Comics in Digital Forms: An Overview and Growth of Digital Comics in the Present Era

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Abstract:

Digital supremacy is ruling the present era in every aspect and our reading experience is also changing day by day. Now readers are not pivoted on printed pages only; rather they are relying more on their smart phones, laptops, computers etc. as every kind of books are now available in these devices. Like other genres, comics are also available in digital forms just to become a companion to the readers

in their digital journey. With the evolving digital revolution, comics have taken less time to adopt the digital forms than any other genre of literature. The fact is that readers can enjoy the best reading experience of comics when the genre includes multimedia. Comics have gone one step further and offer its various digital forms so that the readers can enjoy many varieties. Hence there are many interesting forms of digital comics like web comics, web *manhua*, web manga, webtoons, motion comics etc. This paper is a detailed analysis of the history of digital comics and is a critique of its various forms.

Keywords: Comics, digital comics, web comics, webtoon, Comixology.

Introduction

In recent times, both writers and readers are emphasizing on multimodal literary texts and on New Literacies. As a result of it, comics and graphic novels have become the favourite genres for both the writers and the readers. Digital comics are one such subgenre of comics which are released digitally, rather than in printed mood. Jakob F. Dittmar in his article "Digital Comics" rightly points out that digital comics can transgress McCloud's definition of comics as a medium of juxtaposed pictures and images in deliberate sequence (85). Dittmar's comment is largely based upon the fact that, as Burwen opines, such Digital comics often include moving images, audio tracks, multimedia through which the writers narrate their stories (OA 136). Like the famous comic writer Kelly Sue Deconnick, who once remarked about comics that, "Comics are always going to be cooler because we're cheaper" (qtd. in Dempsey), Scott McCloud also spoke about the potentiality of comics in publishing industry in his *Reinventing Comics*. He went one step further than Deconnick, and regarded internet comics would become ideal for both the readers and the writers as such

comics are not limited by the number of pages and paper (McCloud 45).

Over the decades, critics and scholars have been prioritizing the advantages of digital comics in comparison to printed comics. Digital comics often contribute in the process of digital literacy, which is the need of the hour, especially in the age of internet, computer, laptop, mobile etc. Abdel-Hack and Helwa, while commenting upon the advantages of digital comics, talked about its glossy visualization and clear sound effects that enable the readers to enjoy such comics at their will (32). Writers on the other hand, unlike printed comics, are not bound by any number of rows while creating images for their digital comics. McCloud was highly dazzled with this aspect of digital comics and termed it as "infinite canvas" (183). So McCloud commented, "In a digital environment, comics can take virtually any size and shape as the temporal map – comics' conceptual DNA – grows in its new dish" (223). Another pertinent certitude is that in North America most of the comics are released simultaneously in both printed and digital form. The price remains same for both the formats initially, but later on the digital form becomes cheaper, and attracts the readers more. As a result, publishers in North America are focusing more on such digital forms and consequently getting huge reward; even they are publishing the Japanese Manga in digital format. Thus, it is no surprise that in 2018, the comics market of North America saw revenue of $100 million from digital comics.

Categories of Digital Comics

Jeff Kirchoff in his article "Using Digital Comics to Develop Digital Literacy: Fostering Functionally, Critically, and Rhetorically Literate Students" has spoken about three categories of digital comics: remediated comics, ergodic-hypercomics, and multimedia comics (120). While discussing about remediated comics, we must talk about Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation, as propounded in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*.

According to them, remediation is "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms" (273). Digital comics act like a 'new media' which must 'refashion' its older versions so that we understand them fully (265). In this context, Bolter and Grusin talked about two methods through which such remediation act; those are hypermediacy and immediacy. Hypermediacy is defined as special type of method "whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium" (272). Immediacy, on the other hand, "make the viewer forget the presence of the medium… and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation" (272). Digital comics employ the strategy of immediacy as such comics succour the readers to forget the virtual medium while reading the same content of printed comics.

The second category of the digital comics, ergodic hypercomics, consists of two definite terms: ergodic and hypercomics. Ergodic texts, as defined by Espen Aarseth in his *Cybertext*, demand, "Nontrivial effort… to allow the reader to traverse the text" (87). The problem with such texts is that the story and the design are not in fixed order. Merlin-Goodbrey while commenting about hypercomics, wrote that, "In hypercomics, the choices made by the reader may determine the sequence in which the events are encountered, the outcome of events, or the point of view through which events are seen" (qtd. in Shrestha 45). So put it simply, ergodic hypercomics require more strenuous efforts from the readers to comprehend the events of such digital comics. Besides, the readers have more freedom in interpreting such comics and the outcome of such comics would vary according to individuals.

The third category of digital comics – multimedia comics – can be interpreted keeping in mind the media theorist Peter Weibel's comment upon Digital literature. According to him, in the digital literary world, "no single medium is dominant any longer; instead, all of the different media influence and determine each other" (qtd. in Johns 76). Thus, multimedia comics go one step ahead of the printed comics as they not only include text and images, but also

relevant background narration, music, games, video etc. Such comics present before readers an altogether disparate reading experience in which reading and gratification go side by side. Besides, readers' reading experience is not interrupted by any kind of semantic or cognitive barrier, as pointed out by Wolfgang Hallet in his "Reading Multimodal Fiction: A Methodological Approach" (25). Very few novels can be put under this category; among them Stu Campbell's *Nawlz* and Burwen and De Seve's *Operation Ajax: How the CIA Toppled Democracy in Iran* are most momentous. True to the concept of multimedia comics, Stuart Campbell described his *Nawlz* as "an interactive comic that combines text, illustration, music, animation, and interactivity to create a never-before-seen panoramic comic format" (111).

Online Platforms of Digital Comics

Now we should discuss about some of the eminent online platforms for such digital comics. Although most of such platforms release the digital version of any comics after the release of the printed one, few platforms like DC Comics have recently come up with a new strategy of digital-first. Through this digital-first strategy, the platform releases the digital version of any specific comics earlier than the printed version as they consider this strategy would ultimately become a common manoeuvre among the other platforms in future. Comixology is undoubtedly the leading platform for digital comics as it releases comics from above seventy five publishers including Marvel and DC Comics. With the launch of Marvel Digital Comics Unlimited, Marvel Comics entered in the market of the digital comics. The platform offers many new released periodic comics, not available anywhere else. It also offers a complimentary digital copy to its readers along with the printed version of any comics. DC Comics offers its digital comics through major E-book stores like Amazon Kindle, iBookstore and Nook Store. Some of its popular digital comics are *Smallville Season 11*, *Batman: Arkham Unhinged*, *Justice League Beyond* etc. Another such voguish platform, Dark Horse Comics allows its readers to

access its comics through both iOS and Android devices. Its Dragon Age comics like *Dragon Age: The Silent Grove* and *Dragon Age: Those Who Speak* are very popular among its readers.

Digital Comics with Different Names

Digital comics are known by its various names in various countries and have their unique features, spices, and flavour. For example, in China such digital comics are known as digital *manhua* or web *manhua*. To understand such *manhua*, we must peep into the history of *manhua* in China. The origin of *manhua* was closely associated with historical and political events of China of the early 20th century. Chinese people first saw the appearance of *manhua* in a Shanghai newspaper in 1903. These early *manhuas* were basically obsessed in criticizing the rule of Qing dynasty. However, the term *manhua* was yet to be coined; it was only in 1925 that Feng Zi-Kai coined the term for his comics collection *Zi-Kai manhua*. After that, the *manhua* industry started to flourish and eventually in 1928, the first magazine for *manhua* was published with the title *Shanghai Sketch*. These comics were largely influenced by the socio-political facet. Thus, most of the *manhuas*, published during the Second World War, deal with the themes of war. Sometimes educationists and men of power used such *manhua* as a foremost medium to express their opinion. In the 21st century, the Chinese government and the Ministry of Culture have been constantly encouraging for the development and expansion of *manhua* throughout the world. Due to the huge popularity of printed *manhua*, in recent times, digital *manhua* or web *manhua* are being released in various websites and portals. With glossy pictures, and interesting stories, these *manhuas* can be termed as blissed comics. Some of the most visited portals for web *manhua* are QQ Comic, Vcomic, ManHuaTai etc.

Japanese Manga

Japan has their unique comic format of manga, which is one of the most popular formats throughout the world. This format is so much

favoured that it is read by people of every age world-wide. Manga has two unique features which make this format different from other comic format. First, manga is usually published in black and white format, including its digital version; secondly, manga is read from right to left side. Like any other comic format, manga too has its digital version in the form of web manga, which is getting more popularity in recent times than the printed version. The main reason behind such recognition of web manga is that readers can easily and conveniently read such comics using their smart phone, laptop or pc. On the other hand, from the point of view of mangaka (artists who compose manga), it is more convenient for them to draw and compose the digital version than the printed one with the aid of the digital tools. There are many popular websites like Pixiv in Japan where artists can submit sample of their own manga digitally; this enables them for a bigger opportunity. When any such manga becomes popular, they are published by reputed publishers both digitally and in printed form. *One Punch Man* is one such famed web manga which got popularity via such method. A famous Japanese publisher like Shogakukuan has done a tremendous job for both readers and mangakas through its two websites, Sunday Webry and Ura Sunday. These websites offer free chapters of manga for readers and mangakas get opportunity to upload their work also. Even there are also many modish apps which guide the creators to create their manga; Jump Paint is one such app.

Webtoons of South Korea: In South Korea, printed comics and cartoons are generally known as manhwa. Like many other countries, South Korea has also developed its digital version of manhwa with the title of webtoons. The term webtoons has been formed from two words, website and cartoon and the format has been slowly surpassing its printed form as per as number of readers are concerned. There are few features of webtoons which have made this format favourite of readers in recent times and which make webtoons different from any other comic format. Unlike traditional comics, which are published through horizontal comic strips, webtoons are published using vertical strips. Thus, there are no numerous pages, and readers can read such stories more conveniently via smartphone or tablet by just scrolling up and down. Whereas there is no scope of

including sound and animation in manhwa, creators of webtoons can easily include such multimedia, making the genre more entertaining. Another noticeable thing is that webtoons are generally published in colour rather than in black and white.

To understand the inception of webtoons, it is necessary to discuss the early history of manhwa in South Korea. During its initial stage in the beginning of 20th century, manhwa was published in cartoon form, dealing primarily with political sarcasm. Such manhwa was influenced by the Japanese culture also as Korea was under the rule of Japan from 1910 to 1945. However, in the 1920s, such political cartoon was banned due to political turmoil. When the independent South Korea was established in 1948, manhwa reached a new height with the initiative of the famous comic artist Kim Yong-hwan, who started *Manhwa Haengjin*, the first comic magazine in the country. As the popularity of manhwa was rising, artists started to introduce various themes in them. One such popular genre of that time was sunjeong which used to deal with romantic elements. Manhwa saw a decline again in 1990s as the publishing industry witnessed a financial collapse. Under these circumstances, publishers started to emphasize more on digital form and thus emerged the webtoons. According to the evolution of the webtoons, they can be divided into few generations. At the very earliest stage, webtoons were rather a scanned copy of manhwa than any original composition. During the first and second generations, authors had the opportunity to include multimedia in webtoons; vertical strips also started to develop during that time. At present, with the digital evolution of webtoons, readers have the opportunity to read these comics via apps in their smartphones.

Two of the earliest and most lovable web portals for webtoons are Daum Webtoon and Naver Webtoon, launched in 2003 and 2004 respectively. These portals provide regular webtoons for free. In 2014, Naver launched the revolutionary WEBTOON service, which is now the largest platform for webtoon in South Korea. With the growing popularity of this digital form, portals like TappyToon and

Spotton started to translate webtoons in English in the early 2010s. Some of the popular webtoons which have been translated into English are *The Sound of Heart*, *The Gamer*, *Tower of God*, *Noblesse* and many more. Apart from translation, at present numerous webtoons are being adapted in various mediums like film, television series, game, animated series, theatre etc. *Tazza*, a webtoon by Huh Young-man is one of the earliest examples of a webtoon being adapted into film in 2006. Some other examples of film version of a webtoon include *Hello, Schoolgirl* (2008), *Moss* (2010), *The Neighbor* (2012), *Fists of Legend* (2013), *Inside Man* (2015) etc. The popularity of webtoons are no longer limited within South Korea only as it has created a huge market in different countries like China, Taiwan, India, Thailand, United States, and of course in Japan. In this context it is noticeable that one of the biggest webtoon publishers, Comico, has its origin in Japan.

Webcomics

One of the broad and earliest terms used in the field of comics in digital form is webcomics. The term is applied to those comics which are published exclusively via websites, and usually on weekly basis. These are different from digital comics by the fact that a web cartoonist is the sole owner of his creation and often uploads his comics in serial form to keep the readers' interest. Webcomics are even older than World Wide Web as Eric Millikin's *Witches and Stitches*, the first such comics were shared to the world via CompuServe in 1985. Shaenon Garrity in his article "The History of Webcomics" divided the rise and history of webcomics into five ages or periods: The Stone Age (1985-1992), The Bronze Age (1993-1995), The Singularity (1996-2000), The Age of Shit Getting Real (2001-2006) and The Age of This Whole App Thing (2007-Present). Whereas Eric Millikin's *Witches and Stitches* was shared via CompuServe, the first of such comics shared through website is David Farley's *Doctor Fun* (1993) during the Stone Age. In the Bronze Age, the genre was on the rise, as Garrity wrote, "With the web successfully invented, cartoonists who were nerdy even by

cartoonist standards began to colonize it with comics…" (58). Two of the important webcomics of this period were Charley Parker's *Argon Zark!* and Jese Reklaw's *Slow Wave*. With the publication of Scott McCloud's *Reinventing Comics* in 2000, the world witnessed, to use Garrity's term the "Webcomics Explosion." Presently, such comics are shared not only on websites but on any other social platform. For example, a web cartoonist like Kate Beaton prefers to share such comics primarily through her twitter account.

Photo Comics

A special type of comics which was once well liked and used to include photographs in place of illustrated drawings is photo comics or photo novels. This immediately became very popular among amateur cartoonists who lacked the skill of drawing in their comics. The photos used in such comics may be of real people or sometimes of inanimate objects or dolls. During its earliest stage, the genre was very much popular in Italy and America, and slowly started to spread in such countries like Britain or Canada. The possible earliest appearance of photo comics can be found in *New York Daily News*, the famous American newspaper in 1927. However, the photo comics gained popularity in Italy through *Killing*, one of the best of this genre, which ran from 1966 to 1969. In the 1970s, few photo comics contained the female nude pictures and were termed as "Foto Funnies"; most of them appeared in American *National Lampoon* magazine. In Britain, photo comics used to appear in magazines like *Jackie*, *Load Runner* and *Eagle*. Even there are few apps like Comic Life and Strip Designer which enables cartoonists to create photo comics. Some familiar examples of photo comics are *A Softer World* by Joey Comeau and Emily Horne, *Transparent Life* by Charlie Beck, *Alien Loves Predator* by Bernie Hou etc.

Conclusion

Another popular digital comic, which had its birth in the early 20th century, is motion comic or sometime termed as animated comic.

This digital genre blends elements of printed comics and animation (with music and sound effects), and usually of fifteen to twenty minutes long. Although motion comics have got the popularity only in the recent years, its elements were there from the time comics got popularity. Thus, Paul Wells suggested, "the comic strip was to help provide some of the initial vocabulary for the cartoon film" (qtd. in Smith). In the 1960s, the famous American science fiction writers Philip K. Dick first exploited the concept of motion comic in his *The Zap Gun*. Around the same time, Marvel Comics Animation also experimented with such comics with its *The Marvel Super Heroes*. Marvel's counterpart DC Comics was not far behind in this trend and started to launch similar kind of comics like *Batman: Mad Love* and *Watchman: Motion Comics* in the 21st century. In recent years in India, a comic platform like Graphic India has been promoting its motion comics via social media apps like TikTok, Spotify, Instagram and Snapchat. These are short animated comics around the length of five to fifteen seconds, which provide the viewers a glimpse of these comics. Regarding this tactics, the co-founder of Graphic India, Sharad Devarajan commented that, "The goal is to bring these stories to potentially millions of new people who are not regularly exposed to comic books and can discover the medium in a way that is more relatable to them" (qtd. in Mollan).

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