wanting a concrete answer misses the point. Looking back at history shows that our modern comics are simply the most recent chapter in a legacy of storytelling, that even our current understanding of comics will continue to grow and change. But more on that later.

Fast-forwarding to the 1800s, we can see the first works that look similar to our modern understanding of comics: usually, political cartoons. A cartoon is a single drawing, often with

some caption or text to clarify the message. Influential cartoonists would publish these single panel images in newspapers and periodicals, using the images to make statements and critiques of public figures and policies. By the 1860s, satirical and political illustrations had been commonly used for over a century, but Thomas Nast—lauded as the father of American political cartoons—popularized the practice in American newspapers ("Thomas Nast"). In fact, around 1870, Nast led a campaign of cartoons published in *Harper's Weekly* to remove William M. Tweed, a corrupt New York politician at the time. His cartoons were a success, turning voters against Tweed and eventually leading to his imprisonment for fraud, forgery, and larceny (DiFabio).

Now, granted, cartoons are not comics; the mediums are undeniably similar, but comics inherently require sequential art—or multiple panels that we read as a narrative. But the evolution from single-paneled cartoons to comic strips was a natural, gradual transition. Some of the pioneering comic strips from around the turn of the century included Carl Schultze's *Foxy Grandpa* and James Swinnerton's *Little Jimmy*—which typically told short, humorous stories (Bui). One of the first comics to expand beyond that comedic genre was *Little Nemo in Slumberland,* which began in 1905. *Little Nemo in Slumberland* was a fantasy adventure, following the dream adventures of a young boy named Nemo—sometimes through several weeks of publication, the first comic strip with a continuing story (Bui).

From these newspaper comic strips came the creation of comic books, although at that time they were typically just compilations of the newspaper strips, discovering the profit in selling reprints. In 1897, *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats* became the first comic book— actually boasting the phrase "comic book" on its back cover ("Comics: Comic Books"). The

book was a reprint compilation of Richard Felton Outcault's comic strips, starring the titular Yellow Kid. Similar reprint comic books were published for *The Katzenjammer Kids, Happy Hooligan,* and *Buster Brown.* In 1933, *Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics* was released, one of the first color comic books printed in the now standard size (Ramsey). And then, in 1935, the National Allied Publications—which will eventually be DC Comics—published *New Fun #1*— their first comic book and the first comic book with only new, original material ("Comics: Comic Books").

Historians typically divide the history of American comic books into ages, eras of trends and practices over the past century. These decades of newspaper funnies and comic strips is known as the Platinum Age. The majority of characters created in the Platinum Age have faded into history, with a few exceptions, like Popeye, Tintin, and Little Orphan Annie (Ramsey). Likely, in part, because the Platinum age comes to an abrupt and decisive end in June 1938.

In *Action Comics #1*, Superman debuted—launching the Golden Age of Comic Books. A year later, in May 1939, Batman premiered in *Detective Comics #27*, and in October 1939 came *Marvel Comics #1* from Marvel's predecessor Timely Publications. By 1941, Captain Marvel, The Flash, Green Lantern, Captain America, and Wonder Woman had all entered the comic world ("Comics: Comic Books"). The commercial success and popularity of these heroes drove publishers to want in on the action, and there was a boom of superhero creation. These characters defined the medium in that era, their inexpensive comics and heroic feats appealing to an audience dealing with Great Depression economic hardship. In the early 1940s, Superman, Batman, and Captain Marvel titles each regularly sold around 1.5 million copies per month, and during World War II, nearly 30% of reading material sent to deployed troops were comic books

("Comics: Comic Books;" Ramsey). After all, comic book superheroes—with their patriotic American motifs and staunch beliefs about justice—made for excellent propaganda, and many of the villains from that era evolved as fictional renditions of real foes—such as Nazi equivalents like the Red Skull or Captain Nazi. During the Golden Age, comics sales were at their peak, with 80 to 100 million comic books purchased in America every month—comics were truly widely read (Abad-Santos).

But after the war, both society and pop culture began to change. Although Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman sales remained fairly strong, superheroes fell out of fashion, and through the early 1950s, other genres like crime, romance, Western, science fiction, and horror grew increasingly popular (Ramsey). This shift in tone and content—from blind patriotism and heroism to more serious, disillusioned stories—followed the same pattern seen in the sudden popularity of pulp fiction and film noir at the time, broaching grittier, more mature topics. EC Comics is one of the prime examples that came about post-WWII, specializing in horror, crime fiction, and dark fantasy.

This sudden popularity of more obviously dark and violent storytelling became an easy target for comic critics. Comics had already experienced backlash, particularly from educators and parents, who felt the content wasn't real literature and damaged literacy (Ciciora). And then, in 1954, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, a treatise on the dangers of the youth reading comic books. Wertham, a highly respected and famous psychiatrist at the time, worked at a Harlem hospital and noticed that juvenile delinquents were reading comics, which prompted him to repeatedly speak out against comics for years (Sergi). In the *Seduction of the Innocent*, he concluded that comic books: "are an invitation to illiteracy, create an

atmosphere of cruelty and deceit, stimulate unwholesome fantasies, and suggest criminal or sexually abnormal ideas" (Wertham). He wrote about the perceived gay subtext in Batman and Robin, the oversexualized women, and—of course—how the depicted crime, violence, and drug-use were clearly linked to the rising delinquent behavior of the time, essentially teaching children how to be criminals.

Today, Wertham remains a controversial figure. After his original research was released in 2010, library scientist Carol Tilley found that he manipulated, overstated, and fabricated evidence, using misrepresentative examples to make unfounded conclusions (Wilson). Much like the more recent scare with video games, violent media does not naturally produce violent people. However, some of Wertham's critiques, such as the hypersexualized representation of women and racist depictions of some characters, echo critical concerns still relevant in media today. But Wertham has become a representative figure of the censorship crusade against comics, in part because his work was a catalyst for the already simmering moral panic over comics, sparking an anti-comic campaign.

In the wake of his book, newspaper headlines warned of the depravity of comic books, church and community groups organized to protest and collect offensive comics, and—as early as three years after WWII—Americans were burning books (Hajdu). In 1948, in Spencer, West Virginia, six hundred children publicly burned comic books, watched by priests, teachers, and parents. A similar book burning was featured in Time Magazine, as residents in Binghamton, New York held a mass comic book burning—and similar events spread throughout the country, as groups like the Cub Scouts and Girl Scouts mobilized to destroy the obscene content (Sergi). And, on a governmental level, more than a hundred acts of legislation were introduced to ban or

limit comic sales, including a New York law that prohibited publication of lurid comics and restricted sales to children under the age of 18 (Hajdu).

In response to Wertham's book and the public outcry, the U.S. Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency put comics on trial. The hearings were televised, calling people to testify on the comic book industry—including Wertham himself. No legislation came directly from that hearing, but the impact was still undeniable. Fifteen publishers went out of business the summer after the hearings, and EC Comics—who had been one of the main targets in the hearing—only survived by converting their MAD comic book to a magazine (Hajdu). And as a pre-emptive strike, later that year, the Comic Magazine Association of America adopted the Comics Code Authority, a censorship code to sterilize comic books. To name a few tenets, it required that depicted crimes couldn't create sympathy for the criminals, that police and government officials couldn't be depicted in a way that creates disrespect, that scenes of excessive violence or profanity were forbidden, that good must triumph over evil, and that any suggestive illustration or sex perversion was forbidden. The code even banned the use of the word "horror" or "terror" in comic titles ("History of Comics Censorship, Part 1"). That industry self-censorship is a familiar story, a disturbing echo of what happened in the film industry only a couple decades earlier with the Motion Picture Production Code. It was the same cycle then, too, where society's moral panic drives the industry to censor its material in order to protect itself from governmental influence.

Over the years, the Comics Code Authority went through a couple revisions—the first of which, in 1971, relaxed restrictions on crime comics, discussed how to include drug use, lifted the horror ban, and liberalized standards of sexual representation (Nyberg). And then the dawn of

comic books shops and direct market distribution in the late 1970s gave publishers a way to bypass the Comics Code, which led to the Code's second revision in 1989, shifting to a document that served more as a general guideline. But the Comics Code Authority remained for decades, with DC and Archie the last two publishers to drop the Seal of Approval only in 2011 (Nyberg).

The Comics Code Authority was certainly not the death of comics. In fact, going into the 1960s, the first major comic book conventions began, the *Batman* television series first aired, and Stan Lee joined Marvel, launching superheroes like The Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, and The Hulk ("Comics: Comic Books"). But according to David Hajdu, in his book *The Ten-Cent Plague*, chronicles how the Code's restrictions coupled with the commercial rejection of the medium led to a significant decline in comic work, with the number of titles published dropping from 650 to 250 in just two years. And, perhaps the most lasting impact of the Code on the industry, the Comics Code Authority restricted what stories the comic medium could tell. Because of the moral panic and the Code, the late 50s into the 60s saw another tone shift in comics—this time containing sillier plots and campy jokes, the kind of childish absurdity that still is associated with comics. Just as comics really began to stretch their breadth and capabilities, the Code forced comics to be—first and foremost—a medium safe for children.

From these circumstances came the birth of modern graphic novels, a form of comics that attempted to shake the stigma of "dime-store, mind-polluting" comic books. Some say the first known graphic novel can be traced to the 1783 adaptation of *Lenardo und Blandine*, a rendition of a German ballad told through captioned copper etchings, and there's a lot of discourse over

the origin of the term, who coined it first, and what comic-style works could potentially be considered "graphic novels" (Mulder).

But the term became popularized by Will Eisner—who described his work *A Contract with God* as a graphic novel. If you're unfamiliar, Eisner was one of the earliest cartoonists, lauded as the Orson Welles of comics, particularly for his groundbreaking work in developing our understanding of visual narratives and comic language ("A Short Biography"). Eisner taught classes on the techniques and skills needed to tell stories through sequential art, and his arguably most famous work *The Spirit*—a comic book published as a newspaper insert in the 40s—made full use of the medium in a way few others had, including full-page compositions, noir shadows, and parallel narratives (Norton). His work became the foundation for future cartoonists, and in recognition of his work, the Eisner Awards—one of the most prestigious awards in the comic industry—are named in his honor.

Eisner's *A Contract with God* was published in 1978 and revolutionized the medium, proving that comics could tackle serious, "literary" topics. In *A Contract with God*, Eisner wrote about the struggles of tenement life in New York City, a semi-autobiographical work that drew upon his own experiences and represented life for poor, Jewish, immigrants in the 1930s. It portrayed the lives of everyday people, realistically depicting the heartbreak and humanity within that Bronx tenement. *A Contract with God* is technically a collection of short stories, but they come together to craft a singular work, which Eisner pitched to publishers as more than just a comic book—and instead, as a graphic novel (Kaczynski).

By definition, a graphic novel is—simply enough—a novel told through comics and sequential art. But unlike comic strips or comic books, which are essentially installments in a

larger series, graphic novels are self-contained and book-length—and, perhaps most importantly, bear the name "novel." By calling the work a novel, Eisner attempted to distance *A Contract with God* from the legacy and stigma of comic books, emphasizing the difference between cheap children's entertainment and the literary value of his work. And while that connotative distinction is important, it's also important because going through a book publisher put *A Contract with God* on shelves in bookstores—not on newsstands or a comic book shop, but actual bookstores.

Now, it's important to note that *A Contract with God* wasn't wildly successful upon its publication; it was only accepted by a smaller company, Baronet Press, and it wasn't a bestseller. But it had a remarkable impact on the creative community, paving the way for modern graphic novels and inspiring cartoonists from Neil Gaiman to Art Spiegelman to Alan Moore (Callahan). In the introduction he wrote for the centennial edition of *A Contract with God*, cartoonist Scott McCloud wrote: "*A Contract with God* transports me to a very specific time in comics history: the late 70s, when the art form of comics felt alive with possibilities to me but dead as a doornail to Americans in general—a musty, decaying relic of a bygone era. Eisner's book connected with me as a sign of what comics could be…. It existed in its own continuum, patiently waiting for the rest of its kind to quietly arrive…on the shelves of North American bookstores" (Norton). From its deliberate artistry to its serious subject matter to its prominent claim of being a graphic novel, *A Contract with God* helped to bridge the gap between comics and books.

Since *A Contract with God* in 1978, there have been a plethora of graphic novels that have made waves in the publishing industry. The Eisner Awards provide a platform for the comic industry to recognize and award the best works of the medium. In 1992, *Maus* by Art

Spiegelman made history by winning the Pulitzer Prize—the first and only graphic novel to win a Pulitzer. Beginning as an underground comic, his graphic novel rendition of the Holocaust has become an icon for what serious graphic novels can be, can look like—evidence of how artful the medium can be. In 2006, *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel that tackles racial stereotypes, immigration and identity, and what it means to grow up Chinese-American, was nominated for a National Book Award. In 2013, the graphic novel *March* began telling the story autobiographical story of Congressman John Lewis in the civil rights movement. By the third in the trilogy, *March* won the National Book Award (Gamerman). And just recently, in 2018, *Sabrina* became the first graphic novel to make the longlist of the Man Booker Prize, the UK's most prestigious literary award. More and more, graphic novels are not only finding their place on bookshelves, but also standing beside traditional novels, recognized as literature. In Art Spiegelman's words, "If you're a cartoonist, you're not ostracized from the club of real artists anymore" (Gamerman).

But for all that graphic novels continue to stand out, they remain widely undervalued in the critical literary world. Despite *Maus*'s Pulitzer Prize, there is no category for graphic novels—although there's one for music. *Barnes & Noble's* graphic novel bestseller lists are only available through their Sci-Fi & Fantasy Blog, relegating the entire medium to popular fiction. In 2009, it seemed like things were changing when *The New York Times* released bestseller lists for graphic books, announcing the graphic hardcover, softcover, and manga lists in anticipation of the *Watchmen* movie—boasting that comic have finally joined the mainstream (Gustines). Only to eliminate the lists 8 years later, claiming that the *Times* was cutting back on the lists to dedicate efforts to expanding coverage.

But in 2018, literary agents and others over 400 members of the publishing industry signed a petition requesting the return of the lists, especially because that promised "expanded coverage" never really happened (MacDonald). In the petition, they hit the nail on the head, saying: "The bestseller list is not the be-all-end-all of comics publishing, nor is it an indicator of literary quality, but it does help with the visibility of our medium, and thus helps advance comics as serious literature. The list plays an indispensable role in helping new readers discover books and making the storytelling that we love more visible in the cultural conversation about literature. Without the list, it's harder for us to sell books, which makes it more challenging for publishers to take chances on new voices" (MacDonald). Without those lists—and the attention and credibility afforded by a *New York Times* endorsement—graphic novels have to work a lot harder to convince readers that they're available and worth reading, fighting amongst all other novels to earn a place on the list. (Although it does make it even more impressive when graphic novels like *March* break through, proving they *can* compete!)

And so, despite the ground gained, comics' fight for recognition as a legitimate art medium continues. In future episodes, we'll continue seeing how this struggle plays out in an increasingly complex and interconnected media world. We'll also discuss how the industry moved forward into the modern age of comics and what that means for the current state of the comic industry, particularly how it's been forced to evolve and comic's continuing struggle for legitimacy as a medium. But first, next episode, we're going to deviate from this background context and talk for a moment about the rising consciousness of visual literacy—examining what it means, how it relates to the creation of comics, and the growing recognition that it takes skill and knowledge to both consume and make comics.

Episode 3 Script: Visual Literacy

Welcome and welcome back! Last episode, we took some time to look back towards the history of graphic novels and comics, providing some important background context for the changes we've begun to see in both the industry and the medium. But before we attempt to grapple with these shifting trends, let's take some time to discuss how we've learned to read these images. In this episode, we'll be focusing on the concept of visual literacy, what it means, how we learn that visual language, and—of course—how we read comics.

Visual literacy is something we practice every day, typically with little conscious thought. When we see a yellow triangle sign, we know to yield. When we see brand logos, we know it represents a company or a product. When we look at maps, we understand the visual concept of scale, of boundaries, of paths to follow. Recent research has found that the most basic of image processing takes as a little as 13 milliseconds—just 13 milliseconds for your brain to see an image and begin to categorize and interpret it (Trafton). But as natural as this process is, this ability to comprehend the meaning and significance of what we see is to some degree *learned*. We process visual information in terms of our environmental context, our other senses, and especially our previous knowledge—and that's visual literacy.

Merriam-Webster defines visual literacy as the "ability to recognize and understand ideas conveyed through visible actions or images." Essentially, it's the skill that allows us to read, interpret, and write images. Any image, any icon, any color we see are all processed in terms of deriving meaning, interpreting the visual details to determine significance.

The term visual *literacy,* though, goes beyond the simple concept of image perception and interpretation. The word *literacy* introduces the idea that images are a language, something that we can learn to read—and by proxy, write—in order to communicate complex thoughts and narratives. And while it may seem contradictory to think that we can "write" an image, "writing" here reminds us that images are deliberately created in order to inspire feelings, provoke thought, and communicate ideas. They're encoded with details for viewers to read. Similar to how we learn letters, which are then structured into words, and then into complex sentences, visual literacy proposes that the shapes, colors, and various iconography of images are building blocks, tools that can then be structured and re-structured to tell the stories we want to tell.

It may seem strange to take a whole episode to review the idea of visual literacy when it's such a casually accepted part of our daily lives. However, we tend to take for granted this process of understanding. Visual literacy is a term that's only been coined and recognized fairly recently. It's credited to John Debes, who first used the term in 1969 and went on to co-found of the International Visual Literacy Association, or the IVLA. The IVLA is a scholarly organization of professionals across disciplines, creating a forum to better understand how we learn and communicate through visuals ("What is Visual Literacy?"). They also publish the twice annual *Journal of Visual Literacy*—which I highly recommend checking out if you're interested.

But the point is: while it's hardly a shock to the art community that images have meaning that audiences can interpret as they will, modern scholars are now more widely recognizing the significance of visual literacy, particularly as a form of communication. In fact, the American Association of College and Research Libraries only implemented Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education in 2011, recognizing the need to produce "visually literate

individual[s]" who are both "critical consumer[s] of visual media and competent contributor[s] to a body of shared knowledge and culture" ("ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education").

And I don't think that's coincidental. Within this past century—and particularly within the last two decades—we've seen a widespread proliferation of intentional, constructed images with the design of encoding meaning. From movies to television to commercials to magazines to brand packaging to comics, we are constantly inundated with images, images that carry meaning for us to parse out. This is especially true and relevant in our current age of Internet entertainment and content consumption. According to Mary Meeker's 2015 Internet Trends report, people uploaded an average of 1.8 billion digital images every day, and while we won't see all 1.8 billion of those daily images, according to Nielsen, American adults are estimated to spend more than 11 hours per day watching, reading, listening, and interacting with media (Eveleth; "Time Flies.."). That's the majority of our waking hours spent consuming, processing, and interpreting images—and visual literacy reminds us that the process is a skill, something we learn to do and do well. Just look at memes: about every new week comes with a new meme, a new image format, which we learn to read and understand and then adapt again, and again, and again—until it becomes entirely unintelligible to anyone without the context and literacy necessary to read it.

But even more than that, it's not just that we're consuming more images; we're also consuming them more critically. Part of this shift towards teaching visual literacy is part of a growing awareness that visual narratives are worth studying. In the U.S., film was only first recognized as an artistic medium protected under the First Amendment's freedom of speech in

1952, and as we discussed last episode, it's taken even longer to recognize the narrative value of comic books. It's taken critical literature, like Jules Feiffer's *The Great Comic Book Heroes,* to assess the appeal of comic books as a medium, and then books like Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* to discuss the techniques and skills that are necessary to creating good comics. By bringing in a critical perspective, the books emphasize the artistry behind the product—and our growing need to understand and fluently read this visual language.

Looking specifically at comics, there's certainly a standard visual language used to understand and perceive the narrative told in them. At its most straight-forward, comics rely upon the sequential ordering of images, often with some aspect of written language to accompany the visual. These images are rarely pulled from reality and are instead drawn representations, icons that we know represent far more. This includes everything from stink lines to suggest smell, to onomatopoeia text to mimic sound, to stylized human figures—providing an iconographic reality that is both deliberately designed and universally relatable. As for structure, each segment of a comic—each static image, often contained within some sort of box—is a frame. Those frames can be practically any size or shape, arranged on the page for audiences to read sequentially. The "movement" between the static images is done in the negative spaces— the gutters between each frame, where we interpret the connection and progression between each image (McCloud).

Seem familiar? Even if you aren't an avid comic reader, this structure shouldn't be too difficult to follow. Colors and iconography symbolism appeals to societal connotations, such as knowing that red usually indicates anger, passion, or love or knowing that a "heart-shape"

represents love, despite not actually being heart-shaped or having anything to do with romance. Same as books, comics read in the same pattern as their original language, so for English and related languages, comics read from top-down, left-to-right. More than that, though, the frame-by-frame structure of sequential comic art directly correlates to film. In a literal sense, film itself is simply a series of static images—frames—played so quickly that the human eye creates the illusion of continuity and movement. If you placed each frame beside each other—or just looked at filmstrips, then movies look more like really slow comics (McCloud).

But the similarities in visual structure between comics and film is far more obvious and intuitive than that. Films typically begin as storyboards, which allow the creators to plan shot-by-shot what the audience will see and are essentially just like frames in a comic. Each shot is reasonably comparable to a frame, with the same consideration in designing it. The creators need to determine what angle to look from; how close will the subject be; how will shadows and color impact the mood; what to put in the mise-en-scene, the arrangement of the background and the props in it. And the cut between shots is not unlike the gutter between frames of a comic, separating the two images and indicating that the audience is meant to juxtapose the two, to understand them in relation to each other.

Granted, films and comics obviously can't entirely replicate one other. Film is constrained to the same space, with each image replacing the other, and is reliant on the actual passage of time to tell the story. Meanwhile, in the words of Scott McCloud, "space does for comics what time does for film" (McCloud 7). In other words, the sequential order of images, the way different frames can be resized or organized on the page, allow for the comic creator to manipulate the reader's experience of time. Even though all the frames of a comic technically

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exist at once, we're able to read them in a chronological way—stopping longer on larger frames or reading faster is the frame is angular. In a similar vein, comics cannot include sound or music, but are still able to include onomatopoeia and—of course—dialogue so that readers can perceive the sound anyway. But despite—and, perhaps, because of—these differences, it's important to remember that film or comic, we read the images in a similar way, understanding the order and sequence of the images like the syntax of a sentence. Images alone always carry meaning, but once someone puts them in sequence, we have narrative—and it's in large part thanks to our learned visual literacy that we understand what they're trying to say.

All of these techniques and symbols and iconography inform our visual literacy, providing the building blocks of a visual language. And as with all language, it's important because it provides the framework for communication. As Debes described in his first definition of visual literacy, "Through the creative use of these [visual] competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication" ("What is Visual Literacy?"). Gender assumption aside, Debes acknowledges here that visual literacy is about being able to effectively convey ideas. Having a common visual language means that authors and artists can encode messages into their work and know that their audience will understand, deriving the intended meaning from their creation.

In later episodes, we'll see the relevance of this visual literacy and standard comic language as we move into adaptations and the burgeoning multimedia webcomic industry. More and more, thanks to widespread technological access and the Internet as a distribution platform, webcomics are innovating not just the industry but the medium itself. They still utilize the same

hallmarks of traditional comic design—using the same characteristics of visual language and similar syntactical structure—but that established visual language simply serves as the building blocks for comic creation, a foundation that can then be built upon, reduced down, or even broken as the medium evolves. There are webcomics out right now that blur the lines of what can even be defined as "a comic," and they're able to adapt and innovate because of the foundational visual literacy, providing context to help facilitate readers' understanding—even if they've never seen anything quite like it before.

But that's for another time. Next episode, we'll be looking at the state of the comic industry, picking up our discussion on comic and graphic novel history and turning towards the business side of things. We'll be focusing specifically on how the industry is currently structured, how recent technological and cultural developments have forced the industry to evolve, and whether or not the comic industry is dying. Thanks for joining me; don't touch that auto-play!

Episode 4 Script: State of the U.S. Comic Industry

Welcome and welcome back! Last episode we digressed from the history of the comics so we could discuss the importance of visual literacy, particularly in conjunction with the creation and understanding of comics as a medium. But in this episode, we'll be picking back up with our overview the comic industry. This episode we'll be discussing the current state of the American comics industry, looking at how the digital marketplace and media consolidation has forced the industry to evolve to survive, and of course, answering the repeated question of whether or not the comic industry is dying.

In our history of comics episode, we left off right around the 1970s, which comic historians typically refer to as the start of the Bronze Age (Ramsey). The 1970s marked a time of change and a rising social consciousness—from disillusionment and frustration with the Vietnam War, to the Civil Rights Movement, to the women's rights movement, to the sexual revolution, to the environmental movement—and, in turn, comic industry grew more socially conscious, too. And right around the start of the era, in 1971, the Comics Code Authority relaxed their standards, lifting the ban on horror comics, liberalizing restrictions on sex and crime comics, and discussing how to depict drug use in stories (Nyberg). This opened the door for a younger generation of artists, including Frank Miller who wrote *Daredevil, Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and eventually *Sin City*, who replaced many of the older artists who worked in the 30s and 40s, bringing with them a more realistic art style and more socially aware stories ("Comics: Comic Books").

At DC, Green Arrow and Green Lantern confronted poverty, racism, and drug use, while at Marvel, the X-Men regularly faced discrimination, Iron Man grappled with his alcoholism, and Spider-Man confronted his best friend's drug use. DC and Marvel also introduced a number of more diverse, minority superheroes—including Black Panther, Storm, Luke Cage, and Shang-Chi (Slyton). And 1975 saw the first interracial kiss in mainstream comics in *Amazing Adventures #31* (Serafino). As part of this heightened activism and social commentary, the Bronze Age also sparked the birth of more anti-hero protagonists, like the Punisher and Wolverine, whose vigilante and darker form of justice spoke to the era's disillusionment (Godfrey). That anti-hero trend continued into the 1980s—the Dark Age—with more jaded, pessimistic works and protagonists, such as the *Watchmen* (Grand).

Now, it's important to note that these revolutionary developments didn't begin with the mainstream industry, not with the Comics Code Authority in place. Instead, before the CCA revised its requirements, underground comix—with an 'x'—were the comic outlet for expression and rebellion from 1968 to the mid-70s (Harvey). Underground comix were separate from the mainstream publishers, usually from small presses or self-published books and sold in head shops. This distribution allowed the underground comix to avoid the restrictions of the Comics Code Authority, resulting in graphic, often sexual and drug-filled tributes to the counterculture movement but also in activism pieces about feminism and environmental awareness (Harvey).

Underground comix began to die out in 1973 after the Supreme Court decided that obscenity was defined by local standards, which—alongside the anti-drug movement—forced the underground works from head shops and deprived them of their distribution (Harvey). But around that same time, the mainstream industry developed their own method to circumvent the

CCA: direct market distribution. Prior to direct market distribution, comics were distributed and sold the same as magazines and newspapers, available at newsstands and drugstores. Not only did selling comic books next to periodicals reinforce that comics were cheap entertainment—not literature—but those retailers were effectively able to enforce the Comics Code Authority by refusing to stock comics without the CCA seal of approval (Dean).

That changed in 1973, when Phil Seuling introduced direct market distribution, a system that worked directly between publishers and comic shops (O'Leary and Balonon-Rosen). Rather than going through newsstand distributions, direct market distribution allowed comic shops to purchase a specific quantity of the books they wanted, which was the dawn of the specialty comic shops as we know them, as places that can stock for their clientele, catering to customer pull lists. It's a system that works well for a savvy shop-owner, who knows which comics to buy and when, and it also appeals to publishers because the sales are non-returnable. Previously, distributors were able to return unsold comics for reimbursement, meaning the publishers would essentially refund distributors. Marvel's marketing vice president at the time, Ed Shukin, said that the sell-through rate was 35 percent; for every 10 copies available, only 3 or 4 would sell—which meant the rest would be refunded (Dean). Which is why direct market distribution is typically credited for making the industry profitable again. With direct market distribution, publishers don't have to worry about reimbursing returns, but instead that puts the onus on comic shops. If they don't sell what they order, they're stuck with them (Polo).

The direct market is what the industry still uses today, although it looks a little different now. Distribution has consolidated and is now effectively a monopoly, with Diamond Comic Distributors the sole distributor between publishers and comic retailers. Diamond began in 1982

and gobbled up other, smaller distributors. By 1995, Dark Horse Comics, DC Comics, and Image Comics all had exclusivity deals, meaning they would only distribute to retailers through Diamond—and by 1997, Marvel signed on, too ("Diamond Timeline…"). There's a lot of controversy over whether this is good or bad for the industry as a whole, but the fact remains that direct market distribution, particularly through Diamond, has created an environment where the success of comic book shops is somewhat irrelevant to the rest of the industry (Polo). Both Diamond and comic publishers make their money from the retailers, so if consumers don't purchase comics, it's the retailers who are losing money, stuck with leftover inventory.

That's partially what led to the Comic Book Crash in the 1990s—inexperienced comic book shop owners looking to get in on the comic book boom, only to misjudge inventory and get stuck with overstock. At its peak in the early 1990s, around 10,000 comic book shops were open across the U.S, growing tenfold what it had been in 1979 (Rozanski). At the time, distributors had lowered the entry fee to becoming a comic book retailer, making it affordable and attractive to get into the industry. The industry had recently discovered the hidden value of collectors' items—largely as surviving comics from the 1930s sold at auction for exponentially more than its original cost—and publishers started manufacturing collectibles for speculators. Retailers invested, but the gimmicks worked too well; oversupply would keep the so-called collectible value low (Stillman). After the burst in 1996, nearly 6,000 of those shops closed, left with boxes of unsold and unsellable comics (Rozanski). Publisher sales dropped by over 70%, and Marvel filed bankruptcy in 1996 (Rozanski).

And yet—here we are today. Comics are still here, still surviving, and Marvel has gone from bankruptcy to a multi-billion-dollar brand. So, what's changed?

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The short answer is that media industry itself has changed, and the most successful comic

book publishers are navigating that changed landscape, from global markets to licensed products

to multimedia and transmedia franchises. Nowadays, there are only a few big players in the U.S.

comic industry, and past financial hardships aside, the biggest two are still Marvel and DC—

other than Archie Comics, they're the only comic publishers today with history back to the

1930s. Both Marvel and DC have improved their fortunes and survived the sales slump in part by

relying upon their parent companies—Disney and Warner Bros respectively—and diversifying

their products. This has been particularly true for Marvel's bounce back from bankruptcy, as they

invested in producing their own movies (Williams). For a move originally made to sell toys and

merchandise, the films paid off exponentially. Their risky but successful *Iron Man* movie

kickstarted Marvel's robust cinematic universe and led to their 2009 acquisition by Disney,

which has given them access to those coffers and resources (Williams). Now, only 18% of U.S.

consumers between the ages of 18 and 34 say they haven't watched one of Marvel's recent

movies ("Share of Consumers..."). That's 82% of people who have, which goes to show just how

mainstream the comic book world has become.

Other than Marvel and DC, the biggest names in comic book publishing are Image Comics,

Dark Horse Comics, Dynamite Entertainment, IDW Publishing, Boom! Studios, and VIZ Media

("Publisher Market Shares"). Image Comics, the third best-selling publisher in the industry,

began in 1992 after Todd McFarlane and other Marvel artists left—another factor that

contributed to their bankruptcy. Image Comics was dedicated to fostering creative freedom and

have kept their content creator-owned over the years. Their commitment to creator control and

freedom has led to widely popular and revolutionary works including *Spawn*, *The Walking Dead*,

and *Saga*. Meanwhile, publishers like Dark Horse, Dynamite, IDW, and Boom! have found a successful business model in selling licensed comics—works that utilize and build off of existing franchises—and then using that revenue to support original, riskier ventures (DiChristopher). Dark Horse, in particular, pioneered the model in 1988—investing in licensed projects in a way that other publishers had previously not. From *Aliens*, to *Predator*, to *Star Wars*, to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and many, many more, Dark Horse remains the industry leader in the niche— which has afforded them the opportunity to launch successful original content, like *The Umbrella Academy* ("History"). And even beyond these handful of companies, the comic industry has grown increasingly more diversified over the past two decades, with a boom in smaller, independent comic publishers (Thibault).

Now, it's important to note that while our discussion is focusing on the U.S. comic industry, comics are a worldwide phenomenon, and globalization only continues to broaden the impacts of a truly global market. VIZ Media, one of the top ten U.S. publishers, specializes in licensing Japanese manga and anime for sale in the United States. For those of you who may be unfamiliar, manga is the term for comics and graphic novels created in Japan and has become a robust genre with tropes and styles all its own. In 2017, according to the NPD Bookscan, manga sold for a total of $85 million in the U.S., and just in November 2018, 12 of the top 20 best-selling adult graphic novels were actually volumes of manga (Alverson).

But speaking of numbers—let's talk statistics, because while we can see the continued survival of the comic book industry, there are a number of concerns that sales—especially at traditional comic book shop retailers—are too low to support the industry. The truth is that comics are nowhere close to their heyday, when tens of millions were expected to sell each

month, but since the slump at the turn of the century, the market has been slowly recovering. In 1997, according to Comichron's estimation, the North American market for newsstand comics and book channel sales was around $300-$320 million. That number rose to $925 million in 2017. And since ICV2.com and Comichron began estimating the print and digital market in 2011, the industry has grown from $715 million to $1.015 billion. But particularly recently, the industry faced a sharp downturn in 2017, as retailer orders through the direct market fell 10% and graphic novel sales were down 5% (Miller).

Which brings us to the question of the hour: is the comic industry dying?

The very simple answer is probably not—at least not entirely—but the industry is undeniably changing—and it will need to keep evolving in order to survive. For one, distribution is still one of the many issues the plague the comic industry today, especially as Internet retail platforms and comic distribution services complicate the issue further and further (Allen).

Over the past decade or so, publishers have embraced the digital marketplace, being able to sell digital e-editions of their comics. Marvel Digital Comics Unlimited—the precursor to the Marvel Unlimited we have today—launched in 2007 as a subscription service that provided access to archived comics and updated regularly, although with a delay between print and digital release. Both Image Comics and Dark Horse Comics launched online digital stores in 2013 and 2011 respectively, and DC has just recently launched its new DC Universe service—although they're still working to add more comics to their subscription service's archives. And of course, the biggest player in the digital comics world is Amazon's comic distribution company: Comixology. With their unlimited subscription service, so consumers can pay to access as many comics as they'd like, Comixology has become a one-stop shop for digital comics, featuring a

variety of publishers—including publishers like Marvel, Dark Horse, and adding DC as of January 2019; Comixology Originals exclusively available on their platform; and self-published works through their Comixology Submit. Comixology has even worked to adapt comic consumption to fit the digital platform, allowing consumers on mobile devices to switch to "guided view." This guided view moves panel-by-panel, as the eye would move across the page, rather than simply turning the whole page and forcing users to zoom in ("What is ComiXology's…").

But as much as publishers are utilizing the digital marketplace to compete with other forms of digital entertainment, these digital sales and online services are only intended to supplement retail print sales. After all, as much as publishing industries and critics have bemoaned the death of print, physical book copies of comics and graphic novels still consistently sell more than digital editions. According to ICV2.com and Comichron's industry statistics, digital comic sales only accounted for $90 million of the $1.015 billion spent in North American comic sales in 2017 (Miller). Granted, that means digital sales still account for about 11% percent of total comic sales, which is especially significant considering how recently digital comic sales has been introduced to the market. ICV2.com began calculating estimated digital sales in 2011, and in that year, only $25 million came through comic sales. Only two years later, digital sales reached $90 million and has plateaued around that number since (Miller).

But digital sales don't really help local comic book shops, not if they don't get consumers through their door. As *Publishers Weekly* said, comics is a "market in transition," and retailers have to find a way adapt and maintain sales if they want to remain relevant—and increasingly, that means stocking more than monthly comic book issues (O'Leary). Rob Salkowitz, who wrote

the book *Comic-Con and the Business of Pop Culture*, noted that local comic shops are "clinging to the shrinking market of print periodicals," which means they're losing out on revenue from graphic novels and trade paperback collections—which compile past issues into a volume (Salkowitz). By focusing on the adult superhero market, although it's been and continues to be a staple of the industry, misses the trends in graphic novel and comic consumption. More and more, audiences are moving toward the book formats, from graphic novels, to trade volumes, to manga.

But the technological boom, media consolidation, and Internet revolution have drastically shifted the industry in more ways than just distribution methods. As we move forward in this series, we're going to closely examine a few of the burgeoning trends that have reshaped the industry, from transmedia convergence and adaptations, to the rise of webcomics, to the birth of multimedia webcomics. In this next episode, we'll specifically look at transmedia convergence and adaptations, seeing how comics tie in to a larger and ever-expanding media landscape.

Episode 5 Script: Transmedia Convergence and Adaptations

Welcome and welcome back! Last episode, we discussed the current state of the comic industry, looking at how the industry has grown and changed in the past few decades, especially considering the Internet boom and the dawn of the digital marketplace. In that, we also talked a bit about how comics are perceived, examining the critical reception of the medium and its fight for legitimacy. We'll be carrying that idea of legitimacy into this episode as well as we further discuss adaptations, franchises, and transmedia convergence, examining the role of comics in our complex media landscape.

Both transmedia storytelling and convergence culture are concepts that were popularized by professor, author, and media scholar Henry Jenkins in 2003 and 2006 respectively (Jenkins). But just what is transmedia convergence? Let's break it down:

Transmedia is a term that describes works, approaches, or franchises that create unique content across multiple mediums to contribute to one unified understanding or experience. In terms of transmedia storytelling, that may look the *Star Wars* franchise, where the movies, comics, animated series, novels, games, and various other media can be enjoyed independently but all contribute to a greater canon and Expanded Universe. Transmedia has become a popular buzzword in media analysis, and it's often confused or used interchangeably with terms like multimedia or cross-platform. But transmedia isn't just a synonym. Cross-platform media means distributing the same product—or nearly the same—to different platforms, and multimedia refers to a single work that incorporates multiple different mediums into the one experience. But transmedia gets at the core idea of how media today is interconnected, how each piece of a

franchise can contribute to what Jenkins calls our "additive comprehension" of a universe (Jenkins). It reflects the modern economics of media consolidation, in which large conglomerates have a hand in multiple platforms all used to expand its brand and franchises.

Which brings us to convergence—a broad term used to describe this technological and industrial shift. Media convergence encapsulates how previously distinct aspects of the media world are merging, from content distribution across multiple platforms, to interconnected media industries, to the technology that allows us to consume a variety of media in the palm of our hand. But Jenkins argues that convergence is not just an economic or technological process, but actually a "shift in cultural logic" (Jenkins) He looks at convergence culture in terms of how individual consumers are encouraged to become participants, actively making connections between the fragments of information and media we consume. It's a fascinating perspective on how we assimilate information, and then contribute our perspective to a collective intelligence, a convergence of minds making meaning.

So transmedia convergence strikes at this cultural and industrial movement to cooperatively use multiple media forms to tell stories, engaging consumers in a world so robust that it becomes an experience to discover, discuss, and immerse yourself in. And, of course, that you'll keep paying money to consume.

By my judgement, only a few franchises have achieved this to its fullest extent. I'm talking about well-known and deeply fleshed out universes like *Marvel* and *Star Wars*, where there always seems to be another layer, another character, another story to weave into the tapestry. Even *Harry Potter,* for all that it's trying to become the complex Wizarding World it

boasts, still relies too heavily on its original material—and each attempt to stretch beyond the core books is met with mixed reviews, although its commercial success is still undeniable.

But for comics, whether on a *Marvel* scale or not, transmedia convergence has played a key role in both their pop-culture prevalence and the slow shift towards seeing comics as legitimate art and literature.

Perhaps the most visible and understandable aspect of franchise convergence is adaptation or reimagining a story in a different medium. The logic is simple enough: if consumers liked the story in one form, they'll probably pay to see it in another. Because of that built-in fanbase, adaptations are a more secure investment; publishers and production companies know it will attract an audience, all without having to gamble on the success of new original works. Not to mention, adaptations are also usually cheaper to produce because the source material cuts down on writing and creative costs. So, economically speaking, adaptations are a smart, efficient way to utilize existing material to increase profit.

But more than just another opportunity to profit from the existing fanbase, adaptations hope to attract both long-time fans *and* new consumers. Each new medium offers a new entry point for consumers who may be interested in the franchise. For example, a film-adaptation of a novel is an entry point for movie-goers who may not be as interested in reading. If done successfully, a good adaptation will bring readers to the theater, and send satisfied movie-goers to the book store, looking to read the film's inspiration (Bennett). And it doesn't stop there. The hope is that movie fans read the book and then start looking to read more, inviting them to consume similar media in the future. That way, not only does the franchise reach the largest

audience it can, but it also creates consumers for future content. This cross-pollination between mediums and industries is a lot of what convergence is about.

Now, to be considered transmedia, an adaptation has to contribute to the larger universe or understanding of the franchise. If an adaptation just regurgitates the original—or if it derails from the source material completely—then some may argue that it isn't transmedia, and they've got a point. Not all adaptations are made with the franchise in mind, and it may be better to regard them as related but separate entities. I'm looking at you, *Percy Jackson* movie.

But often, faithful adaptations are still transmedia because of the choices that must be made in order to adapt the story. Moving from one medium to another forces creators to choose how to best tell the story in that form, and along the way, their decisions add to the world. At a minimum, going from a novel to a comic or film adds visuals, which means that creators must present concrete images to replace what had previously been imagined. From characters to settings, the process of rendering description into visuals creates a new canon for how the world can be perceived. Each included detail, from what hangs on the wall in the protagonist's bedroom to what each character wears, works to characterize the story and fleshes out the world in ways that make it slowly become more complete and vivid. And well-done visuals do a lot more than just represent reality.

To paraphrase NPR comics blogger Glen Weldon, a good graphic novel adaptation doesn't just copy the book's prose and put pictures around it; a graphic novel needs to create tension between the text and images (Neary). Because of the economy of words, the art in graphic novel adaptations does a lot of the storytelling work—from setting the tone through color and lines to controlling the pacing with frames and gutters. It goes back to what we discussed earlier with

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visual literacy, and how the building blocks of visual language can be used and experimented with. Comics tell stories through that juxtaposition of visuals and text, making meaning from what their association implies.

One of the most poignant examples of this is the graphic novel adaptation of *Anne Frank's Diary* by Ari Folman and David Polonsky. Folman and Polonsky approached the adaptation as a way to "supplement" the original diary with visuals, attempting to interpret Anne's words as she wrote them (Burack). In one panel, the text from her diary reads that the "bad thoughts creep into [her] mind" at night, and Polonsky's illustration imagines the nightmares that haunt her— representing the looming Nazi threat as gray horde, faces menacing behind every pillar and red smoke weaving around and suffocating her sleeping form. It may not be hard for readers to guess at what bad thoughts might keep Anne up at night, but the graphic novel's interpretation paints an evocative picture of the very real darkness in Anne's life, juxtaposed beautifully with the bright colors of what her childhood once was. It's that artful interpretation that gives value to the adaptation, what reviews called an "exceptionally graceful homage" (Burack). Granted, with all adaptations, it's up to the consumer to decide whether or not they accept an interpretation, but simply by existing, each adapted interpretation contributes to how we conceptualize the story. Even by rejecting an interpretation, we better define our understanding of the material—and almost personalize the story through our perception.

Similarly, adapting from comic to film adds audio and movement, adding an auditory interpretation of the material as well as filling in the motion between the gutters. While audio additions are often more understated or subtle than visual components, voice actors and sound effects breathe life into the world, and music guides our mood while watching, drawing us in to

an immersive space. One recent example that I was particularly impressed by was the Prowler sound effect from *Into the Spiderverse*. With each appearance of the dangerous threat, the sound heralds Miles Morales's panic, building tension with each repetition, but in the end, that sound becomes the introduction to the song What's Up Danger—the theme that plays when Miles steps up, takes the plunge, and embraces his role as Spider-Man. The song itself is an empowering anthem, but it's all the more powerful because it starts with the Prowler's growl, showing that Miles isn't running from his fear—but confronting it. That sound and that song may not be able to translate back into comic form, but that interpretation can remain in the consciousness of the consumer. I certainly know I'll be hearing it anytime I read about Miles.

Now, adaptations don't have to be transmedia in order to grow or strengthen the franchise. There's still profit to be made whether or not the adaptation adds to franchise's universe. But more and more, industries are looking for ways to create adaptations and spin-offs that are transmedia because they offer new content to entice returning fans, who may not be willing to pay if there's nothing new to see. Many authors and consumers alike don't see the value in rehashing an old story when there's much more opportunity—and sales—in prequels, sequels, or side stories about characters or plots that haven't had a chance at the limelight. Even television hit *The Walking Dead*, which could have been a straight adaptation of the comic series, makes an effort to make adjustments to make the series more compelling for the audience (Taormina). Robert Kirkman, creator of the series, has openly discussed their willingness to explore how the show takes a different shape by shifting events or with different characters added or removed. As he sees it, the differences put a "fresh coat of paint on it," keeping the core story intact while contributing new material as well (Harp).

Beyond these adaptations, one transmedia trend that has particularly taken off in the past couple decades is the existence of tie-in comic books. Tie-in comics are—literally—comics that tie-in to a franchise, usually serving as either a companion work, a spin-off, or a continuation of the main series. Expansive multimedia universes like Marvel and DC obviously make use of tie-ins, such as the *Shuri* comic series about T'Challa's sister that came out after *Black Panther* and DC's comic tie-in to *Injustice: Gods Among Us,* revealing the lore behind 2013 fighting game.

But it's hardly surprising that Marvel and DC create comic tie-ins for their other media. Comics is what they do. I find it much more interesting that some franchises that began on screen have also found their way to tie-in comics. Cartoon Network's animated hit *Adventure Time* has a non-canonical comic book series which ran for about 6 years and a number of graphic novel stand-alones and spin-off mini-series, and with the show's conclusion, a new comic series called *Season 11* picks up right where the show's finale ended. Both *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*, animated television shows from Nickelodeon, have similarly published comics to continue the shows' stories after they ended, and popular adult animation *Rick and Morty* has a spin-off comic series starring alternate universe versions of the show's protagonists. Even video games like *Bloodborne* and *Life is Strange* have sparked comic series based on or continuing the stories beyond the game.

To some extent, the jump from animation to comics makes obvious sense. Comics allow an animated series or video game to maintain a similar art style and visual form of storytelling—all while saving on the cost of animation and audio, from music to voice actors. For video game tie-ins, the comics obviously lose interactivity, but comics offer an opportunity to expand on the

world's lore. All and all, it's a smooth transition for viewers who would like to see more from the universe.

But some media tie-in comics are based on live-action shows, such as comics in the *Firefly* and *Doctor Who* franchises. And without an animation style to imitate, all the real-life actors have to be illustrated. Typically, the creators choose a hyper-realistic art style when adapting live-action to comics, trying to mimic their actual appearance as close as possible. (But unfortunately, in my opinion, they're also way too close to the uncanny valley for comfort.)

So why do it? Why add comics into a franchise, especially if the original medium is still publishing content and the comics will remain questionably canonical?

Well, in many ways, it's just smart business—and marketing synergy at its finest. As we've already noted, building a transmedia franchise is all about taking advantage of each potential medium to maximize profit. But more than simply creating extra content, these additions to the series are about providing entry points to consumers that may be interested in the source material. It's not a coincidence that many of the live-action or video game comic spin-offs are science fiction and fantasy; they branch out into comics because they're trying to reach that audience, who are often already familiar and interested in the genres. And these entry points become more and more important as a franchise gets increasingly long and complex. Long-running franchises like *Doctor Who* have so much content that it can be intimidating and confusing for new consumers, but spin-offs or reboots of the series give interested people a new avenue into the bigger franchise.

And as useful as comic spin-offs are for these franchises, these entry points are especially important for comic books and graphic novels, which have long held a bit of social stigma—seen

as nerdy, childish, or even just entertainment. Granted, that stigma has definitely begun to change. Graphic novels have shown that comics have a place in literary fiction and nonfiction, and interest in the more traditional comic book science fiction and fantasy is practically more mainstream than ever. But a lot of that changing perspective on comics is a byproduct of transmedia convergence, as adaptations create new entry points to the medium.

Graphic novel adaptations like *Anne Frank's Diary*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* not only make significant literature more accessible but also introduce readers to the potential of comics. In the words of Scholastic creative director David Saylor, creating graphic novel adaptations of successful properties—like the Baby-Sitters Club and Goosebumps—provides an opportunity to overcome an early "resistance to graphic novels" in a marketplace that sometimes sees comics as a lesser version of prose (Price). By adapting already beloved and respected literary works, graphic novels gain credibility and critical recognition, and those adaptations become an entry point for readers who may have otherwise dismissed comics' potential to be serious literature.

Meanwhile, as those adaptations solidify comics' value as a medium, film and TV adaptations of comics help legitimize the stories that began in comics. *The Walking Dead* has dominated television ratings over the past near decade, and *Marvel* has become an unassailable Hollywood blockbuster powerhouse (Harp; Williams). From *Sin City* to *Persepolis* to every *DC* television series, the stories began as comics, and the franchises have used their screen adaptations as entry points to bring new consumers into the robust, existing world of comics. *Marvel* is particularly good at that, such as releasing "Peter Parker: The Spectacular Spider-Man" the month before "Spider-Man: Homecoming" opened, pairing that comic iteration to match the

movie's lighter tone (Cox and Steinberg). That way, as each movie release spikes interest in its source material, new fans discover the potential stories awaiting them in comic book shops just around the corner.

Now, stay tuned, we're going to pick this discussion right back up next episode as we dive into a case study on unorthodox adaptations and how transmedia convergence can work to help independent creators expand their brand in a competitive market.

Episode 5.5 Script: Transmedia Convergence Case Study

Welcome and welcome back! This episode we'll be examining a couple interesting case studies on adaptations and transmedia convergence. If you haven't seen the previous episode on transmedia convergence, you may want to backtrack and go check that out—because we're diving right in. (Don't worry, I'll wait.)

As our media grows increasingly more diverse and interconnected, we're also seeing some remarkably unorthodox adaptations—adaptations that embody the cultural potential of transmedia convergence. Two of the most prevalent recent examples are *The Adventure Zone* and *Critical Role*, both of which are live-play Dungeons and Dragons podcasts that have broken from their original form and into the world of comics. If you aren't familiar with Dungeons and Dragons—or D&D—it's a tabletop role-playing game (or RPG) based in a fantasy world of monsters and heroes. There are many tabletop RPGs out there with a variety of settings and genres, from science-fiction to crime fiction to dystopia, but D&D has become the posterchild for RPGs since its creation in 1974 and remains one of the most popular systems on the market.

Tabletop RPGs are essentially interactive stories. One person—the Game Master—is like a narrator, crafting the world and setting challenges for the players, and each player creates a personal character that serves as their avatar in the game. Players make choices, rolling dice to determine outcomes, and then the Game Master describes the consequences to their choices, progressing the narrative. In its most natural flow, a good RPG campaign balances the structure of the plot with the autonomy of the characters, allowing all players to shape the story's course. It's a largely organic form of improvised storytelling, filled with personal humor and inside jokes

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that make each game as unique as its players. Which is partially why it's so surprising to see these improv games adapted into other forms, but their success is undeniable.

Looking first at *The Adventure Zone*—or *TAZ*—it is a bi-weekly audio podcast created by the McElroy brothers and their dad, Clint McElroy. Each episode of *TAZ* follows the family as they play RPGs, telling a long-form, episodic story over the course of each campaign. They've moved on from Dungeons and Dragons as they've moved into their second campaign, but their first campaign—the Balance Arc—ran for 69 episodes of D&D adventuring. *The Adventure Zone*'s success, though, has not only led to the family touring across the U.S., hosting live shows where they play D&D in front of a live, paying audience—but it has also led to a graphic novel adaptation, with more books on the way.

The first *TAZ* graphic novel *Here There Be Gerblins* came out from First Second Books in July of 2018 and follows the first story arc from the podcast's first campaign. The story in the graphic novel is almost entirely true to the plot of that first arc, but translating the improvisational, audio podcast into a graphic novel required a number of decisions and edits. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, the McElroy family discussed the process of adapting the story, and while the adaptation began with transcripts from the podcast, they had to consider what jokes worked visually, which ones only worked with audio, and as Justin McElroy notes, what additions "didn't really serve the characters" (McMillan).

Part of the charm of the *Here There Be Gerblins* adaptation is that it preserves some of the original D&D format without sacrificing the emotional integrity of the story. Griffin—the campaign's Dungeon Master—still exists in the graphic novel, serving a pseudo-God figure for the characters to interact with. His presence—offering asides to our player heroes—allows the

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story to retain many of its meta jokes that poke fun at the D&D mechanics or reference the real world beyond the fantasy setting. But despite these comedic asides through Griffin, the graphic novel distinctly separates the characters from their human players, allowing them to exist autonomously as their own beings. That choice cuts out a lot of potential content—including many of the jokes between the players, as a family and out of character—but it gives emotional weight to the characters' stories. In the graphic novel, they aren't just pawns; they're fully realized creations, which gives their story meaning.

And we know the McElroys must have done something right because *Here There Be Gerblins* was received with remarkable acclaim, topping the *New York Times'*s paperback trade fiction bestseller list and clocking in as the third bestselling overall in the combined print and e-book fiction list. That's the highest placement a graphic novel has ever had on the *Times* fiction list (McMillan).

Now, for all that it's still a D&D podcast, *Critical Role* is a bit of a different beast. With a cast of professional voice actors, featuring guest stars of various acclaim, and now sponsored directly by D&D Beyond—the official digital Dungeons and Dragons companion app, *Critical Role* has grown into an independent but powerful force in the role-playing community.

Unlike *The Adventure Zone*, where each episode is released after it's been edited, *Critical Role* is a video streamed live on Twitch each week—which means whatever unfolds each episode is witnessed simultaneously by viewers across the world. After the show airs live, it is released as an audio podcast and a video series on YouTube, but the content remains authentic to that original, live airing, which preserves the spontaneity and improvisational nature of the story. Each week, *Critical Role's* live viewership peaks around 25,000 viewers, and as of this

recording, the first episode of their second campaign has over 4 million views on Youtube

("GeekandSundry;" "Curious Beginnings…"). As you might expect, the views decline over the

course of the campaign—as audience members fall behind or lose interest—but even after 50

episodes into the second campaign, each weekly episode consistently gains around half a million

views.

Which all goes to show that they aren't exaggerating when the *Critical Role* website says

it has grown into a "multi-platform entertainment sensation" ("Critical Role") Similar to *The*

Adventure Zone, *Critical Role* has also dabbled in the live show scene, occasionally performing

at conventions, but *Crit Role* has also hosted an art gallery of fan-created *Critical Role* art,

released physical art books with works from fan creators, and even published an official

"campaign setting" book, so that people can play D&D in the same fantasy world as the *Critical*

Role cast ("Critical Role").

In September 2017, they also released a comic series based on their first campaign called

Vox Machina: Origins. Instead of a graphic novel adaptation, *Critical Role* chose to publish a

six-issue digital comic series through Dark Horse Comics, revealing the previous untold origin

stories of the first campaign's heroes: Vox Machina ("Critical Role Issue #1"). That way, they've

avoided many of the concerns that *The Adventure Zone* needed to juggle during adaptation by

making *Origins* a supplemental companion work—and a new entry point to get into the

expansive series.

However, *Critical Role* has taken their transmedia franchise one step further than *The*

Adventure Zone, announcing just this past March that they would Kickstart an animated special

based on their first campaign. Set to be released in Fall 2020 if funded, *The Legend of Vox*

Machina was originally conceived to be a 22-minute stand-alone episode based on the first campaign, similar to what they did with their comic series. Both the comic and the cartoon can be enjoyed without having the context of the podcast, offering a more accessible way for new viewers to get invested all while providing new content for returning fans.

But fan support has shattered all expectations. The Kickstarter was funded in less than an hour and has broken the record for the most-funded TV or film project on Kickstarter ever. As of recording this, the Kickstarter has raised over 8 million dollars and still has a number of days to go—and those surpassed stretch goals will lead to some adaptational choices ("Discover, Most Funded;" "Critical Role: The Legend of Vox Machina…"). The additional funding has unlocked at least 8 episodes of content—transforming this animated 'special' into a series—and only the first two episodes will be that original stand-alone story. The next six episodes will be an adaptation of one of *Critical Role's* most popular arcs from the first campaign: the Briarwood arc.

Now, it's too early to do anything more than speculate about how that adaptation is going to look, but we can be sure that the *Critical Role* cast will face similar questions and choices that the McElroy family tackled with *Here There Be Gerblins.* What humor and personality are lost in streamlining an improvisational podcast down to just its story narrative? What aspects of the original RPG format do you preserve, and which aspects have to go to ensure the story has weight? Adaptation may turn out to be an easier task for the *Critical Role* crew simply because they spend so much game time in character already; they don't have to reconcile the separation between the players and the characters as much as *TAZ* did. However, *Critical Role* has the additional problem that by beginning their adaptation with the Briarwood arc means essentially

starting in media res. That arc begins 24 episodes in to the web series, and two years before the show even started airing—which is where the *Origins* comic has been attempting to fill in the blank. In the next year, it'll be important to watch *Critical Role*, seeing how—as an independent group—they broach this difficult adaptation, draw upon different comic and animated styles, and—potentially—utilize transmedia convergence to grow beyond their niche audience.

After all, we're all pretty familiar with Marvel and DC and how they've grown into household franchise names, but both *The Adventure Zone* and *Critical Role*—for all that they may not be traditional comic book adaptations—are landmark examples of what transmedia convergence can mean for independent creators. Both series began as games, unscripted and free-flowing, mostly meant for the personal enjoyment of the players, but they found an audience and over the years have only continued to grow in both popularity and renowned. The two series have taken different paths towards legitimacy, but both have shown how different mediums of storytelling can come together, cross-feeding content and bringing in new audiences, to become something greater—a pop culture phenomenon. *The Adventure Zone* has already made waves by hitting the *New York Times* bestseller list, demanding acknowledgement from the publishing world in a way few graphic novels have, and *Critical Role* seems destined to do the same.

For these franchises and many more, transmedia convergence is about reach—and what it means when something niche becomes part of the public consciousness. In this series, we've already discussed a bit of comics' fight for legitimacy, the struggle to be perceived as an artform instead of being dismissed as entertainment, and for comics, transmedia convergence is a way to change people's perspective. By adapting comic books into movies and then rendering beloved TV and book characters into comics, creators remind us that all mediums of storytelling have a

similar power to move us and change us. It proves that no one medium has a monopoly on the stories worth telling—and, conversely, reminds us that all mediums have the power to tell amazing, important stories, comics definitely included. After all, we're still in love in Spider-Man, whether we're watching a live action movie, reading a comic book, or seeing *Into the Spiderverse* for the fourteenth time.

And perhaps that's an odd way to understand transmedia convergence. It's easy to look at each adaptation and spin-off as just another corporate cash grab, and to some degree that's absolutely true. More content to sell means more revenue, and commercially, it's simple financial sense that says making a movie adaptation will boost comic sales or that writing a graphic novel will bring new listeners to your podcast. But for years now, film and written novels especially have provided opportunities for viewers and readers to look at comics in a new light, to see stories that they already know and love in a form they may have dismissed as immature or frivolous. They're not just entry points for a sale but entry points for the whole medium. And I, for one, think it's exciting to see adaptations like *The Adventure Zone*, where for once, it's the graphic novel that helps to legitimize the value of an up-and-coming storytelling medium.

And on that note of growing mediums, in the next episode, we'll be focusing on webcomics. We've already spoken about them a bit in the previous episode on the state of the comic industry, but next episode we're really going to look at the structures surrounding webcomic creation, such as how independent creators are able to profit off their product, as well as how webcomics provide creators the freedom to think outside the page, re-imagining what it means to make a comic in the digital era.

Welcome and welcome back! Last episode we talked about adaptations and transmedia convergence, discussing the role comics play as a singular medium within a larger landscape of media storytelling. More than ever, we live in a world where stories are constantly transformed and reimagined in different forms and with different influences. But this episode, let's take a step back from how the comic industry interacts with other media industries, and instead focus in on one of the greatest shifts in the comic industry: the rise of webcomics. The first known webcomic was *Witches and Stitches*, which was written in 1985 by Eric Millikin and was published on CompuServe, the first commercial online service and one that predated the world wide web (Halliday; Garrity). With the web invented, cartoonists began to populate the space with panels and strips, experimenting with the form and reaching audiences across the world. And then Scott McCloud released *Reinventing Comics* in 2000, which espoused the potential of digital production, digital delivery, and—of course—digital comics, inspiring the industry and birthing a new perspective on the future of comics (McCloud).

We briefly touched on the rise of webcomics when we were discussing the current state of the industry, as comic publishers have been forced to pay attention to changing habits of consumers. But now, the simple fact is that just about anyone can make a webcomic. Between the widespread distribution capabilities of the Internet, the convenience of social media platforms, and increased access to advanced and often professional-level drawing software, it's easier than ever to bring your comic to life on the web. Which means webcomics have become a driving industry force all their own, evolving new publishers, formats, and structures. In this

episode, we're going to examine these innovations and opportunities that have evolved as webcomics have grown into a veritable industry of their own.

Part of the struggle that has arisen with the popularity of webcomics has been the question of how to efficiently monetize digital content. It's a question that's plagued industries practically since the Internet began. From journalism to music to film, any industry that wants their content to be consumable online has to eventually ask, "How can we make money on this?" So far, the answers to that question have resulted in subscription and membership services, ad revenue structures, sponsored content, and donation requests (eMarketer Editors).

For larger comic publishers, monetizing digital comics is typically similar to the shift towards e-books. Digital comics are usually just digital e-editions of the comics normally available in print format, providing a sometimes cheaper, more easily available option for consumers, all while still preserving the value of print editions. Unlike larger publishers, independent webcomic creators do not typically sell their works in comparable digital storefronts. Webcomics are almost universally available online for free for any reader, so many independent creators must rely on advertisements and donation structures to support their comic—at least until they gain enough popularity to sell print copies and merchandise for their work.

Kickstarter remains a remarkably popular option for webcomic creators who are interested in transforming their digital story into print form, kickstarting their independent publication with support from their readers. In 2018, 1,457 comic book projects—varying from graphic novels to webcomics—were funded, raising $16 million in pledges (Stone). What's even more impressive

is that 70% of the comic book projects on Kickstarter that year reached their funding goals, a remarkably high percentage of success for independent creators (Stone).

Patreon and Ko-fi are similar platforms made to financially support creators—but with a very different payment model than Kickstarter. With Kickstarter, backers fund a specific project and expect certain rewards related to that project. Patreon and Ko-fi are more targeted towards long-term, consistent support for creators, whether they're working on one continuous project (like a webcomic) or producing a wide range of content (like an illustrator.) Donors subscribe to give money on a monthly or incremental basis, creating a stable revenue source for the creators. On Ko-fi, donors also have the option for one-time donations, if a monthly payment isn't practical. In return for their money, supporters are usually given sneak peaks, behind-the-scenes material, or other exclusive bonuses. Ko-fi currently boasts over 400,000 creators, while Patreon hosts 100,000 active creators earnings a projected $300 million in 2018 ("The Friendly Way to Fund Your Passions;" "About").

However, these platforms require some extent of a fanbase before they can become lucrative, and hosting your own website can be potentially costly. Many webcomic creators find it more practical to work with an established webcomic publisher, which can help connect. These publishers—such as Hiveworks and Smack Jeeves—offer a platform for webcomic creators to publish their comics. Publishers provide support with website creation and publicity, and Hiveworks is particularly renowned for cross-promoting their comics. Creators profit from ad revenue and are free to use supporting services like Patreon to fund their work. Hiveworks also hosts a store, where creators can profit off of merchandise sales, and offers page-rate payment for comics they directly produce ("About").

Webcomic creators can also publish their work on Webtoon—a Korean website that is now one of the biggest global providers of digital comics, with 17 million monthly users (Acuna). Or they can publish through Comixology Submit, the branch of Comixology dedicated to independent, self-published works. Both Webtoon and Comixology Submit are free platforms, allowing any webcomic creator to publish their work—assuming their submission is approved—but the catch is that there's no guarantee of profits. Comixology gives creators 50% of the net sales of their title, while on Webtoon, if your comic is successful and becomes featured, then you receive monthly payments—with extra bonuses for certain levels of popularity ("Take Comics Further;" "Line Webtoons Discover"). As of August 2018, though, Webtoon has also launched a beta for an ad revenue sharing program, moving towards greater monetization opportunity for creators ("Update on Webtoon's Ad Revenue…").

Having said all that, it's important to note that webcomics are still often works of passion. Unless a webcomic has gained attention and financial support, creators typically cannot dedicate their full attention to making comics—and even then, it's not a particularly lucrative venture. But now, at least, the birth of monetization structures and webcomic publishers—from Patreon to Hiveworks to Webtoon—have given independent creators a chance to profit, to get their foot in the door and earn enough money to support their art and their stories. Which is great news for innovation because the rise of webcomics and independent creators has led to some truly revolutionary works that have begun to evolve and change the traditional comic medium.

We discussed earlier on in this series about the significance of visual literacy and how we've learned to read images—and especially comics—in a specific way, and those building blocks of structure and iconography are certainly still used. But the flexibility of the web

platform is sparking innovation, allowing creators to go beyond what we think comics should look like.

As noted earlier, digital editions of published comics and graphic novels are typically just that—digital copies of what you'd see on the physical, printed page. It's the same concept as most e-books, which simply provide the book content on a screen instead of paper—a different platform to consume the same content. But webcomics live on the Internet, and while they may one day find their way into a print edition, their original form means that webcomics are not constrained by the page.

For one, webcomics can utilize the entire web page as a canvas—breaking outside the boundaries of the standard page dimensions. This naturally provides more room for comic creators to work with, but by expanding beyond the page, webcomics are able to utilize the web medium to build tension, change tone, and ultimately impact the reader's experience.

One of my favorite examples of this is the webcomic *Unsounded*. As the plot climaxes and the action rises, the author—Ashley Cope—lets her art flow off the traditional page. The otherworldly bursts out of the panels, into the margins, and, eventually, contaminates the entire window. And it works so well because it shocks readers. The boundaries of the page are safe and predictable. They keep us distant from what's going on in the story, as untouched bystanders watching it all unfold. But once the art—and the story—breaks that fourth wall, it reaches out towards the readers, encroaching on our space, and in that moment, it becomes real to us. Similar to the formalist styles of film editing—like Eisenstein's montage editing—webcomics like *Unsounded* draw the reader's attention to its techniques, which ultimately forces readers to engage emotionally and intellectually with the work.

However, each web page is still a constraint in itself. It may be a larger, more flexible canvas, but readers still need to click forward to the next page. But one form of webcomic innovation that breaks from the page structure is the infinite scroll. You've seen it on social media and those news websites that won't let you ever reach the bottom of the page. Infinite scroll automatically loads the next page's content, eliminating the need for pagination. For comics, this conceivably allows readers to scroll through the entirety of the work as one, complete experience rather than clicking forward through pages. Webtoon is well known for hosting comics intended to be scrolled vertically through, and independent webcomic sites often explore the adaptability of a scrolling platform.

The infinite scroll is executed rather neatly in the webcomic *These Memories Won't Last* by Stuart Campbell, a biographical comic about Campbell's grandfather and his dementia. As the reader scrolls, the words scroll upwards while the art panels scroll downwards—meeting in the middle. This simultaneous scroll visually represents the narrative marriage between the images and the text, all while playing with idea of the passage of time. The narrator's thread moves upward—forward, based on the scroll direction—while the images, which represent his grandfathers' memory, slip downward, falling off the page. And if the reader pauses the scroll for too long, the words and images fade, lost to the fog—just like his grandfather's memories. As a work, *These Memories Won't Last* is a powerful example of how you can use a medium to reinforce and amplify the impact of your story. Campbell describes his grandfather's memory deterioration, and we can feel a similar fear as the story slips through our grasp, too.

Other works find increasingly creative ways to utilize the scroll feature. One short Korean webcomic available on Webtoon utilizes this technique with particular efficacy.

Bongcheon-Dong Ghost by Horang is a short horror webcomic on an infinite scroll platform. The story tells a fairly typical scary story of a ghostly figure walking around at night, progressing as you scroll down the page. But once you hit the jump scare, the comic rapidly auto-scrolls through the panels—both creating the illusion of movement and wresting control from the reader. By suddenly losing control of the scroll, readers are appropriately startled—creating an effective jump scare in a static medium —but even more than that, the loss of control makes readers helpless, vulnerable and intimately fearful. A typical comic page promises safety, and there's comfort in that predictability. Just like with *Unsounded*, when a comic creator subverts that expectation, breaching the distance between the reader and the story, they create a very real tension and sense of danger.

Other works, like the webcomic *To Be Continued* by Lorenzo Ghetti, still divide updates into "episodes"—keeping some degree of pagination—but each episode uses the web canvas to its full capacity, moving through the landscape horizontally, vertically, and diagonally—almost tracking the motion of the comic like a camera in a movie. The scrolling allows readers to control their reading pace but flows with smoother consistency, as we watch the story unfold.

Now, to be fair, many webcomics do maintain the same page format—even if they play with the industry standard page sizes. Webcomic pages still typically read in the same direction as their native language, jump sequentially from panel to panel, utilize gutter space, occasionally use double spreads for larger immersive images, and ultimately ask you to move forward by clicking next—turning the digital page. These print styles and techniques have also become the webcomic standard for many reasons—partially because it's the established visual language we've learned to read; partially because some platforms require certain page sizes for

publication. For many creators, it's also just a format that makes sense for the story they want to tell. Not all stories are improved by techniques like the infinite scroll, which keeps you going and going ad nauseam. The literal turning of the page allows readers to take the story at their own pace while also involving the reader, making us complicit in the story's progression. And many webcomic creators post in installments, releasing the next page or set of pages according to an update schedule. Infinite scroll comics work well when the entire comic is released in one installment. It's less convenient for updated comics, which either forces returning readers to scroll through the entire comic every update or new readers to begin at the end and scroll down to the beginning.

Which is all to say that no matter their form and innovations, webcomics provide the freedom for independent creators to tell stories in the manner that best suits their content. At its heart, that's what's exciting about the webcomic boom. More than ever, independent creators are able to create their works, support their art, and find an audience, providing a platform for more voices and more stories that we may not have otherwise been able to hear. Separate from publisher restrictions and gate-keeping, webcomics have become a home for diverse voices, giving creators the freedom to tell their stories in their own way.

In the next episode, we'll look at how a few particularly innovative webcomics even take these freedoms to an entirely different degree. Beyond the typical comic page, these innovative works incorporate audio, video, and interactive components—creating a new hybrid medium called multimedia webcomics. Earlier we talked about *These Memories Won't Last,* which actually is a multimedia webcomic. In addition to its scrolling method, Campbell includes animations and uses music to characterize the shifting tones in the piece, going well beyond the

traditional comic medium in more than just format. Stay tuned, and we'll take a closer look at what it means to be a multimedia webcomic in the current media landscape, diving in to one of the most revolutionary examples: *Homestuck*.

Episode 7 Script: Multimedia Webcomic

Welcome and welcome back! Last episode we talked about how technology has changed the comic industry, embracing the digital e-marketplace and opening the door for indie creators to produce and profit on webcomics—regardless of publisher support. But the industry isn't the only thing changing with the times. Looking at some of the most popular and innovative webcomics in recent years, we're seeing the beginning of something new, a burgeoning hybrid medium that fully utilizes the flexibility of a web-based platform, the communal nature of the Internet, and established visual literacy standards from multiple mediums. These hybrids don't really have a defined, recognized term to identify them yet. More often than not, they're just lumped under the umbrella-term of webcomic. But these hybrids are doing something different, breaking away from the traditional comic structure, and becoming something new—something that we will tentatively define as a "multimedia webcomic."

So, what is a multimedia webcomic? Broadly stated, it is any work of sequential art originally distributed on a website that incorporates multiple mediums to convey information. In addition to the comic art, a multimedia webcomic may include video, from live action to animation; audio, such as music, sound effects, or voice acting; written text separate from what's included in the images; and even interactive elements. The extent of multimedia incorporation depends on the webcomic. Some may just play music in the background as you read an otherwise typical comic, while others are entirely based on interaction and animation.

Which is to say—a lot of very different looking works can all be categorized as multimedia webcomics. It's effectively a 'catch-all' term, significant in that it characterizes a shifting trend

in digital storytelling. Traditionally, stories are contained within their medium. A franchise may branch out to different mediums, supplementing the source material or adapting the original to another form, but these multimedia works are different. They utilize a variety of different platforms and mediums together to tell a singular, coherent narrative. Nothing is supplemental. Each piece—each medium—is essential to understanding the story as a whole, which means we're dealing with something new. Stories that are somehow comics, movies, books, and games—all rolled into one unique, innovative experience.

Let me tell you about *Homestuck.* Perhaps the most landmark example of the multimedia webcomic is the Internet-phenomenon *Homestuck* written by Andrew Hussie from 2009 to 2016. Notorious for its distinctive art-style, passionate fanbase, and extensive, convoluted plot, *Homestuck* is an epic—spanning seven years, over 8000 web pages, nearly 15,000 panels, over four hours of animation, and over 800,000 words (Bailey). (To provide a little bit of perspective, the complete *Lord of the Rings* trilogy clocks in at about 480,000 words!) The webcomic has been described by the PBS Idea Channel as the "*Ulysses* of the Internet" and by Tor.com as the "first great work of Internet fiction" ("Is Homestuck the Ulysses…;" Knode). And that emphasis on *Homestuck* as an "Internet" story may seem belittling, if not for the fact that Andrew Hussie made use of the multimedia web platform in a way few other storytellers have.

Each page of *Homestuck* follows a similar pattern. At the top of the page is a title, typically describing the action that prompted the new page. Immediately below the title is some sort of image. For some pages, the images are traditional stills, but many are GIFs, playing a small animation on loop. Below the image is the narrative text—either written as a narrator speaking in second-person "you's" and "your's" or as dialogue between the characters. This dialogue is

almost entirely written as chat logs, with the characters messaging each other over the fictional chat client Pesterchum. First time readers might be tempted to skip the "Show Pesterlog" button below the images, but the majority of the story goes down in these chat dialogues between characters; the story would be unintelligible without them. (Assuming, of course, that you can make enough sense of the characters' typing quirks to read the chats.)

And finally, at the bottom of the page is the next 'command.' By clicking to the next page, Hussie makes the reader complicit in the continuation of the story. We tell the characters what to do, providing a sense of shared control and responsibility for whatever happens next. The command predictably becomes the title of the next page. These commands are left over from the days in which *Homestuck* really was written in part from reader submissions. For the first few months of its existence, many of the commands that moved the story forward came directly from random users, and Hussie himself credits the community for sparking catch phrases and gags that live throughout the comic. And although he stopped taking user suggested commands, Hussie retained the format, drawing readers in with the sense—and the nostalgia—of a story where we share authorship.

But Hussie didn't stop with animated GIFs. Especially for important and climactic scenes, *Homestuck* incorporates flash animated movies, music, and even occasional interactive games for readers to explore. *Homestuck* is a webcomic with an official 10-volume soundtrack and a total of 27 digital albums for sale, creating an auditory experience out of what had previously been conceived as a purely visual art medium. As noted, *Homestuck* is also a webcomic with over four hours of video content, blurring the line between animation and traditional comics. I can only describe the animation in *Homestuck* as the purest example of sequential art I've ever

seen. After all, animation is simply a series of drawings that give the illusion of motion, but in his flash animations, Hussie fuses that movement with juxtaposed stills, calling upon the tradition of Sergei Eisenstein's montage editing.

Montage editing is different from the Classical Hollywood editing style we typically seen in blockbuster movies, a style known as invisible or continuity editing. Invisible editing aims to be just that: invisible, so that viewers forget they're watching a film that's been deliberately edited. Instead of flowing continuously, montage editing compresses time and space, showing simultaneous action or potentially condensing a long period of time. Montage editing also preaches the importance of dynamic contrast (Hess). By juxtaposing two images, the editor emphasizes the space in between them, forcing viewers to consider the ideas implied by their connection (Hess). It works in a similar way to the gutters between comic panels, leaving space for readers to fill with their interpretation. Hussie's animations work in tandem with the still and GIF panels of the rest of the comic, using the motion to clarify the action while still encouraging audience engagement and interpretation in way that classical film does not. Coupling the stills with animation and music, Hussie created a comic that transcends the shortcomings of the traditional medium—all to tell a singular, expansive story.

In short, *Homestuck* proved that multimedia webcomics could tell long-form stories—and tell them well. *Homestuck* garnered widespread attention in part because of its novelty, because it created a new storytelling experience. No matter your previous experience with comics, your interest in gaming, or your appreciation for pretty animation, *Homestuck* has something to offer every reader—different entry points to pique our curiosity and prompt the question, "Is *that Homestuck*?"

But *Homestuck* also got so popular because it resonated with a changing generation, telling a story that hadn't been told before—and perhaps could only be told thanks to the Internet. At its core, *Homestuck* is a coming-of-age story about a group of Internet friends playing a game together—a game that accidentally brings about the apocalypse but a game nonetheless. It's a story about long-distance friendships, a story about dealing with trolls, a story about inheriting a doomed planet, and ultimately a story about how we can escape the confines of fated paths. In a very literal way, *Homestuck* would not be the story it is without chatrooms or without online video gaming, but *Homestuck* also came about at a time when the Internet was changing what it meant to grow up. From the greater access to knowledge and news, to the public nature of social media, to the communities forged across the world, the Internet became a new arena of adolescent self-discovery. And *Homestuck* speaks to that new generation of identity formation, telling a story fit for its multimedia format.

Now, it's difficult to judge the extent of *Homestuck*'s direct influence, but as a successful multimedia webcomic, *Homestuck* has paved the way for many other experimental and multimedia works. In a structural sense, *Homestuck* has provided a viable model of multimedia storytelling, whether through the use of GIFs in place of still images, the incorporation of animated videos, or even the "user command" model of interactivity. The webcomic *Prequel* emulates the *Homestuck* page layout almost exactly, while popular multimedia webcomic *Ava's Demon* utilizes a similar format of stills that build to climactic animation sequences. But perhaps even more importantly, *Homestuck* has taught audiences how to read multimedia works, preparing them for what storytelling *can* be.

A slightly more recent but no less innovative example of a multimedia webcomic is *17776*, a multimedia story published in 2017 by Jon Bois on—of all places—Superbowl Nation. *17776* is a story about the future of football told from the perspective of three space probes that have gained sentience, looking down on humanity. The story consists of GIFs, colored text dialogue, and videos—including Google Earth 3D map renderings to give the effect of looking from the probes' perspective. Bois notes that *Homestuck* was not an inspiration or an influence on his creation of *17776*, and both stories are unique experiences (Bois). But veteran *Homestuck* readers can bring their knowledge to a familiar format and multimedia story experience—this time not from an indie creator but instead a recognized web publisher.

As noted in previous episodes, these shifts show how the industry is changing with the evolving media. More and more, publishers are learning to navigate the new landscape of digital storytelling—and picking up on the potential market opportunity of indie Internet creators as well as their own original works. After all, successful indie creators have already done the hard work of finding and cultivating an audience. We know there's a market for their work because people are already enjoying, consuming, and often voluntarily donating to support them. Even *Homestuck* was recently acquired by VIZ Media in 2017, and VIZ has begun what I originally thought would be impossible: they're releasing printed book compilations of the webcomic, rendering the animations into a series of still frames—back to comics.

But in the press release announcing the publication of the books, Executive Vice President and Publisher at VIZ Media, Leyla Aker, made a point to say: "These books are not replacements for the webcomic…but rather companions to it." She even jokingly noted that, "unfortunately, we couldn't devise a way to embed the music in paper" ("VIZ Media

Announces…"). But this concession is important because it acknowledges that these books are not a full adaptation. The experience of reading *Homestuck* cannot be replicated—which, more than anything, truly shows that these multimedia webcomics are worth recognizing as something revolutionary.

Episode 8 Script: Analysis and Conclusion

So—welcome, everyone, to the conclusion! Thanks for sticking with me this long. We've been over a lot of information in this series, covering a significant span of time and number of topics—and I think there are a few key concepts to take away from all this.

Firstly, the legitimacy of comics as an art form. After everything we've discussed, it may seem a bit redundant to come back to this. At this point, shouldn't it be clear that comics are simply a medium, another potential form for stories to take shape? But comics are still undeniably associated with their legacy of cheap, dime-store entertainment, as the kind of childish stories that rot your brain. That's a perspective that's changing, in part because scholars have made an effort to incorporate comics—and the artistry it requires—into their curriculum. This process with comics is a cycle seen over and over again—in which storytellers innovate, a new medium gains popularity, and then the critical world is resistant to accepting it. Film went through a similar struggle that comics have, dealing with a comparable moral panic over its negative influence and period of self-censorship. But while some blockbuster movies are still branded as entertainment, film as a whole has gained some measure of legitimacy as a recognized art form, in part through legislation, partially from reviewers and programs that specialize in the study of film, and partially from the films themselves.

For comics, we've seen essentially two different paths to try and gain legitimacy and recognition. One—over the years, traditional science-fiction and fantasy comic books have matured their storylines, shaking the restrictions of the Comics Code Authority and speaking to a larger, more adult audience. Then, comic publishers worked to expand their sci-fi/fantasy

properties by branching out into other mediums—from film adaptations to written novel spin-

offs. These other mediums increase the reach of comic book stories and characters, introducing

them to audiences that may otherwise have never known them. The sheer popularity of Marvel

movies—the way that superhero stories have dominated the box office and our current pop

culture—is evidence of how successfully comic book stories have become mainstream.

However, mainstream popularity does not guarantee legitimacy as art—and despite the success

of breaking into the public consciousness, comic book film adaptations are often considered

entertainment first and foremost.

And two—graphic novels worked to differentiate themselves from the comic book

stigma, almost rebranding by claiming the term "novel." In practice, graphic novels are a long-

form narrative not that different from the trade paperback comic collections, but along with the

name change, graphic novels tend towards more serious, realistic fiction and non-fiction topics—

or, at least, the ones winning the awards do. For all the victories that graphic novels like *Maus*

and *March* have won for the medium, they're still often considered outliers —as if popular,

genre fiction like science fiction and fantasy is somehow lesser, a shameful origin.

Art Spiegelman—author of *Maus* and a cartoonist who got his start in underground

comix—maintains that a graphic novel is just a "big comic book that needed a bookmark,"

emphasizing that there's really no difference in value or literary merit. But even in Will Eisner's

biography, *A Dreamer's Life in Comics*, graphic novels are defined as "book-length works of

sequential art expanded in scope [beyond science fiction and fantasy] to include biography,

memoir, history, and other types of non-fiction" ("What is a Graphic Novel?"). This false

dichotomy that divides comics into two camps—comic books or graphic novels, popular fiction

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or literary fiction, entertainment or art—only serves to devalue the medium as a whole, indicating that certain stories can only look a certain way, that comic books truly are a lesser art form. It forces us to consider how we determine literary and artistic merit, to think about why entertainment is conceptualized separately from—and even in opposition to—art, and ultimately it forces us to question whether the fight for legitimacy is worth it if it means we have to abandon or disparage our roots.

Another key concept that we've examined here is how the comics industry serves as a microcosm of the greater media trends that we're seeing today. From transmedia convergence, to media consolidation, to a global market, comics aren't an entirely separate industry. At this point of interconnectivity, where large conglomerates own and produce content across multiple platforms and even small, independent operations work to build their franchises through different mediums and partnerships, the comic industry is less about comic book publishing and more about intellectual property, utilizing all possible mediums to circulate content and earn profits (Woo). It's an important reminder that when we're critically examining media, especially in our modern landscape, we can't examine any one example or industry in isolation.

On a related note, in this series, we were unfortunately unable to spend a lot of time discussing the expansive global comics market, a deeply complex topic in itself. From translation and licensing practices, to Korean-based Webtoon, to the French Bande-Dessinée industry, to the popularity of comic IPs, like Marvel superheroes, in the global box office. We touched briefly on the global prevalence of the Japanese manga industry—as media flows from one country and across the world. The influence of American comics on Japanese manga and vice versa alone reinforces this understanding that no industry exists in isolation,

always growing from new influences and adapting to wider audiences ("A Short History of Japanese Manga"). Moving forward, an interesting avenue of research would be examining the differences and similarities between regional comic industries and attempting to draw connections, determining influences and how the globalized market may be impacting the stories we tell.

And finally, the advent of Internet distribution platforms, increased technological access, and established monetizing structures, has dawned a new age of how comic creators can get their start. Now, it's not uncommon for artists and cartoonists to get their start online, self-publishing their comics independently as webcomics. This self-publishing revolution, which allows practically anyone to create a comic if they'd like to, has opened the door for more diverse voices to break into the industry. Previously, for all that publishers do to promote and distribute their products, publishing companies also served as gate-keepers, deciding which stories and which creators deserved to be distributed. Now, to be fair, big name companies like *Marvel* are improving, becoming increasingly more diverse and appealing to the fastest growing demographic of comic readers: women 17-33 (Weldon). Ms. Marvel is now a Pakistani-American Muslim teenager; Miles Morales, an Afro-Latino boy is Spider-Man; and Riri Williams, an African-American teen is Ironheart, taking over for Tony Stark (Slocum).

But that's not the point; the point is that increased opportunities to self-publish mean that creators don't have to wait for approval to put their story, their voice out into the world. Platforms like Kickstarter and Patreon provide viable ways for independent creators to fund their art—and social media helps them build their own audiences. It's enough that savvy publishers are taking notice, realizing that they can benefit from working with these independent creators.

We saw this with *The Adventure Zone*, we saw this with *Homestuck*, and we've seen it with webcomics like *Check, Please!*—which, after successfully self-publishing three volumes through Kickstarter, was picked up and published by First Second books (Serrao). In that way, Internet distribution and webcomics have also begun to revolutionize talent acquisition for more mainstream publishers.

And what might be the coolest aspect to all these changes, is that webcomics have begun to shift our very concept of what the comic medium can look like. No longer are comics bound to the same standard page side, flipping page by page through static images. Now, creators are making multimedia works that challenge our idea of what comics can be, that blur the line between sequential art and animation and film. *Homestuck* changed the game, telling a story through Internet mediums—from chat dialogues to online video game—and breaking our concept of what a story could look like, all the way down to fan collaboration.

Multimedia stories—and specifically multimedia webcomics—have heralded what may become a new age of storytelling. Transmedia convergence has already primed audiences to make connections, coalescing information from multiple media sources, so maybe it's not too farfetched to presume that we'll only see more multimedia stories in the future—effectively fusing the disparate parts into one, cohesive experience to enjoy. One thing's for sure, I'm excited to see what shapes our stories take. After all, we're only just getting started.

Thank you all so much for joining me here in my little Comic Corner. If you're interested in learning more about the comic industry, from where it's been to where it's going, I highly recommend checking out some of the fantastic existing literature, including some books I've referenced in this series. That includes: *Understanding Comics* and *Reinventing Comics* by Scott

McCloud; *Comics and Sequential Art* and *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* by Will Eisner; *Convergence Culture* by Henry Jenkins; *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis; *Economics of Digital Comics* by Todd W. Allen; *The Ten-Cent Plague* by David Hajdu; *The Great Comic Book Heroes* by Jules Feiffer; and *The Comic Book History of Comics* by Fred Van Lente and Ryan Dunlavey. And, of course, that only names a few of the many resources and works that delve deeper into the topic. Once again, thank you all for watching! I hope you enjoyed. Happy reading, everyone!

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