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AN APPRAISAL OF HYPERTEXT FICTION

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## Abstract

As technology grows and changes, so too do new art forms rise in its wake. With the advent of paint, mankind created pictures. Upon the discovery of language, the world found stories. In print, the two were merged as one, begetting illustration, comic strips, and everything in between. The internet moved comics into a new frontier, and as we explore this frontier, new possibilities arise that print on paper could not accommodate. Of particular note is a form called hypertext fiction. This paper will act as a complement to the webcomic I produced as my thesis project, which incorporates aspects of the hypertext fiction media. The following provides an explanation of the project, as well as the nature of the relationship between technology, society, and popular culture, which all build upon each other to bring new art forms into our culture. Hypertext fiction is defined and explained, as well as the rise of works and traditions that came before it that provide the basis for this new medium. After an in-depth look at the process that went into the accompanying project, I go on to discuss the apparent uses hypertext fiction provides society and provide speculation on where the medium could and will be taken in the near future.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Project

The comic I created for my honors thesis project is an appropriate capstone for my collegiate experience. Throughout my IST classes, while learning about how people and technology interact, the left side of my brain was focused on information I would need to know for exams and eventually for my IT career. Meanwhile, I kept the right side of my brain busy with doodling. Characters that have been bouncing around in my head since my high school days finally escaped into the pages of this comic. It has been my side project all along, and when it came time for me to pick a thesis topic, the comic seemed fitting. What better way to combine my loves of drawing, writing, and technology than to transform the comic I had been drawing and writing for three years into a webcomic?

However, simply scanning the pages and uploading them online wasn't exactly thesis worthy. Fortunately, I had an idea. In the comic, I had created a fictional fantasy universe with extensive underpinnings that never actually made it directly into the pages. The medium is complicated for world building, because written exposition can only be worked in clumsily through dialogue or tedious narration. Fixing this problem became the real project, and I found my solution via the rising medium of hypertext fiction.

### Hypertext Fiction

#### Definition

Hypertext fiction is an up and coming form of storytelling that is defined by Wikipedia as "a genre of electronic literature, characterized by the use of hypertext links which provides a new context for non-linearity." Although it is still an unusual way to tell a story, the format has had more permeance than one might think. Wikipedia itself is one of the most notable sites for the use of hypertext. In the text of a Wikipedia article each of the words that are blue links send the reader off to another page, where the intricacy of his research may continue. This can lead to a spiraling, non-linear adventure

through the site's pages, with each new subject branching off further into other subjects, and multiple potential paths on most pages. While this kind of jumping from topic to topic was possible in a physical encyclopedia, the use of hypertext accomplishes in a click what previously took several frustrating seconds of searching out a new page. It is the goal of hypertext fiction to assume this format in order to optimize heavily layered or non-linear storytelling.

For the purposes of this paper, the term "hypertext fiction" describes a fictional work presented electronically that incorporates hyperlinks linking between story elements or from the story to relevant outside material.

### *Metadata*

The broadest definition of metadata is data about data. In a computer file, the data is the contents of the file, but the metadata is when the file was first created and last saved, how many pages it spans, the file size, and so on. However, metadata can inform fiction as well. The historical context of a story and its author's life and views have provided tremendous insight to the purpose of literature over the ages. To someone who did not know when Swift wrote *A Modest Proposal* or was unfamiliar with the issues it addresses, it would seem to be an essay on the benefits of cannibalism instead of a scathing rebuke of the English.

Metadata brings relevance to works that have a deep impact, but lack timelessness, much in the way that translating from one language to another allows a work to be understood by more than the original intended audience. In their day, many metaphors and allusions to current events would have been apparent to the readers. In order to preserve the integrity of the original work while having it remain meaningful, metadata provides the ideal solution. It neatly surrounds the piece in a context without having to invade the specific wording.

## Reception

According to Julia Keller of the *Chicago Tribune*, “hypertext [fiction]-- or electronic literature, a term its practitioners prefer -- is, depending on one's perspective, either the salvation of the written word or an abomination signaling the end of literacy” (Keller). This sensationalized dichotomy presented by Keller undermines the true potential of hypertext fiction. It will be inappropriate in many cases, in the same way that certain short stories should not be made into novels, and some books are made into inferior movies. Turning a work of art from one format into another does not always translate well, but this should not undermine the legitimacy of the format itself. A story that’s feel and tone are complemented by a reader’s non-linear perusal would be suited to the medium, while a story that is meant to be told in a specific order would seem jumbled and nonsensical.

In my project, I found that the technique could instead be modified to suit a linear piece while still augmenting its impact. Although the comic itself serves as a standalone, linear backbone, there are many other stories that overlap what is seen, and numerous details that are only glimpsed in the pages. A hypertext format allows the original story that I chose to tell to stand independently while providing side paths for readers to travel down in order to explore the underpinnings. It is my hope that my project will one day be one of many stories told in this manner. The medium is still too new to make a definitive judgment on its worth, but with the increased permeance of e-readers and tablet PCs with e-reader capabilities, the format is quickly becoming viable for large audiences.

## The Relationship between Popular Culture and Technology

Technology and popular culture have a cyclical relationship that presents itself in three stages:

### Popular Culture Inspires New Technology

New technology is being formed constantly, as people search out answers to our questions and solutions to our problems. Whether the problem is finding a renewable fuel source or being bored on the bus, technology is evolving to fit the needs and desires of modern life. Although scientists and inventors are a crucial part of this process, popular culture has its part to play in stirring the

imaginations of our society. Many of our modern conveniences were inspired or predicted by authors of speculative fiction. The book *20000 Leagues Under the Sea*, written by Jules Verne and published in 1870, predicted the submarine, which did not see widespread use until the first World War in 1914. The inventor of the cell phone, Martin Cooper, drew his inspiration from the communicators used by Captain Kirk and his crew in *Star Trek* (Inventor Strategies Group). Authors and television writers have an advantage in an audience's suspension of belief. In the world of *Star Trek*, where there is faster than light travel, alien alliances, and teleportation, wireless communication seems trivial by comparison. The job of popular culture is to imagine what is possible, and to portray those possibilities as either desirable or undesirable. For every *The Jetsons* universe where robots are our friends and willing servants, there is a *Terminator* story warning us that artificial intelligence is a dangerous line to walk.

### Popular Culture Comments on Technology and Society

The way that popular culture is able to hold this sway over technological advancement and social change is through constant commentary and critique. One of the most blatant instances of this is the feature of customer reviews. Today, when comparing products, more people will trust customer reviews over advertising. Anymore, anyone with a Twitter account or a blog can have an opinion on a product or a practice, and that opinion cannot only be heard, it can be sought. In the same way that Swift's *A Modest Proposal* needs to be read through a historical lens, TV shows like *Futurama* will one day need context markers for future audiences to be able to appreciate popular culture centralized episodes. An episode that deals specifically with commentary on technology is "Attack of the Killer App," in which the characters all get "eyePhones" (iPhones) and "Twitcher" (Twitter) accounts (Myers). The episode is rife with commentary on the Apple business model, as well as social commentary depicting how far society has been sucked into the virtual world. At one point in the episode, four of the main characters are sitting together at a table in a pizzeria, staring at the screens of their "eyePhones" and uploading messages on "Twitcher" to communicate instead of just talking to each other (Figure 1).



Figure 1 (Myers)

Much like in Swift's day, satire is a potent way for popular culture to point out the failings of technology and society. However, this sort of commentary can easily be created by the everyday user. One of the most popular ways for people to vent their everyday frustrations is called a Rage Comic.

This stage in the cycle is perhaps the most crucial. When a technology fails to achieve acceptance into popular culture, it will either fade into obscurity, or return to the first stage, where appropriate changes are made to conform to public demands. But, if a technology becomes integrated into popular culture, such as computers, social networking sites, and smart phones all have, a different kind of change takes place, as the cycle moves into the third stage.

### **Technology Enables New Forms of Popular Culture**

In this stage, technologies become such an integral part of daily life that they inherently change the way we act, think, and express ourselves. Ten years ago, you could befriend someone, but you couldn't "friend" someone, because it wasn't a verb yet. Before cell phones, plans had to be made ahead of time if you needed a ride from someone, and if you needed to talk to somebody who wasn't near a landline, then that was just too bad. With each new forum we are given by technology, a new form of art emerges. Blogging has reached the point in its practice where it is possible to become a

professional blogger, with notable examples: Hyperbole and a Half and The Oatmeal. A person can make a living off of a YouTube account. Even though Twitter limits its users to 160 characters, tweeting is both a popular and influential form of communication. After all, to quote Shakespeare's phrase: brevity is the soul of wit. These technologies and the new forms of expression that form from them provide a new outlet for popular culture, thus feeding back into the first two stages.

One of the new popular culture trends that has risen out of the internet is the webcomic. Like blogging, webcomics can become a full-time job. This art form has been growing and transforming across the span of its existence, and the future potential of the webcomic will be the focus of this paper.

### Webcomics in Popular Culture

As more and more media moves into an online format, comics have been no exception. Even some of the classic funny pages comics are now accessible online, such as *Garfield*, *Family Circus*, and *Cathy*. However, the internet plays host to an explosion of comics that debuted in online format. These comics take many different forms, from gag-a-day strips, to pages of sprawling story, and everything in between. Publishing directly to the internet gives webcomic artists a unique freedom. A webcomic may have thousands of readers, or be an independent project doomed to obscurity in the recesses of the web; either way, the artist has total liberties and complete control over what and when he publishes. One instance of this was when Tim Buckley, author of the popular webcomic *Ctrl+Alt+Del*, which had previously been a gag-a-day comic, featured a storyline on one of the characters having a miscarriage. Although there is no authority that prevented Buckley from doing this, nor any official repercussions, it was a very unpopular decision among his fans. The business of being a webcomic artist is predominantly based on the sale of merchandise and advertising fees generated by site traffic. For Buckley, the real cost of this dramatic turn in the tone of his comic were similar to any entertainment industry: the loss of readers and consequently a lack of convention invitations.

Webcomics have grown in popularity and prestige over the years that their writers and artists are touted alongside their counterparts in traditional comics at conventions. In fact, there is even an annual convention that exclusively honors webcomics, known as New England Webcomics Weekend (NEWW). Conventions are one of the main ways that webcomics are able to transcend their native internet setting into the real world. Interestingly though, a major milestone in a webcomic's timeline is the publication of a hardcopy of its archives. Despite these archives often remaining free to view online, dozens of comics have opted to publish, often with the added incentive of extra content and creator commentary on the work.

## Chapter Two: Lit Review

### Background

#### Early Art, Language, and Stories

Humans used pictures to communicate before they had language. We have found evidence of this in ancient cave paintings, as well as early languages, which were picture based. The Chauvet Cave, located in southern France, features drawings of nearly familiar animals (Figure 2) and scenes of them fighting (Figure 3).



Figure 2 (Oddee)



Figure 3 (Oddee)

These images are recognizable symbols that can be communication beyond gestures, tone, and body language. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs had symbols that stood for words which are still decipherable today (Figure 4).

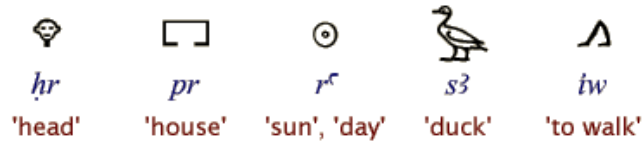


Figure 4 (Lo)

It is not uncommon for children to learn new words by associating pictures with the sounds that represent them. The ability to assign meaning to words has let us become able to communicate intangible things that cannot be represented by pictures. Even with the advent of language, literacy would still be long in coming. For thousands of years after a written language, a picture of a shoe outside a cobbler's shop would reach more customers than a written sign. Epic stories are continually accompanied by illustrations, throughout history to the current day. Pictures and words have danced a duet across mankind's cultural timeline, each bringing their particular impact to a story.

Stories have always been a part of the way we pass along our lessons and heritage. Oral traditions date back far before our written records. The study of early Anglo-Saxon writings shows heavy use of techniques such as alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm to help storytellers memorize lengthy epics for retelling. These stories preserved cultural values and reinforced morals, helping to bring cohesion to ancient societies.

Even today, we still have cultural stories that have the primary function of teaching lessons. A prime example of this is the collection of stories known as Aesop's Fables. Children grow up with stories like *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, which teaches them not to lie if they ever want to be believed (and don't want to be eaten by a wolf). While simplistic, these stories carry powerful sentiments, so much so that idioms in our language are derived from them. For example, to "cry wolf" means to lie, and carries a connotation of an over-exaggerated danger.

## Print

Arguably, the invention of the printing press is one of the most influential moments in history. In a time in European history where the only book for miles was most likely a hand-scribed copy of the

Bible, which only the local religious leader could even read, the mass production of printed material offered an explosion in knowledge and opportunities to the common man. Although the Gutenberg Bible was one of the first things mass-printed, the printing press would quickly begin spreading secular writings as well. As there came to be more things to read, there came to be more readers, who in turn hungered for more things to read. The subsequent explosion of literacy would further solidify the printing press as a powerful tool in the advancement of society.

As time wore on, printing recorded science, politics, and eventually seeped into the realm of entertainment. Information and ideas could be spread more quickly and reported more faithfully (Butler). Stories and thoughts could not only be more easily recorded, but also then distributed to a growing literate audience. Length notwithstanding, a tale could be told again and again by anyone who could read, as opposed to one who had spent his life memorizing great epics. This not only let the story reach many more listeners, but also preserved the story long past the time that no one remembered its words, yet again expanding its audience not only across miles, but years as well.

Censorship by the church was also quickly overwhelmed by printing technology. With the ability to generate so many copies of the work in question, reining the information in after it had been circulated was nearly impossible (Butler). Even before the social and political influence of the church began to wane, social consequences, legal punishments, and even death of the author could not take back information that had already been distributed. It is because of this that many attempts to control a people's way of thinking throughout history have employed book burning to curtail divergent views.

## Evolution of Comics

### Political Cartoons

One of the earliest definitive forms of the comic was the political cartoon. Often, these images employ a barbarous humor to mock political opponents, and provocative images to starkly illustrate the

artist's ideals. The first political cartoon published in an American newspaper is the illustration in Figure 5, which was drawn by Benjamin Franklin (Bellis).



Figure 5 (Belyeu)

In the words of an elementary teacher from Alabama, “Franklin considered the American colonies to be dangerously fragmented and, through this cartoon and its accompanying article, hoped to convince the American colonies that they would have great power if they united against the threat of French expansion in North America” (Belyeu). Although Franklin was a prodigious writer, he chose to accompany his written arguments with a poignant image to make his point memorable. In a more recent example from a more familiar artist, Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, drew a multitude of political cartoons during World War II (Figure 6,7).



Ho Hum! No chance of contagion.

By Dr. Seuss

Figure 6 (Bayn)

**I WAS WEAK AND RUN-DOWN**

I had circles under my eyes. My tail drooped. I had a foul case of Appeasement . . . . .

... THEN  
I LEARNED ABOUT

**“GUTS”**

that amazing remedy  
For all Mankind's Woes

**NOW**

I AM TAKING IT DAILY  
and today

**I FEEL STRONG  
ENOUGH TO  
PUNCH MISTER HITLER RIGHT IN THE SNOOT!**

**BEFORE** **AFTER**

© 1941 Dr. Seuss

Figure 7 (Progressive Pedia Wiki)

Most of Dr. Seuss's World War II comics were highly critical of the isolationist attitude of America at the beginning of the war, and the policy of appeasement. It is the union of illustration and text that creates the ferocity of the arguments. The sentiment of "feel[ing] strong enough to punch Mister Hitler right in the snoot!" sounds silly and childish, but when comparing the eagle on the left to the one on the right, no one would rather be the scrawny, bedraggled weakling.

Comics were and are a concise method of getting across a strong message. However, they were also funny and enjoyable to read. Inevitably, comics branched out into a purely entertainment medium.

### Comic Strips

In the history of comics, "the 1895 "Yellow Kid" created by Richard Outcault has often been cited as being the first comic strip" (Bellis). The strip, named for the iconic character pictured in Figure 8, was one of a handful of comics that began the tradition of newspaper comics.



Figure 8 (Graffix Multimedia)

The original intended purpose of these comics was to incentivize the purchase of a local Sunday newspaper. That paper was Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, and from those seeds grew the episodic comic strip.

Throughout the childhood of the comics, the main ingredient was humor. Each daily or Sunday installment was a singular episode and no reference was ever made to yesterday's strip. The medium would remain relatively unchanged for almost thirty years. (Graffix Multimedia)

As mentioned above, the formula was simple and enduring. It wasn't until the twentieth century that comics began to incorporate serialized storylines; however, by the late 1920s, serialized adventure strips had taken hold. This was the age of big names like Buck Rogers, Dick Tracy, and Flash Gordon, whose comics were already starting to show some of the precursory steps toward the superhero comics that would follow (Graffix Multimedia).

### Comic Books

With the success of the original American comic books that consisted of reprinted newspaper comics, publishers began to print comic books with new, original material (Bellis). One of these comic books, *Action Comics*, headlined a new concept that would quickly define the comic genre.

Superman debuted in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938. Created by two teens from Ohio, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the superhero concept was an immediate hit. The number of heroes fighting beside Superman exploded, and by 1941, there were too many to count (Graffix Multimedia).

### *The Golden Age*

The late thirties to the early fifties is identified as the Golden Age for superhero comics. Big names left their mark on this era, like Jack Kirby, who gave us Captain America, and who co-created several of Marvel's other cornerstone characters with Stan Lee (Wikipedia). Strong figures in DC's history arose as well, such as Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and Jerry Robinson, who all contributed heavily to the creation of Batman, his supporting characters, and the mythos surrounding the Dark Knight (Wikipedia). The Golden Age gave us some of comic books' most iconic characters, but it also took giant strides in the definition of the industry. "From the artwork, to the layout of the pages, to the business

side of things ... the Golden Age forged the foundation of the industry we have today” (Anthony, Sequential History: The Golden Age).

The Golden Age also encompasses World War II. Many comic book heroes joined the fight, and during the war, superhero comics in particular gained significant ground (Graffix Multimedia). During the war, Nazis and other Axis Powers joined the rogue’s galleries of many caped crusaders. The comics were a source of valor and patriotism. It was the hallmark of a Golden Age hero that theirs would be a story of defeating a villain. Issue after issue of good triumphing over evil, generally presented in stark black and white scenarios. It would be years still before comics began to tread the murky waters of moral ambiguity.

### *The Comics Code Authority*

In the decline of the Golden Age, superheroes fell out of favor, leaving the publishers scrambling to pin down the new best-selling genre. Comic books took a turn toward horror, mystery, and crime stories, and in the absence of the clearly wholesome, Nazi-fighting values of the Golden Age, parents began to question what exactly it was that their children were reading. Horrified at the violence and criminal activities depicted in the pages, the people began to cry out for regulation as experts clamored that this new media was corrupting America’s youth. Although the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was not an ideal solution, its creation did stop the medium from outright dying then and there.

In 1954, the CCA came into effect, marking every compliant book with their seal (Figure 9).



Figure 9 (Anthony, *Sequential History: Comics Code Authority*)

How it worked was simple. Publishers submitted their books to the CCA prior to publication.

They were then checked for compliance to the code. If the book passed the check, the publisher was allowed to use the CCA seal on the book. (Anthony, *Sequential History: Comics Code Authority*)

In the frenzy of trying to save America's youth from corruption by the devilish grip of sequential art, many stores would not sell comics that did not carry the CCA seal. However, the censorship was oppressive at times. One of the most critical examples of the Code's flaws occurred when the story "Judgment Day," submitted by William Gaines' *EC Comics*, was rejected because the main character was black. Gaines took the CCA's Administrator to task on the issue. There were no grounds in the Code for this decision, and finally, after threats of law suits, the story ran uncensored with the seal of approval (Anthony, *Sequential History: The Golden Age*).

Despite resistance from the CCA, comics still managed to flourish as a medium during this time. Almost specifically as a backlash to the CCA's oppressive censorship, the trend of underground comics appeared in the late 1960s, and with the reestablishment of superheroes in the Silver Age, the superhero genre was able to grow beyond the simple dichotomy of good against evil.

### *The Silver Age*

DC Comics has the honor of officially beginning the Silver Age in 1956 with *Showcase #4*, in which a modernized version of the Flash recaptured the nation's interest in superheroes. With such a favorable reception, DC completely reinvented its characters. The adventures of the Golden Age were set aside as events taken place in an alternate reality "Earth-Two," and the heroes were all given costume updates and humanizing back stories (Wikipedia). Marvel was quick to join in this trend, rewriting its characters to give them more depth, and responding to DC's creation of the hero team the Justice League of America with the Fantastic Four. Soon to follow were more Marvel teams, the X-Men, and the Avengers, the latter of which included a rebooted Captain America alongside new Marvel heroes Iron Man and Thor (Wikipedia). As the Silver Age came to a close, the regulations of the CCA were loosening, and the mainstream comic readers and writers began to find that they were ready to explore more mature themes, such as drug addiction, sympathetic criminals, and death.

### *Underground Comix*

Toward the tail end of the Silver Age, coinciding with the hippie counterculture of the 1960s, a movement arose in defiance of the CCA, called Underground "Comix". These comics dealt exclusively with subject matter banned by the CCA: explicit sexual content, overt use of drugs, and graphic violence (Wikipedia). As described on Lambiek.Net, the website of the world's oldest comic book store:

The underground movement was an expression of its time. In the latter half of the 1960s the hippie movement in America was engaged, to a greater or lesser extent, with protests against the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggle, anarchism, Women's Lib and Gay Liberation. Add to this an interest in the spiritual value of taking drugs and of "free love" and you had, very simplistically speaking, a thriving "counterculture" against traditional values. (Lambiek)

Another element was the blatant disregard for the CCA and for authority in general, especially where it was restricting expression.

The tradition of the Underground Comix is thought to have grown out of the Tijuana Bibles that saw circulation between the twenties and late forties (Wikipedia). However, the movement in the Sixties flowered into more than pornographic versions of popular comics of the time. Although the content would not pass the CCA review, the works of Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, Art Spiegelman, and Manuel “Spain” Rodriguez, still sold in the stores that were willing to carry them, which were generally head shops, as opposed to their counterparts for sale on magazine racks in grocery stores. These titles were not picked up by major publishers, but instead produced via self-publishing or small, independent, underground publishers. The practice was, unsurprisingly, not sustainable, but their existence during this time created a steady pulse in the veins of mature storylines during the harshest restrictions of the Comics Code Authority (Lambiek).

## The Turning Point

### *Bronze Age*

When well-established writer Stan Lee was asked by the US Department of Health to show Marvel readers the consequences of using drugs, a mainstream publisher ran three issues that did not carry the CCA seal (Anthony, Sequential History: Comics Code Authority). Despite having been specifically asked to do the story by a branch of the US government, even a negative portrayal of drug use did not meet CCA standards. However, the seal-less issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* were published without complication, and then the title went right back into the CCA’s parameters (Anthony, Sequential History: Comics Code Authority).

This began a push and pull that stretched the boundaries of the CCA. Writers and publishers realized that they could run more mature stories with grittier themes and stay in business, and the CCA realized that these comics were running and selling without their approval, and society had not permanently degraded beyond recognition because of it. The CCA began relaxing its authority with revisions made in 1971.

With a newly opened playing field, heroes like Green Lantern and Green Arrow faced the drug addiction of Arrow's sidekick, Speedy. Death, a concept that superhero comics had traditionally treaded upon as lightly as possible, was now fair game. With the death of Gwen Stacy, Spider-Man's girlfriend, readers were no longer able to assume that even well-developed, reoccurring characters that had survived so many perils in the past were automatically "safe" (Murray).

Other changes made the Bronze Age notable, such as co-creator of many beloved Marvels, Jack Kirby, moving over to DC in 1970. During his time with DC, Kirby contributed a significant expansion to the Superman mythos with the creation of The Fourth World, and its notable overarching villain: Darkseid (Wikipedia).

The tone and content of the Bronze Age made a fundamental shift that resonates through to today's comics. Superheroes became people, and their stories were about people with superpowers instead of super powered people. In addition to fighting crime, heroes were fighting personal foes, such as Iron Man's struggle with alcoholism, and societal perils, such as the discrimination faced by the mutants in X-Men, which paralleled the struggles of real world minorities (Wikipedia). Minorities began appearing in the pages of comics, though while non-whites and women gained representation, it would be years before heroes could be openly homosexual. All of these factors built comics up to the grim and grit of the Modern Age.

### *Modern Age*

The Modern Age, the age we are currently in, is sometimes also called the Dark Age. Considered to have started in the mid-80s, some have argued that the Dark Age has ended, and is a previous age between our current Modern Age and the Bronze Age, as described by tvtropes.com:

If The Golden Age of Comic Books and The Silver Age of Comic Books were the childhood of Super Heroes, The Bronze Age of Comic Books was their adolescence, and The Dark Age of Comic Books was their angst-ridden teenage years, then The Modern Age of Comic Books is

surely the college years: all the work gets turned in late, people come up to you with crazy-awesome ideas all the time (most of which don't really pan out), and there's still some adolescent attitude about, but it's growing into something more mature. (Television Tropes & Idioms)

However, for the purposes of this paper, the Dark Age will be considered the current Modern Age.

The aptly named Dark Age saw an inundation of darker, mature, gritty plotlines in comics. Widely considered to have been started with the publications of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller and *Watchmen* by Allan Moore (Television Tropes & Idioms). These iconic titles spun bleak tales of broken heroes, moral ambiguity, and Pyrrhic victories, raising sequential art to a previously unrealized tier: literature.

### *Graphic Novels*

Although the graphic novel was, in essence, a longer comic book, it allowed the medium to reach a new level of respect in literary and artistic circles (ipl2). The length allowed story lines to move away from episodic one-offs, and the new term brought about a level of seriousness that had been difficult to achieve under the connections that “comic” bears to light-hearted humor and children’s entertainment. This medium also saw a break from tales of heroes, adventures, and mysteries. Alongside *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, were titles like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (Figure 10), which depicted Jews as mice and Germans as cats as it unraveled the hardships of the author’s father during World War II, and remains the only comic to win a Pulitzer Prize (Wikipedia).

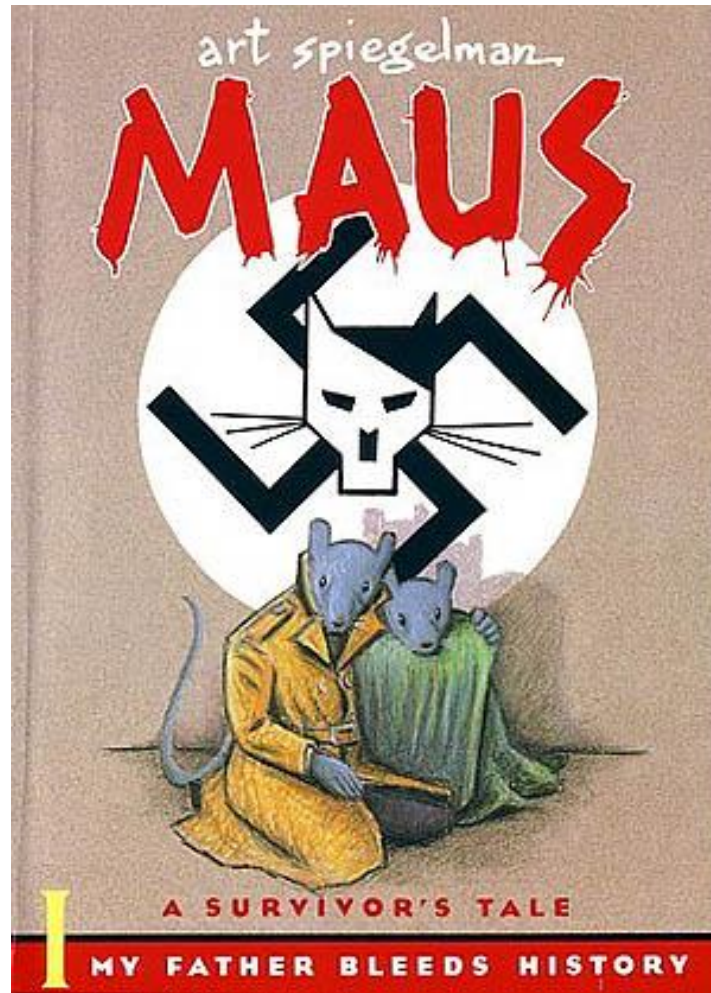


Figure 10 (ipl2)

### *Storylines about Life*

Together with the graphic novel was another trend that lent credibility to comics as an art form. Although heroes had been given human problems to face alongside their super villains, their world remained one of hyperbole and genre fiction. Even non-super powered characters such as Batman or the mystery genre comics depicted the extraordinary. When comic writers finally ventured into the realm of non-fiction and storylines about the everyday, it was part of a turning point where comics to be recognized as a “high” art form (Browne and Fishwick). Particular among these nonfiction works was Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor*, which Browne and Fishwick describe as “fiercely mundane and relentlessly autobiographical” (73). This change brought about other comics with more traditional literary subjects, which helped to ease the transition to a critically accepted art form. Today, there are

college classes examining sequential art as the form continues to garner recognition and approval as art, instead of just entertainment (Weiner).

### New Influences

In the Modern Age, comics have also seen a variety of new influences enabled by technology. Comic book characters began appearing in their own television series and movie adaptations. The familiar characters that had already undergone several continuities on the page now had live action TV shows, one or more animated series, and movies, all keeping similar bits and pieces, but also distinctly separate. For example, in the last fifty years, Batman TV and movie series have included: the live action TV series where he was played by Adam West; the *Super Friends* animated series; the four part movie series in which there is a loose continuity, though Batman is played by three different actors across the movies; the animated movie, *Mask of the Phantasm*, and the subsequent *Batman: the Animated Series*, which ran for four seasons; several additional animated movies, and two series, *Batman Beyond* and *Justice League*, based in the continuity of the DC Animated Universe; the trilogy directed by Christopher Nolan where Batman is played by Christian Bale; a new animated series *The Batman*, with a separate continuity from *Batman: the Animated Series*; *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*, yet another animated series that has no continuity with the other two; several direct to DVD releases affiliated with the DC Animated Universe, but in tenuous continuity with previous series, let alone each other, and the video game series *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City* (IMDb). And these titles are only some highlights of his appearances, each of which bears a slightly different take on the character.

The introduction of these new mediums has made a fascinating impact on the way a character and a comic's universe can be shaped by so many different factors. Again, using the Batman franchise as an example, the comics moved into a television format, but the transference was not one-directional. In 1992, the character Harley Quinn, the Joker's iconic female sidekick, was created for *Batman: The Animated Series*. Due to her popularity, she became a regular character in the series, and eventually

made her way into the comics (Comic Vine). Interestingly, other series have gone one step further in this trend, starting as television series and continuing in comic form, notably titles in the Whedonverse: Buffy season eight, Serenity, Angel, and Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog (Comic Vine).

## Impact of the Internet

Although television bore an undeniable influence on comics, it was not until the internet that sequential art found its new frontier. The most dramatic change being able to publish a comic online brought about was the ability of writers and artists to completely bypass publishers. Anyone with a website could put any content he saw fit out into the internet (Takahashi).

Grown out of MIT's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), the internet became a widespread global infrastructure united under the common TCP/IP protocols by 1990. However, the first online comic is credited to Eric Monster Millikin's *Witches and Stitches*, which he distributed via CompuServe in 1985. He was not alone for long. Today, there are thousands of comics scattering the pages of the internet, though an exact number is difficult to pin down given the multitude of abandoned comics, the ones posted multiple times on different sites, and comics hosted in obscure corners of the internet (Wikipedia).

## Webcomics

Because the original webcomic creators needed to be able to build their own websites, it was unsurprising that the majority of the content was "nerdy, even by cartoonist standards" (Garrity). For years, comics about video games dominated the medium, particularly in the wake of the rampant success of *Penny Arcade*, whose creators currently pull down a six-figure income. However, the means became more accessible to the less technologically inclined as pre-fabricated code began to circulate and comic hosting sites like Comic Genesis and DrunkDuck offered ready to use templates. Although gag-a-day strips based on video games or gamer culture are still rampant, many enduring comics will eventually settle into a character driven overarching plot with interspersed gags that are unrelated or

tangential to the continuity. There are several notable exceptions to this, including *Penny Arcade*, *xkcd*, and *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal*, but other comics, such as *Questionable Content*, are successful with a slice of life focus.

Very few webcomics enjoy the success of *Penny Arcade*, but some few are popular enough to sustain their creators as full-time employment. This demands a high traffic volume, as the profit comes largely from ad revenue, as well as merchandise sales and donations from fans. Additionally, many writers and artists will attend conventions relevant to their work in addition to maintaining a regular weekly updating schedule. Also, in a fascinating turn of events, several webcomics have published hard copies of their online material, which sell in spite of the content being available for free online. In these cases, many webcomic creators will add extra content to their books that does not appear on the website, such as creator commentary, trivia, sketches, or additional strips exclusive to the hard copy. For example, the first volume of the comic *Questionable Content* did not include extra strips, as this comic is plot-based and would not easily accommodate arbitrary additional material, but each strip included commentary from the author, and several older strips were re-drawn to show the dramatic shift in art styles over the years (Jacques).

### Interactivity of the Web

These webcomics were largely the standard affair put in a different place until the advent of Web 2.0. Before, web pages were static, view-only affairs, but because the internet evolved to incorporate media beyond images and text, comics, which have successfully employed both, were opened to new possibilities beyond the physical page. In a web page, comics could be set alongside animation, or even incorporate panels of animation. They could include soundtracks, sound effects, or voiceovers. Although images and language could capture most of a story, the addition of sound and movement added new layers of richness and immersion into the comic's universe.

While the comics began to interface on more levels with their readers, sites became interactive. Not only could comics be published directly from the creators to the readers, but readers could also react directly to the creators. Comments, blogging, forums, and fan works became part of webcomic culture. The relationship between webcomic authors and fans now is both direct and instantaneous. Often, having something to say to the author or the rest of the fan community is only a matter of clicking over to the forums, jumping on the comic's wiki, or leaving a comment on the author's blog.

As these interactive elements were explored, so to were the other possibilities afforded by the new medium. Webcomic creators could call on fellow artists and fans to supply guest comics during a time when they need a break from a regular updating schedule. Collaborations with other artists would be possible regardless of physical locations, and cameos of characters from other comics could be done to promote both comics to new audiences. Webcomics have also, in certain circumstances, employed a more direct form of reader interaction in the form of choose your own adventure story arcs. This was done in the comic *Ctrl+Alt+Del* by asking the readers to email their path choices in by a certain deadline.

One example that has taken the format of a webcomic and tested the boundaries of that medium is the collection on comics on the site *MS Paint Adventures*. These stories exhibit an evolution in reader interaction across the four stories: "Jailbreak," "Bardquest," "Problem Sleuth," and "Homestuck." The original format of these comics, employed in "Jailbreak," "Bardquest," and early "Problem Sleuth" gave readers full autonomy over the plot, taking reader suggestions as "commands" simulating the format of a text based adventure (Hussie). "Jailbreak" and "Bardquest" remained unfinished, as Hussie's strict policy of always illustrating the first response made the story "haphazard" and "rambling," and he found the branching, choose your own adventure paths he had implemented in "Bardquest" to be too much to maintain (Hussie). Over the course of "Problem Sleuth," the first completed story, the form of reader interaction and storytelling changed, in part due to a large influx in the number of readers. He began with picking from the suggestions instead of taking the first, and

toward the end of the story, when suggestions numbered in the thousands, Hussie admits to “cherry-picking,” or in some cases “outright making up” commands to suit the direction in which he wanted to take the story (Hussie). In his newest adventure, “Homestuck,” Hussie took a different approach. The story itself was mostly mapped out ahead of time, but while user input would not change the story in any significant way, it would still be included on occasions for humor or, as Hussie calls them, “tangential effects,” which range from minor deviations to plot tie-ins that even the author had not foreseen at the time of inclusion (Hussie). The fan input for “Homestuck” has been mostly in the form of multimedia content. Music from the series is entirely fan-generated, filling over a dozen albums that can be purchased off of the MS Paint Adventures website. Also, some of the animations in the comic have been collaborative efforts on the parts of several artists and musicians enlisted by Hussie, giving the animations a greater depth of variety in look and sound.

### **Hypertext Fiction**

As defined earlier in this paper, Hypertext fiction is storytelling that employs the use of hyperlinks to add an element of non-linearity. The most basic instance of this is a random button, which will automatically take a reader to a random page in a comic’s archives. This is generally used by gag-a-day comics that can be picked up at any stage and don’t rely on continuity, though even gag-a-day comics will sometimes have running gags, or recurring characters, such as the Hat Guy in *xkcd*. Other comics may have intermittent stories that they pick up and leave off periodically.

Hypertext fiction would be a useful mechanism in these cases because separate modes of navigation could allow readers to browse a particular storyline or a specific character in addition to browsing randomly, or in the order the pages were uploaded. This utility is severely underutilized. Some comic creators will provide links back to relevant points when a subplot has been long dormant, or to link new readers back to pages in a similar thread, but this is a courtesy, not a standard.

Slightly more commonly, a comic may feature a link to an alternate ending of a strip, or extra content for the page that, for whatever reason, did not make the final cut. One comic has this kind of extra content for every strip. *Amazing Super Powers* has a hidden button that links to these extras, which is only visible when the user hovers the mouse over it. This feature is not advertised by the comic itself, and even the sparse references made to it do not reveal the location of the link. Finding the hidden content is like being in on a secret, cementing a bond between readers as a sort of insider status.

The technology at use is not, by any means, overly complicated. It is more of a matter of how an author chooses to incorporate the hypertext elements of the story. Links can be made blatant, or hidden. They could be interwoven in the body of the piece, or set apart. They can create winding, divergent paths throughout the piece, or detour off of a main flow to interesting side notes. As with other mediums, form can be changed to fit the feel of the work, and given the tools at a hypertext fiction writer's disposal, the options are extensive.

In using the internet to conduct our everyday lives, we have become use to information at our fingertips. Any passing interest can be pursued on a whim, and hypertext fiction caters to this mindset. Whether it is travelling organically from subject to subject, or finding a point of interest and being able to drill down to learn more, the exploration factor is tantamount to this technology. Information can be fed to a user in bits, accompanied by pictures, movement, and sound to augment the experience. Solid blocks of text can be daunting to users. For example, Figure 11 breaks up the long strand of continuous text with an amusing little comic I've drawn about penguins who are pirates.



Figure 11

Although a more ideal illustration would have been more strongly related to the text, the little break in heavy reading relaxes and rejuvenates the mind and the eyes. With the growing prevalence of e-readers, this multimedia experience need never be reduced to a print format in order to be enjoyed offline and on the go.

Hypertext fiction and the incorporation of multimedia are showing strong signs of being the next steps in the evolution of the comic. It is suggested by some scholars that "hypertext will survive as an art form only by incorporating graphic, auditory, and cinematic effects and by providing the interactive, collaborative creativity" (Travis). These technologies bring together society's most recent advancements to help further define comics as a literary form. Comics offer a unique combination to the art of storytelling. While they give us the words to describe the detailed, and the metaphysical, they also give us the visual grounding to help make even the most fantastic of worlds truly come alive on the page.

With the addition of animation, sound, and exploration, the process of inviting a reader into the story ceases to be a process and becomes an adventure.

## Chapter Three: Project

To inform the coming pages, please read through my project at:

<http://www.personal.psu.edu/ara5077/>.

### History

The story that I have illustrated for my thesis is one that I've been writing since high school.

Some of the characters in it have been formed, reformed, and recycled in stories since I was in middle school. My artistic abilities were honed almost entirely via drawing my characters over and over during my free time. Figure 12 shows the progression of my drawing abilities from 2005 through 2009, featuring drawings of myself in the first row, and three of the main characters in my comic, Lizzy, Lance, and Phoenix, in the following rows.



Figure 12

Although it may be obvious, I will point out that Lizzy's appearance and personality are most directly based off of my own; however, as an interesting aside, I have found over the years that I relate more to Phoenix, the comic's straight man.

Unfortunately with so many meandering stories, alternate timelines, and contradicting continuities, the characters I'd put so much of my heart into were not a part of anything I felt was understandable by an audience. When I got to college, it was time to change all of that. With the skills I developed in the creative writing classes that lead to my English minor, I was able to create a new incarnation of my characters. My writing has always been character driven, so the story is mostly a process of spinning the main characters into a situation where they're all together and letting conflicts evolve out of their personalities.

In order to pull my love of art and writing together with my Information Sciences and Technology background, I decided to turn the comic I had drawn into a webcomic. Also, in this format, I would be able to share my comic with more people, and people who would not have physical access to my hard copy. Additionally, the ability to seamlessly integrate metadata into my comic works to my advantage. The comic format is not particularly conducive to exposition, at least not in any way that isn't cumbersome and heavy-handed. Hypertext fiction turns out to be the perfect format for my piece, as it allows me to weave in the extensive universe I've built around the story that I've chosen to tell. And it has the added benefit of helping readers of my comic be slightly less confused.

## Overview

### Creating the Comic

In creating the comic, I have a collection of plot points that I want to hit, and I channel the characters' motivations toward those goals. The structure of a comic is not the same as writing a normal story. There are many different levels that need to cooperate in a comic to make it an engaging reading experience. Panels all come together on a page, which much flow smoothly into the following

pages, which form a comprehensive chapter. I have chosen to make my comic focus more heavily on story than humor, but I do like to incorporate something of a punch line on most of the pages.

The artwork is drawn first by hand on loose leaf paper, and then scanned into my computer. After that, I bring the pencil drawings into Adobe Photoshop, in which I am able to ink the pages with clean lines and add typed dialogue. This is also the stage where I am able to make corrections to the original line work, and to add backgrounds and shading.

### **The Use of Metadata**

I add the metadata in places where I want to flesh something out further or to clarify something that has happened. This is my best opportunity to tie in the character histories that are too cumbersome to work into the plot itself in any kind of straight-forward, cohesive manner. Certain details that can inform the actions in the main story, or are interesting, but tangential stories themselves, are the kind of material I focused on incorporating into the hypertext. In addition to helping with characterization, the metadata is a useful tool for world building.

World building is a crucial part of any fantasy story. “In other words, when you create some guidelines about the place in which your story takes place or about the people who inhabit the place in order to maintain consistency within the story and add a feeling of verisimilitude to your work” (Lisle). Lisle, who has written fantasy since 1992 and published multiple other books specifically to help authors create more realistic fantasy worlds, does not overestimate the power of the world building process. For fantasy to hold together, it must possess internal consistency, and it is easier to play by rules that have been determined in advance. The process of defining a world in a fantasy book is generally laid out in detailed exposition that comes in the form of descriptions, actions, and dialogue. However, in a visual media, such as a movie, or comic, it becomes more complicated. Much of the exposition must be done visually, as too much dialogue or narration can quickly weigh down a visual piece. This phenomenon is known colloquially as a “wall of text,” where “a writer not allocating space carefully will end up covering

their panel with a bunch of text and white space. Eventually the reader will realize that they're just looking at plain text," at which point, they might as well have been reading a novel instead of a comic (Wall of Text).

This, in particular, is where the format of hypertext fiction shines. While it does not remove the burden of incorporating exposition in an artful way at the core of the story, it offers an outlet for all of the often unused background work. Normally, a fantasy author could create an entire language and document years of history and racial strife that never makes it into their story for more than a line or two, if at all. With hypertext fiction, those sparse lines could offer a dissident pathway for curious readers into the intricacies of the world surrounding the core story. An author's notes and scribbles, which led to the polished version he chose to present, are morsels that many fans crave. J.R.R. Tolkien's son compiled his father's notes and essays on the world of Middle-earth into a twelve-volume book series with a thirteenth book serving as a comprehensive index of the series (The History of Middle-earth). At the time of writing, author J.K. Rowling is launching the website *Pottermore*, which advertises itself as a "new website from J.K. Rowling that can be enjoyed alongside the Harry Potter books. You can explore the stories like never before and discover exclusive new writing from the author" (The Blair Partnership). While these offer companions to their respective pieces, a presentation in hypertext fiction format could offer an integrated experience between the core works and the metadata, instead of forcing fans to cross mediums for an interactive experience.

## Future Possibilities

### Education

Perhaps the most exciting possibility of this new technology is its potential to influence learning. The exploration aspect in particular promotes curiosity and interaction from what tends to otherwise be the rather passive practice of reading. While, an initial case study yielded low comprehension scores from tenth-grade students who were given a hypertext story to read, the dual purpose of observing the

use of computers in the classroom may have been a distracting factor in this study (Dail). Additionally, a hypertext work, being non-traditional, may require non-traditional comprehension approach. As the medium grows and evolves, it will be up to teachers to help students tackle the meanings wrought from this new form (Patterson). Additionally, for there to be learning potential in the transition of existing works into hypertext formats, care and attention will need to go into the translation. For example, many instances of literature throughout the ages are only truly understood in their historical context, and a branching style of links that inform the history surrounding the work could be very beneficial, but overuse of this feature could easily overwhelm the work itself.

Another academic possibility for this technology would be a new style of citations. As more books are digitized, and others are published only in electronic format, we may soon see a time where every source is an electronic source. If every source had a link, the citation conventions could be set aside in favor of simply including a direct link to the source material. This would be beneficial to the researchers, and the readers, as readers will be able to drill down into the subject they are investigating, and citations will become less cumbersome.

### **Mixing Medias**

The great advantage of hypertext media is the ability to not only pull together clusters of information, but also that that information can be in such diverse forms. In the same way that our technologies are merging into multi-purpose devices, we may soon see an outbreak in multimedia stories. It would be possible to read on our smart phones that play music, stream video, and play games to listen, watch, and play intermittently throughout the story. Many different media could be pulled together by one author to tell an intricately, multifaceted story, or many different authors could come together and frame their works in an interconnected anthology. Instead of having a different continuity for a character in the comic, the television show, the cartoon, the movie, and the game, some or all of

these media could be combined to add onto instead of supplanting one another. We have all of this, and more to look forward to as hypertext fiction matures.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

A long tradition of sequential art has led the comic to the standing that it now holds today: a tenuous grasp on critical acknowledgement. In their transition to the web, comics seem destined to interlock their destiny with the rising mixed media, hypertext fiction. Because the medium of the web and the nature of hypertext fiction allow hitherto unprecedented story structures and media blends, comics seem ideally poised to capitalize on this storytelling technique. To illustrate this, I have put my interests in writing, drawing, and technology to use in creating a project that exemplifies the potential in this potent combination. While the comic itself follows a traditional, linear storyline, I have incorporated links within the page images via image mapping that lead off into branching information such as character back stories and world building details. Although it is yet to be seen if the medium of hypertext fiction is more than a passing fad, with refinement and proper utilization, the form has the potential to reach new forms of immersion and bring together the best qualities of existing media.

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