

Choose The Format Of Your Destructor

Design Choices For Comic Creators In Print & Digital Media

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What did you do, Ray?

I couldn't help it. It just popped in there!

Comics is a Form

- ▶ There are certain key characteristics of this form that we can identify:
 - ▶ Space as time
 - ▶ Simultaneous juxtaposition of images
 - ▶ Closure between images
 - ▶ Spatial networks
 - ▶ Reader control of pacing
 - ▶ Tablodic images
 - ▶ Word and image blending
- ▶ Not all comics necessarily exhibit all of these characteristics.
- ▶ There are lots of different formats of comic, in which these characteristics may become more or less prominent.

Popular Print Comic Formats



Newspaper strip



Monthly comic book



Graphic Novel

European Album

Manga
Phonebook

Trade
Paperback

Popular Digital Comic Formats



Digital Comic

Guided View



Webcomic



Hypercomic

Game Comic

Guided View Native

Choosing Your Comic's Format

- ▶ If you're a creator wanting to tell a story using the form of comics, you will have to make a choice about what format you want to work in.
- ▶ In fact, you'll have to make a series of choices connecting to format at several points during the creative process.
- ▶ Some of these are conscious choices, some you make without realising it.
- ▶ But each choice has multiple repercussions for the final comic you create.
- ▶ In this talk I will highlight some of these choices and unpack the various repercussions they may have on your comic's creation, distribution and consumption.

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of blue, ranging from light sky blue to deep navy blue. The shapes are primarily triangles and polygons, creating a dynamic, layered effect. The text is positioned on the left side of the frame, set against a plain white background.

The First Choice: Format Specific or Format Flexible?

The First Choice: Format Specific

- ▶ Choosing to focus on creating a comic with only a single format in mind can allow a creator to fully exploit the specific qualities of that format.
- ▶ But it can also limit you to fewer channels of distribution and consumption.
- ▶ Ultimately this can limit the size of the potential readership.
- ▶ That audience may appreciate you making something 'just for them.'
- ▶ But should you later decide to try to adapt your comic to another format, it can be difficult to do this without significant extra work.
- ▶ The resulting adapted comic may feel unsatisfactory compared to the original format, or come across radically different from how you originally intended it to be read

The First Choice: Format Flexible

- ▶ Choosing to create a comic that operates well across multiple formats can lead to a wider range of distribution channels and a larger potential readership.
- ▶ But it also places increased limits on the layout and design of that comic and prevents you from making full use of any one format's specific qualities.
- ▶ You may have an ideal format in mind, but creating a format flexible comic means also thinking about how the comic will read in other formats.
- ▶ Failing to think fully about all the potential formats you're aiming for can again result in some versions of the comic delivering an unsatisfying or awkward reading experience.
- ▶ This can place a number of extra restraints on aspects of the comic's creation.

The First Choice: Format Specific or Format Flexible?

Once you've chosen to work towards a specific or flexible format, a further range of choices start to present themselves.

To unpick these I'm going to use two examples, one format specific and one format flexible.

Example One: Format Flexible

- ▶ You decide to create a graphic novel in a typical American format. 120 pages of a complete, self-contained narrative.
- ▶ Because you want to build an audience for that graphic novel as you work on it, you decide you will serialise it as a webcomic and publish online as you go.
- ▶ You also decide you want to reach the small press and indie scenes, so you plan to self-publish the graphic novel as five single issues.
- ▶ Going for maximum visibility, you want these issues to also be available to be read digitally via a service like Electricomics or Comixology.
- ▶ And then at the end, when it's all done, you'll publish your graphic novel.

Example One: Format Flexible

- ▶ Because you're aiming towards that graphic novel, you decide to work with portrait-orientated pages.
- ▶ This is the 'standard' orientation for a printed comic or graphic novel.
- ▶ It works well for all your chosen formats except webcomics, where a landscape page would be a better fit for the screen's dimensions.
- ▶ But still, a lot of webcomics are done at portrait size, and your ultimate priority is that graphic novel, so you decide this is an acceptable trade-off.
- ▶ Because you also want to serialise your story as single issues and you want your comic to feel at home alongside other serial comics, you design your pages to use standard US comic dimensions.
- ▶ Serialising your story as single issues means you want each issue to work well on its own, so you start to think of your graphic novel as five 'chapters'.

Example One: Format Flexible

- ▶ Each chapter will have a hook at the start to draw the reader in, and some sort of cliff-hanger at the end to keep them reading.
- ▶ But it's also going to be a webcomic. Webcomics thrive on small, regular updates.
- ▶ A lot of your initial audience will experience the story one page at a time, getting only one to two new pages each week.
- ▶ So you also start to think about your story in terms of making each page feel like it provides a satisfying chunk of narrative.
- ▶ Enough reason for the audience to tune in again eagerly in a few days times.
- ▶ This is a balancing act - write too much to the single page and the story may not flow well when collected all together.

Example One: Format Flexible

- ▶ You have to think about how multiple different audiences are going to engage with the work.
- ▶ Although you've got your eye on the graphic novel at the end, a lot of your audience may never encounter it in that format.
- ▶ Some of the specific features of the graphic novel format can also be problematic for other formats.
- ▶ A splash page that makes for a great dramatic moment in a graphic novel can feel like an unsatisfyingly 'short' instalment in a webcomic.
- ▶ A double page spread that makes for a dynamic change of layout in print can be very difficult to read satisfyingly as a digital comic on the iPad.

Example One: Format Flexible

- ▶ Font size is also an issue many people don't think enough about.
- ▶ iPad screens tend to be a little smaller than a print comic, so if you want something that reads well both in print and digital you need to use a slightly larger font size.
- ▶ While you could have two differently lettered versions, this is a significant amount of extra work and writers often 'write to the balloon', adjusting dialogue to fit the amount of space available.
- ▶ Overall, format flexibility is always a balancing act.
- ▶ It's important to decide what your primary formats are, and how much you are willing to bend or limit yourself around these.

Example Two: Format Specific

- ▶ You decide to create a digital comic to be read on a tablet computer like the iPad.
- ▶ Digital comics aren't themselves one format, but rather a variety of different formats.
- ▶ A number of further choices open up around which format you want to use for your comic and which qualities of the digital medium you wish to exploit.
- ▶ A good thing to think about first is if you want to use 'pages'?

Example Two: Format Specific

- ▶ You can use a digital recreation of a traditional paper 'page' but in a digital comic you don't have to.
- ▶ You could choose to take a 'Panel Delivery' approach.
- ▶ This keeps the idea of page-like groupings of panels but let's you build them up or alter your page one panel at a time.
- ▶ Or you could choose to take an 'Infinite Canvas' approach.
- ▶ This treats the screen as a window on a much larger map-like network or scroll of panels, which the reader then navigates through.

Example Two: Format Specific

- ▶ How the reader navigates through the comic becomes another choice.
- ▶ Do they tap the screen? Swipe?
- ▶ Pinch to zoom through the comic?
- ▶ Tilt or turn the tablet to go forward or back?
- ▶ Do you want to keep this navigation method consistent?
- ▶ Or force the reader to explore multiple different ways of navigating the story?



Example Two: Format Specific

- ▶ Do you want to create a traditional, 'uni-cursal' narrative with only a single pathway through from beginning to end?
- ▶ Or do you want to create a 'multi-cursal' narrative with multiple pathways that require the reader to make a choice about how they progress or what happens next in the narrative?
- ▶ Such 'hypercomics' can create complex networks of narrative for the reader to explore.
- ▶ But they can also cause confusion for the reader, who finds themselves lost in the maze of choices on offer.

Example Two: Format Specific

- ▶ Do you want to incorporate animation or sound into your comic?
- ▶ Panels that move around on screen can add a dynamic moment to a scene.
- ▶ Ambient loops of animation or sound can enhance the atmosphere in a particular panel or scene.
- ▶ But too much animation and sound can disrupt the reading process or take control of the comic's pacing away from the reader.

Example Two: Format Specific

- ▶ Do you want to incorporate play into your comic?
- ▶ Maybe your digital comic is also a videogame that can be played as its read?
- ▶ Or maybe it's like an interactive storybook, with hidden surprises and interactions that can be uncovered through experimentation?
- ▶ Do you want to incorporate locative or generative elements into your comic?
- ▶ Comics that change depending on where in the world they're read?
- ▶ Or the time of day they're read?
- ▶ Or who the camera on the tablet can see reading them?

Example Two: Format Specific

- ▶ As always, creating a successful format specific digital comic is a balancing act.
- ▶ You want to try and exploit the opportunities offered by the digital medium, but throw too much at the reader and you may overwhelm them.
- ▶ The more you add technical complexity or additional media, the more you may have to grow the team it takes to create the comic (adding coders, musicians, animators etc.).
- ▶ The more you use and embrace the specifics of digital formats and platforms, the more you create an experience unique to that format.

Example Two: Format Specific

- ▶ The uniqueness of this experience can serve to attract a significant audience to the work.
- ▶ But you also run the risk of limiting your audience to those that have access to that specific device or marketplace.
- ▶ And if that device or specific software you've relied upon becomes obsolete in the future, you may have to do significant additional work to ensure your comic's continued availability.

Conclusions

- ▶ This is just a sampling of some of the choices involved when it comes to choosing your format.
- ▶ It's important to stress there are seldom right or wrong choices.
- ▶ Just different outcomes that may be more or less advantageous depending on what your priorities are as a creator.
- ▶ It's always useful to try and figure out what those priorities are when you go into a project.
- ▶ But If you don't want to over think it - don't. Just make comics!
- ▶ Never underestimate the power of 'wing-it-and-see-what-happens'.