

5. Hypercomics

Digital comic pioneers have explored many of the possibilities offered by the inherent interactivity and multimodality of digital formats. It is from this period of experimentation and innovation that the hypercomic format has emerged. A hypercomic combines the key characteristics of the form of comics with the multicursal narrative structure of a hypertext. It is a format that foregrounds the importance of reader interaction, with choices made by the reader influencing elements of the narrative. The first half of this chapter provides a description of the format and traces the emergence of the hypercomic from its conceptual roots in the work of Ted Nelson (1974). It considers some of the paper-based and videogame precursors that influenced the development of hypercomics and led to them becoming an offshoot of the nascent webcomic scene. It provides a contextualisation for my own work as a hypercomics practitioner and documents some of the offshoots of the format into physical, gallery-based art installations.

The second half of the chapter then examines these offshoots in more detail, providing an analysis of a selection of hypercomics that address the challenges of architectural spatiality. It takes as its primary case study an architecturally mediated hypercomic created as a practice-based inquiry into the workings of the format. Alongside comics theory, this section draws on the study of narrative space within videogames and media. It considers the use of tropes appropriated from digital comics and explores the tension between fixed sequence and freeform exploration inherent in architecturally mediated works. It examines how spatial positioning impacts on the reading experience and considers the importance of site-specificity in architecturally mediated works.

Definition and origins

A hypercomic can be described as a comic with a multicursal narrative structure. Cursality is the apprehension that there are multiple paths in addition to the one

followed (Peacock 2005). The aesthetic experience of the hypercomic draws on concepts of the maze. A unicursal maze has only one path, no matter how convoluted, while a multicursal maze has many different possible pathways to navigate. Multiple paths within a narrative mean choices must be made by the reader as to which path to follow. As such, a multicursal narrative foregrounds the importance of reader's choice. In a hypercomic, the choices made by the reader may determine the sequence in which events are encountered, the outcome of events or the point of view through which events are seen.

Hypercomics are a type of hyperfiction or cybertext and as such exhibit many of the associated formal properties as identified by Aarseth (1997). They are ergodic in nature, meaning that the reader's experience of the hypercomic's story will often be locally unique based on the specific choices made and pathway formed in navigating the comic. This process of navigation requires a 'nontrivial effort' on behalf of the reader (1). Rather than simply turn the page to progress through the story, progression comes about as a consequence of intention, deliberate choice or inadvertent action on behalf of the reader. The experience of reading a hypercomic can often engender a sense of tmesis. This is the sense of having skipped over or missed something and relates to the reader's apprehension that their own path through the narrative is one of many different potential pathways (Peacock 2005).

Hypercomics have their conceptual roots in Ted Nelson's concept of hypermedia. Nelson himself was the first to coin the term hypercomic in his 1970 paper, *No More Teacher's Dirty Looks*. This paper went on to form part of Nelson's famous conjoined work on hypermedia, *Computer Lib / Dream Machines* (1974). In these texts Nelson defines hypermedia as 'branching and performing presentations which respond to user actions, systems of prearranged words and pictures (for example) which may be explored freely or queried in stylized ways' (313).

He goes on to propose several different examples of possible types of hypermedia. One of these examples is a screen-based educational 'hyper-comic' that:

branches on the student's request. For instance, different characters could be used to explain things in different ways, with the student able to choose which type of explanation he wanted at a specific time (316).

Nelson focuses on the potential use of the format as an educational tool but the fundamentals of a hypercomic are clearly laid down as a comic that branches into different pathways based on the reader's choice. Nelson's concept of a hypercomic is clearly that of a screen-based, digital format although it would be a while before computer and interface technology would catch up to this idea.

Rather than educational tools, some of the earliest significant examples of hypercomics come from the gaming world. *Dice Man* is a five-issue *2000AD* spinoff that was written and edited by Pat Mills in 1986. It combines the form of comics with the game rules of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series of books that began publication in 1979 with Edward Packard's *The Cave Of Time* (Montfort 2005, 71). In each issue of *Dice Man* a character from *2000AD* is placed under the control of the reader, who is instructed to identify themselves directly as that character. The panels of the story are then numbered to indicate reading order, a convention common to early print comics but seldom used in modern formats (Witek 2009, 150). Certain panels in the story ask the reader to choose the character's next action from a range of possible alternatives. Each choice directs the reader to jump to a different panel number, branching the narrative and eventually resulting in one of a range of different endings. In this way *Dice Man* functions as an ergodic text and serves as an example of a paper hypercomic.

The first screen-based hypercomic also appeared in 1986. *Redhawk* (Silhouette Software 1986) is a videogame that was published for the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC. Similarly to *Dice Man*, *Redhawk* mixes the tropes of adventure games with those of comics. The videogame uses a text 'parser' and verb system common to text-based and early graphic adventure games (Montfort 2005, ix). By typing instructions the player can control the actions of the game's

titular superhero protagonist. As the game is played, a constantly updating comic strip is created across the screen. This strip illustrates the results of the player's choices and the interaction between Redhawk and the world around him. While visually crude by modern standards, the free-roaming gameplay of *Redhawk* and generative nature of the comic make for an impressively deep hypercomic reading experience.

In 1988 a notable fictional example of hypercomics emerged in popular culture. In the film *Big* (1988), Josh Baskin is a child who magically becomes an adult overnight and then lands a job at the fictitious MacMillan Toy Company in New York. Played by actor Tom Hanks, the adult Baskin rises swiftly through the company and is given the chance to propose a new line of toys of his own invention. The idea he comes up with is for an 'electric comic book' that is 'different every time' it's read (ibid). In some respects the device Baskin proposes is intended to provide a similar reading experience to that offered today by a tablet computer. In his pitch for this device the choice-based, hypercomic nature of the concept is made clear:

There's this flat screen inside with pictures on it and you read it. And when you get down to the bottom you have to make a choice of what the character's going to do. Like if he's going to go in and fight the dragon then you have to push one of the buttons (ibid).

Also released in 1988 was the Macintosh-based children's adventure game, *Manhole* (Cyan, Inc. 1998). *Manhole* provides the player with an illustrated fantasy environment to explore and interrogate, although whether the game can be considered a true hypercomic is open to debate. *Manhole* has a multicursal structure and makes use of tablodisc artwork and word and image blending via the use of occasional speech balloons. But it also exclusively uses full screen images rather than panels in simultaneous juxtaposition and shows a strong reliance on time-based elements of audible sound and animation. This marks *Manhole* out as an interesting edge-case that could also be considered as a hypermedia precursor to the motion comic format discussed in Chapter Four.

Manhole was created by the brothers Rand and Robyn Miller using a piece of Macintosh software called *HyperCard* (Apple, Inc. 1987). Designed to be easy to learn and use, *HyperCard* was one of the first widely adopted pieces of hypermedia authoring software. In addition to *Manhole*, it was later used to create a hypercomic adaptation of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel, *Maus* (1986). *The Complete Maus* (The Voyager Company 1994) recreates the pages of the original comic for reading on the screen, adding hyperlinks to background material such as sketches, early drafts, archival documents and photographs (Savage 2005). In this way Spiegelman hoped the hypercomic would act as a 'repository' and 'indicator of the various levels in making *Maus*' (The Voyager Company 1994).

Despite these early examples and the beginnings of a wider awareness in popular culture, hypercomics remained a niche concept through the 1980s and early 1990s. While software like *HyperCard* made it easier to create hypermedia, distribution of these works was still problematic and relied on the use of physical media like floppy disks and CD-ROMs. In 1993 McCloud notes in *Understanding Comics* that 'the idea that the reader might choose a direction [in a comic] is still considered exotic' (1993, 105). Although significantly, McCloud goes on to state that reader participation would be a major issue that comics would need to address in defining their role in the new century (106). Indeed, as outlined in the previous chapter, 1993 saw the beginnings of a major change for the consumption and distribution of comics with the arrival of inline image display to the World Wide Web (Campbell 2006, 15). The webcomics that sprung up as a result of this innovation were quick to embrace the web for display and distribution, but initially ignored the hypermedia potential of the web's underlying structure.

The first true hypercomic created specifically for the web came a few years later in 1996. *Club Salsa* (McKean and Miller 1996) is a 24 part hypercomic intended to promote web developer Wall Data's *SALSA* software. The work is a collaboration between the renowned comic artist Dave McKean and designer and programmer

Chris Miller. The comic embraces the hyperlinked nature of the web to tell the story of a murder mystery set in a strange cyberpunk club where patrons can experience virtual reality via the consumption of specially tailored chillies. In terms of the reader's experience of the story, McKean describes the work as 'a big jig-saw puzzle, with useful information mixed with random elements and dead-ends and all-out entertainment' (Wall Data 1996). As such, the work embraces its hypercomic nature, offering the reader a multicursal maze of narrative to explore and interrogate.

Reinventors

The webcomic scene continued to expand and mature through the 1990s, but its focus remained primarily on the serial formats described in the previous chapter. Towards the end of the decade a new movement of comic creators began to emerge that attempted to challenge this status quo (Campbell 2006, 33). This movement to explore the potential that the web offers for new formats of digital comic was championed by Scott McCloud in his book, *Reinventing Comics* (2000a). The book acted as a rallying cry for a new wave of online experimenters that were later dubbed the 'Reinventors' by Campbell in his history of webcomics (2006, 115). McCloud himself became both an unofficial spokesperson for the movement and a key curator of the growing scene.

Two of the earliest, web-based hypercomics produced during this period were Jason Shiga's *Meanwhile* (2000) and Antony Johnston and Ben Templesmith's *After Days Of Passion* (2001). Although originally created for print, Shiga released a web adaptation of *Meanwhile* that took advantage of the hyperlinked nature of the web. The somewhat awkward process of negotiating the print edition's multiple tabbed pages is streamlined via the use of hyperlinks, making navigation through the comic's complex branching narrative significantly more straight-forward. Nelson asserts that hypertexts are 'best presented on computer display screens' as they avoid the physical limitations of print and allow for 'pathways of any structure the

author wants to create' (1974, 314). *After Days Of Passion* was conceived from the beginning for the web, with Johnston describing the work as 'a collage piece, with no arbitrary narrative structure, inviting the reader to piece together parts of the puzzle themselves, through fragments and shreds of the whole' (2012). Hypercomic creator Neal Von Flue recalls the particular influence of *After Days Of Passion* on his own work:

It was such a simple and effective implementation of a hyperlinked narrative [...] the reader was allowed to move though at their own pace and in their own fashion. Re-reading it became a joy, as the order in which you ingested the story changed, and the separate events coloured each other differently when rearranged, making the dynamics of the whole piece shift (2012).

My own work as a comics' practitioner began as part of this growing experimental scene, with my first major work being the hypercomic anthology *Sixgun* (2001). At its core, *Sixgun* is an attempt at resolving the conflict between the spatially based form of comics and the non-spatial relationships between linked 'lexia' that are typical of most web-based hypertexts (Landow 1997). Significantly, the piece introduces the concept of panels that operate as hyperlinks while also remaining as spatial constants across the two pages being linked. Each page of the comic acts as a lexia, with hyperlinked lexia sharing a panel of common content and screen position that reinforces their spatial relationship. *Sixgun* also explores an alternate strategy that makes use of McCloud's infinite canvas approach to digital comics. This gives a fixed spatial relationship to all the pathways through the narrative, leading to a hypercomic format in which the spatial network characteristic is significantly strengthened.

In the previous chapter I asserted the power of the infinite canvas to capture in a digital format the spirit of how multipage print works are traditionally read and explored. However, when the concept was initially introduced by McCloud, it was seen by many as a break with tradition. In his history of webcomics, Campbell

provides a description of the early reception to the infinite canvas and the reading experience it provides.

Narrative comic strips and comic books usually featured cliff-hangers, emotional incentives to turn the page or tune in next time. Infinite-canvas work, more often, relied on an uninterrupted flow, a matrix of spatial relations that pulled the reader from first frame to last. If you were used to taking comics four or six panels at a time, consuming 100 at a gulp was a heady rush (2006, 115-116).

To aid the reader's navigation through the expanded layouts offered by the format, McCloud introduces the idea of the trail - a line connecting all the panels in the narrative which the reader can then easily follow through the story (2000b). *Sixgun* explores the idea that this trail could perhaps branch, introducing a choice to the reader and multiple pathways into the narrative.

McCloud completed his own initial experiment with infinite canvas hypercomics in 2001. *Choose Your Own Carl* (2001) is based on a character introduced in *Understanding Comics* (1993, 84) and features the branching misadventures of its unlucky protagonist. The multiple branches of the comic were created over a two year period as a result of reader suggestions supplied via McCloud's website. Although in keeping with the pattern established by the original Carl story, every branch ends with Carl's death and subsequent gravestone.

Another early *Infinite Canvas* hypercomic is Neal Von Flue's *The Jerk* (2002). Von Flue describes one of his goals in creating the piece as being 'to find a clean way to join [...] two seemingly disparate stories into one reading experience' (2012). The comic combines a scrolling canvas structure with a branching underlay of animated digressions as well as hyperlinked elements of textual meta-commentary. For Von Flue, hypercomics can be defined as a format that 'blends visual storytelling with any of the unique formal properties of computer technology' (ibid). The varied mix

of different web media successfully employed in *The Jerk* provides a good example of this particular outlook on the format.

Zooming

My first significant contribution to the development of the infinite canvas format came with the hypercomic *Doodleflak* (2002), which was the first such comic to employ a zooming interface. This technique allows for the spatial network of the entire comic to be viewed at one level and then for individual segments of the comic to be zoomed into and read. This was a significant development within the field, with previous infinite canvas work only allowing readers to move through the narrative at the reading level. The addition of the zoom allows the reader to experience the entire spatial network of the comic as a single shape. This brings to the fore McCloud's idea of building more direct connections between spatial configuration and narrative, as discussed in the previous chapter.

After my success with *Doodleflak*, I continued to explore the potential for hypercomics to make use of the infinite canvas format. In 2003 I was invited to contribute a section to the gallery-based collaborative hypercomic, *PoCom* (Brooks, Gauld and Gravett 2003). While I initially took a role as one the collaborating cartoonists involved, I was also later given the difficult task of adapting a version of the comic for consumption via the web (Goodbrey 2003). To achieve this I built on my existing hypercomic work and used Flash to create a zooming infinite canvas delivery system that I dubbed *The Tarquin Engine* (2005). The engine proved important both in terms of comic production and reader experience. From a creator's point of view, the engine is coded so as to allow complex, zooming infinite canvas comics to be created using a straightforward drag and drop process in Flash. This greatly simplified the technical aspects of my working method, allowing me to create a whole series of infinite canvas hypercomics in which I was able to focus more on aesthetic and narrative concerns. An example of work from this period,

Never Shoot The Chronopath (Goodbrey 2007), was discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

The engine also made it possible for other comic creators without knowledge of coding to produce zooming infinite canvas comics. One of the first cartoonists to try out the engine was McCloud, who used it to create the improvised hypercomic, *Mimi's Last Coffee* (2004). After some more refinement and experimentation I eventually put a version of the engine on sale in 2005. During the time I spent developing the engine, parallel development was also taking place on a piece of software dubbed simply *Infinite Canvas* (Müller 2004). The Mac-based software was developed by Markus Müller at Vienna's University of Technology and offered creators another useful set of tools for creating zooming infinite canvas comics. Both the *Infinite Canvas* software and *The Tarquin Engine* helped to address important usability issues of infinite canvas comics, such as the awkwardness of scrolling browser windows in different directions in order to follow the path of the narrative.

While remaining popular on the web, the hypercomic format has yet to see much use in comics created for tablets and smartphones. At present these devices are primarily used to provide more traditional, unicursal reading experiences based on fixed sequences of pages. In this respect the hypercomic format faces similar issues to those outlined for the infinite canvas in the previous chapter. However, notable examples do exist that point towards the potential of these new platforms. Interactive fiction author Andrew Plotkin has collaborated with Jason Shiga to release a new version of *Meanwhile* (2011) tailored specifically for iPad and iPhone consumption. While the previous print and web adaptations of the hypercomic both separated the work into distinct page groupings, the new iOS version instead makes use of a zooming infinite canvas structure. Plotkin asserts that this gives the work a new level of fluidity, ensuring that the reader isn't 'bogged down with the mechanics of page-flipping and line-tracing' and that they can instead 'zip forwards at a natural reading speed, and then back up easily' (2011).

I have also experimented with smartphone and tablet-based hypercomics in my own practice. The first of these experiments is *Jack's Abstraction* (Goodbrey 2011). Designed as an app for Android touchscreen devices, the hypercomic makes use of an infinite canvas structure under the gestural control of the reader. To navigate the comic the reader is required to swipe around the canvas, with new panels and pathways appearing as a result of their exploration. In terms of my practice, *Jack's Abstraction* was in many ways a transitional work. In addition to being my first attempt at understanding a new delivery platform, it was also created in the months leading up to the official start of my doctoral study. Aspects of the work (such as the way the spatial network builds up around the reader's exploration) can be seen as a stepping stone towards ideas of videogame hybridisation that I have explored through practice-based research during this thesis. An examination of the potential offered by such hybridisation and the implications this has for the hypercomic format is provided in Chapter Six.

Gallery comics

At the same time that branching infinite canvas comics were being explored on the screen, a parallel exploration of the form was taking place in physical space. Swedish artist Lars Arrhenius' piece *The Man Without Qualities* (2001) has clear visual similarities with McCloud's *Carl*, even ending several of its paths with the central character's grave. But Arrhenius's work exchanges the electronic canvas for the walls of the gallery, wrapping the pathways of his hypercomic narrative around the corners and doorways of the room. A year later Arrhenius created another similar gallery hypercomic, *A-Z* (2002) that uses a folded-out London A-Z map as the basis for its multicursal narrative.

Arrhenius work is a key influence in the creation of the collaborative hypercomic, *PoCom* (Brooks, Gauld and Gravett 2003). Short for "potential comics," this major hypercomic work began as the brain child of Paul Gravett, Brad Brooks and Tom Gauld. It featured a collaboration between eighteen cartoonists to create a

hypercomic for the wall of the Institute Of Contemporary Art as part of the inaugural *Comica* festival in 2003. The collaborative nature of the comic and formal constraints under which it was created drew on the ideas of *Oubapo*, the comic-based offshoot of the French literary movement *Oulipo*. The original piece measured seventeen meters long and, in terms of scope and complexity, was one of the more ambitious hypercomic projects that had thus far been attempted.

Arrhenius' work and *Pocom* are architecturally mediated hypercomics, with multicursal structures designed to inhabit and be navigated via real world, three-dimensional environments. Gravett states that a 'wide-open space for multicursal comics was provided by the white cube of the art gallery' (2013, 131). Referring to this emergent format as 'gallery comics' (ibid), he notes that these are typically works 'made specifically for exhibition and not necessarily for [traditional] publication' (ibid). Mutard similarly argues that a successful gallery comic cannot simply repeat the dimensions of the page, but instead must be scaled to inhabit the larger gallery space (2013, 287). In this respect gallery comics can be considered as a hybrid format that combines the form of comics with the qualities typical to many examples of installation art.

The Tate Gallery describes installation art as typically consisting of 'large-scale, mixed-media constructions' that may 'occupy an entire room or gallery space that the spectator has to walk through in order to engage fully with the work of art' (2017). Installations are usually designed to inhabit specific spaces or sites, but may later be adapted for installation elsewhere (de Oliveira et al. 2003, 28). They are often described as works that seek to envelop or immerse their audience (Onorato 1997, 29; Coulter-Smith 2006a), requiring the viewer to 'circumnavigate a space' in order to gain a full experience the work (Rosenthal 2003, 23). The spatial configuration of the elements within an installation are accordingly 'modelled or arranged towards the presence of the viewer' (de Oliveira et al. 2003, 35).

A gallery comic shares the above qualities, specifically incorporating sequences of comics into the mix of objects and media that constitute the installation's

construction. This integration of the form of comics tends to place a particular emphasis on the narrative elements found within the installation. These elements are typically presented to viewers as ‘fragments that must be explored and assembled’ (Coulter-Smith 2006a), requiring viewers to become the ‘authors and generators of their own meanings’ (de Oliveira et al. 2003, 17). Coulter-Smith asserts that installation art excels at the creation of such multicursal narratives due to:

the fact that the placement of a variety of objects in a room as part of a single work requires the reader to engage creatively in making connections between the parts [...] without the specified linear direction evident in literature, theatre, film, video, music etc. (2006b).

Hypercomics are a particularly good fit for use within installations due to their inherent multicursal structure and their foregrounding of the choices made by the reader in the construction of narrative. While my focus as a practitioner began with the creation of digital hypercomics, as a result of my work on *Pocom* I became increasingly interested in experimenting with further architecturally mediated pieces.

This experimentation eventually led to my participation in a major gallery exhibition of hypercomics at the Pumphouse Gallery in London. The exhibition opened in 2010 under the title *Hypercomics: the shape of comics to come*. It was curated by Paul Gravett and featured the work of four artists - Warren Pleece, Adam Dant, Dave McKean and myself. Perhaps most impressive was McKean's contribution, *The Rut* (2010), which used the gallery space to present a criss-crossing multiple view-point narrative incorporating sculptural elements alongside traditional comics panels. The exhibition was well received critically, receiving five stars in *Time Out* (Charlesworth 2010) and positive reviews amongst the comics press (Round 2011). As such it contributed significantly towards raising the profile of hypercomics amongst both the general public and the wider arts and comics communities.

My own contribution to the exhibition, entitled *The Archivist* (Goodbrey 2010), was created initially for architectural mediation but designed in such a way as to allow for easy adaptation as either a printed or digital comic. Working on *The Archivist* served to highlight and contrast the qualities of these three media and allowed me to develop my thinking on the impact of mediality on the hypercomic reading experience. During this work I started to notice that many tropes of screen-based comics could also be usefully applied to real world, three-dimensional spaces. I also began to wonder how the reader's relationship to the form of comics was changed or disrupted via these acts of architectural mediation. To explore these ideas as part of my doctoral study I began a practice-lead inquiry into architecturally mediated comics. This culminated in 2013 with a public experiment into how the infinite canvas concept could be extended to address the challenges of architectural spatiality.

Black Hats In Hell

The hypercomic *Black Hats In Hell* (Goodbrey 2013) was installed in the Framework Gallery at the University of Hertfordshire in April 2013 (Image 1). A second version of the comic was then installed a few days later in the entranceway of the Platform Theatre at Central St Martins in London. The plot of *Black Hats* is that of a western. It tells the story of two rival cowboys and the cycle of violence that leads to both men's eventual descent into Hell. The comic is a site-specific work that draws direct influence from the layout of the Framework Gallery. The later version installed at the Platform Theatre is an adaptation of the original work that uses a new configuration of panels based on the layout of the theatre's entranceway.



Image 1 – Black Hats In Hell

Gallery comics have the potential to integrate other elements commonly used in installation art (such as video or audible sound) that can lead to the further hybridisation of the format. However, the primary focus of my study has been on the architectural mediation of the form of comics, rather than this additional potential for hybridity. In developing *Black Hats* I therefore chose to exclude experimentation with such hybrid elements within the narrative. While outside the scope of my doctoral study, the potential for further hybridisation within gallery comics is one of the areas for further study discussed in Chapter Eight. In this chapter, the analysis of *Black Hats* has been structured across five interrelated areas. These include the use of digital comic tropes; the navigation of spaces; the role of links, looking and signifiers; comics across three dimensions; and adapting work to new spaces.

Digital comic tropes

In an architecturally mediated comic, a wall typically offers a space much larger than a standard page and as such draws on a collection of tropes similar to those found in the infinite canvas. While a wall remains more fixed and finite than an equivalent digital space, both media present a creator with a reduced set of spatial constraints. This in turn allows for greater experimentation with the spatial relationship between panels. As discussed in the previous chapter, changes made

to this spatial relationship can influence the reader's interpretation of the passage of time within the comic's narrative.



Image 2 – Panel spacing

Black Hats makes use of this phenomena, keeping to a standard spacing between the majority of its panels and then varying the distance and positioning in certain sequences to achieve specific effects. A larger space between panels in one sequence (Image 2) is used to indicate a longer period of time passing between the depicted events. Parallel to this earthbound narrative, another sequence set in Heaven runs higher up the wall. Here all the panels are positioned much further apart to suggest a more gradual perception of the passing of time. Elsewhere an isolated panel is separated in space from the rest of its sequence (Image 1). This suggests a longer period of time passing without any further events taking place, leaving the reader to dwell on the single depicted image.

In an architecturally mediated comic, the relative position in space between reader and panel sequence can also be used for narrative effect. In *Black Hats*, the parts of the story that take place on earth are primarily displayed around eye-level, locating the reader on the earthly plane. The reader then looks downwards towards

sequences set in Hell and upwards towards sequences set in Heaven. The idea of Heaven as a higher plane and Hell as a lower one is reinforced through their spatial positioning relative to the reader.



Image 3 – Visual onomatopoeics

The previous chapter introduced Barber's concept of 'visual onomatopoeics' (2002, 66) where the animated movement of a panel matches the action depicted within the panel. In *Black Hats*, visual onomatopoeics can be seen operating in sequences that show the characters rising or falling through space. Events such as climbing a mountain, ascending towards Heaven or falling into Hell are mimicked by rising or descending sequences of panels. To read a sequence showing the fall of the cowboy into Hell (Image 3), the reader must tilt their head to follow the panels down the wall. This physical movement on behalf of the reader reinforces the dramatic nature of the fall depicted within the panels.

Navigating spaces

When reading a traditional comic our eyes follow a linked path from panel to panel across the page that allows us to understand the narrative contained in the sequence. Comics theorist Jayms Nichols describes this path as 'the raster of reading' (2013, 304) and further notes that although 'the raster varies depending on the cultural norms and differs from location to location, in western culture it usually runs from left to right, top to bottom across the page' (ibid). In contrast to this fixed reading raster, installation art places an emphasis on the viewer's ability to explore a space without adhering to a single correct pathway through the work. (Rosenthal 2003, 27; Coulter-Smith 2006b). Games theorist Michael Nitsche similarly asserts that three-dimensional space 'implies the option of a different turn at any moment, a new choice or a different perspective that outweighs traditional nodes and links' (2008, 28).

Architecturally mediated comics exhibit a clear tension between the freeform exploration inherent in the three-dimensional space of an installation and the fixed progression dictated by the arrangement of panels in a sequence. Further complicating this relationship, architectural spaces may also impose their own raster of reading on a sequence of panels. This can at times be counter to the left to right, top to bottom raster of the traditional western page. To take *PoCom* as an

example, the seventeen-metre-long work was installed into a space that acted as an entranceway into the rest of the building. As a result, the majority of foot traffic through the space moved from right to left. The comic was therefore designed to be read from right to left, so that the audience could progress through the comic at the same time they moved deeper into the building. This decision impacted not only on the reading order of panels but also on their content, which featured characters chiefly moving through the frame from right to left rather than the more traditional left to right.

The Framework Gallery that contained *Black Hats* featured a similar flow of right to left traffic. Accordingly the comic uses the same approach taken in *PoCom*, matching the raster of reading and flow of action internal to the panels to the primary flow of people through the space. However, *Black Hats* was intended for installation across multiple walls and occupied a space that was significantly more varied in terms of layout. I became concerned that this could lead to choke points in the gallery if all in attendance were funnelled to read the story from the same starting point. The solution to this problem was to tell the story using a looping narrative structure.

This approach was influenced by the structure used by McKean in *The Rut*. The narrative of *The Rut* loops and branches multiple times around the room in the Pumphouse Gallery for which it was created. Gravett notes that the work came presented with 'no instructions or set order... [leaving visitors] ...to their own devices' (2013, 132). As such the layout encourages readers to chart their own paths of exploration through both the room and the story it contains. In constructing *Black Hats* without a single clear start or end point, readers can move into the space and choose their own point at which to enter and follow the narrative loop. This approach builds both on the nature of three-dimensional space to empower the reader with choice and the nature of the hypercomic to create narrative pathways locally unique to each reader.

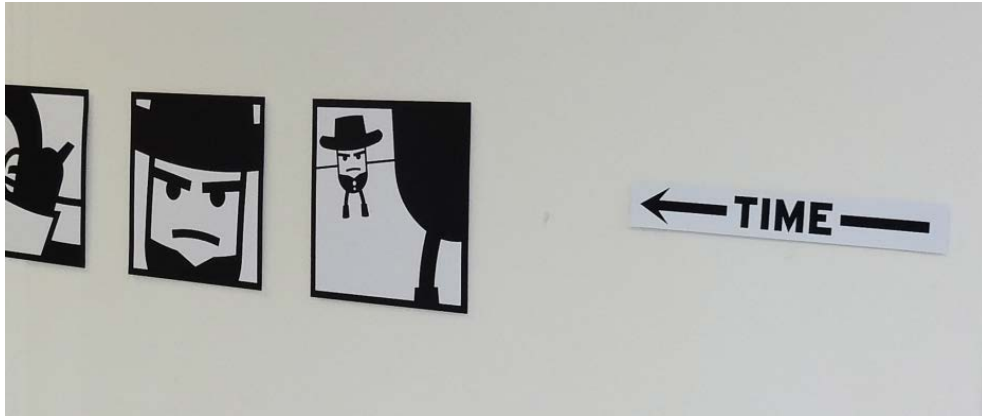


Image 4 – Arbitrary tags

Links, looking and signifiers

To make clear its reading order, *PoCom* makes use of another infinite canvas trope identified by McCloud; the trail (2000b). Trail lines serve as effective navigational aids by linking together panels and making the raster of reading visually explicit. Sometimes (as with *PoCom*) trails also include an arrowhead or similar device to further reinforce the direction of reading. However, given the looser, looping structure at work in *Black Hats*, I decided to forgo the use of trails as an explicit signifier of reading order. Instead, positioned at several points around the room are arrows to indicate the flow of time in the narrative (Image 4). Like the numbering of panels, arrows to indicate reading order are a device common to early print comics that are less often used in modern formats (Witek 2009, 149). When they do appear in modern print comics, Witek notes that ‘the use of directional arrows serves to temporarily suspend the normal reading process in order to foreground the spatial relations of the panels’ (152).

In the case of *Black Hats*, the arrows present the reader with a choice; to read with the flow of time or against it. The arrows also serve as an example of what Peacock describes as a ‘perceptual tag’ (2009). In discussing the role of perceptual tags in locative media, Peacock divides their use into two groupings. Embedded tags are ‘things that exist already in the environment and are appropriated as signs’ (ibid) by an art installation or locative work. Arbitrary tags (such as the time arrows) are

‘deliberately placed and carefully designed’ signifiers (ibid) that have been added into the environment. Another prominent set of arbitrary tags used in *Black Hats* are the thick black panel borders that frame each image in the comic.

Installation art is sometimes associated with the idea of ‘liberating art from the frame’ (Davies 1997, 9) or of being an ‘unframed form of art’ (Rosenthal 2003, 27). However in a gallery comic, framed images often remain a major focus within the spatial arrangement of the installation. Groensteen notes that the frame around an image in a comic ‘is always a sign of something to be read’ (2007, 53). Hague makes the similar assertion that comics which rigidly enforce the use of panel borders around each image help to strengthen the ‘perception of the comic as object’ (2014, 52). Accordingly the thick panel borders used in *Black Hats* act as a key signifier for the audience that what they see on the walls is not just a collection of images. Rather they are a narrative sequence; a story told using the form of comics and intended to be read using the process of closure to construct time and motion out of simultaneously juxtaposed images.



Image 5 – Embedded tags 1

De Oliveira et al. note the common practice in installation art of appropriating ‘previously existing aesthetic artefacts in order to divert their meaning or intent’ (2004). *Black Hats* features two examples of appropriation where pre-existing visual

elements are incorporated into the narrative as embedded tags. In one sequence, a cowboy arrives home to discover his homestead has been set ablaze (Image 5). The panels are arranged so as to incorporate the fire alarm and emergency action instructions that are already present on the gallery wall. Elsewhere in the space an emergency exit sign is similarly appropriated (Image 6). In this instance the image of the doorway in the sign carries across thematically into the nearest panel, which shows the doorway of a saloon. The addition of the word "time" to the sign also draws a connection between this embedded tag and the time arrows, further reinforcing the flow of time within the narrative.



Image 6 – Embedded tags 2

While written words are present in some of the perceptual tags used in *Black Hats*, the comic panels themselves are silent and feature no words or word balloons. In my earlier work on *The Archivist* I took an opposite approach and made heavy use of word and image blending within the narrative, employing a font size similar to that which might typically appear on the printed page. However, this approach ultimately proved to be problematic. In discussing the display of original comic pages in a gallery setting, Mutard asserts that:

a cognitive dissonance occurs. By being physically present within a gallery, readers will tend to position themselves at a distance from the work for the

long look, but... [are] ...forced to move close and enter reading mode if they are to perceive anything more than the page, or hyperframe (2013, 286).

I observed this tension first hand in readers of *The Archivist*, who at times appeared torn between standing far enough from the work to contemplate the layout of its wider spatial network, and standing close enough to read and follow individual sequences. The solution Mutard proposes to the problem is to increase the scale of the comic so that it better fits the space of the gallery and can be both read and contemplated at a similar distance (287). While this helps to address the tension between sequence and spatial network, it also results in new problems for the blend of word and image.

On the page, a comic reader is familiar with the act of reading word balloons as part of a sequence of panels. As part of the process that Groensteen describes as 'plurivectoral narration' (2007, 108), a reader absorbs the content of each panel in a sequence without visually losing track of the sequence as a whole. For this process to effectively incorporate words, Baetens and Lefèvre highlight the importance of 'minimizing the time gap between the perception of the image [...] and the tracking of verbal signifiers' (2014, 189). However, in some architecturally mediated comics the larger scale of the panels on the wall means reading a sequence involves a physical turn of the head to view all the panels. This can be problematic for word and image blending as it introduces a discontinuity between the focused reading of text in a word balloon and the appreciation of this element as part of the sequence as a whole.

By avoiding the use of written text in its panels, *Black Hats* avoids the problems outlined above. Although by allowing the images to carry the narrative on their own there is also potentially some trade-off in clarity. Harvey cautions that wordless comics can 'ooze ambiguity and inexplicable action' (2002). The intent with *Black Hats* is for the larger sequence of panels to cancel out any unwanted moments of ambiguity that might occur in individual panels. Another approach to the use of text in architecturally mediated comics can be seen in Luke Pearson's contribution to

the *Memory Palace* exhibition at the V&A (2013). In Pearson's infinite-canvas-styled sequence, the conversation between two characters is shown in a separate block of text beneath the related image sequence. By simply separating out word and image, the conflict between reading the written text and consuming the larger image sequence is neatly circumvented.

Comics across three dimensions

Hague makes an interesting comparison between comics and sculpture, noting that traditional printed comics 'allow the mobility of both the object and its spectator' (2014, 53). In contrast sculptural works usually occupy fixed positions that only allow for the mobility of the spectator. Architectural mediation results in hypercomics that also occupy fixed positions in space and that, like sculpture, present 'objects that are intended for viewing from multiple angles and unlike painting or cinema cannot be taken in fully without this requirement being met' (ibid).

In installation art the mobility of the viewer increases further, with the viewer's gaze being 'divided across a spatially extended distribution of objects, rather than being focused on an integral object' (Coulter-Smith 2006c). In examining *The Rut*, Dittmer notes how the three-dimensional quality of the work 'shifted the narrative from being a thread to follow through the comic to being emergent from the space of the exhibit itself' (2011, 381). One of the goals of my public experiment was to further explore this potential of the gallery as a three-dimensional space for comics display. Mutard asserts that in an architecturally mediated work, 'the turn of the wall becomes the equivalent of [the] turn of the page' (2013, 287). Just as with the turn of a page in a traditional comic, blind corners can hide surprises for the reader or suggest a progression in time between the events depicted on the two joining walls (Image 7).



Image 7 – Blind corners



Image 8 – Facing corners

Corners between two facing walls provide other opportunities. In one sequence (Image 8), one cowboy is shown advancing menacingly on the wife of the other. Here the relative position in space between the panels helps to foster the suggestion of eye contact between the two characters, heightening the tension of the scene. Another key sequence in the comic (Image 9) extends the idea of eye contact between panels even further. A pair of parallel walls depicts a classic western showdown between the story's two protagonists. The sequences are anchored together by parallel middle panels that depict the two characters staring out at each other across the space of the gallery. In this manner the layout of the space situates the viewer directly within the sequence of panels as the events of

the gunfight unfold. In describing his experience of *Black Hats*, Gravett notes how readers find themselves caught ‘inside a gunfight, between the two cowboys’ synchronous points of view’ (2013, 132).



Image 9 – Inside a gunfight

While given specific focus during this showdown sequence, the idea of being inside a comic is central to much of *Black Hats*. By considering the comic in Groensteen’s ‘dechronologized mode’ (2007, 147), the reader can explore its spatial network separately from the vector of the narrative. Through explorations of the gallery space, the reader can adopt multiple different points of view within the ‘panoptical spread’ (ibid) of the comic. In this way the reader is free to chart their own discovery of the juxtapositions, repetitions and symmetries of layout that exist between thematically linked sequences within the story.

Conversely, the inherent freedom of three-dimensional installation spaces can instead be deliberately subverted in order to limit the viewer’s gaze or encourage specific angles of viewing (de Oliveira et al. 2003, 18). While asserting the importance of designing a comic to fit the available architectural space, Mutard notes that a creator also has the option to ‘construct a space’ (2013, 288) specifically to hold the comic. This increases the potential for what Nitsche describes in videogames as “narrating architecture” that enforces a certain vision through the limitation of the spatial practice within it’ (2008, 106).

In Frank Laws' contribution to *Memory Palace* (2013), we see an example of this idea at work in an architecturally mediated comic. A series of panels depicting surrealist urban constructions are arranged inside a tight pentagon of walls. The reader can only view the work from outside the pentagon through narrow gaps at each of its corners. This limits the field of view of the reader so that each corner brings the focus to a different panel in the sequence. In *The Rut* this technique is taken even further, with a sequence of masks placed in fixed positions around the room. By looking through the eyeholes of each mask, previously unreadable elements of the comic's sculptural centrepiece become readable. As Dittmer notes, 'the reader/viewer of this comic is positioned in space such that they, for a moment, embody one perspective of this fragmented tale of violence and regret' (2011, 383).

Adapting work to new spaces

Black Hats is a site-specific installation and as such 'is dependent in large part on the configuration of the space in which it is realized' (de Oliveira et al. 2004, 35). The more an architecturally mediated comic embraces its site-specific nature, the more difficult it becomes to successfully transpose that work to a new location. This limitation of the format became readily apparent during the installation of the second version of *Black Hats* in the entranceway of the Platform Theatre. The new location was configured in a significantly different layout to the Framework Gallery, with the forking nature of the entranceway meaning that foot traffic naturally flowed in two different directions through the space. The looping nature of the narrative remained intact but the right to left flow of the raster of reading no longer aligned as perfectly to how the space was used. In the new version, rather than the flow of traffic through the space being mirrored in the flow of the narrative, the right to left flow in the narrative became the major element leading readers in one direction through the space.



Image 10 – The missing doorway

Elements of layout in the comic that were made in response to architectural features of the original gallery space are also problematic. The sequence depicting the cowboy's retreat to a secluded mountain and eventual plunge into Hell (Image 3) was originally designed around an open doorway in the Framework Gallery. At the Platform Theatre the same sequence had to be laid out against a blank wall where no such doorway exists (Image 10), robbing the arrangement of some of its visual impact.

However, in transposing the work, new synchronicities and interactions between the comic and its environment also suggested themselves. For example, in the sequence showing an angel looking down on proceedings, the nearby wall lights add a bright glow to the artwork that reinforces its heavenly setting (Image 11). The increased space available at the Platform Theatre also allowed room for the incorporation of a series of comic strips by other artists that serve as tangents to the central narrative. These additional story branches serve to enhance the hypercomic nature of the original, providing divergent and parallel viewpoints on the landscapes of Hell and the Wild West.



Image 11 – New synchronicities

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an account of the origins and history of the hypercomic format in both digital and physical contexts. It has identified the format as having a multicursal structure, in which the reader must make deliberate choices as to the path they take through the narrative. Navigating this path may require the reader to follow hyperlinks between linked lexia of panels. Alternatively, it may require them to follow fixed trails of panels in branching, infinite canvas arrangements. In documenting the development of the format, the chapter has further served to contextualise my own contributions as a leading hypercomic practitioner.

The chapter has also presented a detailed examination of the challenges raised by the architectural mediation of hypercomics within a gallery setting. Gallery comics have been identified as exhibiting many of the typical characteristics of gallery-based art installations. The gallery comic *Black Hats In Hell* has provided the focus for a practice-based inquiry in which parallels have been drawn between digital and physical mediations of the hypercomic format. This inquiry has identified useful strategies for the incorporation of perceptual tags and textual elements in architecturally mediated works. It has allowed for a creative exploration of the use of three-dimensional space as a narrative device within the form of comics. Lastly, it

has helped bring into focus some of the issues raised in the adaptation of site-specific works to new locations.

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