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Comics, Materiality, and the Internet

The first American comics were read in newspapers and thrown away. When newspaper publishers discovered they could repackage comics and sell them again, the precursor to the comic book was born. Like newspapers, comic books were printed on cheap paper and designed to be read and then tossed away. For the cartoonist, having work published meant placing your comics in newspaper syndication or working under a contract with a company like Marvel or DC Comics. Comics, from the beginning, were embedded in a consumption materiality. There was nothing precious about the material form that comics took.

In the 1960s R. Crumb and his friends created alternative comics for the underground movement. Even though these creations could be stunning in their artistry or their content, they were still published in alternative newspapers or as comic books on cheap paper. Unlike their mainstream counterparts, underground cartoonists did not expect to earn a conventional living from their comics. To paraphrase Kim Deitch, “If I make enough to pay the rent and eat, and have time to make my comics, what more do I need?” At a panel discussion held at the University of Richmond on October 25, 2009, Deitch seemed puzzled by the idea that he would create comics with the intention of tapping into a commercial market. His attitude, from the underground movement, is echoed by the later DIY/Punk movement. To create alternative comics meant creating comics with no intention of ever syndicating a comic strip to family newspapers or signing a contract to produce serials of Batman.

Then 1960s counter-culture youth aged into a mainstream audience and Will Eisner coined the term “graphic novels.” Cartoonists began to create and publish long-form narrative

comics. Like the alternative movement cartoonists, they bypassed syndication censors and the Comics Code Authority by operating independently, and the public wanted to read their work. Because there was money to be made, book publishers began to solicit book-length projects from independent cartoonists or to compile mini-comics and small serials into books for the general public. The spinner rack of comic books at the grocery or news stand gave way to specialty comics stores. While emerging cartoonists still aspire to newspaper syndication, a contract with DC comics, or a book deal, the economies of their profession are shifting under their feet.

Through all the changes from the late 19th century to the end of the 20th century, the material form in which readers consumed comics remained constant. American comics were printed to be read on paper, whether in a newspaper, a serialized magazine, or a graphic novel. In the first years of the 21st century, however, the digital revolution is challenging all conventional forms of publishing, including comics. This appears to be both a blessing and a curse for emerging comics artists. While there are fewer newspapers in which to place work, the Internet provides cartoonists with direct and immediate access to an audience. It is certain the digital revolution will also change the comic art form itself, not merely its distribution, but exactly how remains to be created. From the digital space a new form of comics may ultimately emerge. Today, however, the Internet serves cartoonists primarily as a means of connecting with readers. And many readers are still drawn to the material pleasure of reading comics on paper and the convenient technologies of the book, even as they use the World Wide Web to discover their favorite comics. When a new form of digital comics emerges, however, it will not translate as easily back to the printed page.

The demise of reading anything on paper has been widely predicted as the inevitable outcome of the digital revolution. In “Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of

Embodied Community,” Alison PeipMeier writes, “As electronic media multiply, some critics have predicted not only the death of the zine but the death of the book as well – the death of paper media” (220). Those who love the codex book form and all its material cousins call this a “death” while believers in technological progress say it will be good for the environment and for social justice and equality. This line has been drawn before – with the advent of the printing press, the telegraph, the telephone, railroads, movies, radio, television. Even Plato spoke out against the technology of writing as being bad for a man’s character. New technology is seen as inevitably eradicating the old way of doing things. But, to paraphrase Mark Twain, “Stories of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” What is known from the history of technology is that old and new technologies usually overlap and coexist, sometimes for years, as change takes hold.

Reading newspaper comics around the table was a communal act for my family. We passed the newspaper between us and read favorites out loud to each other’s annoyance. It is hard to imagine having the same experience over a web comic. Scholar William H. Gass would agree. He takes a curmudgeon’s look at the digital revolution and the predicted demise of the book in his *Harper’s Magazine* essay, “In Defense of the Book: On the Enduring Pleasures of Paper, Type, Page, and Ink.” With sentences like, “The book and I loved each other, and I don’t mean just its text” (46) and “Words on a screen have visual qualities, to be sure, and these darkly limn their shape, but they have no materiality, they are only shadows, and when the light shifts they’ll be gone. . . . They do not wait to be reseen, reread; they only wait to be remade, relit. I cannot carry them beneath a tree or onto a side porch; I cannot argue in their margins” (46). Written before the Kindle was imagined, his 1999 diatribe sounds slightly dated and plaintive now. With smaller and smaller portable digital devices, we can “carry them beneath a tree or

onto a side porch.” His sentiment, however, remains a seductive one to anyone raised with a love of books, newspapers, magazines, comics.

Scott McCloud envisions a better future for comics in the digital revolution. In *Reinventing Comics*, he asks, “Is there some intrinsic aesthetic quality to paper and ink that digital media can never match? ... is there a fundamental need on our part to touch what we read in the form of books or magazines?” (177) Through these questions, he articulates the heart of the issue with comics, materiality, and the Internet. Even more poignantly, he asks, “Will comics lose their magic if we can no longer touch them?” His conclusion is that comics readers do not “need to hold or own comics to experience them fully” (177). To convince me, he equates comics with movies and music, which do not require physical contact “to form an emotional bond with a work.” One of the pleasures of comics, however, is a physical one – the visceral pleasure of holding the paper in my hands and reading the comics in that form. Music and movies are ephemeral by nature. Comics are more like photographs than they are like movies or music. Comics invite me to linger over them on a page, to flip back and reread them if I want. Which leaves McCloud’s question resonating more powerfully than his response. “Will comics lose their magic if we no longer touch them?”

More convincing is McCloud’s argument that the Internet provides cartoonists direct access to an audience, bypassing the middlemen and moneyed gatekeepers. He convincingly argues that the Internet will allow more cartoonists to be read and for them to reach a more diverse audience. He writes that technological advances in bandwidth and quality of transmission can “... only mean one thing for comics ... a path from communication – to promotion – to delivery. When I talk digital delivery, I’m referring to comics that travel as pure information from producer to reader” (163). What he predicted nine years ago in *Reinventing*

Comics is happening now in comics. Unless a cartoonist is so established that they can afford to ignore the marketplace or so alternative that they don't care, a cartoonist in 2009 cannot afford to ignore the World Wide Web. How they choose to engage the Internet, however, is as individual as the artists themselves.

Eddie Campbell engages with the web through his blog, [The Fate of the Artist: His Daily Blogospherical Publication](#), to which he has posted regularly since November 25, 2006.

Campbell is best known for his work with Alan Moore on *From Hell*. He published his first comics in the alternative British comics scene in the 1970s, but relocated to Australia in 1986. For years he published *Bacchus*, a monthly serial under his own imprint, Eddie Campbell Comics. He is a cartoonist familiar and comfortable with paper, ink, printing – the traditional material of comics. His main body of work is his autobiographical *Alec* series. He has recently compiled more than 25 years worth of the *Alec* series into a volume called *Alec: The Years Have Pants*, to be published by Top Shelf Productions.

From his blog archive, it appears that he was less than enthusiastic about blogging when he started. In the first week of his blog, he called himself a “technological oaf” and published some delightful *Alec* comics that include being berated by a friend for letting his web domain go (he writes that he was too cheap to pay \$83 to keep it) – that one is in Spanish – and another where he is destroying a computer mouse, dialogue in Italian. Underneath he writes, “I showed that wee bastard who’s in charge,” that is the “Scottish version.” His first sentence as a blogger includes the phrase: “I’m not quite the last person you’d expect to start a blog.” He admits a few days later that his daughter started a blog before he did. He titles that entry “A Block Off the Old Chip.” Most telling about his initial attitude toward blogging is a line near the end of his

first blog entry. He tells a story about his wife and a phone call. Then he writes, “In the old days I’d have made a one-page ‘Alec’ out of this, but today we squander our narratives in a blog.”

Since he had done guest blogging earlier in 2006 for Second First Books (one of his publishers) and for Powell.com bookstore, and since he had let his website go, he was probably told by his publishers and encouraged by his friends and family to create a web presence and maintain it. In his November 27 entry, he thanks friends for their comments to his new blog and writes, “It reminds me of when I used to have a letters page in the back of *Bacchus*.” A blog is a more social vehicle than a website and invites a personal tone, which matches Eddie Campbell’s autobiographical style of cartooning. Before social networking sites were available, blogs served a function like Facebook in terms of building community through their comments section. While blogging can “squander a narrative” – that is one of the dangers of blogging for writers and artists – it can also provide relief from the isolation of solitary creative work. But the main reason Eddie Campbell blogs, I suspect, is to build and keep an audience for his work.

Scott Adams, the creator of Dilbert, takes the “storefront” approach to a web presence. He is comfortable with technology and obvious in embracing it. The website, Dilbert.com, archives the Dilbert comics from 1987 on, offers an online merchandising “store,” an animated series of Dilbert cartoons, and interactive features like the “mashup” where readers write the punchline to a Dilbert strip, a “favorites” ranking mechanism, and widgets for posting to Facebook, MySpace, iGoogle, and blogs. His FAQ page explains much of the technology. In answer to the question “what’s up with this website?” Adams answers, “It was a combination of a strong desire to make you happy and a bunch of free time on our hands. But the good news is that, in spite of ourselves, we did come up with some brilliant doodads, if we do say so ourselves.” Because Adams has a neurological medical condition that affects his ability to draw,

he was an early adopter of the Wacom drawing tablet and uses digital technology in his comics production, as well as on the website. He is a member of the International Digital Arts Society. Unlike Eddie Campbell, Scott Adams has enthusiastically embraced the digital revolution and actively uses the technology to cultivate a following for his work.

[Gabrielle Bell](#) does not “squander [her] narrative in a blog” because she uses her blog to publish installments of her autobiographical series *Lucky*. Her approach illustrates how most emerging cartoonists use multiple publishing venues to build an audience for their work, taking advantage of both traditional publishing on paper and digital publishing. In addition to her blog, Bell publishes mini-comics, which she creates by xeroxing her work and stapling it into a serial form. These she distributes personally at small press expos or comics conventions, and through her friend Tom K.’s website [Uncivilized Books](#). On October 14, 2009, she publicized her newest mini-comic through her blog. She also publishes her work in both serial form and in book-length compilations through Drawn & Quarterly press. Taking a cue from musicians, she gives her work away on the Internet, although attempting to download her comic reveals some savvy coding which prevents one from easily downloading a full-size copy. Giving her work away creates an audience for selling her books and serials through a publishing house, as well as the mini-comics she makes and distributes.

Gabrielle Bell’s strategy illustrates the beginning of the “new economy” that McCloud predicted the digital revolution would foster. He writes, “For music, art, movies, comics and the written word, our whole planet is about to become one giant jukebox – and the foundations of a new economy are about to be built” (189). His anticipation of a move away from paper to wholesale purchasing and reading online is not how the digital revolution is currently playing out. Ironically, the more a comic is shared online, the more demand grows for a printed copy of

that comic. Gabrielle Bell's approach represents a strategy that takes advantage of both the access the Internet provides and the material pleasure of reading comics on paper. Cindy Jackson, who is the Archival Assistant for Comic Arts in VCU's James Branch Cabell Library Special Collections, knows comics. In a recent conversation, she confirmed that reading online boosts rather than diminishes the sale of comics. She said, "People go online and, when they find a web comic they like, they purchase the compilation of that work. They want to own it, in a book where it's all in one place, and they want to hold it." About the digital revolution's affect on the making and selling of zines, theorist Stephen Duncombe writes, "I doubt this new computer medium will supplant the paper zine entirely. After all, the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television never did away with the underground presses. There is something about the materiality of a zine – you can feel it, stick it in your pocket, read it in the park, give it away at a show" (198). While the Internet is a useful tool for connecting and communicating with readers, readers are still drawn to the materiality of comics on paper and the convenience of the book.

Artists from the [PARTYKA Comics / Art Collective](#), based in Brooklyn, New York, have taken a cooperative approach to marketing and selling their work via the Internet, but appear to prefer a mini-comics/zine approach to publication. PARTYKA collective members Matt Wiegler and Shawn Cheng make mini-comics which they market through their PARTYKA Collective website, on their individual websites, and by going to zine fests. According to scholar Stephen Duncombe, in his book *Notes from the Underground*, zines are "scruffy, handmade little pamphlets. Little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design" (1). The terms "zines" and "mini-comics" are not interchangeable terms, but mini-comics frequently are sold at zine fests and the radical DIY philosophy that underpins zine

culture is a comfortable companion for independent cartoonists who prefer mini-comics to web comics for self-publication.

Choosing print over web comics for publication signals a love for print culture and the material form of comics presented on paper. The aesthetic pleasure cartoonists take from this presentation of their work, and the personal, non-digital interactions with readers that this form of distribution frequently requires, take on a counterculture aspect in the face of the digital revolution. PARTYKA collective artists Matt Wiegler and Shawn Cheng represent this trend.

[Matt Wiegler's comic *Seven More Days of Not Being Eaten*](#) is a 76-page comic that stars a fish, who keeps from being eaten by assorted fishermen through his cleverness. This comic was nominated for the 2007 Ignatz Award for Outstanding Mini-Comic and the 2007 Maisie Kukoc Award for Comics Inspiration. Its cover appears to be printed on a letterpress, but the pages are simply stapled together. The mini-comic narrative is based on a folktale. On the PARTYKA website, Wiegler includes two double-page spreads of the comic. To experience the rest, it must be purchased. It is available for purchase through the PARTYKA collective website.

Shawn Cheng also uses folktales as inspiration for his mini-comics. His 38-page comic [The Would-Be Bridegrooms](#) is an interpretation of a Native American story in which two young men vie for a grandmother's approval of her granddaughter's hand in marriage by morphing into more and more fantastic beings until they are two mythological creatures locked in battle. The tale ends with the grandmother saying to her granddaughter, as the monsters finish each other off, "They were no match for you anyway." Instead of folding and stapling his mini-comic, Cheng cuts the pages and hand-stitches them together using a Japanese stab binding. Some of his mini-comics are partially silk-screened. The attention he pays to the material form his mini-

comics take reminds me of the book arts movement, where attention to binding and the material form are paramount, in contrast to most zines or mini-comics.

Some zine distributors are moving online. The online zine shop [Parcell Press](#) currently has forty-four zine-like mini-comics on sale, along with more than a hundred printed zines of all genres. They include reviews and photographs for each zine they offer for sale. On their website, I found [Bullshit Frank & Gorilla Joe](#), an explosive-looking comic made by Providence, RI-based artist Michaela Colette Zacchilli. It features a three-color screen print cover. [Zacchilli also maintains a website](#) with her artwork and comics available for sale through that venue. On her website, she has links to the [Dirt Palace blog](#), a feminist art collective located in the Olneyville neighborhood of Providence, RI, and to the [Electric Ant Zine Blog](#), described as a “blog open to the awesome group of writers/cartoonists/authors that make up the contributors to the zine *Electric Ant*, along with other members of the extended zine family.” The *Electric Ant* is a 136-page print publication with a collection of comics, essays, illustrations, photography, and interviews. It appears to be available only in print and will be sold at the Alternative Press Expo and through a few distributors like Quimby’s in Chicago, IL. The thread I have mapped here represents the diversity of creative networks Zacchilli is utilizing to promote and distribute her work. She not only maintains a web presence, but also participates in multiple creative communities who all use blog interfaces on the web to maintain and nurture connections with other artists. *The Dirt Palace Blog* networks a geographic and gender-based artistic community. In the *Electric Ant*, like-minded artists, writers, photographers, and cartoonists publish collectively, and maintain a flow of information about their creative work through their communal blog. This method of publishing differs from a traditional submission process to publications that use a hierarchical editing structure as a gatekeeper. Collective publishing has

more in common with avant-garde movements, which in the past have had more geographic limitations. The digital revolution, particularly the Internet, is removing those limitations. As Stephen Duncombe writes, “This type of association has long been the dream of anarchism, parallels the hopes of multiculturalism, resonates with the virtual community of the Internet, and describes the ideal of the place that is bohemia” (52). With the Internet, bohemia becomes portable and democratic.

Of the cartoonists I have profiled so far, only Gabrielle Bell publishes significant portions of her work online. The others use the Internet to build and maintain connections with readers, attract new readers, and tease them with excerpts from print copies of their work. They are not representative of the web comic landscape in 2009. A website called [*the webcomic list*](#) tracks and compiles “the latest additions to web comics and online comics around the world in chronological order. The list is updated automatically every two hours. We currently track 14897 comics.” While some of these comics are updated infrequently, all are self-published online.

The range, quality, artist intention, and even the comic convention an artist is using vary widely among the 14,897 comics that *the web comic list* follows. Two examples, which demonstrate the range, are *Last-Ditch Effort* by John Kroes and *The Ragtag Box* by Dave Kender.

Kroes started [*Last-Ditch Effort*](#) for his college newspaper. On his website, he writes, “I may have graduated, but the characters seem to be perpetually stuck in school, showing up at various campuses across the country.” His strip has run in more than fifty university and college papers. His goal in publishing online is simply to attract an audience for his work and to “tell a

lot of the stories I didn't get to the first time around." From information on his website, it appears that he is offering his strip for free or for a nominal fee to campus newspapers.

Dave Kender, who self-published a graphic novel called *The Ragbox*, created [the Ragbox Blog](#) as a means to attract readers and sell copies of his book. He is not subtle about this. Kender writes, "Over the next few months, I'll be publishing every page of the first volume online, enticing you beyond hope until you must own your own copy." Unlike Kroes who both writes and draws his newspaper-strip comic, Kender wrote the long-form comic script and worked with three artists, Mark Hamilton, Braden D. Lamb, and Matthew Reinke, who each illustrated a different section of *The Ragbox*.

While Kroes and Kender differ in their approaches to making comics, their style of comic narrative, and their reasons for publishing online, both are still clearly working within print conventions for comics. McCloud, on his website, writes, "Today, most web comics are short gag strips and most long-form comics are page-by-page formats that look a lot like their paper counterparts." This assessment applies to all the comics I have perused online. In *Reinventing Comics*, McCloud writes, "The page is an artifact of print, no more intrinsic to comics than staples or India ink. Once released from that box, some will take the shape of the box with them – but gradually, comics creators will stretch their limbs and start to explore the design opportunities of an infinite canvas" (222). He argues for cartoonists to begin to explore the freedom of the digital space and push comics as an art form beyond the conventions of print.

The innovations McCloud cataloged in *Reinventing Comics* fail to break the shape of the box. While CD-ROMs "gave many their first glimpse of the creative possibilities of digital media ... because the pages themselves remained unchanged, the work was less about comics as multimedia – and more about comics and multimedia in collaboration" (208). As for

incorporating movement and sound, McCloud writes, “When it comes to time-based immersion, the art of film already does a better job than any tricked-up comic can” (210). The innovations McCloud is anticipating have not been invented yet, but he sees no reason that the form of comics should remain true to print conventions in a digital environment.

Scholar and book artist Johanna Drucker agrees that the digital environment offers opportunities for comics that have not yet been explored. In her article “Graphic Devices: Narration and Navigation,” Drucker writes, “Books, artists’ books, comics, graphic novels, and diagrams are all print-based examples. All provoke spatial-temporal readings, but they are materially stable and static with regard to inscription” (132). Instead of treating the computer screen as a “page,” both Drucker and McCloud advocate thinking of it as a “window” and web comics as more than digitized print material. According to Drucker, “The mutable character of cybertexts combined with their immersive properties should be thought of as *simulation* and not narrative” (132). Unlike the conventions for reading comics in print, navigation through a digital space does not have to be flattened and reduced to a left-to-right or up-down movement. Drucker writes, “The action of moving through has been the core of cybertext-as-simulation argument” (133). What can web comics deliver within the digital space that cannot be experienced in their print form? How can the conventions of comics be adapted for a medium with design and interactive potential beyond what has yet been imagined? McCloud writes, “For nearly any narrative challenge, digital comics can offer potential solutions unlike anything ever attempted in print” (226). Unfortunately, no one seems to know what those solutions will look like yet. As bandwidth and other limits in technology are removed, the impediments to a new form of digital comics become psychological and cultural. It is only a matter of time, however, before a cartoonist as innovative as R. Crumb or Will Eisner will show readers what

comics can be within the digital space. When that happens, the aesthetic choices between print comics and web comics will be more obvious to both cartoonists and the comic-reading public.

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