

1. Methodology

As digital display becomes an increasingly popular mode of consumption, the form of comics is undergoing a transition. Although originally developed within the confines of the printed page, today the form of comics is also commonly consumed through the screens of personal computers, smartphones and tablets. As the form changes to embrace the potential offered by these new platforms, it is useful to examine the key characteristics of the form in the context of these changes. This chapter outlines the research questions at the heart of this examination and introduces some of the central principles of my doctoral study. It then details the cross-disciplinary, practice-based methodology I have established in order to address these research questions.

This study analyses some of the new formats that have been made available to the form of comics by the widespread adoption of portable digital display devices. Included in this analysis has been a consideration of hybrid formats that incorporate multicursal, ludic and audible elements. While the primary focus of this inquiry has been on digitally mediated comics, it also explores how some of these formats may be further adapted via architectural mediation. Central to the study as a whole are the following four research questions:

How are the key characteristics of the form of comics impacted by:

1. Digital mediation and extension of the comic page?
2. The challenges of architectural mediality?
3. Hybridisation with the ludic qualities of the videogame?
4. The integration of audible, time-based soundtracks?

The inquiry based on these questions has been driven by the need to establish a critical vocabulary of ideas with which to examine newly emergent formats of comic. These ideas have both informed and been informed by the production of a number of prototype comics as part of an iterative creative process.

A key idea to the inquiry is the concept of “mediality” itself. Thon provides a useful definition of mediality as ‘the set of prototypical properties that can be considered constitutive for a conventionally distinct medium’ (2014, 334). He identifies the ‘characteristically hybrid nature’ (355) of digital media and asserts that digital mediation results in mediality becoming ‘more “fluid,” more tentative, [and] only valid until the next technological or institutional landslide’ (336). Hague accordingly notes the ‘relatively little stability’ (2014, 26) in the field of digital comics, and the problems this can create for its study. The complexities of the study of digital comics are outlined by Wilde (2015), who explores several approaches to examining their mediality. The approaches Wilde identifies can be grouped into three main categories:

1. Analysis of the key differences between digital comics and other media (5).
2. Analysis of new similarities and points of comparison between digital comics and other media (8).
3. Reanalysis of the ‘established qualifying factors of comics’ within the context of digital mediation (9).

All three approaches can be seen at work to some extent within my study, but it is the reanalysis of the established qualifying factors that constitute the form of comics that has been central to my research. Hague provides a useful summary of the range of approaches and techniques applied to the wider study of comics (2014, 9). Amongst these are several that could potentially be applied to digital comics, such as semiotic, economic, sociological or historical study. Within this breadth of approaches, Hague notes that formal studies provide one ‘area of common focus’ (ibid) in the field. By identifying and examining the key formal characteristics by which the form of comics operates, I have been able to usefully apply this existing body of comic theory to the study of digitally mediated comics. A focus on form is also significant for the connection it makes to my previously established practice as a comic creator.

This professional doctorate builds on my existing body of work as a recognized pioneer within the fields of digital comics (Withrow 2003; Barber and Withrow 2005) and installation-based hypercomics (Round 2011; Charlesworth 2010; Gravett 2013). Over the last seventeen years I have amassed a portfolio of creative and experimental work that explores the potential of the digital comics form. This work was created in part as a response to the theories of McCloud (2000) and influenced by the form of hyperfiction and the ideas of scholars such as Aarseth (1997) and Murray (1997). As a practitioner I have self-identified as a formalist (Goodbrey 2004) within McCloud's 'four tribes' categorisation of comic creators (2006, 243). In much of my practice I have accordingly placed a priority on the 'understanding of, experimentation with, and loyalty to' (232) the form of comics.

In the initial phase of my doctoral study I began by seeking out appropriate theoretical models that could inform and contextualise my existing body of practice. Supported by the guidance of my supervisors I revisited the texts that had influenced my earlier work and used these as the starting point for a comprehensive literature review. By identifying key concepts and following up on the works of cited authors I widened my body of theory and constructed a map of the current state of the field. This provided me with a critical framework within which to begin identifying and analysing other significant works of comics practice. To further supplement my research I attended and contributed to a number of academic conferences focused on both comics and digital media. This resulted in an additional range of useful research leads.

Hague draws attention to the multidisciplinary nature of comic scholarship, noting 'the sheer diversity of routes into the study of comics, given that within each discipline there are ranges of methodological and perspectival foci to choose from' (Hague 2014, 9). My own approach to the subject can be defined as cross-disciplinary in nature. Lattuca identifies this term as being commonly used to describe research approaches 'that borrow either theories or methods' from other disciplines (2001, 113). Nissani asserts the need for such approaches, stating that

many 'complex or practical problems can only be understood by pulling together insights and methodologies from a variety of disciplines' (1997, 209).

In her own typology of interdisciplinary scholarship, Lattuca aligns cross-disciplinary research with the concept of 'Informed Disciplinarity' (2001, 79). Informed Disciplinary approaches feature research questions based in one discipline that necessitate 'outreach to other discipline(s)' for relevant methods, theories and concepts (81). Influenced by my background as a formalist practitioner, I began my study of comic scholarship with a focus on ideas that related specifically to the formal qualities of comics. My research questions then drove an outreach into other areas of study. Examining the digital mediation of comics led me to study a variety of texts that explored the properties and potential of digital media. The particular potential for hybridisation between comics and videogames led me towards theorists focusing specifically on the latter.

Videogame-related theory went on to inform several aspects of my study. My research first led me to encounter the methodology established by Juul in his identification of the key characteristics of games (2005, 36). It was by applying this methodology to my study of the form of comics that I developed a model of the key characteristics of the form. The role of three-dimensional space in videogames later contributed relevant ideas to my consideration of the challenges of architectural mediality in comics. Similarly, the approach taken to sound in videogames was influential to my study of the integration of audible soundtracks into digital comics. My examination of architectural mediality and audible soundtracks also led to further cross-disciplinary outreach into other areas of relevant study such as installation art, locative media and sound in cinema.

In addition to building on an existing body of practice, my study has also been advanced via the creation of several new experimental comics. In this respect I have followed a practice-based methodology that has intertwined with my cross-disciplinary research. Yee notes that such mixes of methodological approach have become an 'established paradigm' for design research (2010, 16). Both Yee (2010,

5) and Sullivan (2010, 77) assert the growing support for practice within doctoral studies in art and design, although Biggs and Büchler note that there have been difficulties in reaching agreement on the terminology associated with such methodologies (2011, 82).

My own methodology aligns to Candy's definition of practice-based research as an 'original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice' (2006, 3). This is distinct from 'practice-led' research, which Candy states 'is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice' (ibid). Yee asserts that doctoral studies in design are 'inherently practice-led [...] either through studying the people, process, or products' of design practice (2010, 5). However, to be described as practice-based, studies must specifically use 'practice as the basis of investigation' (ibid).

The starting point for my own practice-based investigation was to approach each of my research questions in terms of the practical challenges they raised for comic creation. Supported by my growing framework of cross-disciplinary research, I then embarked on an iterative creative process to develop new comics that could explore these challenges and test possible solutions. In-depth accounts of the specifics of my practice-based research process are provided in Chapters Five, Six and Seven of this thesis. Gray and Malins highlight the value of practice in research for developing 'deep' understanding from 'an informed perspective on issues relating to practice' (2004, 105). However, they also caution that this approach can lead to 'indulgence and over-subjectivity' if not placed within a clear research framework (ibid).

Candy and Edmonds similarly highlight the importance to practice-based researchers of developing 'frameworks that guide their practice and the evaluation of the outcomes of that practice' (2011, 127). With the release of each completed comic for public dissemination, I went through a process of reflectively analysing and contextualising the work within my existing framework of theory. This analysis

was used to drive further theoretical research and, where appropriate, to trigger further cycles of creating, reflecting and contextualising. Candy and Edmonds identify this as a common approach amongst practitioners engaged in research, noting that in such studies there is 'a cyclical process of putting theoretical knowledge into practice and revising theory as a result of the outcomes' (2011, 127).

Candy and Edmonds highlight the importance of accompanying texts to contextualise the practical outcomes of doctoral research (125). However, they also note that direct experience of these works is 'usually necessary for a full understanding of the contribution to new understanding (knowledge) that the practitioner is making' (130). Unlike practice-led research, where the results 'may be fully described in text form without the inclusion of a creative outcome' (Candy 2006, 3), in practice-based research 'the role the works play in evaluation is vital' (Candy and Edmonds 2011, 130). Because of this, while my written thesis forms a significant part of my original contribution to knowledge, a full understanding of this contribution 'can only be obtained with direct reference' (Candy 2006, 3) to the creative outcomes of my study. Full details of these outcomes can be found in Appendix A.

The four digital comics created during my study involve aspects of hybridity between comics and videogames. In their study of research frameworks developed around the creation of interactive digital artefacts, Candy and Edmonds note that this can present 'the particular problem for the practitioner of understanding how audiences engage with specific works' (2011, 122). The development and public release of my interactive "game comics" provided me with several useful channels of qualitative audience feedback. During each comic's creation I received input via e-mail and one-to-one testing sessions with both academic colleagues and fellow comic practitioners. This feedback filled a similar role to playtesting in videogame design (Fullerton 2008, 248) and allowed me to refine and iterate on each piece in terms of its gameplay and usability.

Completed comics were released through online channels of dissemination aimed primarily towards casual gaming communities. Public feedback on the comics was received via e-mail, the comments on casual gaming websites and playthrough videos uploaded to *YouTube*. This public response fed into the evaluation and analysis of each comic, influencing both the development of my theoretical framework and future iterative cycles of comic creation. In the refining of my theoretical framework, I have also sought out regular opportunities to publically disseminate my work and receive feedback on my ideas. Throughout the course of my research I have presented multiple conference papers focused on different aspects of my study. A full listing of these papers is provided in Appendix B.

Public peer review has proved to be an invaluable part of my methodology. Presenting my findings at comics and digital media conferences has allowed me to disseminate my findings amongst the wider academic community and receive feedback from others working within these fields of study. Typically I have sought to present each paper across several conferences, iterating and refining my work based on the input and research leads this generated. At the completion of each conference cycle I have aimed to further disseminate and refine my thinking by seeking a channel for peer-reviewed publication. I have found this strategy extremely helpful in refining my thinking and developing the quality of my academic writing. It has also resulted in the publication of a number of peer reviewed outcomes, including three journal articles and three book chapters. These published outcomes have then gone on to form the basis for the written component of my final thesis. Full details of the original publications can be found in Appendix C.

In accordance with the methodology outlined in this chapter, the second chapter of this thesis provides an account of my cross-disciplinary literature review with a primary focus in comic scholarship, supported by informed outreach into games and media theory. This review leads towards the identification of the key characteristics of the form of comics, which is documented in detail in Chapter Three. Chapter Four focuses on how these characteristics have been impacted by different approaches to digital mediation and extensions of the comic page.

Chapter Five examines the hybrid format of the hypercomic, both in terms of digital mediation and the new challenges raised by architectural mediality. It contextualises my existing body of work as a hypercomic practitioner and presents a major case study based on a new architecturally mediated hypercomic, *Black Hats In Hell* (Goodbrey 2013a).

Chapter Six explores the potential for hybridisation between the form of comics and the ludic qualities of videogames. The chapter presents a case study based around the creation of three new hybrid game comics, *A Duck Has An Adventure* (Goodbrey 2012), *Icarus Needs* (Goodbrey 2013b) and the unpublished work, *Margaret Must Succeed* (Goodbrey 2013c). Chapter Seven explores the implications of videogame hybridity for the integration of audible, time-based soundtracks into digital comics. It examines a number of existing examples of audible digital comics and presents a major case study based on a newly created game comic, *The Empty Kingdom* (Goodbrey 2014). In the final chapter of my study I offer the conclusion to my thesis, identify my original contributions to knowledge and practice and outline some key opportunities for future research.

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