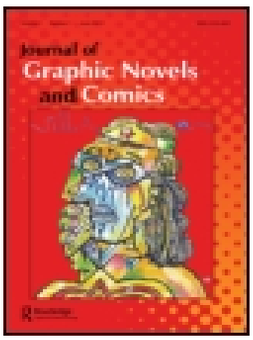

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Defining digital comics: a British Library perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a working definition of digital comics for the specific context of the British Library. It explores formal and sociocultural characteristics of digital comics as well as the sociocultural issues surrounding comic collections at national libraries. This article argues for the value of flexible working definitions over formal definitions and explores the problematic issue of definitional authority at a national institution such as the British Library. This article defines what distinguishes a digital comic from a print comic and explores visual, functional, and sociocultural features of digital comics before presenting a flexible, composite working definition of a digital comic. This definition is presented in the spirit of an instrumental case study with the aim of helping to inform other context-specific working definitions of digital comics.

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Introduction

Why another article about defining comics? There is no shortage of comic definitions. And despite (or perhaps because of) this large number of definitions, there remains little consensus as to what constitutes a comic. However, this lack of consensus has not prevented the emergence of numerous scholarly works exploring comics, or noticeably impinged on readers' engagement with the medium. Indeed, Meskin (2007) questions the value of defining comics, while Sanders (2013) notes that with few exceptions, it is generally easy to identify a comic on sight, and it is only when we attempt to theorise comics that it becomes harder to separate them from other media. Certainly, digital comics, which this article deals with specifically, are often at the fuzzier end of the spectrum, and are more likely to include those exceptions that Sanders describes. But what do we actually gain from having greater clarity about whether a motion comic should be considered a comic or an animation? Regardless of how you classify it, you still have a work of art and literature.

However, the value of definitions lies not in their nature but in their purpose – on what you are defining *for*. The lack of consensus over a definition of comics may partially arise because people approach comics from different perspectives and explore them for different purposes – the debates over the relative values of formalist, historical, and sociological approaches to definition stand as evidence to this facet of the debate. As such, overarching definitions which aim to define all comics for all purposes are

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never likely to either find consensus or to be universally useful. A potentially more helpful approach is a working definition.

Working definitions are created for specific purposes, and because of these specificities, it is not uncommon for working definitions to vary. As an example, independent comic shop Page 45 aims to provide varied stock for its customers and as such defines comics as 'stories told through a sequence of juxtaposed images'. This leads them to define items such as Klassen's Hat trilogy (2011, 2012, 2016) and Tan's *Eric* (2010) as comics, whilst in other contexts, those items would be considered picturebooks (personal communication, 28 June 2017). Conversely, a college library, which has pressure on space, distinguishes between comics and picturebooks by not collecting comics, as the library does not collect 'primarily visual items'. However, they make an exception to this guideline for picturebooks, as they have a large collection of children's literature, and as such, they have both Klassen's Hat trilogy and Tan's *Eric* in their picturebook collection (personal communication, 28 June 2017). The medium of comics is defined differently by these two institutions, according to their particular purposes, in order to best suit their needs.

Due to this emphasis on purpose, working definitions are always open to revision. This is helpful for all comics as it allows for trends and developments, but may be particularly useful at this point for digital comics, which are currently evolving alongside changes in technology. Groensteen (2007) argues that the collection of comic strips into albums moved the technical unit of comics from the horizontal segment to the whole page, and notes how the page has now become a defining aspect of comics. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that as digital comics continue to evolve, other defining technical units may come to the fore and may then need to be included in definitions. Working definitions allow the flexibility of future-proofing, being able to incorporate developments to maintain their applicability.

The specificity of working definitions, however, does naturally reduce their wider applicability. Theoretically, taken to the extreme, a working definition could become so specific to its context that it no longer reflects any kind of socially accepted consensus. While this is unlikely to happen in practice, it highlights the importance of constructing working definitions with reference to outside views, and the need to share working definitions alongside their context. Working definitions can act much like an instrumental case study, whereby through exploring both their content and their context, others can draw from the working definition aspects which are applicable to their own context and purposes (Stake 1995).

In this spirit of instrumental applicability, this article discusses the creation of a working definition of digital comics for the British Library. The specificity of the British Library context has been made explicit throughout, and it is hoped that this discussion will prove useful for others seeking to establish working definitions for their own collecting, researching, or teaching purposes.

Case background – digital comics at the British Library

During the summer of 2017, I undertook a 3-month placement at the British Library exploring ways of preserving digital comics. The British Library has a remit to preserve publications from the UK and Ireland for current and future generations. As of 2013,

that remit was extended to non-print items within the UK, which includes electronic publications such as digital comics (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2013). My role was to explore the preservation requirements for a variety of formats of digital comics and begin the creation of a special collection of webcomics.

In order to begin the process of exploring the preservation of digital comics, I had to establish a working definition of a digital comic. A working definition was necessary not only to outline the scope of the collection for archivists, but also due to the sociocultural role of the archive. Archives and libraries are non-neutral spaces, and the choices made about what is and is not included in a collection have the power to construct people's views about any number of subjects (Steedman 2001; Schwartz and Cook 2002; Stead 2013). This is particularly true of collections at the British Library, which, due to its nature as a national institution, is likely to be seen by many as an authority. The very act of collecting digital comics is, therefore, inherently an act of definition, as if the British Library chooses to include an item in its digital comic collection, users of that collection are likely to accept that the item is a digital comic. This is particularly problematic when considering the long-term nature of the British Library collections. Most library collections are aiming to provide for the immediate needs of the community they serve (Futas 1995). On the local level, Thorne (2010) discusses how libraries can identify webcomics which are likely to be of interest to patrons who are already engaged with print comics. On the national level, the new webcomics collection at the Library of Congress, for example, focuses its collection policies around the dual priorities of representing prestigious works, alongside including works which deal with underrepresented topics or are authored by creators from marginalised groups (Library of Congress, n.d.). However, archives, and the British Library, wish to serve the needs of not only current users but also future generations. It is, therefore, important to consider both what future users might think of as digital comics so as not to exclude items at risk of loss, and also to attempt to accurately represent what contemporaries consider to be digital comics (or not). This issue of authority requires a considered and transparent definition, so that users of the collection can see the choices that have been made and the reasons behind those choices.

The British Library context

Due to the concerns of authority outlined above, the working definition of digital comics for the British Library needs to be precise enough not to mislead (e.g. it would not be accurate to present an item widely accepted as a digital picturebook as a digital comic in the British Library context, whilst it is perfectly acceptable in a retail context), whilst remaining broad enough not to exclude some of the more innovative forms of digital comics, such as motion comics or games comics. At the same time, the bounds of the legal deposit system upon some British Library collection policies (and the presence of other institutions such as the National Archives and the British Film Institute) mean that not all items will fall under the legal deposit collection remit, which does not include items which are purely games, purely moving image, or purely audio (though the library does have a growing sound archive as well as some moving image collections, such as news broadcasts, which have been created outside of the legal deposit system).[1] This is a concern for motion comics and game comics, and requires

the drawing of lines between comics, animation, and games. The British Library also makes a priority of supporting research for both present and future generations (The British Library 2015) and so does not aim to make distinctions based on judgements of 'quality', due to the impossibility of assessing what present or future researchers may consider to be of value. Rather, the emphasis is to work towards being as comprehensive as possible (within practical limitations of technology, accessibility, and staff time). As such, no guidelines were included about collection priorities, such as prioritising award-winning items or long-running series. While these types of priorities are both common and useful for many special collections (Futas 1995), within the British Library context, they are not appropriate. Moreover, much of the archiving, after the initial stages I have undertaken personally, will be completed by busy archivists who are not comics specialists, and the archive is likely to be used by large numbers of non-specialists. Therefore, the working definition needs to be clear and succinct, so that it can be practically useful to any archivist or user.

Defining digital comics

Like print comics, digital comics are an extremely broad medium, and despite many items being recognisably 'comics' from a brief glance, it is difficult to establish a set of characteristics which apply to all items that may be considered as digital comics. Therefore, after establishing what constitutes a 'digital' comic publication, I have drawn on Cohn's (2005) approach of identifying 'features' of comics rather than 'criteria' for definition, and have given consideration not only to the structural elements of comics but also to sociocultural factors. These features have been identified from scholarship on digital comics, scholarship on print comics (adapted for the digital context), and my own analysis of several digital comic texts. After identifying these features, which for clarity I have separated into the categories of visual, functional, and sociocultural (though in practice these categories are both overlapping and interdependent), I have drawn together key ideas into a composite approach to definition which allows for both clarity and flexibility. This section will explore the identified features of digital comics and then present the working definition alongside a justification for its content and structure.

The 'digital' of digital comics

The 'digital' nature of comics can span several different aspects of production and consumption. For example, many print comics are now created using digital software. There are e-book versions of comics available, as well as apps such as comiXology which provide a digitally mediated reading experience. Some digital comics are created intentionally to be read in digital format (digital-born), while others are adaptations from print publications (print-born). Some of these comics make explicit use of digital technology through hyperlinks, animation, or sound, while others strongly resemble print comics but have been published on digital platforms. Any one of these features could arguably justify a comic being referred to as 'digital', though some aspects (such as being digital-born) may be closer to a general perception of what is meant by a digital comic than others (such as having been created using a software package).

For the British Library context, the digital nature of a comic is explicitly linked to publication formats and collection considerations. In order to capture the broadest possible spectrum of digital comics, if a comic is published solely in a digital format, then it is considered a digital comic. However, where a comic has both print and digital publication formats, distinctions must be drawn. Due to the delicate nature of digital files (Michelle et al. 2017), it is easier to both collect and preserve print versions of comics, and holding duplicates of works in both print and digital formats utilises additional amounts of finite resources. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between comics which happen to be in digital format and digital comics. For print comics which are also published in digital format (whether as later adaptations or as simultaneous publications where the print publication format has been the working standard for production), the Library of Congress Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (Tillett 2003) provides the concept of 'expressions' which I have drawn on when considering what constitutes a digital comic.

Using this framework, a print-born comic that has been adapted into digital format can be considered a digital comic if it is a 'new expression' of the original work, rather than the 'same expression' in a new manifestation (or format). For example, an e-book version of a comic may be considered to be an 'electronic representation' (Garrish 2011, 1) of that print comic, as it is the 'same expression' in a different format, rather than an explicitly digital comic. An example of a 'new expression', however, would be the Madefire (2017) adaptations of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, which significantly adapt the print comics through extensive use of animation and can, therefore, be considered digital comics. For comics published through platforms such as comiXology, where a digital comic is published as an electronic representation of a print comic and it is the platform which is mediating the reading experience rather than the publication (Johnston 2017), the digital publication would still be considered to be the 'same expression' as the print version (and for the purposes of legal deposit, the British Library collects publications, rather than platforms). However, digital-only comics hosted by mediating platforms, or print-born digital adaptations which constitute 'new expressions' within the publication rather than simply through the platform, would be classed as digital comics.

While the 'expression' guideline works for print-born works which have a digital counterpart, it is not sufficient for digital-born works which also have a print version. While many digital-born comics do not utilise specifically digital components such as the infinite canvas (McCloud 2000), hyperlinks, or animation, they have been created to be digitally published texts. As Wershler (2011) argues, following on from Straw's (2009) premise, publication forms shape works of art as well as transmitting them, and comic scholars can gain as much from studying the production and publication methods of comics as they can from studying their content (Brienza 2010). All digital-born comics are, therefore, defined as digital comics, even where they have a print counterpart.

Visual features

As a visual medium, many of the common features of comics are immediately recognisable from looking at a comic, before the reading process begins. The following

features are visual characteristics which can be identified as belonging to comics from a simple glance.

Single- or multiple-panel images

The debate over whether single-panel texts are considered comics is one of the longest running in comics studies. The notion of a sequence of images is essential to the comic definitions of both Eisner (1985/2008) and McCloud (1993), while Groensteen (2007) argues for the importance of a network of interdependent images which are recognisably part of the same whole (contain 'iconic solidarity', p.18). Saraceni (2003) also considers multiple panels to be a defining aspect of comics and, like McCloud (1993), believes that single-panel images are cartoons, rather than comics.

Alternatively, Varnum and Gibbons (2001) note that comics and cartoons bear a 'strong family resemblance' (p.xvi), sharing many common features, an argument also put forward by Meskin and Cook (2012) who comment on the overlap in technique between single- and multiple-panel comics. Further to this, Mikkonen (2017) points out that distinguishing between single images and sequences of images is not straightforward, and that a single-panel image may contain multiple images, including sequential images, calling into question the value of the emphasis on a series of panels. Moreover, Meskin and Cook (2012) acknowledge that many creators work with both single panels and multiple panels, which they argue justifies treating both single- and multiple-panel comics as different formats within the comics medium.

With digital comics, it is common practice for creators not only to work in both single- and multiple-panel formats, but also to use both formats within the same work. Diary webcomics such as *Chaosbunny* (Green 2008–present) frequently feature both single- and multiple-panel comics, and it would not only be impractical to only collect the multiple-panel entries, but also be an act of abridgement to do so. It could be argued that by residing within a broader context, these single-panel entries in diary comics are still interdependent, yet they can often be read in isolation as well as in the context of the larger sequence. Moreover, while there are many who claim that multiple panels are required for a text to be considered a comic, there are similarly many who argue that single-panel comics should be classed as comics. To avoid the risk of excluding items which may be considered as comics by many individuals, a broader definition is preferable.

For the purposes of the British Library collection, therefore, one of the main features of digital comics is either a single-panel image or a series of interdependent images. The phrase 'interdependent' (Groensteen 2007) was considered preferable to 'sequential' (Eisner 2008; McCloud 1993) due to the presence of digital comics which utilise McCloud's (2000) theory of the 'infinite canvas', such as *The Archivist* (Goodbrey 2010), where the images are interdependent, but the sequence they are read in is flexible.

Frames

A common visual feature of comics is that the panels, whether singular or multiple, are bounded by a visible frame. While this feature is not present in every comic, it is a recognisable characteristic of many comics. The framing of an image sets it aside as an individual moment (Chute 2010), and within multiple-panel comics, the frame can act

as a form of punctuation (Eisner 2008). Comics often use this device as a way of demonstrating the passage of time (McCloud 1993). By framing an image, a reader is invited to consider its contents as a single entity which is worthy of contemplation (Groensteen 2007), and both single- and multiple-panel comics take advantage of this function. Both the frame and, where present, the gutter (or space between the frames) are visual characteristics of comics which are widely recognised by both specialists and non-specialists.

For certain formats of digital comics, the frame is of particular significance. Wershler (2011) argues that the mediation of comics reading through the comiXology platform, which at the time of writing this article holds the largest market share of digital comic apps (Johnston 2017), has moved the major unit of the comic away from the page and down to the frame. On many devices and publications, the frame disappears into the edge of the device, and so the physical device becomes the frame of the panel, giving an extra element of materiality and weight to the framing function. On other devices and publications, the frame reaches around the edge of the screen, resulting in a double-framing effect, whereby the panel is framed not only by the frame in the publication but also the frame of the physical device. This device-based panel-by-panel reading can not only emphasise frames, but actually create them, as Lombard-Cook (2015) notes. In cases where a visible frame was not present in the publication, the edges of the device become that frame, regardless of authorial intention. Frames, therefore, are not only common features of many digital comics, but an inescapable aspect of the 'guided view' app reading experience.

Iconic symbols

As Cook (2012) notes, the medium of comics contains a large number of conventional elements such as speech balloons and motion lines. Varnum and Gibbons (2001) refer to these elements as a 'lexicon of images' (p.xii) which has been built up over time (and is culturally specific – Japanese manga have their own iconic lexicon which is distinct to that used in Western comics), while Khordoc (2001) describes these symbols as a 'code' which requires more active decoding than other forms of literature (p.159). Iconic symbols in comics, be they stars above a character's head to indicate pain, word balloons to indicate sound, or motion lines to convey movement, often play the role of sensorial or temporal aspects of text which might be represented differently in other media. For example, McCloud (1993) has described how motion lines were created as a method of indicating motion within a static image, while Khordoc (2001) discusses the numerous ways in which visual symbols can create a comic's soundtrack. While these iconic symbols are not only used within the medium of comics, both Cook (2012) and Nodelman (2012) have noted that when used within other media, such as film or picturebooks, they are a recognisably 'borrowed' element and are often functioning as a reference to comics.

As with frames, not every comic uses all or even any of the visual lexicon of iconic symbols; however, they remain a recognisable visual feature of the medium. Certain forms of digital comics, particularly motion comics, may be less likely to utilise some of these features, as they can provide alternative ways of communicating the same information. Motion lines can be replaced by animation, and soundtrack symbols can be replaced by an audio track. Despite this, however, there appears to be a reluctance to

abandon these elements altogether. Indeed, it could be argued that some self-identified motion comics such as *Mary Queen of Scots* (BBC 2014), which function as animations rather than comics, are relying entirely on these iconic symbols to justify their identification as comics, despite having made them redundant through the use of voice acting, animation, and sound effects. This reluctance to abandon the visual lexicon of comics, even when it is no longer functionally necessary, demonstrates the importance of these iconic symbols as a defining visual feature of the medium of comics.

Handwritten style lettering

Writing within the comics medium is distinguished by being simultaneously visual and verbal (Mikkonen 2017), due to its handwritten appearance. Whilst font choice may contribute to the communication of meaning in other forms of written text (Kress 2010), in comics, the handwritten style of lettering is used in a deliberately graphic manner to add meaning to its written message (Eisner 2008). The size of comics lettering can indicate volume, whilst style can communicate any number of emotions (Khordoc 2001). This position of writing as *drawn* is significantly different to the standard use of writing and images in other media, such as illustrated novels or picturebooks. In both illustrated novels and picturebooks, the separate modes of word and image are brought together into one multimodal medium. In comics, the graphic nature of writing brings both modes of communication – writing and images – together into a unit whereby the individual modes are blurred and combined, creating less distinction between the two modes and a greater sense of a single visual grammar. While some picturebooks do play with visually complex uses of writing, such as in the works of Lauren Child, the words often feel distinctly separate from the images, which may be due to the 'typed', rather than 'handwritten' style of the writing. Not only does handwritten style lettering bring a form of 'drawn' cohesiveness to the medium, but Chute (2010) argues that it provides a counterbalance to the distance created by a comic's frame – the frame draws attention to the segmented nature of the comic which may distance the reader, while the handwritten style lettering invites intimacy through its perceived personal nature. I would argue that the handwritten style counterbalances the framing in another way as well – while the frames emphasise distinction between moments, the handwritten lettering works with the drawn images to emphasise cohesion within those moments.

My exploration of digital comics has not uncovered any instances of lettering within digital comics being used in any way that is significantly different from its use in print comics (though, of course, this may change in the future). Handwritten style lettering is, however, a distinct feature of comics (digital or not) and, while not present in every comic, should be considered as a common feature of the medium.

Functional features

After an initial glance at a comic which may reveal instantly recognisable visual features, the next stage of engagement is reading. At this point, the way that a comic works becomes important when considering its characteristic features. This aspect of function is particularly important when considering digital comics (especially motion comics), as it is often the way in which a comic functions which separates it from being

a film, a work of prose, a game, or a picture. In concurrence with the views of Madefire founder Wolstenholme (Den of Geek 2012) and digital comics advocate Daniels (nd), I define comics (digital or otherwise) as a medium which is read, rather than watched, as films are (Daniels nd), or used, as many apps are (Sargeant 2015). As such, the following functional features are particularly notable when considering a definition of digital comics.

Narrative rhythm

While novels have a continually forward pressing motion or climactic narrative (Nodelman 1988), what Rowe refers to as the 'dynamic mode of framing' (2016, 363), leads to comics having a distinct narrative rhythm. McCloud (1993, 67) describes this rhythm as 'a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconstructed moments' which are brought together by the reader through the process of moving from one panel to the next and mentally connecting them. Certainly, using an enclosing panel, a comics creator is able to create a moment in time (Eisner 2008), and in multiple-panel comics, each successive panel both moves the story forwards and arrests that forward momentum by encouraging contemplation of a new moment (Groensteen 2007). Labio (2015) further suggests that we not only read the narrative of comics, moving forwards within the time of the story, but we also 'dwell within' the individually constructed moments, a dual sense of rhythm which can be applied to both single- and multiple-panel comics. The multiple-panel comic's rhythm is further complicated on pages which include a multiframe containing many panels. Chute (2010) argues that in multiframes, the narrative rhythm is characterised by the duality of seeing both the overall grid of panels and then progressing through the individual components. While this rhythm is replicated in many digital comics, the duality of multiframe and panel is removed in comiXology's 'guided view' system, and this inherently changes the rhythm and pacing of the comic (Lombard-Cook 2015). The 'guided view' removes the panel from its contextual position in the multiframe by displaying each panel individually, and in doing so removes the juxtaposition of the panels. Each panel is physically framed by the device, and rather than moving to the next panel by moving the eyes across the page, the reader must touch the screen to swipe across, turning every panel transition into a page turn. This emphasises the feeling of each panel as a separate moment in time, increasing the sense of pause and decreasing the sense of forward momentum.

Whilst different forms of comics – single panel, multiple panel, and 'guided view' – have differing emphases within their narrative rhythms, what they have in common is the element of the moment. The invitation to stop and look at what is contained within a single panel, and to consider it as a coherent, individual point in time, is a notable feature of the comics medium.

Reader agency

One of the most important functional characteristics of this rhythm of individual moments is that it gives the reader choice over how long they spend examining each moment and, to some degree, what order they view those moments in. For many scholars, it is this aspect of choice which separates the medium of comics from the medium of film. Eisner (2008, 40) notes that 'there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first. The turning of the page

does mechanically enforce some control, but hardly as absolutely as in film'. Rowe (2016, 365) notes that comics may suggest pace and rhythm, but unlike film, comics 'neither possesses nor orders duration'. These distinctions have led scholars such as Chute (2010) and Morton (2015) to view comics as a medium which exists in space, rather than time, in which it is up to the reader not only to set the pace of reading but also to infer the temporal relationship within and between each panel. Additionally, McCloud (1993), Groensteen (2007), and Eisner (2008) all comment on comics as a medium with gaps, which readers must actively fill in order to create meaning, a level of active participation which is not required when watching a film. Whilst these scholars place emphasis on the transition between panels in creating these gaps, gaps can equally be seen within single panels. The reader must choose the order in which they read within a panel and must infer sounds, movement, and time from a visual and written representation, work which is not required when watching a film or animation. Drawing these considerations together, comics can be seen as a medium in which the reader holds a lot of agency.

Indeed, this role of reader agency is so fundamental to comics that it has been championed by leaders in digital comics as well as those who work with print. Daniels (nd) argues that for a digital comic to remain a comic, it must not take temporal control away from the reader, while Goodbrey (2015) states that the rate of information absorption must still be controlled by the reader's own reading pace, which includes the retention of control over the digital equivalent of a page turn. It is when readers lose control over pace and forward momentum that a digital comic ceases to be a comic and becomes instead an animation. An example of this would be the self-identified 'motion comic' series *Striker* (Planet Striker 2016), an adaptation of Nash's long-running comic strip, which appears as 1-min-long YouTube episodes that unfold before the viewer with no allowance for the viewer's own choices about pace.

Individual digital comics may either decrease or increase reader agency. Sanders (2015) notes that Alex de Campi's digital comic *Valentine* allows for reader control over when transitions occur, but in its control of space and management of transitions using filmic techniques, it removes much of the agency provided by a print comic. ComiXology's 'guided view' restricts readers from reading the panels out of order as they may do in a print comic, or viewing all panels on a page at once, enforcing a more strictly linear reading process. Motion comics such as Wolstenholme and Sharp's *Mono* (2013–2017) allow reader control over pacing, but remove some of the gaps which require readers to actively construct meaning by including animation and sound. Hypercomics, by contrast, which have multiple possible narrative structures, actively increase and foreground reader choice and agency (Craig Smith 2015; Goodbrey 2013, 2015), as do game comics, which allow for reader decision-making, but still retain the comics characteristics of spatial networking and inference between panels (Goodbrey 2015). While the scale of reader agency may be manipulated in digital comics (as it may also be by print comics), to remain within the medium of comics, control over pacing must remain with the reader.

Reading pathway

One way to draw together the functional features of comics is to consider them in terms of reading pathways. Kress (2003) notes that writing is organised in a clear pathway,

progressing (in English) from right to left, top to bottom. A picture, however, may suggest an order of meaning through its organisation, but is unlikely to have a clear pathway for the reader to follow. Moreover, two images are unlikely to share the same reading pathways, unlike two sentences in the same language. In practice, especially in longer texts, a reader may not read all of the writing strictly in order – skipping paragraphs or chapters or returning to earlier passages. However, there is no question about what the intended order of the writing is. Writing, therefore, can be seen to have a guided reading pathway. Images, by contrast, have an unguided reading pathway – they can be read in any order. Comics, including digital comics, lie between the two, and can therefore be described as having a semi-guided reading pathway.

A semi-guided reading pathway is one in which some elements of reading are guided, whilst others are unguided. At a basic level, comics which include writing will contain guided reading pathways within the writing, but progression through the visual elements within a panel will be unguided. In multiple-panel comics, two forms of reading are presented simultaneously – that of reading the page as a whole and that of following the individual panels (Gunning 2014). While progression through the panels may be suggested, it is at the reader's discretion when they switch between reading the page as a whole and reading the individual panels. That suggested progression through panels may also vary from being extremely clear, such as in a two- or three-panel diary webcomic entry, to highly complex and unclear, such as in a hypercomic.

Due to the large number of elements within comics, Orbán (2014, 170) suggests that comics almost never contain 'a single mandatory path' but rather have a number of possible alternatives. Similarly, Nodelman (2012, 438) refers to comics as a 'mosaic art' which must be pieced together by the reader, rather than following a clear pathway. Whilst these observations are accurate, certain elements of comics reading are more clearly guided than others. In addition to the writing itself, the placement of speech balloons frequently suggests an order of reading and looking, helping to clarify the temporal progression of the narrative (Khordoc 2001; Mikkonen 2017). The drive of narrative also supports the reader in making connections and organising comics, although, as Wolk (2007) argues, the reader will always use their own discretion, particularly over how long they spend exploring any individual element, in creating that organisation.

Hatfield (2005, 36) considers comics to be 'radically fragmented and unstable' because of the various kinds of reading they require, but comics are not so fragmented and unstable that they cannot be followed. Rather, they contain a semi-guided reading pathway, in which the reader has autonomy over the time they spend reading any particular aspect of the item, and some agency over the order in which they read the item, especially the visual elements. However, reading is also guided in the progression through any language elements and likely to be guided in the order of movement from one image to another, though this pathway may not always be clear. It is this semi-guided reading pathway which distinguishes comics from prose, pictures, or films, and is necessary in order for a digital comic to still be considered a comic, and not, as Sabin (2000, 49) sceptically referred to digital comics back in 2000, 'multi-media art'.

Sociocultural features

Alongside the visual and functional features of comics, it is important to consider their sociocultural features. This is not least due to the enormous diversity within both print and digital comics production, which makes definition based purely on formalist features difficult (Mikkonen 2017). Moreover, it is important to consider how comics are socioculturally located, as this impacts our interactions with them. As Cook (2012) argues, we interact with art forms based not only on their formal characteristics, but also on how sociocultural conventions suggest we should interact with those art forms – how we should read, discuss, or value them. This is, as Cohn (2005) and Nel (2012) argue, why we think of comics and picturebooks as different mediums, when structurally they bear very close resemblance. This importance of sociocultural positioning has led Hague (2014, 27) to argue that 'a comic is what is produced or consumed as a comic'. While this definition is rather too broad, as the above discussion of *Striker* demonstrates, it is worth including as part of a composite definition which draws on common features rather than simply including a series of requirements. Where there is confusion as to whether an item might be classed as, for example, a digital comic or a digital picturebook, and examination of the visual and functional features listed above does not seem sufficient, then it is worth considering the value of self-definition. If something appears to be a digital comic, functions as a digital comic, is produced as a digital comic, and self-identifies as such, it is likely that a reader will approach it as a comic, and therefore, it is worthy of inclusion in a digital comic collection.

The digital comics definition

The final definition agreed upon for the digital comics collection is as follows:

The scope of this collection covers items with the following characteristics:

- The collection item must be published in a digital format.
- The collection item must contain a single-panel image or series of interdependent images.
- The collection item must have a semi-guided reading pathway.[1]

In addition, the collection item is likely to contain the following:

- Visible frames
- Iconic symbols such as word balloons
- Handwritten style lettering which may use its visual form to communicate additional meaning

The item must not be

- Purely moving image
- Purely audio

For contested items, where an item meets these categories but still does not seem to be a comic, it will be judged to be a comic if it self-identifies as such (e.g. a digital picturebook may meet all of these criteria but self-identifies as a picturebook, not a comic).

Where the item is an adaptation of a print-born comic, it must be a new expression of the original, not merely a different manifestation, according to FRBR guidelines: https://www.loc.gov/cds/downloads/FRBR.PDF http://www.loc.gov/cds/FRBR.html.

[1]Definition of a semi-guided reading pathway: The reader has autonomy over the time they spend reading any particular aspect of the item, and some agency over the order in which they read the item, especially the visual elements. However, reading is also guided in the progression through any language elements, and likely to be guided in the order of movement from one image to another, though this pathway may not always be clear. This excludes items that are purely pictures, as well as items which are purely animation.

This definition works on a progressive system of identification. The necessary elements included are those shared by all digital comics, but may not be enough on their own to identify a digital comic. As such, they are followed by a section of common features which are not necessary for an item to be a comic, but are frequently found within comics and may, therefore, aid identification. By considering sociocultural as well as formalist features, it is possible to gain a suitably broad definition of comics which recognises the role of sociocultural influences on approaches to art forms, without ignoring the socially accepted formalist features of comics and, therefore, becoming misleading. Additionally, the definition includes concerns of the British Library when it comes to collection management, which allows the definition to be useful within its specific context.

Conclusion – ameliorating the impact of authority

Despite the care that has gone into creating this working definition of digital comics, there is no doubt that it will still provoke debate and disagreement, which brings us back to the issue of authority outlined above. By utilising a working definition, the library is demonstrating an understanding that many definitions of comics exist. However, this understanding must also be communicated to users of the collections, so as not to mislead them into believing that the British Library's working definition of digital comics is the authoritative one. One way of achieving this is by making the scope of the collection transparent and highlighting the lack of consensus over definitions. As such, the collection policy has been published in a blog linked to the new webcomics collection (British Library 2017). Another essential requirement is the revisiting and updating of the collection scope, in order to allow for developments within the production and consumption of digital comics, and to include changing views and opinions (Futas 1995).

In the future, another technique may also be useful – that of user indexing. User indexing is a feature in many library catalogues where the users of a collection can add keywords or comments to item descriptions. With the willing participation of the digital comics reading community, additional descriptors could be added to items (e.g. not comic – cartoon) in order to demonstrate the debate around comics definitions and

encourage collection users to be critical of the items included in collections. Whilst this feature is not currently available on the UK Web Archive where the new webcomics collection is housed, it may be something which could be added as the digital collection management software is updated. By incorporating user indexing into the metadata of collection items, the catalogue itself can help to form a working definition, created with the input of many people, and, therefore, more accurately reflecting social consensus than a working definition put together by one person (or even a few people). Whilst working definitions are highly useful for specific circumstances, they must always be considered within the context of other opinions and definitions, and frequently updated to allow for developments and changing views. User indexing may provide an elegant way to achieve a continually updating and contextualised working definition of digital comics which can be useful to both present and future generations of comics scholars and enthusiasts.

Note

1. This continued distinction between different forms of media for collection purposes may become increasingly untenable in the future. It is already questionable how valuable it is to distinguish between different media forms when many literary and artistic works are currently being made which are considered either 'hybrid' media or new forms of media that do not fit into the categories which existed when these institutions were founded. However, the present situation does require these distinctions to be made, and therefore, for the purposes of the current version of this working definition, they are taken into account.

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