An examination of webcomics using McLuhan's four laws of media.

Daniel Merlin Goodbrey

Digital Traditions Essay

MA Digital Practices

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Marshall McLuhan's four laws of media first saw publication in 1977. These laws, which McLuhan believed could be applied to any medium, are known collectively as a tetrad. Tetrads take the form of four interrelated questions concerning extension, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal. McLuhan outlined the details of these four key questions as follows:

- What does the artefact enhance or intensify or make possible or accelerate?
- If some aspect of a situation is enlarged or enhanced, simultaneously the old condition or unenhanced situation is displaced thereby. What is pushed aside or obsolesced by the new "organ"?
- What recurrence or retrieval of earlier actions and services is brought into play simultaneously by the new form? What older, previously obsolesced ground is brought back and inheres in the new form?
- When pushed to the limits of its potential (another complementary action), the new form will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics. What is the reversal potential of the new form?[i]

McLuhan scholar, Paul Levinson, notes that the four laws of media act as unique instruments to: 'gauge the health, status, heartbeat and prognosis of our media'[ii]. Accordingly, it is the intention of this essay to use the form of a McLuhan tetrad as the main tool in an examination of the new medium of webcomics.

In his landmark 1995 work, Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud defines the medium of comics to be: 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence'[iii]. More recently, the last few years have seen the emergence of a new form of comic that marries many of the traditional conventions of paper-based comics to those of the World Wide Web. The result of this convergence is the new medium christened by traditional comic book creators as webcomics. In examining this medium, the tetrad structure leads us to look at what parts of the medium of comics are extended in webcomics and what parts are made obsolete. It highlights

which aspects webcomics retrieve from the predecessors of modern comics and what the medium may reverse into when extended to its limits.

The process of publishing and distributing a traditional paper based comic is costly in terms of the time, money and effort involved on the part of the creators. However, the medium of webcomics allows individual creators to publish and distribute their own comics by making use of the pre-existing delivery platform of the World Wide Web. In this way webcomics extend the ability of a comic creator to reach their intended audience by removing the majority of intermediary stages associated with traditional comic book production. They make it more straightforward for a creator to tell the story they want to tell and then to connect with an appreciative audience for that story. This, Scott McCloud notes, is a case of webcomics helping creators: 'to bring the mountain to Mohammed'[iv]. An increasing number of creators telling an increased diversity of different stories extends the amount of choice available to the reader when they come to decide what type of story they want to read.

Figure 1. Screenshot of *Astounding Space Thrills* by Steve Conley.
http://www.astoundingspacethrills.com

One webcomic that has made good use of the advantages offered by digital delivery is writer and artist Steve Conley's *Astounding Space Thrills*. This daily science fiction adventure serial's main innovation was in allowing its readers to add a free self-updating version of the series to their own websites. In this way Conley makes

direct use of his existing readership to help advertise his webcomic and thereby grow his audience. At the other end of the scale thematically, but making use of a similar distribution method, is *Abby's Menagerie* by Jenni Gregory. Set in a zoo that unexpectedly finds itself the home of previously long extinct animals, the series was praised by Comic book writer and theorist, Warren Ellis for its: 'coherent, original conceptualisation'[v]. It acts as good example of the diversity of genre found in webcomics that is still lacking in their print based predecessors.
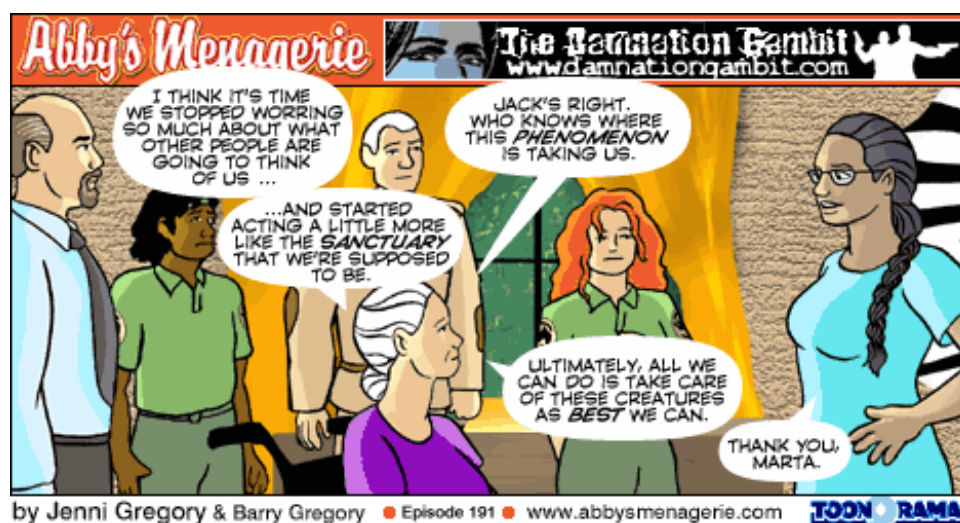
Figure 2. Screenshot of *Abby's Menagerie* by Jenni Gregory.
http://abbysmenagerie.com/

The webcomic by its very nature moves traditional comic book publication and distribution methods towards obsolescence. The major proportion of the industry involved in the production and distribution of a comic has now been placed in the hands of the creator. Comics Journalist, Matt Fraction, makes note of how dramatic a change this can be for someone intent on self publishing their own work:

> Comics can be made, produced, and distributed for practically nothing now save talent and intensity. The eight grand that one *could* spend getting a small print run… …printed, shipped, and solicited will - digitally speaking - provide you with each and every single tool you would ever need to make comics the rest of your life and get them out to a world-wide audience.[vi]

This change takes place against the background of an existing American comic book industry that has been in a state of decline for a number of years. The two major US

comic book publishers, DC and Marvel, have seen the number of people buying their products drop significantly. Marvel in particular has fared badly and, although still publishing at present, do so with the threat of bankruptcy hanging over their heads.
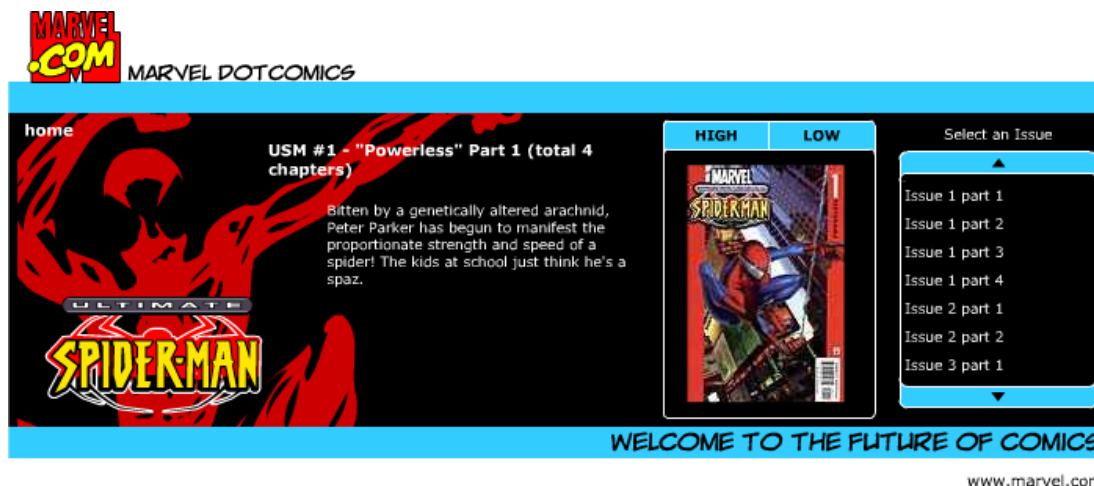

Figure 3. Screenshot of Marvel Comics' *Ultimate Spiderman* webcomic by Brian Bendis.
http://www.marvel.com/dotcomics/menu_flash.html

Understandably keen to reinvent themselves out of their current crisis, recent months has seen an important shift of emphasis in Marvel's distribution method. New series like *Ultimate Spider-Man* and *Ultimate X-Men* have both received only a limited initial print run before being reformatted for distribution as webcomics on the company's website. Competing directly with a company the size of Marvel would be a daunting task for an individual creator working in print comics, but webcomics are something of a different matter. Warren Ellis emphasises the key difference, stating that he: 'can have a website and so can Microsoft and it's no more difficult to access one or the other'[vii]. When it comes to distribution, the Internet does much to close the gap between the resources available to larger publishers and individual creators.

In a traditional comic book the layout of panels must be made to fit within the confines of the page, while the reader is expected to follow the story in the same way they would a printed body of text. They read from left to right, moving down one line of panels at a time until the end of the page, at which point they jump to the top of the next page and repeat the process. While some webcomics treat the computer screen as simply a differently proportioned page, Scott McCloud proposes the alternate view that: 'the monitor which so often acts as a page may also act as a

window'[viii]. Rather than break down the flow of a story so that it has to be read from left to right across several pages, on the web it is possible to contain the whole story within one large page that presents a single unbroken path for the reader to follow. The computer screen then acts as window onto that page, which the reader scrolls through to see the whole of the story.

This approach to the way a story is laid out is not in fact a new idea but rather an example of something that webcomics have retrieved from their preprint ancestors. The Bayeux Tapestry, in telling its pictorial story of the Norman conquest of England in 1066, follows a simple path from left to right along its 230 feet of length. Going even further back to around 1300 BC, paintings on one wall of the Tomb of Menna the Scribe tells the story of a typical harvest in ancient Egypt. Again told in a single unbroken line, this time events are told in a zigzag moving up the wall. In the diagram by Scott McCloud reprinted below, these and other examples help to show some of the diversity of layout that existed before comics became standardised in their current printed form.
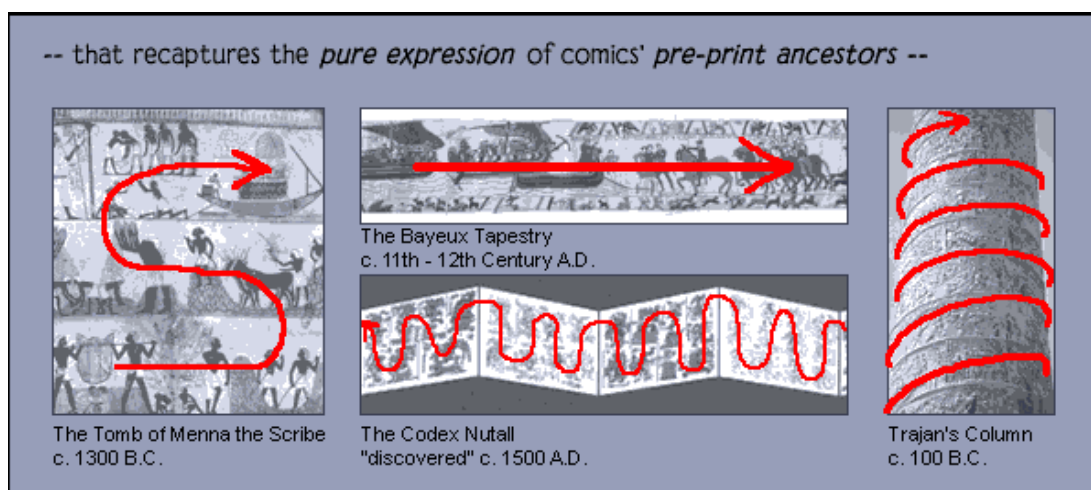

Figure 4. Diagram taken from *I Can't Stop Thinking! #4* by Scott McCloud.
http://www.scottmccloud.com/comics/icst/icst-4/icst-4.html

Today's webcomic creators have begun to reclaim this diversity of layout as they experiment with different methods of positioning comic panels to tell a story.
A prime example of this is the work of Jason Lex. Best known as the creator of the monthly anthology webcomic, *The Aweful Science Fair*, Jason describes the series as his attempt to: 'bend the rules of sequential storytelling'[ix]. Each month he uses a

different layout for his stories, seeing each chapter in the series as an opportunity to tryout a new path for his panels to follow. The results range from wide screen cinematic affairs that progress down the page in long straight lines of panels, to more hectic works that zigzag around the screen and spiral inwards as events approach their conclusion.

Figure 5. Two examples of panel layouts used in *The Aweful Science Fair* by Jason Lex.
http://www.opi8.com/sciencefair.shtml

Pushing the webcomic towards the limits of its potential causes the medium to reverse along two distinctive paths, leading in one direction towards the animated comic and in the other towards the hypercomic. In talking about the first of these two reversals, Warren Ellis described animated comics as: 'being grown out of comics, but they're something new'[x]. They make use of some of the same conventions that the webcomic inherited from the comic but also add elements of movement, sound and music to the mix, often taking advantage of streaming animation technologies such as Macromedia's Flash. The further these additions take the resulting stories away from the spatial based narrative of the webcomic, the more this form comes to resemble the time based medium of animation.

This is a reversal that has become more noticeable as Internet connection speeds have increased and file download times have got smaller. One example of the results of this process is the Flash animated espionage thriller, *Jonni Nitro*. When the series first began it made use of a combination of still imagery, text, animation and a limited sound score to tell its story in a way reminiscent to that of a webcomic. However, more recent episodes have shown a noticeable shift away from the webcomic aesthetic. Voice actors have replaced the combination of text and still images originally used to tell the story and, with the addition of more fully realised soundtrack, the overall effect is to place the series squarely within the domain of animation.

Figure 6. Screenshot of *Jonni Nitro Episode 4: Crash and Burn* directed by Marc Silvestri.
http://www.eruptor.com/shows/jonninitro/index.html

While the move towards animation puts the pacing of the story more firmly in the hands of the creator, hypercomics shift narrative control in the opposite direction. A hypercomic is a form of hyperfiction and as such consists of a collection of interlinked sections that form part of a distinctly ergodic structure. The reader follows a locally unique pathway through the story based on their reactions to the choices they are offered. Unlike the way in which webcomics retrieve older notions of layout that work to extend the spatial aspect of comics, hypercomics tend to move away from a fixed spatial relationship between panels. Instead, the reader's

experience is of what Scott McCloud describes as a story told through individual panels: 'linked in an interactive matrix of narrative choices'[xi].

Creators Steve Casares and Neal Von Flue take advantage of the opportunities offered by the hypercomic medium in their work-in-progress science fiction series, *Paradigm Flux*. Image maps are used to create hotspots within certain panels that can be clicked to open up new panels and sequences of panels in other windows. The reader can either choose to follow each page in numerical sequence, tracking the flow of panels from one page to the next, or they can opt to explore their own path through the story. If taking the latter route, any one particular page can act as a starting point from which they then progress through the narrative by a gradual process of enquiry into the images contained in each panel.

Figure 7. Interlinked panels from *Paradigm Flux* by Steve Casares and Neal Von Flue.
http://hypercomics.tripod.com/images/flux/flux1.htm

In reaching our conclusion it important to consider a note of caution raised by Paul Levinson about the use of McLuhan's laws of media. He states that: 'the four effects of the tetrad are rarely singular. Instead, given media usually enhance, obsolesce, retrieve or reverse into many things'[xii]. In using a tetrad to examine the webcomic, I have produced just one possible snapshot of where the medium is today, where it came from and where it is going. None the less this snapshot has provided the

opportunity for a valuable dissection of a medium that, although still in its infancy, shows great potential for further growth and development.

To sum up, the webcomic enhances the ability of the author to create and distribute their own works while moving into obsolescence the traditional publication and distribution methods of the comic book industry. It is a medium that retrieves preprint notions of spatial layout and, when taken to its limits, reverses into the media of animation and hypercomics. The webcomic is, as Scott McCloud asserts, an important step towards finding for the medium of comics a: 'durable mutation that will continue to survive and thrive into the new century'[xiii].

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[i] McLuhan, Marshal. *Essential McLuhan* (London, England: Routledge, 1997), p. 379.

[ii] Levinson, Paul. *Digital McLuhan* (London, England: Routledge, 1999), p. 17.

[iii] McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics* (New York, USA: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 9.

[iv] McCloud, Scott. *I Can't Stop Thinking! #2 –The 99.9% Solution* (June 2000), http://www.scottmccloud.com/comics/icst/icst-2/icst-2.html

[v] Ellis, Warren. *Come In Alone Issue #11* (11th February 2000), http://www.comicbookresources.com/columns/index.cgi?article=210&column=1

[vi] Fraction, Matt. *Ninth Art - Zeroes and Ones* (18th May 2001), http://www.ninthart.com/display.php?article=14

[vii] Ellis, Warren. *From The Desk Of* (21st December 1998), http://www.warrenellis.com/12-21-98.htm

[viii] McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics* (New York, USA: Paradox Press, 2000), p. 222.

[ix] Lex, Jason. *The Aweful Science Fair* (January 2001), http://www.opi8.com/sciencefair.shtml

[x] Ellis, Warren. *Come In Alone Issue #11* (11th February 2000), http://www.comicbookresources.com/columns/index.cgi?article=210&column=1

[xi] McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics* (New York, USA: Paradox Press, 2000), p. 214.

[xii] Levinson, Paul. *Digital McLuhan* (London, England: Routledge, 1999), p. 190.

[xiii] McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics* (New York, USA: Paradox Press, 2000), p. 207.

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