

Dissertation Proposal: Design of, and the Identification of factors involved in the digitisation of the Comic Book

The comic book is a popular form of culture and expression that has existed in its current form in society for a number of decades. The basis for the comic book lie as far back as 3000bc and historical evidence suggests even further. The comic book is as relevant to modern society as a form of visual narration and historical evidence as it was in the form of Egyptian wall paintings and engravings of 3000bc, Japanese Satire in 500ad, Japanese manga, and British political caricature of the late 19th and early 20th century.

While the comic book is stereotyped as being sensationalist fiction for children and adolescents covering the exploits of superheroes created by comic book artists within companies such as Marvel and D.C. comics, the reality is that the comic is versatile enough to convey any message be it fact or fiction, documentary or historical event. The comic book also has the ability to communicate this message to a very large audience ranging from child to adult, but also different classes of individual and people from many different cultures, the instructions used to inform passengers of an airliner what to do in an emergency are a prime example of this ability.

Fundamentally the comic book is different from a newspaper and magazine, or indeed any other form of literature. The comic book also differs from a piece of art that might sit on a wall in a gallery even though comic book art itself can be found in some galleries. The comic book bridges the gap between literary art and drawing and combines the two, creating a very different art form. Art Spiegelman's "Maus" (1986) winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1992¹ showing that comic books can achieve literary acclaim.

There is scope to study the comic book academically for its artistic value and its literary value. It may also be possible, if not necessary to study the two together; an example of this in Maus is the personification of the characters in the form of various animals. Maus is a story of Spiegelman's father's experiences of the holocaust in Nazi Germany and the survival of his family at a time of great danger. The book personifies the Nazi soldiers as cats, the Jews as mice, Poles as pigs and American soldiers as dogs.

If the book were to be studied purely for literary value then a great deal could probably be taken from it. Also the powerful artwork in specific frames is likely to be of interest to the art critic. Although using a similar idea to Orwell's Animal Farm, together the words and the drawings involved work together in an almost symbiotic relationship creating a very different experience for the reader.

The story is non-fiction, yet sets up an interesting premise on which to set the story in, a premise which is likely to have a very specific and powerful effect in the reader. If we take the idea of dehumanisation from a psychological point of view, personification of an individual or group of individuals was one of the tools of propaganda, the purpose of which was for inducing or intensifying specific attitudes and actions². Dehumanisation described by Hirsch (1995) in the context of describing the atrocities involved in genocide and how an individual can commit such acts, involves the victims being reduced to something less than human, allowing the perpetrators to suspend their usual moral prohibition on killing. In history dehumanisation has had powerful effects, so for Spiegelman to choose to use animals for the characters in his comic book it a) reflects the way dehumanisation was used during the holocaust, and b) either lowers the users ability to connect with the characters in the book, or c) which is far more likely, heightens the ability to connect with the characters in the book.

¹ <http://www.pulitzer.org/> - accessed 29th April 2005

² http://encarta.msn.com/text_761569545___1/Propaganda.html - accessed 30th April 2005

Using cats, mice, dogs and pigs the book relates the actions between Nazis and Americans, or the Polish and the Jews during the holocaust to the stereotypes that may exist about how dogs will chase cats, how cute mice can be and how ugly the pig can be. With the reader bringing to the book their own preconceptions of the mice being cute it heightens the disgust and shock at how they are treated by the Nazi cats. In making the characters in the book 'less human', in this case not human at all, and removing certain pre-conceptions about their human counterparts it allows Spiegelman to communicate the story in a much more effective and deliberate fashion which combined with the literary characteristics of his writing lead to a very interesting overall effect which is arguably worthy of academic study.

Although the comic book is a different from a newspaper or magazine in terms of its artistic value there are other elements that make the comic book similar to both. A feature of notable interest is the advertisements that are found within single editions of comic books. The comic will relate to a particular audience and the advertisements in the comic can help to provide evidence for the range of individuals the audience may have been, or simply reflect the stereotyped vision of who may read superhero comics or who may read science fiction or horror comics. The advertisements can also reveal information about the time the comic was being read and the current events at that time.

A page opening from an American 1974 Star Trek comic reveals a large body of information that may or may not be able to reveal the readership of the comic and the message that the comic maybe trying to convey. On this one page opening is an advertisement proclaiming "GET THESE DYNAMITE EMBROIDERED CLOTH PATCHES THAT TELL IT LIKE IT IS!". This advertisement shows 35 patches that you can purchase, at least a third of them relate in some way to peace, such as the peace symbol within a set of army stripes, or the earth with a peace symbol over the top of it. Another 6 or so patches relate to the patronage of America itself, the other patches hold less of a message and are more generic patches such as one of Felix the cat and one of a racing car fuel enhancement fluid.

The comic as mentioned above was released in 1974; the war in Vietnam was declared over in 1975. So from the intriguing use of language such as describing the patches as "dynamite" or "groovy" to the refund message being to "cheerfully" refund or swap the patches, and then to the symbolic message conveyed by the majority of these patches, this one single page opening makes an interesting statement. Especially as this comic is a very specific form of science fiction – Star Trek looks at the exploration of the galaxies in the future and the idea of making peaceful approaches to other alien races and learning about their culture, and the supposed audience for this book being the adolescent male.

Other advertisements in comics are much more commercially orientated and naturally are much more likely to reveal the type of reader for the comic as the commercial will be correlated with the type of reader the book is likely to attract. The 1980's superhero comics for example contain many advertisements for computer games for various games consoles The early 1980's being a time for revolution in entertainment with the introduction of consoles such as the Nintendo Game Boy or Sega Master System, and the type of game usually being aimed for young children and adolescents – as noted above the general view of the readership of the superhero comic.

Prown (1998), Describes the study of material culture as a method of understanding the mind of the great majority of non-literate people; past and present, who remain otherwise inaccessible except through impersonal records and the distorting view of a contemporary literary elite³. The study of the materiality of the comic book can be illuminating in much the same way. For example we can look at the physical aspects of the comic book, the paratextual information such as the materials used to create it, and the binding, also the way in which so many still survive in excellent condition from the last half century and more. Also looking at the issues highlighted above for comics from every decade and from issue to issue it will help to reveal information about the use of comics and their readership that might otherwise remain undocumented either in written, or material form, should something happen to comic books in the future.

³ It is important to emphasise that he describes non-literate as non-writers, individuals who don't keep diaries or journals documenting their particular part in the culture of the world. Not those with the inability to read.

It is the aim of this project to investigate whether the comic book is worthy of academic study and if so whether its preservation is something that should be looked into. The project will determine a number of possible solutions for the digitisation of the comic book and look at the issues involved in doing so. It will also suggest a number of other initiatives that could be taken to ensure this unique and rich area of culture is not lost for future generations.

The attributes identified that are all important issues that need to be worked through in understanding the comic book and how it can be useful to us are:

- Subject Matter
- Artwork and Artists
- Comic book publishers
- Advertisements
- Letters and Fan mail
- Language
- Decade and Historical Period of publication
- Print and Bindings
- Editions
- Cultural differences in form and style

In creating a digital edition it is not just enough to study what we can get from a comic book, it is also important to understand the audience reading it, the material conditions under which the comic book is read, the way it is purchased, even the maintenance of this artefact which is fundamentally printed on paper of average quality and is bound with no more than staples. Comic books are also not just published in single issues but also comic strips exist, special edition annuals exist, and many comic books issues are also collected to bind an entire storyline together in a single collated edition. Again this is important detail that requires looking at to help us understand why this is done, and how it can be represented digitally knowing the intentions of the publishers, artists, and writers involved in such a project.

I have identified three objectives within this project; the results of each stage shall be considered a deliverable for this project:

Study of the Comic Book

The first part of the project will expand further on the literature review that has already been conducted. I will attempt to understand the comic book further looking closely at how it can be studied and how it has been studied. I will look at the cultural past of the comic book; important points will be its evolution through history and its presence over the last sixty decades. It will be necessary to discover the value of the comic book to individuals and understand how many have survived in contact to this day.

It may be necessary to design a questionnaire for this part of the project to help to decipher its importance to individuals and the way in which comic books are used and other information such as where they were read, how they were kept etc.

I will attempt to build a picture of the comic book and illustrate its importance as a cultural artefact and why it should be preserved for future generations.

Prototype

The prototype will be conducted in parallel with the above study of the comic book. The importance of the prototype within this project is that it will be created around information that we already know about the comic book. Primarily this information will be the physical aspects of the comic book. The prototype will be a digital version of the comic book and I will be creating this prototype for a hand held device.

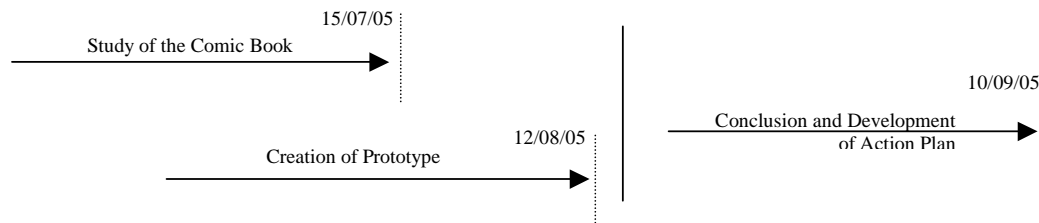
The importance of the comic book prototype is to reveal what the actual physical comic book achieves and how it achieves it by studying the limitations of a digital version. It will provide a useful source of information for the conclusion and final stage of this assignment.

Analysis of the prototype may involve a usability survey looking at how well users accept the interface and how effectively they can use it. It will be an interesting experiment to complete this survey on the physical artefact to see what it can reveal about the comic.

The prototype stage will also explore a number of other possible designs and implementations on handheld devices. It will be necessary to review projects utilizing hand held devices so far, and projects that utilize other techniques such as interactive flash presentations.

Conclusion and Further Work

Collating the information discovered from the above two stages and drawing a conclusion about how the comic book can be preserved and how it can be represented digitally. The ultimate aim of this section will be to draw up a number of designs and an action plan for the preservation of the comic book and possible methods of achieving this. The conclusion will also look at using the Internet as a method of distribution and gaining access to archives of comic books, and as a method for accessing a directory of information about the writers and publishers of comic books.



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03/05/05

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