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3-1-2009

What's up with Webcomics? Visual and Technological Advances in Comics

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Rights

# What's up with Webcomics? Visual and Technological Advances in Comics

Posted on **March 1, 2009** by **Editor**

By Maria Walters

Comics are a serious business. With the advent of the Internet, a range of authors and artists began to realize the potential of publishing their own works without printing costs or production chains. Comic creators were no exception. According to Wikipedia, the first webcomics were published in the mid-to-late '80s, and the industry has been growing ever since [1]. The transition from print to the Internet allowed comic authors to explore new art styles and create genres aimed at more specific audiences. Soon, artists began to stretch their limits, and many realized the variety in shapes, sizes, and colors available in online comics. Experiments with Flash and other navigation methods led to comics which appear to zoom in toward the reader or interact with other panels. In this, the first of a series about the evolution and variety of webcomics, I will show you how diverse the webcomic world really is. Click on any image to see its original context and read more like it!
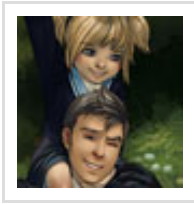
What is a Webcomic?

Surprisingly, many people use the term "webcomic" in different ways. I consider a webcomic to be a comic originally published on the Internet. This does not include print comics that maintain an online archive (as many now do). I also classify webcomics as works primarily made up of stationary art and text, though the boundary between some interactive display methods and animation is sometimes difficult to distinguish. It can safely be said that at least 15 or 20 thousand webcomics can still be found online. [2] These include everything from stand-alone webcomics, to weekly or even daily comics, whose archives it would take hours or days to read.
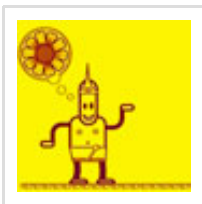
### What Webcomics Are Out There?

With those kinds of numbers, a reader could never run out of webcomics to read. For someone interested in exploring a thematic or artistic variety, below are a few suggestions. Of course, I am shaped by my own biases, but I have tried to represent a variety of both well-known and up-and-coming webcomics. My hope is that everyone will find a new favorite! For more ideas, check

Wikipedia [3] or the blogroll of an interesting webcomic. If you feel that a webcomic is being left out (since a lot are), share a link in a comment below and that comic could be reviewed in a coming issue of *Interface*.

The Genre Variety
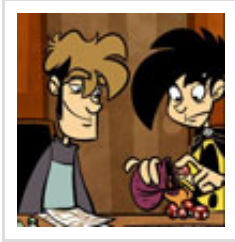
With the advent of the Internet, many webcomics were geared toward "geeks" and those few who would be familiar enough with the Internet to use it for entertainment. For that reason, there continue to be many historically well-known comics containing video game jokes, scientific themes, Internet memes, and other "geeky" subjects. These include *Penny Arcade*, by Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik, [4] *Ctrl+Alt+Del*, by Tim Buckley, [5] and *PvP*, by Scott Kurtz, [6] all of which feature gaming humor, relatively simple animation styles, a generally newspaper-like layout, and a faithful following.

These are also among the most successful webcomics, having survived and evolved for at least seven years. Randall Munroe's *xkcd* [7] also ranks among the well-known "geeky" comics, though it is unique in its range of technical, scientific themes, as well as its minimalist, stick-figure art style.

Questionable Content, [8] created by Jeph Jacques, was originally an indie music comic, though it has gradually evolved away from its roots and into a more narrative drama. Like many webcomics, the storyline is far more "adult" than a children's comic book. Though the story appears to take place in modern times, futuristic technology (including self-aware pet robots called AnthroPCs) keeps the story unexpected.
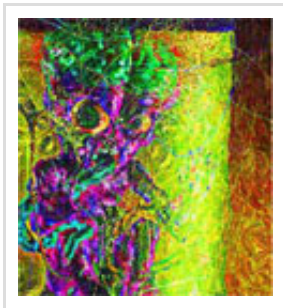
Fetus-X [9] can be classified as romance horror, making it an example of a comic which defines its own genre. Eric Monster Millikin calls his single-frame comics "disasterpieces," and frequently deals with zombies and the occult. His artistic style is characterized by brilliant colors and whorls —not exactly what one might expect from a horror comic, but it fits.

Unsurprising in a world of blogs, *American Elf* is a daily diary comic, which simply depict moments in the life of the author, James Kochalka. [10] His colorful, loose art style allows for the feeling of being in-the-moment, turning his diary into a collage of memories. His family also demonstrates the versatility and accessibility of the Internet: his 5-year-old son now also draws intermittent comics, [11] which are posted to his father's site.
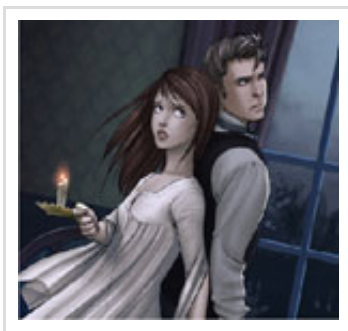
Comics that can be extolled for their artistic qualities abound. In *Phoenix Requiem*, by Sarah Ellerton, [12] the beautiful digital art creates a fantastical, mysterious, Victorian-inspired world. Though it is gorgeous, the artwork does not overshadow the cohesive storyline, especially because the comic is presented as an online graphic novel instead of simply a series of comics.

Some authors take artistic liberties by making their art worse! *Dinosaur Comics*, by Ryan North, [13] is updated daily, but each comic consists of the same 6 pixelated panels, simply updated with different dialogue. Though geeky jokes are often made, the main theme of this comic (if it even has one) is absurd humor.

Webcomics and Technology

Though it can be a lot of fun to be sucked into the ongoing stories created by so many webcomics, what many people don't understand is how much is going on behind the surface. The technology available has made possible interesting developments as webcomics have evolved to be presented on computer screens instead of paper pages. On paper, especially in a book, an author was constrained to a vertical rectangular space in which to tell a story, allowing for transitions between pages. The space given for a newspaper-published comic was even more limited—in general, it consisted of a horizontal row of 3 or 4 panels.

On the computer, on the other hand, comics are viewed through a window oriented horizontally instead of vertically. Because a user can scroll through a page without disrupting the story, an author has an "infinite canvas," in the words of Scott McCloud, a comic writer and theorist. [14] This canvas not only allows for frames of different shapes and sizes, but also enables the transitions between frames to change, and makes it easier to create a comic containing multiple endings or other non-linear transitions.

Scott McCloud experiments with this concept by creating extra-long comics, which only require the reader to continue scrolling instead of turning a page. He has developed several of these long comics, including an online "graphic novella" featuring his superhero characters from the series *Zot!* This novella is presented in 16 long "pages" which, when printed, would lay approximately 140 feet end-to-end. [15]

Though it is easier and more conventional for readers to scroll vertically, a few comics have also branched into the world of side-to-side scrolling. One interesting example can be found by demian5, in a comic called, *When I am King*. [16]

New techniques have cropped up to make the navigation of comics even easier—for example,

the "Tarquin Engine," a Flash-based system developed by Daniel Merlin Goodbrey that is natural to use and especially good for non-linear comics. [17] A list of these "hypercomics" is also available as "The Tarquin Listings." [18] We must note the difference between what the Internet makes possible and what it just makes easier—non-linear comics have existed in the past, including one which was 17 feet long displayed at a comic convention. [19]

Other comics also have different styles of Flash-based navigation, like Scott McCloud's *The Right Number*, in which each frame is nested in the center of the previous ones and, on a click, appears to zoom out (shown above). [20] In John Barber's *Vicious Souvenirs*, because each frame overlaps the previous one, the reader almost has the sensation of watching a movie with speech bubbles, except it will only transition to the next frame when the reader clicks. [21] *Vicious Souvenirs* is unique among Flash-animated comics in that it is updated regularly, instead of being a stand-alone comic.

Many uses of technology do allow for simple yet effective changes that are more often used in weekly comics. In *Year of the Rat*, Cayetano Garza Jr. (cat, to his friends) sometimes uses animations as backgrounds for static characters, mixing media like never before. [22]

Another simple change enabled by the Internet is even more subtle. Alt-text, the text that appears when hovering a mouse over an image, provides a punchline for many online comics, like *xkcd* (shown left)[23] and *Dinosaur Comics* [24] Having an "optional" commentary on a given comic strip would only be possible otherwise for someone sitting beside the author!

These advancements only scratch the surface of what the Internet has done for webcomics. The amount of interaction between artists and their audiences shows how online communities are formed, and artists themselves are found forming longer and deeper relationships. Financing webcomics is a challenge in and of itself, but it has created an opportunity for a variety of responses. These topics (plus more webcomics!) will be covered in the coming months. To suggest a comic or subject, leave a comment below!

See Part II

Endnotes

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Webcomic

[2] http://www.talkaboutcomics.com/blog/?p=766, http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A36337

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_webcomics, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Webcomic

[4] http://www.penny-arcade.com/comic/

[5] http://www.ctrlaltdel-online.com/comic.php

[6] http://www.pvponline.com/

[7] http://xkcd.com/

[8] http://questionablecontent.net/

[9] http://www.fetusx.com/, formerly http://www.serializer.net/comics/fetusx.php

[10] http://www.americanelf.com/comics/americanelf.php

[11] http://www.americanelf.com/comics/monsterattack.php

[12] http://requiem.seraph-inn.com/

[13] http://www.qwantz.com/

[14] http://www.scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/index.html

[15] http://www.scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/zot/index.html,
http://www.scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/index.html

[16] http://www.demian5.com/index-e.php

[17] http://www.webcomicsnation.com/tarquin/

[18] http://www.webcomicsnation.com/tarquin/listings/series.php?
view=archive&chapter=208&name=listings&line=229

[19] http://e-merl.com/pocom.htm

[20] http://www.scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/trn-intro/index.html

[21] http://www.moderntales.com/comics/vs.php

[22] http://www.magicinkwell.com/?p=101

[23] http://xkcd.com/

[24] http://www.qwantz.com/

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[http://bcis.pacificu.edu/interface/?p=3584]** .

20 THOUGHTS ON "WHAT'S UP WITH WEBCOMICS? VISUAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES IN COMICS"

Editor
on **March 1, 2009 at 6:28 PM** said:

Poster Name: jeffk

Message: If you haven\'t seen it yet, this guy\'s webcomics interface is pretty great:

http://balak01.deviantart.com/art/about-DIGITAL-COMICS-111966969 I\'d love to see creators start to us that kind of setup – it creates all kinds of interesting formal possibilities. (And it\'s a lot more practical than the Tarquin Engine, which seems better in theory than in practice.)

Editor
on **March 1, 2009 at 6:29 PM** said:

Poster Name: Maria Walters
Message: Yes, that interface reminds me of The Right Number and Vicious Souvenirs, mentioned above. All 3 are Flash-based and allow the reader to navigate simply using either mouse clicks or arrows on the keyboard. The less readers have to search for or learn the navigation of a particular comic, the easier it is for them to read the story and get interested in it, which is why so many people are experimenting with different navigation tools.

Editor
on **March 1, 2009 at 6:30 PM** said:

Poster Name: Anonymous
Message: For webcomics, I'd suggest these: Girly The Adventures of Dr. McNinja Gunnerkrigg Court Girls With Slingshots Octopus Pie MS Paint Adventures

Editor
on **March 1, 2009 at 6:31 PM** said:

Poster Name: Anonymous
Message: Thingpart: http://jsayers.com/thingpart/thingpart.html Truth Serum: http://citycyclops.com Mr. Wiggles: http://www.mrwiggleslovesyou.com

Editor

on **March 1, 2009 at 6:32 PM** said:

Poster Name: Albert Acala

Message: Dont forget web-comics for kids! http://www.kidjutsu.com/ has all kinds of them — and for free!

Editor

on **March 1, 2009 at 6:33 PM** said:

Poster Name: thirtyseven

Message: Because of myself creating one of the few professionally made photocomics you can find on the web I would love to read an article about this subject. Yeah, I know: Its selfish and photocomics really are a little niche. But you can see that this niche has started to expand during this last year: Union of Heroes, Night Zero, The Pure and Hidden Truth, Surviving the world… 2008 has brought us at last four new photocomics – all with real actors (not toys). In four different gernres. The first three serials, the last one a daily joke comic. All four of them very well done and thought out… If you need some more links to other photocomic-projects or an interviewpartner concerning this topic: Feel free to send me an email. Best regards from Germany! Arne Schulenberg

Editor

on **March 1, 2009 at 6:34 PM** said:

Poster Name: AndrewBoldman

Message: da best. Keep it going! Thank you

Editor

on **March 1, 2009 at 6:35 PM** said:

Poster Name: jeffa00

Message: I do a webcomic for kids that tries to be fun and educational. The storyline that is current as of my posting this involves a flashback to the Apollo 17 moon landing. If you are interested, have a look and let me know what you think: http://funzietown.com The only claim I can make to going beyond the traditional comic is that I have a math

practice game tied to my storyline. It uses Silverlight (Microsoft\'s answer to Flash) because my day job is computer programmer using mostly Microsoft technologies. The link to the game is: http://funzietown.com/funzietown/saveFlapjack.aspx Thanks! jeffa

Cullen Pittman
on **December 1, 2013 at 8:09 PM** said:

Hi. My name is Cullen and I make webcomics that try to be both funny and educational. http://www.therebusquestwebsite.com/
My main cartoon is called Rebusquest. A continuing series about a boy named Carson who solves a magic rebus puzzle and gets transported to a land where rebuses are a way of life. With the help from a teenage elf girl named Reba, she and Carson must travel the many strange lands of Rebusquest, meeting funny creatures who'll give them objects that will form rebuses, hoping one day they'll find that special rebus that will send Carson back home.
Other webcomics on my site feature X.O. Seal, who is a cyborg seal that fights crime and teaches us about different shapes like circles and squares. And finally, there's Skelroy and Bonus who are two skeletons who do crazy motorcycles stunts then give us safety tips at the end.
I make webcomics that teach kids things like puzzle solving skills, shapes, and safety tips while giving them some laughs as well.

dating
on **January 30, 2014 at 11:35 AM** said:

Hurrah, that may be what I was searching for, what a information! present here at this website, thanks admin of this website.

plotka
on **February 1, 2014 at 1:56 AM** said:

moncler piumini

gry online
on **February 1, 2014 at 2:18 AM** said:

I have mastered some critical elements through your site post. A single other subject I would like to talk about is that there are lots of games accessible over a marketplace formulated especially for toddler age children. They include pattern acceptance, colors, household pets, and shapes. These usually focus on familiarization as an selection to memorization. This keeps small youngsters engaged without sensing like they're studying. Thanks

dating online
on **February 3, 2014 at 1:50 AM** said:

I utilized in order to find good details from your content.

plotki
on **February 3, 2014 at 1:54 AM** said:

If you might be going away to watch comic videos online then I suggest you to pay a quick visit this site, it consists of really thus comical not only movies but also additional data.

naija
on **February 4, 2014 at 10:15 AM** said:

Hurrah, that may be what I was searching for, what a information! provide here at this website, thanks admin of this website.

nigeria entertainment news
on **February 4, 2014 at 10:26 AM** said:

unhappy for ones immense assessment, but I'm extremely loving the post, and hope this, and the great assessment some other persons have written, will aid you decide if it is the correct choice for you.

nigeria entertainment news
on **February 4, 2014 at 10:35 AM** said:

This extremely answered my drawback, thank you!

Nigeria social network
on **February 5, 2014 at 12:16 AM** said:

Hi! This really is my First comment right here so I just wanted to give a quick shout out and tell you I genuinely enjoy reading your articles. Can you suggest any other blogs/websites/forums that go more than the same subjects? Enjoy it!

comment telecharger crimes and punishments sherlock holmes gratuit
on **February 5, 2014 at 8:18 AM** said:

What's up, after reading this awesome post i am too happy
to share my knowledge here with colleagues.

cork board ideas
on **February 5, 2014 at 12:55 PM** said:

An outstanding share! I have just forwarded this onto a coworker who was doing a little research on this. And he actually ordered me dinner due to the fact that I discovered it for him… lol. So let me reword this…. Thanks for the meal!! But yeah, thanx for spending some time to talk about this issue here on your website.