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BUILDING SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH INTERACTIVE WEBCOMICS

by

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B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2009

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree

Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts
In the Graduate School
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

BUILDING SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH INTERACTIVE WEBCOMICS

By

Sarah Marie Shelton

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media and Media Management

Approved by:

Dr. Aaron Veenstra, Chair

Graduate School
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

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TITLE: BUILDING SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH INTERACTIVE WEBCOMICS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Aaron Veenstra

Comic books are a popular form of creative storytelling. Through sequential juxtaposed panels, comics have the unique ability to interact with the reader through time and space. The context within comics is the constrained amount of panels a typical comic book page allows, and the space that exists between the panels encourages the reader to manipulate meaning. Through this unique process of interaction between the narrative and the reader, comics have proven to be a creative medium to promote meanings of social change. Throughout history, comics have utilized their entertaining guise to mask underlying themes of social injustices and political upheavals. More so, through the use of the technological advances and the Internet, Webcomics now have the ability to provide an interactive experience that encourages reader engagement within the narrative, while expanding widespread communication. This project seeks to understand how interactive Webcomics can promote social change. This research project consists of a self-created interactive Webcomic involving a fictional narrative that depicts the dangers of hydraulic fracking; the comic is intended to promote social change and awareness on the issues of fracking. A focus group has been conducted in order to better understand the effects the comic has on participants' knowledge, awareness and advocacy on the dangers of hydraulic fracking. The concluding results show that Webcomics do have the potential to promote social change.

DEDICATION

This research project is dedicated to all of the activists living within the Southern Illinois area who are encouraging social change. The relentless fight against hydraulic fracking is a slippery slope into an ever-evolving quest to restructure our dependency on fossil fuels. The people I have met through protests and outreach have left a lasting impression on my mind and spirit. This research project is the small start to my contribution to ban hydraulic fracking and to always encourage society to question the status quo.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“In some ways, a truly honest account of everyday life, in fiction or nonfiction, can serve a social and political purpose as it helps to counteract the distorted images of society continually fed to us by mass media – especially if the lives portrayed are not the beneficiaries of society’s status quo” (McCloud, 2000, p. 38).

In 1992, members of the Pulitzer Prize committee could not identify a category for Art Spiegelman’s work titled *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. The graphic novel was a rarity during this time for its long form comic approach to a non-fictional narrative. The members of the committee believed the graphic novel deserved merit, but could not quite categorize its medium (Doherty, 1996). The “Biography” and “Editorial Cartooning” categories were considered, but the committee thought they were not the right fit for the graphic novel. Spiegelman’s work was eventually placed into the category “Special Awards and Citations” all on its own.

When *Maus* was first published, *The New York Times* also had a difficult time categorizing the work’s medium. Originally, *Maus* was placed in the “Fiction” category on *The New York Times Bestseller List*, but this became controversial. In a letter to *The Times*, Spiegelman requested that the book be moved into the “Non-fiction” category due to it being a truthful account of his father’s time in the Holocaust. *The Times* eventually changed the book’s placement into the “Non-fiction” category.

Why would the Pulitzer Prize committee find it difficult to place *Maus* in a category? Why would *The New York Times* mistake the book as a work in fiction? It was difficult for critics

and academics to understand where *Maus* belonged because of its medium, but suffice it to say, it was clear that comics had evolved into a new noteworthy concept during this time. When comics first got their start during the early 1900s, they were created as a form of entertainment (Beaty, 2010). Critics thought originally, books that were published in comic form were a bit childlike, a medium whose potential had been overlooked. It wasn't until the late 80's and early 90's that critics began to publish research on the medium as a deeper, more meaningful way of developing narratives. With the help of graphic novels like *Maus*, *Watchmen*, *Dark Knight Returns*, *Ghost World* and *V for Vendetta*, comics began to unfold a paradigm shift in the way they were approached; comic books with hidden themes of social injustices and political upheavals were on the rise and scholars took note of their potential.

In this project, I argue that interactive Webcomics can help promote social change. Throughout this paper, I seek to understand how comics are defined; research how comics have developed a relationship with society by reflecting societal issues; study how persuasion within narratives allow for comics to implement hidden themes and mask political upheavals; reflect on the how the power of narratives, in general, help promote social change; and look at the technological evolution of comics in a digital age.

This research project conducts a user study that attempts to validate how comic narratives can have an impact on promoting social change. The project is comprised of a self-created interactive Webcomic about hydraulic fracturing. The fictional narrative uses images and written word in an interactive comic format to inform the reader about the potential threats hydraulic fracturing can have within communities living in Southern Illinois. The user study is comprised of interviews with 10 individuals living in/near the Southern Illinois area. Through an interview

process reflecting on how participants feel after reading the Webcomic on the dangers of hydraulic fracking, results conclude that interactive Webcomics do encourage social change.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

What are Comics and why are they important?

In 1980, Will Eisner came out with his book titled *Comics and Sequential Art*. In his work, he began to understand and define an academic view of comic books. Eisner (1980) termed comics as “sequential art” and believed that the notion of “reading” did not only lie in the general sense of text, but through interpreting symbols. By combining text with images in a sequential format, the process of reading becomes a language all on its own. “When these (panels within comic books) are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language - a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the ‘grammar’ of Sequential Art” (Eisner, 1980, p. 8). Slightly over a decade later, Scott McCloud narrowed down the definition of comics more so by stating that they were greater than sequential art, they are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p.9).

Through defining “comics,” some comic scholars, like McCloud, studied the use of comics within a historical context. From ancient writings to abstract art, defining comics as visual language through the combination of text with images or through sequential juxtaposed images, much art can be defined as “comics” (McCloud, 1993). This shifting of defining comics through a historical timeline ignores other forms of visual literacy (Cohn, 2005). “This moving of the origin date of ‘comics’ to fit historical examples is used as a justification to combat the somewhat degrading treatment that the form has received in much of modern society” (Cohn, 2005, p. 6).” Cohn (2005) points out that the pressure to define comics as a form of visual

language denotes other categories within visual language. By defining comics within its modern context, a new art form that emerged in the early 20th century, and noting the features of comics as a form of visual language, comics can be approached as a newer medium, all on its own. By separating comics as a category *within* visual language scholarship can approach comics as a place within the field of literacy and cultural studies (Cohn, 2005).

During this time, the works of Eisner, McCloud, and other comic scholars gave comic rhetoric a more serious role within visual language. Due to their nature of reader engagement, comics became reevaluated as more than just a form of entertainment, but as a serious medium with the potential to harbor deep literary themes. Within the past few decades, scholarship on the potential of the comic medium has risen.

In studying comics as a form of visual literacy, scholars have also noted the use of comics as a tool for education, particularly among children. Because comic books are generalized as a medium geared specifically towards a younger demographic of readers (Beaty, 2010), the use of comics has been increasingly successful in the classroom. Dating back to the early 1940s, W.W. D. Stones (1944) conducted a series of studies on using comic books as a tool for education. He noted the success of comic books as a tool to help build literacy in his research, stating that the reason comics proved successful in the classroom was their ability to tell a story and being “easy to read” (Stones, 1944). Comics were a popular form of literacy during this time. Stones states: “Both newspaper and magazine comics are produced for the purpose of popular entertainment. That the comic magazine would be pointed in the direction of instruction was a natural development” (Stones, 1944, p. 234).

Not only are they deemed fit as a serious form of reading (Eisner, 1980), but comics in the form of graphic novels have the potential to help increase literacy rates. “These novels appeal

to young people, are useful across the curriculum, and offer diverse alternatives to traditional texts as well as other mass media” (Schwarz, 2002, p. 1). Schwarz (2002) notes that, in the classroom, graphic novels can better provide insight on societal issues. “An important benefit of graphic novels is that they present alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general in accessible ways, giving voice to minorities and those with diverse viewpoints” (Schwarz, 2002, p. 3). Books used in the classroom, such as *The Four Immigrants Manga* and *Still I Rise*, offer stories that portray viewpoints of minorities through the use of cartoons (Schwarz, 2002). These stories are able to use imagery and dialogue to increase the ability for young readers to connect to the narrative, in turn, engaging the reader to learn through alternative views and provide insight through a cross-cultural context.

Graphic novels have provided a space for historical accounts and non-fictional portrayals of history to emerge. Works like *Maus*, *March*, *Comanche Moon*, and *American Splendor* contribute to the long historical bodies of work found in comics and some have been used as teaching tools within the classroom, but others share a demographic that appeal to an older audience (Witek, 1989). Thus, graphic novels, as tools for education inside and outside of the classroom have emerged. In Jack Jackson’s (1978) graphic novel, *Comanche Moon*, Jackson depicts the relationship between the Comanches, other Indian tribes and white settlers. This historical tale accounts for untold stories of Native American history and provides a platform to invite alternative accounts of history. Witek (1989) writes, “Jack Jackson’s revisionist historical tales of the American Southwest attempt to reintroduce the stories of previously excluded figures of American History” (Witek, p. 4). Works, such as, *Comanche Moon* and *Maus*, have provided an alternative medium to reflect on revisionist historical accounts of history, thus providing a tool to educate and offer facts about history that go against the status quo.

Through a series of “comic lectures,” algebra teacher, Gene Yang states that his personal connection with comics and teaching has proved successful in the classroom. In his article titled, *Graphic Novels in the Classroom*, Yang (2008) explores how comics are able to educate his students. “When I questioned my students about this, two strengths of the comics medium as an educational tool emerged. First, graphic novels are visual, and our students love visual media. After all, they’re immersed in it” (Yang, p. 187). Yang notes that, due to the increase in a screen based society, the use of visuals paired with text are more powerful than ever in conveying messages. Through the use of comics, images and text can provided a better connection to a screen-based generation (Yang, 2008).

With the increase in academic research on comics and the use of comics in the classroom, the medium of comics has proven to contribute to overall idea of visual literacy. The success graphic novels have in educating young students and adults proves that comics can convey information across generations of readership. Not only have comics proved to successfully communicate information to readers in the classroom, but society, at large, has been impacted by comics deep literary themes throughout its history.

Comic books and society - A timeline

The ever evolving career of the comic has had its ups and down. From the beginning, early comics were coined as “political cartoons.” The comic’s first platform was stationed within early American newspapers and readers of such newspapers were mostly politically minded. Comics, being entertaining in nature, were sought after for their unique ability to communicate political messages in a creative way. The early newspaper comic, *Yellow Kid* (1895), was one of the first regularly stationed comic strips that provided themes of social identity within poverty

stricken communities. The comic appeared in Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper, *The New York World*, and raised subtle awareness on poor economic standards within urban environments. The setting of *Yellow Kid* was depicted in a mythical poor community called *Hogan's Alley*. The cartoon characters were drawn dirty, had a consistent look of sadness and lived within poor standards of health. Although meant to be funny, the comic's reflection of the poor economic conditions encouraged a sense of despair among readers (McAllister et al., 2001). The comic masked a sense of injustice among impoverished communities. Other early political cartoons, such as Winsor McCay's (1905-1911) *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and George Herriman's (1913-1944) *Krazy Kat*, provided a platform for comics to raise political questions and social awareness, as well.

The popularity of comics began to develop outside of the newspaper platform. During the early 1930s comic *books* began to emerge, along with comic book companies. It was an interesting start for comic books during this time. In been the aftermath of the great stock market crash of 1929, comic books offered an alternative escapism for readers. Societal issues were ignored, as readers could immerse themselves in the lives of *Superman* and other action hero comics. Comics had the unique ability to focus on the future, in turn, ignoring the present; the reader could be transported somewhere far away from the societal issues they were faced with. Comics were "fueling escapist fantasies for the economically distressed" (Savage Jr., 1990, p.5). But according to Hogan (2009), superhero comics can be reflective of society. "Analyzing the superhero is the perfect means of analyzing the culture. The superhero is such an asset in sociological research because the hero provides a record of the values prized by a society" (Hogan, 2009, p. 199). The comic book creator could reflect values that society wanted through

the depiction of the hero (Hogan, 2009). It's through these heroes that society was able to escape their issues during the 1930s.

In the midst of the Cold War, Americans lived in fear of communist threats. Many political leaders and citizens were called into question and the rest kept quiet on the subject in fear that they wouldn't seem loyal to their country. It was an interesting era for comics during this time. According to author James Black (2009), comics were able to offer a voice of dissent while remaining under the radar as a potential threat to the anti-communist propaganda used during this period (Black, 2009). "Comic strips offered hidden transcripts and built-in alibis for the expression of dissent during the 1950s at a time when others could not. They tended to parody injustices over the desire to bring about change" (Black, 2009, p. 461). Comics were originally meant to be funny. It was through the use of humor that the voice of comic artists such as Walt Kelly and Al Capp were able to "poke fun at society and voice dissent when policy makers within the public forum could not" (Black, 2009, p. 461). Through humor, comics inherently questioned authority, something that is usually paired with political agendas. "Comic books are culturally valuable because they can help us to better understand our society." (Hogan, 2009, p. 200) Through the use of humor and parody, the reader is able to reflect on the injustices of society within comics. And this use of humor is what aides comics in their hidden narratives to promote change. The reader's reflection can bring about the aspiration to promote social change. Particularly during the Cold War, comics were able to use parody to question political agendas and, through the power of humor, aid in the readers discussion and question of government actions.

Moving forward from the Cold War, comic books have been utilized to convey hidden themes and promote historical accounts of the past. The graphic novel *Maus* (1986), depicts the

author's father's account of his time during the Holocaust. The comic book *March* (2013), by John Lewis is a civil rights memoir-as-comic trilogy. Fictional comics such as *The Massive* (2012), tells the story of a post-apocalyptic tale that follows a group of environmentalists who try to save what's left of the environment that has been destroyed by humanity. Comic books by Alan Moore, such as *Watchmen* (1987) and *V for Vendetta* (1982), question authority and provide narrative content about a failed political system that the main characters of the story choose to fight. In the comic book, *Superman: Peace on Earth* (1999), the story depicts Superman's quest to end world hunger. The book tackles real-life issues in regards to the issues of world hunger that we currently face today. Through the use of visuals and narrative themes, comic books are able to translate messages to promote social change. This is what Scott McCloud calls the "reinventing" of comics. The "reinventing of comics" is to use them as a potential medium to bring about change. "The job of reinventing comics fell to a politically-aware group of wry iconoclasts who relentlessly mocked the status quo" (McCloud, 2000, p. 16). The notion of using comics to bring about change is what McCloud (2000) considers the "revolution" of the medium.

Power of Persuasion within Graphic Narratives

There are many unique elements to consider when researching how comics can promote social awareness and change. When considering comic book artists such as Alan Moore and Art Spiegelman, their narrative themes of political upheavals and social injustices are deliberate; their comic narratives are intended to evoke a certain attitude and encourage social awareness amongst its reader, which, in turn, is a form of narrative persuasion. Not only is the context

within the narrative persuasive, but also the comic book medium, as a whole, has the potential to be persuasive within its own framework.

According to Figueiredo (2011), “comics, broadly defined, offer us the opportunity to create a space for our audience to enter the community by representing that community in a way that involves the audience in a community's practices” (Figueiredo, 2011). Carrier (2011) writes, “reading these (comics) narratives is to look into the minds of the fictional characters, as if their inner worlds had become transparent to us” (Carrier, p. 74). The idea of transparency allows for the reader to engage with the narrative in a way that transports them into the story. This idea of transportation is very effective in terms of persuasion. McCloud explains that, “when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face - you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon - you see yourself” (McCloud, 1993, p.36). The comic narrative has the ability to engage the reader into the story by allowing them to experience themselves within the cartoon form. “By simplifying the fictional character in the narrative, comics attempt, in a visual context, to focus on the information over who present it.” (Figueiredo, 2011, p.88)

The use of cartoons as a reflection of the self is similar to the idea of the “Transportation-Imagery Model” by Green and Brock (2002). The model suggests that an audience can engage with the narrative and identify themselves within the story; they tend to lose themselves within the story. The mental state of a person, when transported into the story, can account for the overall persuasion of a narrative. The idea of transporting oneself into the narrative has proven to be an effective persuasion tactic within storytelling, and in particular, fictional narratives. “As a rule, readers of fictional narratives are supposed to experience transportation at least to some extent. For them, the fictional world of the narrative partly replaces the real world while they are reading, a phenomenon often described as being lost in a book” (Appel & Richter, 2007, p. 117).

Narratives and Their Role Within Social Movements

The creation of social movements is a natural process that forms from conflicts of interest. They are “normal, rational, institutionally rooted, political challenges by aggrieved groups” (Buechler, 2000, p. 35). Movements arise from collective interests or grievances among groups of people through the act of mobilizing. Davis argues that movements form “outside the polity and therefore must rely on non-institutional means to achieve political influence and change” (Davis, 2002, p. 5). There are several key factors that arise when social movements begin to form outside of polity, but one action that is undeniable is the ability to communicate through the use of narratives.

Narratives have played a role within social movements throughout history. From public speaking to performance art, storytelling within social movements has become a social process, something that people use to tell of life histories and personal accounts to connect with others. Activists have conveyed narratives throughout history in order to spark attention, gain awareness, and promote collective action. “Insurgents have always known that stories of exodus and redemption, of chosen people and returning prophet, are powerfully motivating of collective action” (Polletta, 1998, p. 419). Davis (2002) argues that “narrative is both a vital form of movement discourse and a crucial analytical concept” (Davis, 2002, p.4).

There’s more to social movements than just telling stories, but when is it necessary to tell a story and how are certain narratives structured in terms of framing? For the purpose of my research, I look towards Francesca Polletta’s (1998) study of persuasion through the use of narrative framing within social movements. “When successful, frames foster a sense of injustice, identity, and collective efficacy - cognitions that a situation is wrong, that it is not immutable and that ‘we’ can battle ‘them’ in order to change it.” (Polletta, 1998, p. 421) Understanding framing

within narratives, in terms of emplotment, can help identify how social movements are formed. Polletta points out that in telling a story the use of “I,” “we,” “us,” as subjects within the story develops a sense of collectiveness. In order to help mobilize a movement, the use of a plot within narratives can help provide a solution to shared grievances. The plot organizes the events of a story to unfold. The “ending” of the story concludes a sense of purpose; the story has a moral. “Plot gives stories a projective dimension as well as a configurational one, and the two are inseparable” (Polletta, 2002, p. 33).

In observing the student sit-ins during the 1960s civil rights movement, Polletta found that the power of narratives among students escalated the mass wave of sit-in demonstrations that spread throughout the country. Within two months, the students who participated in the sit-ins grew from four black students from Greensboro Agricultural and Technical College, to fifty thousand people from fifty-four cities in nine states (Polletta, 2002). Polletta notes that “since narratives simultaneously explain and evaluate, account for the past and project a future, students were also constituting an action-compelling collective identity as they narrated it (Polletta, 2002, p.32). Through the spread of narrative among students, the sit-in demonstrations grew rapidly and ultimately grew in mobilizing power.

The use of narratives to foster shared grievances among communities can harbor a sense of justice and promote the political will to bring about change. McCarthy and Zald (1977) state, “Shared grievances and generalized beliefs about the causes and possible means of reducing grievances are important preconditions for the emergence of a social movement in a collectivity.” (McCarthy & Zald, p. 1214) Throughout many social movements people have had the ability to share stories about their collective beliefs. This notion of collectiveness has built power in the practice of storytelling and promotion of narratives.

Throughout time, social movements have advanced with new communication systems. The collectiveness of physically present people taking direct action has always been a major part in how social movements form, but the power of mobilizing people has grown with the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the Internet and ability for these platforms to share the narrative.

The Evolution of Social Movements and ICTs

The nature of social movements can be complicated. Many theorists differ in their understandings of how social movements are formed and how they create collective identity. However, a common characteristic among most is that social movements form shared grievances and common beliefs about an issue or a cause (McCarthy & Zlad, 1977). These general grievances and beliefs can help build goals to reduce grievances and are important in the process of collectiveness within social movements. Even though there are general grievances among members of a social movement, without the use of social movement organizations (SMOs), structuring a movement is difficult. “A social movement typically lacks membership forms, statutes, chairpersons, and the like. It may expand or shrink considerably over relatively short periods of time, and exhibit phases of visibility and latency” (Donk et al., 2004, p. 2).

Through the use of the Internet, some researchers believe that information and communication technologies, or ICTs, benefit social movements because they increase participation and formation of collective behavior (Meyers, 1998). In the beginning, before the use of the Internet, activists depended on mass media to convey their message. From protests to blockades, activists depended on radical behavior in order to spark mass media attention to convey their message. Although this behavior can help gain media attention, the dependency of

mass media to raise awareness only allows for one-way communication. The activists had to depend on the reporters to articulate the message, which can risk how the message is conveyed. This result of one-way communication lacks in communicating a plan for action (Meyers, 1998). However, evolved ICT capabilities paired with the Internet can put the message directly in the hands of the activists, present a two-way form of communication, and can call on a plan for action. Essentially, ICTs have improved how social movements are formed and how they can stay connected. By utilizing the Internet, ICTs become very useful in the process of building social movements.

There are several characteristics that ICTs have which attribute to the power and formation of social movements. First, time and cost play a role in building a movement. Without the use of SMOs, social movements can be hard to organize, gain funding, and depend on timely action. Through the use of the Internet, millions of people can be reached within minutes and are of little, to no cost. The use of interactivity also contributes to how current ICTs have been utilized within social movements. Connecting with people via interactions and engagement, understanding the ideological view of others by posing questions, studying user involvement, and the ability to communicate instantly, or through time shifts, contribute to how social movements now use interactive technology. Meyers states, “All of these interactive characteristics can facilitate the operation of social movements and combine to provide advances on earlier communication methods utilized by activists” (Meyers, 1998, p. 6).

Defining Interactivity in the Digital Age

In researching scholarship on the use of the term “interactivity,” it is challenging to find a common consensus of what interactivity means. Some suggest a dependence upon people’s

reaction and perceptions of messages received, others view interactivity by the technological properties used in the process of exchanging messages. "Such questions ask, among other things, whether interactivity is a characteristic of the context in which messages are exchanged; is it strictly dependent upon the technology used in communication interactions; or is it a perception in users' minds?" (Kiouisis, 2002, p. 356). However, in his article "Interactivity: a concept explication," author Spiro Kiouisis (2002) sought to understand and define what interactivity is and how we can apply the concept to future research. In understanding Kiouisis (2002), most interactivity is used within technologically-mediated environments. The notion of face-to-face communication does not fit into the box of interactivity, but rather the concept of 'interpersonal communication,' which can occur in both technologically and non-technological-mediated environments. "On a simple everyday level, interactivity deals with the ability of systems to simulate interpersonal communication, although the features and components of it change with authors" (Kiouisis, 2002, p. 367). There is a co-dependence between interactivity and interpersonal communication.

Based on the works of many scholars, there are several ingredients that make up interactivity. According to Kiouisis, the ability to have two-way or multi-way communication is a big factor in the make-up of interactivity; in interactivity, communication should be interchangeable between message sender and receiver; third-order dependency among participants should be present in interactive communication; communication has the ability to be human or machine; and the communicators, in some way, can manipulate the content, form, and pace of a mediated environment (Kiouisis, 2002). In sum, Kiouisis defines interactivity:

"Interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one,

one-to-many, and many-to-many) both synchronously and asynchronously and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency)." (Kiouisis, 2002, p. 379)

The common characteristic behind all the key ingredients to the makeup of interactivity, is agency - the ability for the user to engage and act within the context of interactive communication. Agency is an important part of the interactive experience. The users are able to help mold the outcome of the communication process.

Interactivity and Comic Books

Through the use of technology, interactivity within storytelling has increased over the years due to the rise in technological advances. Through the use of interactive elements, narratives have the ability to engage and interact more with the user. From film and television, to online news and blogging, the advances in interactivity have contributed to the overall experience the narratives are able to create, especially via an online platform. Through the use of the Internet, storytelling can be more creatively explored. Digital creation and reproduction of storytelling, combined with HTML web coding, allows for not only widespread communication, but also an interactive experience between the narrative and the user.

In particular, comic books have advanced within computer-mediated environments. Digital Webcomics have become a popular medium within the field of comics as technological advances have increased. "Online comics are all digital comics in a technical sense, but many are still no more than 'repurposed' print at heart." (McCloud, 2002, p. 203) The ability for Webcomics to exist online, yet remain true to their familiar form has allowed for the potential of

comics to flourish. In turn, the use of interactivity within Webcomics gives the narrative space to interact with the user within panels and between them.

Taking a looking back, comics have always had the ability to interact with their readers. McCloud (2000) suggests that through the use of cartoons, the readers are able to see themselves within the story. Cartoons are relatable and therefore allow the reader to engage with the story. Through the use of engaging cartoons, doubled with interactivity in Webcomics, the users have the ability to become apart of the narrative. “By becoming a contributor and/or creator of the world of information (within comics), then, the audience begins to become active members in the community of knowledge.” (Figueiredo, 2011, p. 92) Figueiredo (2011) expresses that comics are similar to information design, and can easily be a platform for interactivity through their simplicity and cartooning. In other words, “the ‘cartoon’ creates an interactive experience for an audience that allows them to interact in the world of information presented” (Figueiredo, 2011, p. 92).

McCloud states that interactivity is crucial to the success of user engagement within Webcomics. “Whether by choosing a path, revealing a hidden window or zooming in on a detail, there are countless ways to interact with sequential art in a digital environment.” (McCloud, 2000, p. 229) The interactive experience within Webcomics can enhance the users engagement with the story.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The Anti-Fracking Movement in Illinois

For the past few years, the residents of Illinois have increasingly grown aware of the oil and gas industry's plan to start hydraulic fracturing in the region. Hydraulic fracturing is the process of injecting water, sand and chemicals into the ground at high pressure to produce fractures in shale rock that excretes natural gas (Bieneman, 2013). The process is highly controversial due to the techniques the industry use to obtain the natural gas that is embedded in the shale rock. From using only fresh water, to the hundreds of unknown chemicals that are used in the process, hydraulic fracturing (or "fracking") has posed a potential threat to some of the residents that live in the region where the process takes place.

Fracking raises a few key issues, such as the potential to contaminate drinking water. From a research report in *Environmental Health Perspectives* it states, "Flammable levels of natural gas are common in water supplies, and explosions—even reports of flammable drinking water—have occurred near fracking sites" (Schmidt, 2011). Not only contamination of drinking water is a posed threat due to fracking, but the millions of gallons of fresh water used in the process of fracking is an issue. "Such large-scale water withdrawals for fracking could impact water supplies, and other industries and uses as well as ecosystems may find themselves competing with the gas industry" (Negro, 2014, p. 727). Air pollution is another concerns for residents near fracking sites and potential fracking sites. From methane, benzene and naturally occurring radio active material (NORMs) can pollute the air quality near fracking sites, this air pollution adds to the threat of fracking in regions of exposure or potential exposure to fracking

(Merrill & Schizer, 2013). A positive outcome of fracking is the potential for it to create jobs in rural communities where fracking exists, or will exist. However, studies have shown that the growth in jobs also brings population growth within small rural communities that do not have the infrastructure to maintain a population increase. “A population surge can put pressure on the local housing stock, schools, and other services (Merrill & Schizer, 2013, p.176). In fracking states, research has shown that the deep disposal of fracking wastewater injection wells have caused earthquakes within fracking sites (Kerr, 2012).

Currently, legislation has passed that will allow hydraulic fracking in the state of Illinois. Although hydraulic fracking has not occurred in Illinois, as of yet, the increase in news reports and research done in the areas where fracking currently exists in other states has given residents of Illinois the ability to become increasingly aware of the social and environmental threats the process can bring to their area. “Transformation resulting from fracking development has thus been met by an analogous surge in grassroots activism” (Willow & Wylie, p. 227, 2014). Currently, social movement organizations have formed in the state of Illinois that address the concerns of fracking and educate the public on the issues of the fracking process. This study looks more at the region of Southern Illinois, in and around the Shawnee National Forest, and the increased social movements centered on fracking in that region. Organizations such as *Southern Illinoisans Against Fracking Our Environment* (SAFE), *Hills and Hollers*, and *Illinois South Resistance* have all played a role in the anti-fracking movement within the state and the nation. From public outreach, music concerts, film screenings, and non-violent direct actions, the anti-fracking groups of Southern Illinois have become a big part of the overall anti-fracking movement and have increased awareness within the region.

Creating the Webcomic

This research project is comprised of a self-created interactive Webcomic titled *Attack of the Shawnee Flesh Eaters*. The Webcomic depicts a narrative that is centered on the dangers of hydraulic fracking with the Southern Illinois region. Through a fictional narrative of a zombie apocalypse due to fracking, the interactive Webcomic uses fictional persuasion to entertain and inform the reader of the threats hydraulic fracking has been known to cause.

The narrative uses facts about the issues of fracking and pairs it with a fictional scenario involving those facts. The Webcomic is a satire on the current fracking crisis and it serves to represent ideology within the existing discussion on the issues of fracking. The comic represents current challenges Southern Illinois faces within the fracking discussion and the challenges other states face with fracking. The comic also examines how issues of social power influence how the fracking discussion is dictated in Southern Illinois and encourages the reader to engage within the discussion through an interactive “choose your own adventure” process.

The Webcomic’s artwork was created through hand illustrations paired with filtered photographs (see figure 1). The three main interactive features the comic offers are hover over effects, picture links, and a branching “choose your own adventure” path throughout the comic. Through HTML5 coding and CSS styling, selected panels throughout the comic change pictures, animate, or zoom in on features once the cursor hovers over a panel (see figure 2). Blood splatters were added to some comic panels that, once clicked on, offer a link to an online news article on the topics the characters are discussing (see figure 3). For an example, in one part of the comic one of the characters discusses how fracking has caused earthquakes in Texas. A blood splatter within that panel offers a link to a news article on fracking-induced earthquakes in Texas. The last interactive feature the comic offers is a “choose your own adventure” path that

allows for the readers to choose which action they want the characters to take within the story (see figure 4).



Figure 1. Webcomic Artwork



Figure 2. Hover-Over Interactive Features

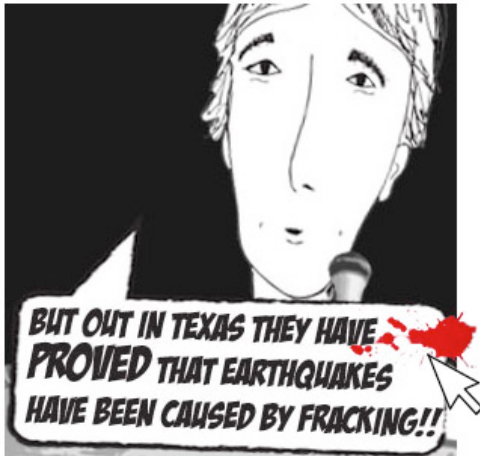


Figure 3. Blood Splatter Links



Figure 4. Choosing Your Own Path

Due to the interactive features within this Webcomic, the users have agency throughout the navigation of the story. Within the narrative, the user is confronted with a problem, which he/she must choose what route to take in order to confront the problem. This gives the user agency within the context of the story and demands their attention to the information presented

to them. Through my research based on interactivity and narrative persuasion, I believe that the user will become more engaged and invested in the story if they have a voice and the ability to freely act within the comic space.

User Testing

Through a panel comprised of 10 participants living in the Southern Illinois area who have little to no knowledge of hydraulic fracking, this user study attempts to validate how interactive Webcomics can promote social change. The potential participants were first identified through a SAFE (Southern Illinoisans Against Fracking Our Environment) listserv. The listserv is comprised of individuals living in the Southern Illinois area who receive email updates on news and events that are centered around hydraulic fracking.

A random group of members from the listserv were invited to participate in the focus group and interview reflecting on the Webcomic. The first 10 respondents were picked and voluntarily participated within this study. The 10 participants were asked to read the Webcomic, *Attack of the Shawnee Flesh Eaters*, and then participate in a one-on-one interview via Google Chat or Skype. Through a list of interview questions (see appendix) the participants were asked a series of questions that reflected on their thoughts after reading the Webcomic. Three main research questions were discussed when conducting this study.

RQ1: Has your feelings towards the dangers of hydraulic fracking changed after reading the Webcomic?

RQ2: How has the use of interactivity within this comic narrative engaged you more within the story?

RQ3: How likely are you to participate in promoting social change on the topic of hydraulic fracking?

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The sample of participants were people living in the Southern Illinois area who had some, to little knowledge of hydraulic fracking. The age range of the group was between 24 to 45 years of age. The group was comprised of 4 males and 6 females. Two of the 10 participants were familiar to Webcomics, while the remaining had little interaction with comics, in general.

For the purposes of this study, the participant's names were removed in recording the results in order to protect their anonymity. Each participant was given a number to identify them to their comments.

Overall Views on Hydraulic Fracking

Although all of the participants knew a little about hydraulic fracking before reading the Webcomic, each participant felt a greater sense of negativity towards the process of hydraulic fracking. Participant 6 said that they did not really know much about fracking, but after reading the Webcomic understood potential threats it could cause to the area: "I learned there is a lot of fresh water being used for fracking, as well as lots of harmful chemicals. Also that the process itself can have a lot of unintended side effects, like increased traffic in work sites." Participant 4 claimed that they had spend some time researching the topic of hydraulic fracking before having read the comic, but after reading the comic they understood the potential "reality of the severity of fracking." Participant 1 knew "general knowledge" on the topic of fracking, but after reading the comic states: "Some of the real take away points were all the ways that it can and has harmed the lives of people who live in close proximity to fracking wells."

By reading the Webcomic, participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 9 all learned that fracking can cause earthquakes and contaminate well water sources near fracking areas, something that they did not learn from before reading the comic.

Overall, every participant learned something new about the potential dangers of hydraulic fracking. Most participants seemed to have been influenced to only retain negative attitudes and perceptions about hydraulic fracking after they learned about the harmful effects. Participant 3 stated: “It definitely made me feel like it's a bigger, nastier issue than most let on.”

User Engagement With Interactivity

All of the participants stated that the use of interactivity within the Webcomic helped their engagement within the story. Most participants had a favorite interactive feature that they remembered from the comic. Participant 5 stated that they enjoyed the hover-over features involved with a flashlight used after an earthquake within the story: “It (interactivity) kept the story moving. I really liked the movements (gifs, etc), especially the portion with the flashlight, that was great.” Participant 3 stated that they like the animation of some of the panels: “I really enjoyed the driving scene, I think the moving background added emphasis to the plot. I also think the list of chemicals was great too. It had a sense of urgency and despair.” Participants 1, 2, 5, 6 and 8 stated that the use of “choose your own adventure” helped them engage more within the story. Participant 8 stated: “I really liked the fact that at some points during the story I can choose what the characters will do. It kept me focused and interested in what is going on.” Having had read books with “choose your own adventure” themes before, Participant 10 talked about the fact that it added “nostalgia” to her navigation throughout the comic. Participant 1 stated:

“Even though it is a fictional narrative, it contains a lot of issues that have the potential to actually affect the people reading it. The choices makes the narrative really personal and allows the reader to put themselves in the context of the story. So every time I was asked a questions of what to do, I stopped and thought about if I was really in that situation, what would I do?”

Participant 6 stated that being able to choose your own path “puts you more in that decision making mindset and forces you to take on the mission of the protagonist.”

Promoting Social Change

During the last part of the interview, participants were asked if whether or not they wanted to participate in taking action to prevent hydraulic fracking in their area. At the end of the Webcomic, users were asked to click on a link to learn more about what they could do to help prevent hydraulic fracking. Every participant in this study stated that they clicked on the link at the end of the Webcomic to learn more about preventing fracking. Eight of the 10 participants stated that they would take part in some action to prevent hydraulic fracking. Participant 2 felt that they would “definitely be more willing to get involved than before” on the prevention of fracking. Participant 5 was “pretty likely” to take part in an action to prevent hydraulic fracking, while Participant 6 stated that they were sure to take part in an action to prevent fracking and added:

“Well I’m not much of a ‘go door to door’ type of person, or activist in really any serious sense. But I do like to support causes that are best for the community and it’s residents, especially when they are likely to have a direct impact on the lives of me and my loved ones.”

However, Participants 3 and 10 did not feel inspired to take any sort of action to prevent hydraulic fracking, even though their attitudes towards the fracking were negative. Participant 3 stated:

“It’s easy to beat a dead horse with many social/community issues. For instance, domestic violence, children in Africa, etc. Don't get me wrong, I still care about these issues but I can't spend everyday thinking about them and not be able to do much.”

When asked if participants would share the link through their social media outlets, all of them said that they would likely do so. Participant 2 said that they “will definitely share it” and Participant 5 said they would share the comic and added: “I think anyone who shares an interest in not only environmental issues, but also zombie stories, would enjoy hearing about this comic.”

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Throughout this research paper I have studied how narratives help play a role in how social movements form. Polletta (2002) states, “Stories are better equipped than other discursive forms to elicit emotions and, just as important, to attach those emotions to particular courses of action and target” (p. 32). This study is an attempt to bridge the gap between the use of narratives to elicit meaning within social movements and comic books. By recognizing the importance of narratives, comic books can harbor the potential to express themes that encourage social change, in turn, help build collective action within a movement.

By addressing the technological advances both social movements and comic books (amongst all forms of communication) have adapted to, this study has sought to embrace interactive Webcomics as a means to promote social change and spread of information to a wider audience. The use of interactivity, as a technological means, can help increase the potential for users to engage more within narratives. By allowing interactive features within narratives to exist, the user becomes a part of the narrative. This idea of transportation is heightened when used within the comic book medium. In comic books, time that exists between comic book panels paired with the use of cartoons, encourages the reader to assume the role of the character within the story. By combining comic books with an online interactive platform, Interactive Webcomics are an obvious choice for reader engagement. McCloud (2000) expresses that comics must keep expanding its potential to promote change. “To reach its full potential, both as an art form and as a market, comics must expand its territory, plunging into many areas at once and not losing sight of past gains as it chases present goals.” (McCloud, 2000, p. 18)

The findings in this study suggest that interactive Webcomics do have the potential to promote social change. Through this user case study, a persuasive interactive Webcomic that highlights the dangers of hydraulic fracking impacted users to have a negative attitude towards the process of hydraulic fracking. Majority of the participants said that they would take part in some action to prevent hydraulic fracking, as well as share a link of the comic amongst their social media outlets.

This study is a small start to understanding the potential interactive Webcomics can have in promoting social change. Witek (1989) writes:

“Whether the comic-book form will make good its bid for wider cultural acceptance as adult literature remains to be seen, but it is worth remembering that the major modes of artistic expression of this century, the novel and the cinema, were both at first scorned as vulgaries until serious artists demonstrated their potential.” (Witek, p. 5)

It is important to keep studying the use of comics as a tool to share knowledge and promote social awareness.

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APPENDICES

Appendix – A

List of Interview Questions

1. How much do you know about hydraulic fracking?
2. What elements, if any, did you learn more about in regards to hydraulic fracking from this Webcomic?
3. What connection did you find to the characters within the comic?
4. What interactive elements (such as rollover features, external links, and “choose your own adventure” navigation elements) impacted your engagement within the comic narrative?
5. Did you find that a fictional Webcomic was an engaging way to learn about hydraulic fracking? Why?
6. How likely are you to read more Webcomics involved with this story?
7. How likely are you to share and direct others to a link of this Webcomic?
8. Did you click the external link to learn more about how to help with anti-fracking efforts in Southern Illinois? Why?
9. How likely are you to participate in a collective action against hydraulic fracking?

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