Manifesting Stories: The Progression of Comics from Print to Web to Print

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Manifesting Stories: The Progression of Comics from Print to Web to Print

By: Hannah Fattor

Advisor: Professor Brett Rogers
There are many young creative people today who have a passion for comics and are eager to tell their own stories. These writers and artists have expanded the comics medium beyond the printed word and are using the Internet as a means of distributing their comics. American comic books have been discounted and their legitimacy questioned throughout their history because comics are an art form designed for mass production and consumption. Comic books today are also designed for a specific, exclusive audience, and this paradoxically removes them from society at large. Comics published via the Internet subvert the elitism associated with the comics industry, once again reaching out to the masses and providing stories that appeal to a more diverse audience. These works are called ‘webcomics,’ and many webcomic creators have embraced the new online publishing medium as a source of great inspiration and wider creative scope. I refer to them as ‘creators’ because these people are often both the writer and the artist for a webcomic; it is uncommon that a webcomic will split the work between writer, penciler, inker, and letterer (or even simply between writer and artist) the way mainstream comic publishers do. This gives webcomic creators a great deal of creative control and allows them the freedom to experiment in all areas of comic book production. Despite the creative possibilities that the Internet presents, I was surprised to find how common it is for webcomic creators, even those who have pushed the limits in terms of graphic storytelling, to print their webcomics. Motives for wanting a printed webcomic vary widely among both creators and their audiences. In my investigations into the webcomics market I found that webcomic creators’ aspirations to print their webcomics arise from the fact that artwork is not considered legitimate unless it has tangible weight. Creators also have a respect for the comic book as an art object and as a storytelling medium—though creators do not always follow the comic book format’s constraints.
Readers’ enthusiasm to own these printed webcomics often comes from a desire to support the creator, or to own something tangible, collectable, and sometimes personalized. While print comics created the initial framework for webcomics in terms of art and design, I argue that webcomics have rejoined published comic books with a new, influential perspective, first filling an overlooked market for stories that are not told in mainstream comics and now, even more recently, contributing to interpersonal and economic changes in the relationship between comic book creator and audience.

The perception of comic books in America has been largely negative due to the cheapness of the art, stigmas against the medium, and an assumed narrowness of genre. American comics were initially in strip or single-panel gag format, and newspapers used them to increase sales during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most popular comic strips were collected into shoddy, flexible books made with cardboard or soft paper covers and cheap paper interiors.¹ These first comic books evolved beyond simply reprinting popular strips, instead growing to tell long-form stories with original characters. The first superhero comic, a genre that is most heavily associated with American comic books, was Superman, introduced by Action Comics in 1938.² The fact that children were the target audience for superhero comics established reading comic books as a childish pursuit, and suggested that comic books were not for adult consumption.³ When comic books’ content became less childish but the audience remained young, there were serious reactions against the medium. Beyond the superhero comic,

² Ibid., 32.
crime and horror comics were particularly popular towards the end of the 1940s, and it was the sexuality, violence, and gore in this genre that incited an attack on the entire medium of comics.\textsuperscript{4} In 1954, a Senate subcommittee held hearings that investigated the effect of comic books on children.\textsuperscript{5} Education specialists insisted that “children have feeble minds and naturally bad instincts,” and that the crudity of comic books was dangerous to these growing minds.\textsuperscript{6} Those who objected to comics cited acts of violence that children copied from comic books\textsuperscript{7} or acted out on their schoolfellows (though evidence of the latter was slim).\textsuperscript{8} Comic book publishers responded to this criticism by establishing a “self-regulatory Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America,” which effectively banned crime and horror comic books.\textsuperscript{9} In the wake of censorship under the new Comics Code the clean-cut superhero genre returned to being the most popular genre, but the rise of television and radio meant that the popularity of comic books in general declined.\textsuperscript{10} Superheroes have continued to dominate the comic book market ever since, even when the Comics Code fell out of power in the 1970s and comic books became edgier.\textsuperscript{11} The popularity of superhero comics has colored public perception of what types of stories and characters comic books uphold.

\textsuperscript{4} Duncan et al., 37.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{6} Groensteen, 6.
\textsuperscript{7} David Hadju, \textit{The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America} (New York: Picador, 2009), 88.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{9} Duncan et al., 39-40.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{11} Scott McCloud, \textit{Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing an Art Form} (New York: William Morrow, 2000), 111.
While comic books are no longer considered detrimental to children’s psyches, they are still perceived as mediocre art because they are designed for mass sale. French comics critic Thierry Groensteen notes a common argument against the artistic value of comic books, explaining that “the comics market obeys the rules of commerce. The saleability of the product seems to be more important than the intrinsic worth of the art.”\textsuperscript{12} It is true that comic publishers cater to existing comic book readers who will reliably buy certain genres. Publishers print just enough copies to sell in comic book stores and only market genres, characters, and storylines that they believe will become popular with their target audience (which is understood to be white, heterosexual, and male).\textsuperscript{13} Even with all of this marketing aimed directly at a reliable comics following, because comics are sold via a direct market system that exclusively distributes comic books through specialty shops, readership is not expanding. Though limiting printed comic books to well-loved titles and printing just enough comics for the known fanbase saves publishers money, it does not invite new readers to engage with comic books.\textsuperscript{14} There is also little diversity among comic book fans, as the comics themselves lack diversity in terms of story and character design. I conclude that potential fans are alienated from traditionally printed comic books because of comics’ association with childishness; by the belief that most comics have low literary, artistic, and financial merit; and because the direct market system’s limited selection makes it difficult to invite a wide range of people to find stories to which they can relate.

\textsuperscript{12} Groensteen, 10.
\textsuperscript{13} Duncan et al., 94.
\textsuperscript{14} Duncan et al., 96.
The modern American comic book is still fighting against limited perceptions of the medium to be understood as an art form. The direct marketing system limits comic book consumers to a small, dedicated group, and people outside of this group perceive comics as almost exclusively catering to fans of the superhero genre.\(^{15}\) While it is true that superhero comics have been the backbone of the medium, the ‘underground comix’ movement of the 1960s provided proof that comics creators with a message outside the standard comic book genres can still find an audience. Underground comix worked outside of the Comics Code to publish anti-authoritarian comics, highly personal stories, and comics by minorities not normally represented in mainstream comics.\(^{16}\) Some artists grew extremely popular during this movement, including 1992 Pulitzer Prize-winner Art Speigelman (the creator of *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*).\(^{17}\) Though most comics today subscribe to common tropes within their chosen genre, “there is no reason to suppose that an uncommon production will not strike a common chord among diverse receivers.”\(^{18}\) After all, comics are designed to be a mass art, and thus should appeal to and entertain a range of people. This potential diversity of audience is not always recognized, but when creators who belong to minorities are able to make their comics public, the comics medium experiences a diversification in terms of story. However, once these writers and artists “get their books printed, distributed and placed on comics store shelves [they must] try like Hell, along with everyone else, to figure out how to get noticed by the 99.9% of their potential audience who

\(^{15}\) McCloud, *Reinventing*, 111.

\(^{16}\) Duncan et al., 56.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 71.

barely know those stores exist.”\textsuperscript{19} It is difficult to attract a diverse market for comics, as comic book stores still prefer to stock titles that they know will sell.\textsuperscript{20}

While some potential comic book appreciators are uninterested in the narrow range of stories, others are dissuaded from buying comic books by the fact that, despite the creative effort that goes in to creating a comic with aesthetic and literary merit, a comic book is inexpensive and no longer has potential to turn a profit. At the height of the medium’s popularity many comic book fans had comic collections, including a small subsection of collectors called ‘speculators’ who bought comics to sell for profit later.\textsuperscript{21} Twentieth century art critic Julius Meier-Graefe commented on the conditions of buying and selling within a small market of knowledgeable, discerning professionals who are not connected with the general public (i.e., speculators). He noted that the market exchange of art does “reduce the aesthetic usefulness of a work to a minimum. Pictures become securities, which can be kept locked up like papers.”\textsuperscript{22} Before the 1990s, comic books were a commodity to these speculators; their artistic value was negligible. During the 1990s, however, speculators realized that comics were being printed in runs up to a million.\textsuperscript{23} Value on comics would take longer to increase, and often only first-run printings were worth more than what the buyer paid for them.\textsuperscript{24} Increased production thus devalued the tangible

\textsuperscript{19} McCloud, \textit{Reinventing}, 110.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 115
\textsuperscript{21} Duncan et al., 76.
\textsuperscript{23} Duncan et al., 76.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 76.
product in the eyes of speculators. The market that remained, however, kept reading comics for the art and stories contained within.

The fact that almost anyone can own comics because they are so inexpensive suggests that comics are not exclusive enough to be considered art by traditional standards. In actuality, comic books are an example of philosopher Walter Benjamin’s belief that “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.”\(^{25}\) The ‘ritual’ of experiencing art refers to the reverence of visiting museums in order to view famous paintings. Benjamin explains how this fetishistic conception of art deteriorates as art becomes more accessible. Rather than visiting comic books, readers may buy these mass produced works of art and experience them at home. Even if the art itself is not the ‘original’—as comic books are designed for print runs into the millions—the true value of comics lies in the potentially diverse, creative, and exciting stories that they can tell and the aesthetic elements which enhance those stories. Comics have always been designed for popular consumption, as their simplified art style demonstrates. Comic books rely on few colors and bold lines in order to capture the human form in the simplest way possible, enabling cheap and easy reprints of these uncomplicated figures.\(^{26}\) Balancing simplified, cost-effective elements with recognizable and repeatable character designs is a kind of art form. Indeed, the popularity of collecting comic books implies that fans of comics consider these works of art worthy of ownership and display. Moving beyond the tangible, artistic value of comic books, the new

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phenomenon of webcomics has focused even more on the idea of creating new, revolutionary art for the masses.

There has been a long history of artistic and commercial innovation in the comics medium that continues today with the artistic opportunities that digital comics present. Benjamin addresses the progression of technology and art, explaining, “One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later. The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form.”

Webcomics are this new art form born of recent technology. Mainstream comic book artists now use Photoshop or other digital inking and coloring programs to create their work, but using these new tools in order to publish via the Internet opens up a range of artistic possibilities. For example, webcomic creator Dirk Grundy explores innovative digital coloring techniques in their webcomic, String Theory.  

*Fig. 1*—Close-up of panel 4 in *String Theory* Ch 6, pg 13.

*Theory* was originally published in black-and-white, then shifted to full-color in the second volume as Grundy grew more confident with experimentation. In this way, Grundy’s webcomic

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27 Benjamin, 296.


is an example of ‘art progression,’ where the appearance of a comic changes as the creator experiments and establishes the style in which they would like to communicate their comic. Because their webcomic’s colors are designed for the Internet and not intended for a comic book, Grundy does not have to worry about their elaborate coloring techniques (such as the dark, saturated colors shown in figure 1) transitioning from a computer screen into print, nor do they have to worry about the high cost of printing their webcomic in color. Philosopher and art critic Douglas Davis noted that publishing online ensures that “any video, audio, or photographic work of art can be endlessly reproduced without degradation, always the same, always perfect. The same is true for handmade images or words that can be scanned.” When a creator fully uses the innovative opportunities that the web offers, beyond the established artistry of color, line, and shape, they can damage the essential aspect of its line and color, or even lose valuable elements of their webcomic, when it is translated into print.

The web format is a literally unlimited canvas, and some artists utilize the extent of this canvas in new, creative ways that would be impossible in a printed comic book. While Ashley Cope, creator of *Unsounded*, follows a standardized page size and panel layout, her art is not restricted by the page; elements of a webcomic page may extend into the surrounding website.

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30 A computer screen creates images using the three primary colors of light (red, blue, and green) while printed comic books use the three primary colors of paint (cyan, magenta, and yellow) as well as black. Transitioning between the two coloring techniques can be difficult. Brad Guigar, Dave Kellett, Scot Kurtz, and Kris Straub, *How to Make Webcomics* (Berkley: Image Comics, 2011), 45.


space, either for dramatic\textsuperscript{33} or humorous\textsuperscript{34} effect. She also employs different backgrounds on her website in order to communicate chapter breaks within the webcomic. What renders her webcomic distinctive, however, is how Cope explores the ‘endless scrolling’ potential offered by the Internet. Scrolling adds suspense to a webcomic by using the limited window size of a standard computer screen, but it also keeps the story fluid as the reader does not have to click a ‘next’ button. Cope uses scrolling particularly well on page 28 of Chapter 7 in \textit{Unsounded}, shown in figure 2.\textsuperscript{35}

On this page, the character is falling, and scrolling through the comic gives a sense of the unknown depths that are lurking outside of the computer screen’s window. Cope has collected the first three chapters of her webcomic into a printed book, but the comic book lacks the

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mood-establishing website backgrounds, and the panels that bleed into the space around the comic on her website are cut off in the print book.\textsuperscript{36} Printing her comic also loses the fluidity of endless scrolling, as readers must turn pages. The readers of Unsounded insisted that she print her comic (though she initially had no intention of doing so), but in this case the artistic experimentation in the webcomic was more daring than it appears in the resulting comic book.\textsuperscript{37}

Another stylistic technique that webcomics can sustain is the option to animate panels. David Shabet animates occasional comic pages in his webcomic, Dead Winter, usually to heighten tension.\textsuperscript{38} Shabet’s animations end in static panels laid out in a traditional comic page format, but the initial animation is eye-catching, directs the reader through the comic, and adds suspense. This clear direction would be lost in the printed book, where only the static panels could be printed. While Cope and Shabet can push artistic limits on the Internet, they are once again constrained by the medium when they translate their webcomics to print.

While many webcomic creators explore the boundaries of artistic possibility presented by the Internet, others strictly follow the established format of a comic book in order to either attract an audience of potential buyers, or to establish a personal deadline for a story and work on it in chunks with the support and scrutiny of readers. Warren Ellis has a background in the mainstream comics world that began in the early 1990s, but he chose to explore the medium of webcomics starting in 2007, when he collaborated with artist Paul Duffield to create FreakAngels.\textsuperscript{39} The webcomic ended in 2011 and is now available in a series of six comic books

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\textsuperscript{36} Ashley Cope, Unsounded Volume 1: The Zombie & The Brat, 2012, 67.
\end{flushleft}
published by Avatar Press, though the entirety of the comic remains free online at www.freakangels.com. **FreakAngels** is not as artistically innovative as other webcomics; it follows a fairly standard, made-for-print page layout that rarely deviates from four panels per page and while it is colored, it has a limited palette to keep printing costs down and limit the risk of colors changing during the transition to the printed book. Because Ellis already possessed an established career as a writer for both Marvel and DC when he decided to use the webcomics medium and Duffield seems to have settled on his own style with few deviations, neither writer nor artist was attempting to break into the world of comics or push artistic boundaries with **FreakAngels**.40 The webcomic, in this case, was a hook to attract readers into buying merchandise and, later, the printed books. If the comic skipped one of its weekly updates (due to illness, outside work, or a convention), there would be a post advertising merchandise and books in place of the update.41 Everything from the webcomic’s design to its presentation on the website prepared the webcomic for print and distribution as a traditional comic book. E.K. Weaver’s webcomic, **The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal**, is likewise formatted for printing. The comic pages42 are standard comic book size,43 there are no colors apart from an occasional sepia tone or splash page (both of which were removed in the printed book to save money), and Weaver’s website simply conveys the story rather exploring stylistic and web-related artistry. Unlike **FreakAngels**, however, Weaver’s webcomic is intended for print but not

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40 “Warren Ellis.”


for profit.\textsuperscript{44} She explains on her blog that she chose to create \textit{The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal} because it was an artistic challenge and she found the emerging story compelling.\textsuperscript{45} Weaver’s webcomic is a personal project that has taken years to evolve from idea to story to publication, and it has become incredibly popular, most likely due to its distribution on the Internet. Due to the explicit, homosexual content of her work, as well as the character-driven (rather than plot-driven) storyline—both of which are rarely found in mainstream American comic books—it is extremely unlikely that Weaver could have published \textit{TJ and Amal} with an established comics publisher.

Women and other minorities that have historically been ignored both as comics creators and in the world contained within comics have found their stories supported by the medium of webcomics. The comic book industry does not often represent minorities in a positive, well-rounded way because many of the writers and artists are white, cisgender,\textsuperscript{46} heterosexual, able-bodied males.\textsuperscript{47} If there are minorities employed by comic publishers, in particular women and people of color, it is most likely that they are “working for publishers because they were the lowest bidders and took the lowest pay, or no pay at all.”\textsuperscript{48} These minorities are trapped by a system in which they cannot afford to turn work down in order to hang on to their principles, and will silence their own opinions or testimonies in case their perspectives jeopardize a comic’s


\textsuperscript{46} Cisgender means that a person self-identifies with his or her anatomical or biological sex.

\textsuperscript{47} Duncan et al., 262.

perceived marketability and their future employment. With webcomics, however, a wider variety of creators are able to express their personal worldviews, which are often dramatically different from what mainstream comics present as ‘the norm.’ Webcomic artists communicating the stories of minorities do not have to worry about finding shelf space in a comic book store in order to find an audience; they are able to reach their readers directly via the Internet. The community of webcomic creators is often happy to recommend other webcomics to their readers, with creators usually including a page of links to other comics on their websites.49 Webcomic artists who write about a specific minority may recommend other comics that also address issues this minority faces, as when Blue Delliquanti, creator of the queer webcomic *O, Human Star*, suggested comics that explore genderqueer characters.50 Publishing a webcomic about characters who do not fit the mainstream comic mold can appeal to a specific, niche audience, and it can help readers either understand a minority or feel less alone if they are part of that minority.

Webcomics are not restricted by editors or concerns about marketability, so creators are less concerned about fitting genre conventions or censoring themselves in order to increase mainstream appeal. Weaver addresses the difference between porn comics and comics which contain sex, noting that (including nonsexual or partial nudity) her own comic, *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal* “is between 2 and 3 percent sexual content,” yet it is consistently labeled a gay pornographic webcomic.51 She argues that she has “put 6 years of

49 Guigar et al., 102.
serious work into [*TJ and Amal*] and is really tired of that kind of dismissal,” though she does not “want to lend any more weight to the idea that sexual content is ‘lesser’.” In light of Weaver’s protest against dismissing webcomics which have sexual themes, I would designate a subset of pornographic webcomics not safe for work (NSFW) comics rather than specifically porn. NSFW webcomics deal with a storyline and compelling characters instead of focusing on generating adult content. These webcomics usually have sexual situations, but many also deal with nonstandard sexualities or relationships that do not appear in mainstream comics. Delliquanti’s *O, Human Star* looks at internalized homophobia as well as transsexual issues, while Tab Kimpton’s now-complete *Khaos Komix* and more recent *Fifty Shades of A* deal with the entire GLBTQ spectrum. NSFW webcomics are a new generation of romance comics, willing to acknowledge sex as a major part of most romantic relationships but also interested in exploring these relationships with a level of depth and sensitivity that would be almost impossible if creators were seeking marketability rather than content.

Webcomics also offer the possibility of exploring subject matter that is crude for reasons beyond sexuality, or of presenting a realistic range of character designs rather than characters that are conventionally attractive and marketable. Randal Milholland’s *Something Positive* has content that would be considered offensive due to violence, cruelty, and poor taste; for example, his very first comic implies a coat hanger abortion. In mainstream comics, it is unlikely that

52 Weaver, “since a couple folks asked.”
something so shocking and controversial would be allowed to go to print. Violence is fairly standard in comic books, but abortion is a loaded topic that would create a great deal of backlash for the publishing company. Milholland is unconcerned with backlash, however. The audience for webcomics has less influence over the creator because the creator is not attempting to sell their work to a specific, established group of readers, as the direct market system of mainstream comics does. Even though some readers may consider a webcomic to be in poor taste, there are always more people on the Internet to whom a comic may appeal; despite the crude content, Milholland’s webcomic has a loyal following that has allowed him to work on *Something Positive* full-time.\(^{57}\) Webcomics also tend to possess a range of realistic character designs rather than the marketable character designs that appear in mainstream comics, such as the cast of C. Spike Trotman’s webcomic, *Templar, Arizona*.\(^{58}\) Her webcomic contains characters from diverse ethnic, religious, and financial backgrounds, including a variety of body types and examples of people suffering from mental health problems and addictions.\(^{59}\) Portraying characters that fit a specific, appealing, marketable model is less important in webcomics, which are not trying to appeal to a comic book audience that has come to expect certain physical conventions. Instead, webcomics focus on portraying visually realistic characters. Likewise, telling a story that agrees with genre conventions in order to cater to a specific market is less important in webcomics, which are able to find an audience by telling stories for people the comic book industry ignores. Webcomics have pioneered artistic storytelling techniques and filled a marginalized market, but I perceive that they are also affecting the ways in which mainstream comics industry interacts with

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its artists, writers, and fans. Creators are leading by example as they establish rapport with their audiences, assert the importance of good work over updating speed, and rely on their fans to help them print their work and prove that there is a market for the kinds of stories that they tell.

Webcomics survive because of the contact between fans and creators, which builds trust in both the quality of the work and in the fact that fans will support the creator. In the book How to Make Webcomics, various webcomic creators explain how to profit from a webcomic. Their main suggestion for webcomic creators is direct interaction with the audience, as “you have the opportunity to not only capture a reader with your work, but with the personality behind the work. […] By interacting directly with your audience, you can create passionate, passionate, passionate readers. And that should be your goal, above all other marketing, PR, and sales goals.”

Building a rapport with fans renders a webcomic creator accessible, and fans are more likely to support and encourage someone they feel is willing to acknowledge, appreciate, and respond to them. A relationship with comic readers has been a part of the comics industry since its early days, when DC editor Julius Schwartz took the time to respond to fans in a letter column and help them connect with each other during the 1960s. The possibility for fan interaction increases with the communication potential of the Internet. E.K. Weaver solicits advice about comic details on her blog as well as holding contests for her fans. Webcomic creators also may include a comments section on their websites where fans can discuss strips and the creator can join the conversation. David Willis’ comment sections for his various webcomics often have

60 Guigar et al., 105.
61 Duncan et al., 45.
fans swapping jokes and references. These conversations among fans and creator are unfortunately lost when a webcomic goes to print. Due to the prevalence of social media, however, webcomic creators continue to freely converse with their readers, take questions about elements of their webcomics which are unclear, and address any problems a particular webcomic page may have.

Unlike comic book writers and artists, webcomic creators can adjust their webcomics to fit their own schedule or personal goals for the story, as they are not under contract to generate work. As shown in figure 3, Aaron Diaz’s webcomic, *Dresden Codak*, was used as an example of the publishing innovation webcomics offer in response to a comic printed in American newspapers on February 2, 2013. Gary Tredeau’s *Doonesbury* comic asserted that comics would vanish if newspapers did. In response, webcomic creator David Willis inserted a page of *Dresden Codak* into the empty space that Tredeau left to symbolize the creative void that would occur if newspapers

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ceased to print comics. This sparked a discussion of webcomics’ update schedules in contrast to daily comics’ update schedules. Webcomics almost always update on a weekly basis, usually on a set day or series of days; very few webcomics update in the comic book format of a packaged storyline. Updating on specific days helps work a webcomic into a reader’s schedule and ensures consistent readership. Critics of Willis’ response to Trudeau cited the fact that Dresden Codak has one of the least-consistent update schedules in popular webcomics. Willis countered this argument for a traditional output schedule by explaining that webcomics:

> can update when they’re ready and when they’re excellent. Not having to update every day means we can have stuff like Dresden Codak. And there’s obviously a market out there FOR stuff like Dresden Codak, what with him making a living off of it and all. Folks just want good stuff! It’s exactly why I chose Dresden Codak for the original photoset: it’s an amazing comic that can only exist outside of newspapers. […] If you’re an artist who can hit a deadline 365 days a year and produce great stuff, that’s great! It’s just not what’s most important to me, nor do I think it should be the most important.

Most webcomics are pet projects, a personal creative outlet for people who work day jobs.

Only some webcomics are popular enough that their creators can work on their webcomics full-time, and this typically results in a more consistent output. Willis himself has created five webcomics, two of which are ongoing, daily-updated strips that support him financially. However, not all webcomic creators focus on timely updates. When comics are a labor of love rather than a necessary part of an artist’s continued employment, webcomic creators are able to work on their own schedules and deliver the best possible content. Artists like Weaver and Diaz

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66 Guigar et al., 41.


68 Guigar et al., 14.
consider their webcomics to be a personal project, and posting online is simply an incentive to put out a story that they want to tell. Other popular webcomics survive because they have a reliable output; Cope’s *Unsounded* and Willis’ *Dumbing of Age* and *Shortpacked!* are good examples of webcomics that update regularly. Though it is true that consistency helps, quality art and interesting stories can also keep readers coming back. Ultimately, a webcomic’s update schedule is a creator’s choice, not their obligation to an audience or a publisher. Many readers disagree with this, demanding new content, but most fans of a webcomic will wait patiently for a new page if they know that it will be the creator’s best work.

Due to the success of webcomic creators in maintaining a supportive audience, mainstream comic writers and artists are beginning to call upon their fanbases as well. When webcomic updates are erratic, creators can keep their audiences by explaining the amount of work, the personal problems, or the unforeseen circumstances that render a consistent schedule impossible. Though this does not stop some readers from complaining, taking the time to explain is often enough for fans of the webcomic to understand a late update and reassert their support for both the webcomic and the creator. Madeline Rupert, creator of the webcomic *Sakana*, maintains a solid, supportive fanbase despite her erratic updating schedule because she interacts with them on social media sites and tells them when and why she will be unable to update.⁶⁹ Fans of her webcomic can see that she is a human being, not a machine making art for their consumption, and they can return to her webcomic whenever she offers new content. A comic on hiatus was unheard of during the Golden Age of comics, when assembly lines of comics...
writers and artists worked together to churn out comic book after comic book.\textsuperscript{70} Recently, however, popular writers and artists publishing print comics are beginning to take time for themselves. Due to social media, fans can interact with specific comic creators, following their work and offering feedback and encouragement. Comic book writers and artists with fan followings no longer have to rely entirely on publishers’ marketing to support their comics. Brian Vaughan, the writer for \textit{Saga}, and Fiona Staples, the artist, take months-long breaks in between storylines of their comic book and freely admit that they need these breaks in order to maintain the quality of their work.\textsuperscript{71} I see this as an example of webcomics beginning to influence print comics and challenging the way the industry has been run. As social media brings fans in contact with their creative idols, what started with overworked webcomic creators has shifted to include mainstream comic book writers and artists; comic creators are no longer afraid to admit that they are human beings and demand a measure of personal freedom. It is a reclamation of creativity and creative energy and a signal that, even if fans have to wait a while for the story to continue, an artist’s work is worth supporting.

Printing a webcomic is a long, difficult process and the transition from web to print can affect the artistry and distribution of a webcomic, yet many creators choose to print their work in order to have a tangible expression of their art that can generate profit. Most webcomic creators self-publish their work, as it is rare that a major publisher will offer to take on a webcomic (though it is not unheard of—Noelle Stevenson’s ongoing webcomic \textit{Nimona} is scheduled for publishing under HarperCollins in 2015).\textsuperscript{72} As exemplified by Cope and Shabet, webcomics that

\textsuperscript{70} Duncan et al., 33.


use the format of the Internet creatively often lose some artistic aspect when the creator translates them into the more limited format of a printed book. There is also a reduction of audience in many cases. For example, creators of pornographic or NSFW webcomics cannot ship their books to certain countries if the content of the comic is illegal.\textsuperscript{73} Despite these potential setbacks, many creators publish their webcomics in order to assert the legitimacy of their work. The intangibility of webcomics, as well as the fact that they are freely available, leaves the value of the webcomic in question. The current societal understanding of art remains in the tangible realm, which Benjamin defines as “aura,” or the quality of art based on its uniqueness and its place in history.\textsuperscript{74} Benjamin believed that the aura of artwork, the power of the original, would fade in the age of mechanical reproduction as the value of original art decreased in the face of mass reproducibility.\textsuperscript{75} This has not proven to be true. People still desire to collect works of art, even if these works are not one-of-a-kind. Artists still want to create art that has physical worth, even though it is easier to set up a website and tell a story than it is to market and self-publish a comic book. It is impossible to make a living from webcomics without “unabashed capitalism and an acceptance of art-as-commerce,” and printing a book asserts a webcomic’s tangible, artistic value.\textsuperscript{76} Webcomics are an art form, and when a creator possesses a concrete expression of the time and effort that they have put into their comic, it is easier to show people the true weight of what they have done.


\textsuperscript{74} Benjamin, 286.

\textsuperscript{75} Davis, 381.

\textsuperscript{76} Guigar et al., 119.
Backed by their fans, popular webcomic creators can lower the risk of printing their work by utilizing crowdfunding and offering rewards that will benefit fans of the webcomic. Crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter and indiegogo are very useful ways for a webcomic creator to gauge reader response to printing their webcomics. The creator establishes a goal amount that will allow them to create a printed book, then offers various rewards at different levels of funding. If a reader chooses to donate a certain amount, they will receive that reward package. These packages can include anything from simple sketches in a book, to an increased update schedule,\textsuperscript{77} to entirely new content related to the webcomic.\textsuperscript{78} Due to the increasing success of Kickstarters, some comic artists also come up with ‘stretch goals,’ or reward tiers that will become possible if the project is funded over the projected goal amount.\textsuperscript{79} The book is only funded and created if there is sufficient reader interest and thus there is minimal risk of having a surplus of books and no market for them. In addition, readers are able to support the artist and gain something tangible from their support, sometimes even beyond the book that the artist is trying to fund. Most high-level funding tiers offer commissioned sketches or limited-run artwork, and most books can be personalized by the artist. The presence and success of crowdfunding is a tangible expression of the symbiotic relationship between creator and fans. Though webcomics are freely available on the Internet, fans are willing to spend money to support an artist, and buying the book is a material expression of this support. Having the webcomic in book form also provides the option of lending; it has been suggested that “every


\textsuperscript{78} Cope, “Unsounded Comic Volume 1.”

\textsuperscript{79} Willis, “Dumbing of Age: The Second Book Collection.”
book sold today is read by an average of four people.”\textsuperscript{80} Lending a comic book creates social pressure on a lendee to read a book and return it, with a dialogue about the quality of the work, to the lender.\textsuperscript{81} With a printed webcomic, readers can share their favorite works with friends in a format more substantial than a link in an email.

Beyond a desire to help out struggling artists, fans may also buy printed webcomics in order to add these works to their personal collections. This impulse to collect comic books dates back to the early days of comics in America. Mainstream comics were initially only sold haphazardly at newsstands, which was inefficient and did not inspire readers to become invested in a particular comic since it might not be available from month to month. During the late 60s and early 70s, “teenagers and young adults were using their personal comics collections to set up comic book shops in cheap storefronts or storage sheds in their backyards,” which helped comic book fans to read the titles that they wanted so long as the resident comic book peddler had liked the same title and gathered those comics.\textsuperscript{82} High school teacher and comic book collector Phil Seuling began shipping comics that had not sold in the newsstands to these grassroots distributors in 1973, enabling them to carry more titles and to request issues that they lacked.\textsuperscript{83} Collecting a story was one of the reasons that comic book fans waited patiently every month. These fans were completing a circle of production and consumption that has been discussed by Karl Marx. In Marx’s opinion, the consumer “completes the act of production by giving the


\textsuperscript{81}In my experience, telling friends to look at a webcomic, even if I send them a link, rarely produces results. However, when I lend books, I am surrendering a piece of my property to someone and I am more likely to insist that the lendee read the work and then return it to me in a timely fashion.

\textsuperscript{82}Duncan et al., 68.

\textsuperscript{83}Ibid., 68.
finishing touch to the product,” in this case by purchasing it and reading the story contained within it.84 However, Marx also notes that “production produces consumption, by determining the manner of consumption, and further, by creating the incentive for consumption, the very ability to consume, in the form of want,” which establishes the symbiotic relationship between producer and consumer, and is more clearly understood as the principle of supply and demand.85

There was an ever-expanding market for comic books up until the 1980s, and so these comics were printed in huge volumes for collectors. Printed webcomics are published in smaller runs that are created due to fan interest and are sold differently than traditional comic books. Comic book specialty shops and certain bookstores carry comic books, but it is rare that a printed webcomic will appear in these stores. One exception is Barry Deutsch’s Hereville, which began as a webcomic but can now be found only in stores; once Hereville was picked up by a publisher, Deutsch took down all but teaser pages from his website and used the site to instead market his work.86 Printed webcomics that are self-published typically reside with their creator and are shipped to buyers directly from the creator’s home.87 There is a more direct demand for these books, as buyers are unlikely to casually purchase printed webcomics from a store. True fans of a webcomic will buy the book and put it on their shelves with the rest of their comic book collections.

Printed comic books are only bought (and, indeed, only published and sold) if the webcomic is good and the fans are eager. The fact that webcomics do not have to cater to ‘the

85 Marx, 36.
87 Guigar et al., 131, 135.
norm’ and still have an audience willing to pay for the printed content establishes webcomics as an art form that is closer to the masses than today’s comic books in many ways. Webcomics are accessible, both to creators who want to make their own comics and to audiences who want to experience new, genre-breaking stories and include the minorities that are increasingly apparent and vocal in the world today. The diversity of creators, fans, genres, stories, and characters within webcomics emphasizes the stagnation that has occurred in mainstream comic books. This diversity also reflects a new hope for the medium of comics. Since webcomics continue to prove that new kinds of stories and characters do have a market eager to read and purchase these works, there is a possibility that mainstream comics will begin to diversify their titles and give new writers and artists a chance. I perceive that webcomics are influencing print comics already, slowly but surely, by providing a new business model based on good art, good stories, and supportive fans. The web has opened up possibilities for artists, writers, and comic book appreciators. Even though the Internet’s canvas is increasingly explored by creative pioneers, there will always be a market for the printed word. Promising webcomic creators are being offered contracts and can see some future in their work. Hopefully, this recognition of talent will continue, and comics will begin to benefit from new markets for original stories.
Bibliography


