

**Comic Naysayers Response**

**Informative Podcast**

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Deliverable: filename Comics as an Inclusive Medium for Visually Impaired Readers An Informative Podcast.mP3

### Report

For our deliverable, we chose to do a podcast to address the critique that comics are not inclusive to visually impaired readers. This was both to be accessible to visually impaired readers, but also to show non-visually impaired readers an alternative information delivery method. We wanted to convey our argument and give specific examples that listeners could imagine in their minds. This can help our audience to relate to visually impaired comic readers and understand our claims. With the podcast we explore three of the main methods that are currently being used to make comics accessible, explain the main challenge of making comics accessible as well as highlight creators that are embracing new technology and ways of creating comics. The following includes select references and how they helped to shape our argument:

Christopher, B. (2018). Rethinking Comics and Visuality, from the Audio Daredevil to Philipp Meyer's *Life*. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 38(3). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i3.6477>

A large portion of our argument revolved around three different formats of comics. The first was audio comics, where we referenced the 2011 comic release of Daredevil #1 and how it was presented as an audio based version. By describing how the comic information is relayed to the listener, through script and fullpage descriptions, the audience is able to understand how a comic can be enjoyed through listening. The Daredevil story features a blind protagonist, which made it even more relevant to our argument and gave reason for its inclusion. Our second example was the use of tactile comics for visually impaired readers. We noted Phillip Meyer's comic, *Life*, and how the staticness of the main character was used to create an easy to read touch-based comic. By describing this, our audience can visualize what it would be like to feel the comic character and how it might be manipulated to show movement or progress the story forward. We made sure to note Rayar's three types of tactile images, raised lines, highlighted and textured images, to help with this visualization.

YouTube. (2021). *Adapting Comics for Blind and Low Vision Readers: A Roundtable Discussion*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-ByjpXbK5s&t=3s>.

We also referenced the San Francisco State University hosted roundtable discussion, *Adapting Comics for Blind and Low Vision Readers*, where it was mentioned that adapting a comic is not about converting the information from one format to another. It is about creating a comparable experience to the original work. Another format we featured was digital comics, which featured a definition of haptics technology, the vibrations a device gives off, as noted in the discussion.

Osolen, R. S., & Brochu, L. (2019). Creating an Authentic Experience: A Study in Comic Books, Accessibility, and the Visually Impaired Reader. *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.33137/ijidi.v4i1.32405>

Although it focused mainly on audio descriptive comics, in this text Osolen and Brochu explain their process for creating an accessible *The Walking Dead* comic and the challenges of creating a balanced description of both visual and narrative story. This source helped ground our understanding of the unique challenge adapting comics presents, since an accessible adaptation needs to capture both the information and the comic experience to create a truly equitable reading experience.

### **Comic Naysayers Informative Podcast Script**

[Intro Music - 00:50s Rascals by Zapsplat.com - Royalty Free Music]

(Introduction)

Duncan: Comics, Graphic Novels, Manga. All are fun, visual ways to engage with storytelling, education and personal entertainment. But what if you were excluded from the medium? What if you were unable to see the images and illustrations that emphasize the storytelling of comics. The critique that Comics are not inclusive to visually impaired readers excludes the existence of audio, tactile and digital versions. The following will explore how each of these contributes to combat the claim that visually impaired readers cannot enjoy or participate in comics and graphic novels.

Lets start by defining Visual Impairment:

To be clear, visual impairment doesn't necessarily define potential comic readers as completely blind. Levels of impairment range from high to low vision. In this piece we will be using the definition provided by Frederic Rayar in the conference proceeding document *Accessible Comics for Visually Impaired People: Challenges and Opportunities*. Visual impairment is a critical loss in vision that is unable to be fixed with typical solutions such as glasses or contact lenses. Visually impaired individuals are either blind or have low vision.

Duncan: Part 1 - Challenges to Making Comics for the Visually Impaired

Meghan: Before diving into how comics can be made accessible to those with visual impairments, let's first explore the unique challenge comics as a medium presents when creating accessible formats.

First, since comics are largely an image-based medium the visual storytelling is just as important, if not more so, as the written text. Every element of a comic from the panel layout to the font choices has been carefully considered by the creator and conveys information to the reader about the story. Therefore, to create an accessible comic one must find a way to convey both the visual interpretation and written text through description without losing any essential pieces of the story or bogging down the reader.

This means that describing comic books becomes a balancing act between conveying the visual information of the scene while also preserving the reading experience and flow of the comic. Standard narration cannot always capture the connected moments between panels or convey that same level of immediacy in the action. Josh Miele during the roundtable discussion of *Adapting Comics for Blind and Low Vision Readers* describes this problem best saying:

[CLIP - 00:08s Josh Miele, *Adapting Comics for Blind and Low Vision Readers*]

“Accessibility is not just about getting at the information, accessibility is about creating a similar experience to what the original intent offered.”

That's to say the biggest challenge created by the comics medium is not how can the information be presented to a visually impaired reader but how can it be done in a way that creates an authentic reading experience.

Comics are a unique storytelling medium that is difficult to convey using traditional descriptive video, or alt-text descriptions; but that does not mean it can't be done. Next, we are going to explore three different ways comics can be made accessible for visually impaired readers.

Duncan: Part 2 - Audio Comics

The first alternative to explore is the audio format. As noted in the roundtable discussion *Adapting Comics for Blind and Low Vision Readers*, accessibility for visually impaired individuals, in regards to comics, is not just about getting the information. It is about creating a similar experience to the original intention. It might be easy to think about reformatting comics into an audio format, but an overfocus on too many of the visual elements can distract from the original messaging of the work. This might include audio transcriptions including elements that wouldn't be of concern to visually abled comic readers.

An example of an audio-focused comic is the 2011 release of *Daredevil #1* by Mike Waird which includes the text formatted as a script and full page descriptions. Audio can be used in different ways to convey the message of the comics. Audio comics could also relay the text from the comic pages exactly as it is or have panel by panel descriptions. Ian Hague notes the concept of Sounds with Comics where comics are sold with audio components attached to them, such as CD's. These formats may even include the sound effects on the page reproduced with audio sound effects. Important to note are some tips to use when creating audio-based comics as mentioned by Rachel Sarah Osolen and Leah Brochu. These include being specific with descriptions, direct with actions, including mentions of time and space, and providing details to build the world of the story.

Duncan:

### Part 3 - Tactile Comics

A second alternative are tactile or comic materials read with physical touch. Oftentimes, these comics are created or converted into images that visually impaired people can interpret. Rayar notes three different techniques of tactile images. These include raised lines - where the contours of an image are highlighted, thermoforming - where both the middle area and contours are highlighted, and Textured images- that include various texture codes specific to parts of an image.

An example of this method is Phillip Meyer's Comic *Life*. The entire narrative of the comic is wordless and centers around a character that remains in the same position for the duration of the story. Different characters and items are understood by the different shapes and sizes of dot patterns used. Brandon Christopher notes that *Life* can be considered a

comic because it shares the definition of being sequential art and juxtaposes images to create a narrative.

Another tactile option are braille transcriptions. A familiar format including braille has one side of the page describing the comic story and dialogue and the other side narrating the images and panels used. In Japan, there is an association called The Small Braille club where in 2007, they started transcribing manga into braille friendly versions. This included adapting the text as well as the illustrations with raised dot patterns.

Duncan: Part 4 - Digital Comics

A final alternative for readers, specifically those with low vision and not completely blind, are digital or eBook versions of comics. These can be housed on phone or tablet screens and allow readers to magnify the material to their desired comfort level. This can be done by enlarging the image with their fingers or a button feature. Digital comics also place significance on navigation and page layout, with some materials allowing a panel-by-panel or full page option. Additionally, haptic technology could be incorporated into digital comics. In this context, Haptics is defined as the vibrations a reader's device can give off to indicate a story element in the comic, the end of a section or as a feedback mechanism.

Duncan: Part 5 - Where to find Comics for Visually Impaired Comic Readers

Meghan: Now that we have explored three of the main accessibility formats, the next question is where can you find them?

Unfortunately, accessible comics are not nearly as accessible as they should. High costs and labour-intensive production are a deterrent to many; but new innovators are working to change this.

In 2019 Marvel made a deal with Dreamscape Media to release several of its most iconic titles as audiobooks, while also announcing a Marvel's Heroes Project's "Unstoppable Adonis"- a comic book about a blind high school football player written in Braille.

Tim Simmons, frustrated because he couldn't find an online resource for comic book scripts, decided to create his own founding The Comic Book Script Archive. This educational resource for those interested in comic book scripting is also a useful resource for visually impaired readers, providing a collection of comic book narrative scripts free.

Advances in screen reading technology have also unlocked the power of alt-text tags allowing for webcomics like 100 Demon Dialogues by Lucy Bellwood to use their power to make comics accessible to more readers. Here is a sample of one of her panels:

[CLIP - 00:33s Lucy Bellwood, 100 Demon Dialogues]

Page 11:

"The demon is smiling as it walks in with a hat on its head and a suitcase in its hand, talking to Lucy, a woman with short curly hair. The demon says, "Hah, see? You can't live without me!" Lucy replies, "No, I've figured out that you only shut up when I talk about you. It's different."

Page 12:

Lucy is walking while the demon sits in her shoulder bag and smiles up at her, saying "you should quit now--before they realize you're no good." Lucy says, "You should know that I don't give up that easily."

Dr. Darren DeFrain, an associate English professor at Wichita State University, is also embracing new technology as he and his team are currently working towards creating an app. Called Vizling the app will have the standard audio version of the comics but will also include haptics technology and allow readers to touch anywhere on the page to get a description of what is there.

Beyond making existing comics accessible there are also comics like Unsee, an audio comic created by Chad Allen. Written by a blind person, with a blind heroine, for blind and sighted audiences alike, this comic is the first of its kind, but will hopefully inspire others to create more like it. Proving once and for all that enjoying comics does not require sight.

The question of how to make comics more accessible to those with visual impairments is a fascinating topic that is attracting lots of attention from academics, educators and creators alike, especially as technology evolves

opening up new horizons and exciting possibilities for the future of accessible comics.

(Conclusion)

Meghan: According to the Canadian Council of the Blind, as of 2019 there are an estimated 1.2 million Canadians living with some type of visual impairment, with more than 8 million more living with an eye disease that may lead to some form of visual impairment in the future . Only a small percentage of these individuals are blind, demonstrating that the visually impaired population is a diverse group with unique needs and no one size fits all approach is going to make comics accessible. So, to say that comics are a purely visual medium that cannot be enjoyed by the visually impaired is to accept that we are willing to deny millions the comic experience simply because there is no easy answer to accessibility.

[Exit Music - 00:57s Rascals by Zapsplat.com - Royalty Free Music]

The examples we spoke about here today combined with further advances and the digital experimentation being conducted, have presented creators a whole new realm of opportunities to create comics that do not rely purely on sight. Additionally, comics are so much more than just their visual medium format. Though the visual format of a comic makes them unique, comics contain more than just visuals- the stories, powerful emotions, and imagery they invoke are universal and can be enjoyed by all readers. Comics are stories and stories are not just for the sighted. With the right tools and a little planning, the joy of comics transcend the confines of being considered purely a visual medium and becomes include to every reader who wants to experience this exciting literary form.



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