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Successive Revolutions: The Evolution of the American Comic Book

Imagine a person starting their career as a politician, becoming a salesman, then an author, then a propagandist, then an author again, and finally settling down and becoming an artist. Seems like an inordinate number of mostly unrelated career changes, right? Absolutely, but comics have changed their role in American society at least, if not much more than that person. From their introduction in newspapers up until the present day, the American comic book has achieved its present form through a process of successive evolutions; the genre is an art form which will undoubtedly continue to shift in the years ahead.

Machiavelli once said “Whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times.” In order to be able to make predictions about where comic books are going, we must first explore and understand where they have been. The story of the American comic begins on May 9, 1754 when what is widely known as the “Join or Die” comic was published in the Pennsylvania Gazette as part of a commentary by Ben Franklin on the lack of accord between the British colonies in the New World. Given the political climate of America in its infancy, it is not surprising that the first popular cartoon in American history was a political one. 141 years separated the publication of the “Join or Die” cartoon and *Hogan’s Alley,* the comic “which is considered the first commercially successful comic strip,” (The Ohio State University Cartoon Library and Museum) in 1895*.* *Hogan’s Alley* marked the beginning of a new phase in the evolution of comics. Rather than being used entirely as a medium for political expression, comics were now “[c]reated, frankly, to sell newspapers,” (Cart) and sell they did. These early comics were intended solely to entertain and relied upon their entertainment value to make sales.

In 1897, two years after the publication of *Hogan’s Alley, The Katzenjammer Kids* appeared in the *New York Journal*. As public interest in newspaper comics grew, many newspapers began publishing “cartoon books” as promotional incentives to increase readership (Pratik). However, the dramatic increase in popularity of newspaper comics did not translate to success in standalone comic books, which did not have selling as their primary motivation, and the focus of comics quickly shifted away from expanding into the book format and returned almost entirely to the newspaper supplement format, remaining focused in that direction for almost 35 years.

The first “comic book” not solely motivated by politics or advertising motives was *Flash Gordon Strange Adventure Magazine No. 1* in 1936. It was “an illustrated text story…by James Edison Northfield, [which] featured several full-page illustrations. Obviously intended as a regular publication, it disappeared after the first issue, probably because it was unlicensed,” (Lortie). For better or for worse, the comic book proper had appeared. Even though Detective Comics’ (DC Comics’) *Action Comics #1* was published in 1939, a full two years after *Flash Gordon Strange Adventure Magazine No. 1*, most comic book historians believe that it marks the true beginning of the so-called “Golden Age” of comics. *Action Comics #1* featured Superman, who differed from Flash Gordon in one major respect: Superman was a superhero, whereas Flash Gordon was not. Comic sales exploded almost overnight. A year later, “Bob Kane created a costume-wearing superhero without any powers, Bat-Man, appearing in Detective Comics number 27,” (Shmuel). At around the same time, Red Circle Comics, the company that would eventually become Marvel Comics, released the *Marvel Comics* series, which featured heroes like Sub-Mariner, Ka-Zar, The Angel, and the Human Torch. The comic medium had begun to transform from a medium of advertisements to a medium of expression.

Superhero comics continued to grow in popularity up through the end of WWII, at which point something changed. With the advent of the Nuclear Age, “a generally negative mood toward comic books held amongst American society. Comics grew to be increasingly associated with adolescent delinquency and this ultimately led to a [Senate hearing] as well as many local ordinances banning comics from schools,” (Pratik). Strangely enough, during this period, other comic genres continued to flourish. In order to prevent the total extinction of the superhero genre, the Comics Code Authority was created. This regulatory alliance between the major comic publishing companies of the day established guidelines for the moral regulation and censorship of all comic stories.

Fears about the corrupting influence of comics alleviated, consumers flocked back to superhero comics. By the time Spider Man and the Hulk were released in 1962, comics had recovered much of their past readership. During this period, Marvel Comics came into its own as the publishing powerhouse it is today through the introduction of such well known original characters as the X-Men. As time progressed, the Comics Code Authority became less and less powerful, and “Marvel released stories without the requisite symbol relating their approval by the Code Authority. In reaction the [voluntary] Code was steadily relaxed,” (Pratik). This relaxation led to an increase in the topics that comics explored and a corresponding increase in the ways that comics could comment on the world. Comics began dealing with more adult themes, such as drugs, violence, sex, death, and disease. During the 1980s, the final transformation of the comic medium into a forum for mature thematic expression began. In 1986, Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* was released; in 1989 DC launched the Vertigo line of adult comics with *The Sandman*.

Since the late 1980s, comics have existed in a state shaped more or less by the evolutions of the past. However, far from stagnating it appears that comics are starting to trend towards taking still another new form. In an informal poll, 87% of respondents indicated that during their lifetime, they have noticed a trend towards comics being targeted at adults and teens aged 13-19 (Appendix I). Another apparent trend in modern comics is the apparent movement away from the purely commercial format of the newspaper comics of the mid 19th century even more so than the comics of the Golden and Silver Ages. In other words, comics are becoming less concerned with selling things and more concerned with telling stories. Advertisements in modern comics tend to be focused on selling other comics or selling merchandise related to the comic being read, rather than towards selling other commercial products. With the advent of trade paperbacks, it is possible to read entire comic stories without having to deal with advertisements. In the future, it is at least a valid argument that comics will abstract entirely from the magazine-type synthesis of content and advertising that they currently utilize and become entirely content based, with individual issues becoming more like trade paperbacks, graphic novels, and books.

Future comics will likely diverge and develop along two very different lines. On the one hand, the comic book proper will likely come to resemble a trade paperback in that it will become longer more narrative in nature, and rely more upon single copy sales than on garnering repeat business for its survival. This possibility is strengthened by the fact that more and more comics are becoming longer, running fewer ads, and costing more than ever before. Another reason why the narrative comic book is becoming ever more likely is because serial media (i.e. radio, newspapers, magazines, T.V., comic books, etc.) is slowly being phased out in favor of customized on-demand entertainment. In a world where complete stories are just a click away, following a multi-part comic title through months or even years of iterations in pursuit of a conclusion will become obsolete. Why go to the effort of following a title month by month in tiny chunks when one can easily find similar literature elsewhere on-demand?

On the other hand, graphic novels will probably become progressively more art centered. As they have already come to rely more upon single copy sales than on repeat sales in a manner similar to the literary novel, graphic novels already have to rely on sating the tastes of a specific audience in order to maintain a level of success. This will continue with graphic novels focusing on cutting edge issues as they do now, but with comic books taking up the narrative slack, it will be up to graphic novels to help analyze and express issues in an artistic rather than a story-based manner, a task which titles such as *Sin City, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,* and *Watchmen* have already begun to tackle to one degree or another, incorporating both stand-alone and successive aspects of visual art into the telling of a story through words and dialogue.

The student of the past can learn much about the future. All indications point to a forthcoming new age of comics, for things have remained relatively stagnant in the genre for too long. The shape of this new generation, however, is up to interpretation. Will comic books become more narrative while graphic novels shift their focus to the artistic side of their expression, or will something entirely different occur? Only time will tell for sure, but it is at least reasonable to say that big change is coming for comics, and it is coming soon.

Appendix I: Survey

1. Do you read more, about the same, or fewer comics than books?

More: 1, Same: 2, Fewer: 12.

2. Do you find that comics are more offensive, about as offensive, or less offensive than books?

More: 0, Same: 15, Less: 15

3. Did you read comics while growing up?

Yes: 8, No: 7

4. If yes, have they changed positively, negatively, some of both, or not at all in the interim?

Positively: 3, Negatively: 0, Some of Both: 2, Not at all: 3

5. Has the comic book genre shifted more towards adults, teens, kids, other, or none of the

above since you started participating in the genre?

Adults: 9, Teens: 4, Kids: 0, Other: 0, None: 2

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