Digital Comics:
New Mutations & Innovations

merlin@e-merl.com

www.e-merl.com

Introduction: Who Am I?

- Hi, I'm Daniel Merlin Goodbrey.
- I'm a lecturer in Narrative & Interaction Design at The University Of Hertfordshire.
- I also work as a freelance designer and consultant for companies that want to do weird things using comics.
- Did a Masters degree in Hyperfiction in 2001.
- Have created a large body of experimental digital comics over the course of the last decade.

Introduction: Who Am I?
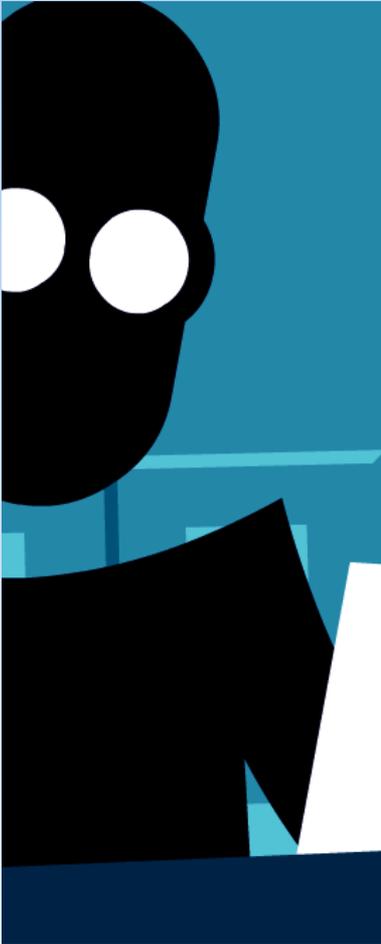
- Also worked in print, writing graphic novels and doing work-for-hire for Marvel.
- In 2005 helped a company called Clickwheel develop comics for the iPod.
- In 2007 worked for Sony on the development of comics for the PSP.
- Just started studying for a Professional Doctorate In Design
- Today I'm here to talk about some of the new mutations and innovations in digital comics that may soon arise.

Digital Comics: Strange Mutations
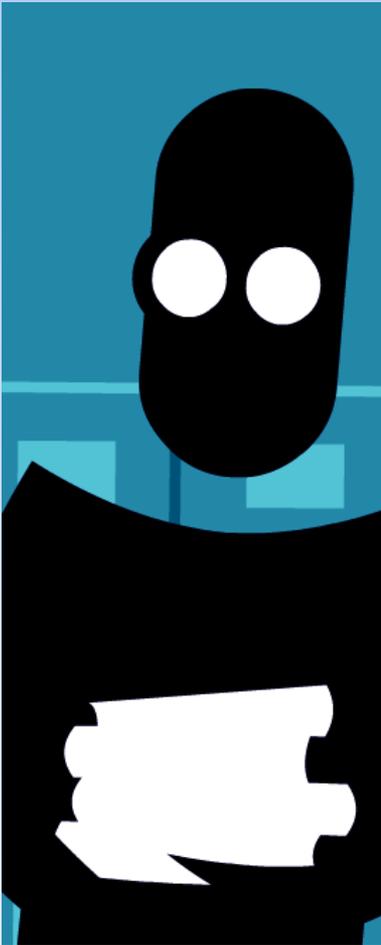
- In terms of how they are read and how they function as a medium, most webcomics work in a very similar manner to their print cousins.
  - Pages or strips are read from left to right and top to bottom.
  - The reader clicks to go to the next page or strip in a fixed, linear sequence.
- But not all digital comics are quite so faithful to these established print comic rules.

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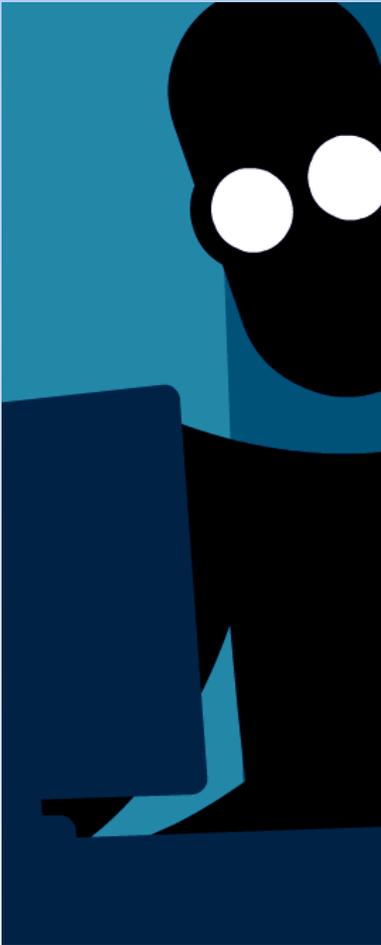
- Since the dawn of the web there have been creators experimenting with the new possibilities offered to them by the screen.
- While never achieving the mass popularity of the strip approach to webcomics, these strange mutations of the comic form are still worthy of consideration.
- They become particularly relevant given the current rise in pad computing and smart phone devices that may herald a similar period of reinvention and innovation in the comics form.

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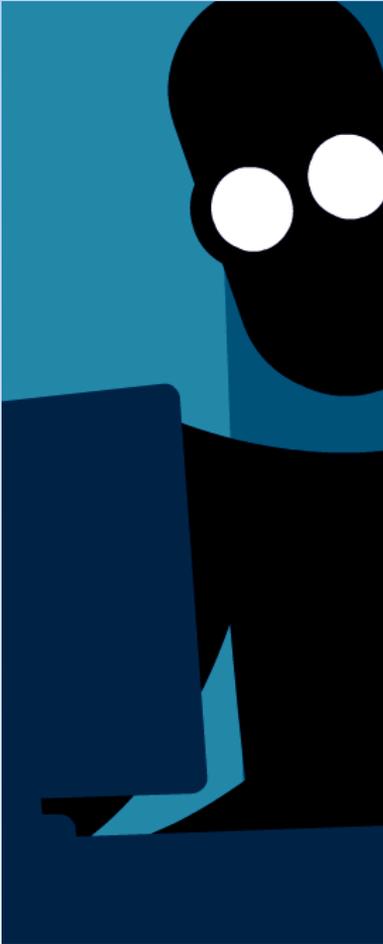
- My own early work in comics began in the area of experimental digital comics.

- In particular I focused on how comics might embrace the non-linear aspects of the World Wide Web in the form of the hypercomic.

Digital Comics: Strange Mutations

- A hypercomic can be defined as a comic with a multi-cursal (non-linear) narrative structure.
- In a hypercomic, the choices made by the reader may effect :
  - The sequence of events
  - The outcome of events
  - The point of view through which events are seen.

Digital Comics: Strange Mutations

- Some hypercomic examples, drawn from my own work:
  - Sixgun, 2001
  - Doodleflak, 2002
  - PoCom-UK-001, 2003
  - Externality, 2004
  - Never Shoot The Chronopath, 2007
  - The Formalist, 2004
  - Four Derangements, 2009
- All at E-merl.com/hypercomics

Mobile Devices & Pad Computing

- There are big shifts in the comic industries around the rise of portable digital display devices.
- This is a movement that has been going on for several years – ever since phones have been able to show pictures and access the web, people have been trying to push comics on to them.

Mobile Devices & Pad Computing

- These phone screens started off quite small and data streaming was quite slow.
- Today we have 3G and widespread WiFi for data streaming.
- Coupled with big, sharp touch screen displays on iPhone and Android Smartphones.
- Taken together, this gives us a very viable new platform to read comics on.

Mobile Devices & Pad Computing

- For comics based around the dimensions of the traditional comic book page, the real game-changer has been pad computers.
- Spearheaded in popular culture by the iPad, but soon followed by a wealth of Android and Windows based devices and e-readers like Amazon's kindle.
- Already several companies out there pushing Direct Market comics content to Pads. The two biggest being Comixology and Graphicly.
- All major comic companies now moving to take advantage of the new platform.

Digital Comics: The New Frontier

- We currently have an industry and a readership increasingly ready to embrace paperless comics.

- Freed from the constraints of the printed page and the PC screen, what else might the medium of comics become capable of during the course of the next decade?

- The following are five possibilities for new forms of comic that I think may be worth exploring.

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- **Game Comics** that marry the conventions of the comics medium to those of interactive narrative-based videogames.
- Think adventure games – the classic choose your own adventure structure
- But also think of puzzle games, with dynamic movement of panels and physical shaping of the narrative on screen being part of the fun.

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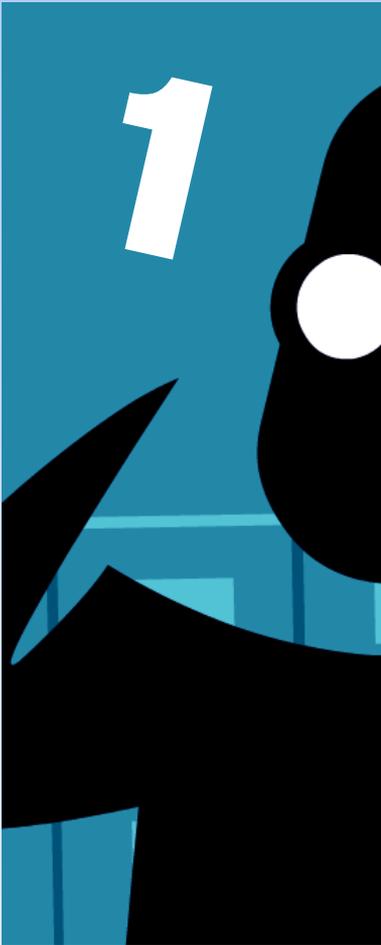
- The focus remains on using the comics' medium to play games rather than just shoehorning game segments in between segments of comics narrative.

- I'm building some of these at the moment. Hopefully it'll make more sense when I can show more examples next year.

- My goal is to construct something that a gamer thinks is a game and a comics reader thinks is a comic.

- A current work-in-progress:
  - A Duck Has An Adventure
  - http://e-merl.com/stuff/game.html

Digital Comics: The New Frontier

- **Sonic Comics** that create reactive soundscapes based around the reader's current position in a multimodal narrative.
- There've been various experiments in this regard before but no one's ever quite perfected the combination.
- Music is time-based medium where as comics is a spatially based medium, so the two are tricky to get to work together.

Digital Comics: The New Frontier

- The trick I think is to find a way to always know exactly what panel in a comic the reader is focused on.
- Then it's possible to build a reactive soundtrack that reacts to the reader's progression through the story, much like the soundtrack in a videogame changes based on the player's actions.
- I know exactly how to solve this was one from a technical standpoint, but lack the musical talent to make it work.
- Hopefully at some point I'll find some collaborators to pull this off

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- **Locative Comics** that react to their environment and the proximity of other comic readers.
- Locative media is an idea that's been around for a while but no one's ever really applied it to comics.
- Essentially they're narratives read using mobile devices that either react to their surroundings or that can only be experienced by going to specific locations and following specific instructions.

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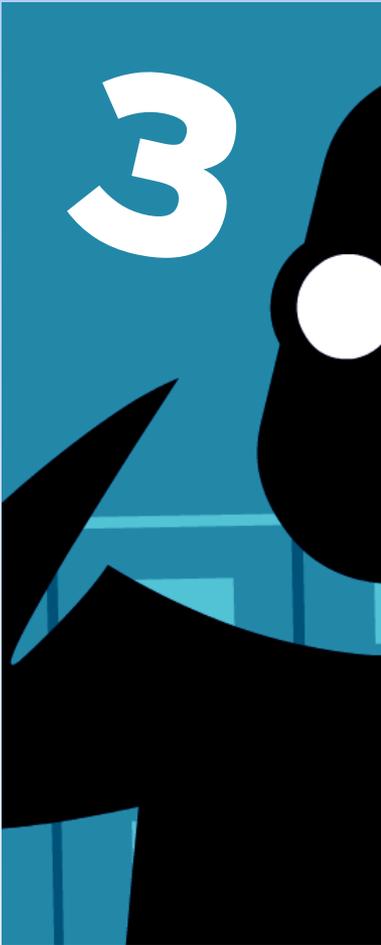
- Using GPS and geo-tagging, it becomes possible to tie comic panels or sequences of panels to particular locations.

- Imagine taking a walk around London that slowly unfolds a Hellblazer story set around the locations you're passing by and through.

- Or going to a comic convention and slowly constructing a larger, unique comic story by swapping little packets of narrative with the different fans you meet during the weekend.

Digital Comics: The New Frontier

- **AR Comics** that use Augmented Reality to extend physical spaces into the digital world of the hypercomic or extend comic page out into the physical world.
- This is kind of an extension of the Locative comics idea, but it uses various easy-to-come-by bits of Augmented Reality technology to actual insert comic panels into real locations.
- Imagine standing in a street in New York, pointing your smart phone up and seeing panels of Spider-man swinging past overhead.

Digital Comics: The New Frontier

- Or being in your front room and using your Xbox's kinetic to place you inside a giant comic, where you have to physically pull and push your way through the panels of the story.

- Or pointing your smart phone at a comics page and seeing a new layer of reality interacting with the narrative of the page.

- I currently have one of these at script-outline stage with funding and a publisher in place. Just need an and artist and some spare hard-thinking time to make it all work.

Digital Comics: The New Frontier

- **Spatial Comics** that use installations to extend hypercomics into real-world locations and architectural structures.
- Sort of the reverse of AR comics, building comics as actual physical structures in the real world.
- Essentially these are narrative art installations and may include a mix of images and 3D sculptural elements.
- But they still read like comics - one panel/image/sculpture following the next in deliberate sequence to tell their story.

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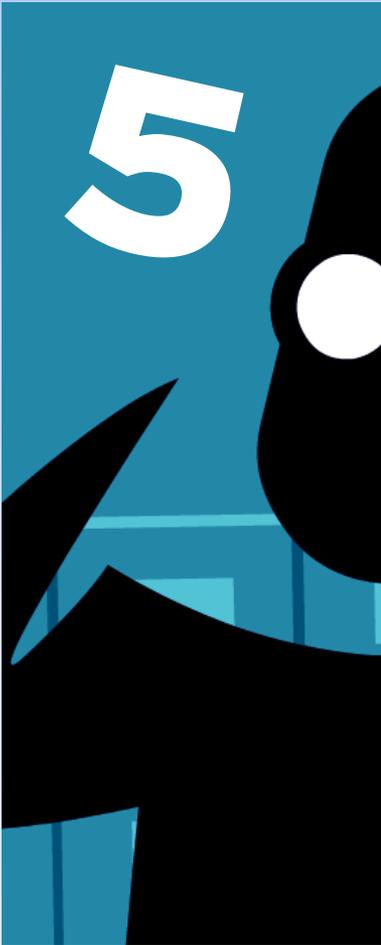
- Examples of these already exist in the works of practitioners like Dave McKean, Karrie Fransman, myself and others.
- I think we're going to see a real rise in popularity for this idea amongst the art world.
- They also show potential as a way of renovating and adding interest to shared public spaces.

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- These were just some examples of the different directions it's possible for creators to take with the comics form in the immediate future.

- Impossible to say at this stage which ideas will be carried forward and succeed in finding an audience and which are just too strange or unwieldy or impractical to make work.

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- Another interesting question is whether any of the big comic companies can be persuaded to join in with these more out-there experiments.

- During the last great upheaval brought about by the rise of the web, Marvel & DC stuck steadfastly to print.

- But in a world where they're clearly already moving to embrace paperless comics, perhaps this time round they'll be more willing to get experimental themselves.

Digital Comics: The New Frontier

- Might we see that Hellblazer locative comic one day? Or an AR Spider-man comic suspended between the skyscrapers of New York?

- I remain optimistic.

- (And available for hire, if needed).

Digital Comics: The New Frontier

- So, any questions?

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