

# ***A COMIC IS A COMIC IS A COMIC: EXPLORING PROTOTYPES, PARAMETERS, AND (POST)DIGITAL COMICS***

GIORGIO BUSI RIZZI

Ghent University, Belgium

**Giorgio Busi Rizzi** is FWO post-doctoral fellow and adjunct lecturer at Ghent University, teaching the Comics and Graphic Novels course. His current project investigates authorship in post-digital comics; his previous ones analyzed nostalgia and young readers (within the ERC project Children in comics) and experimental digital comics (BOF fellowship). He holds a PhD in Literary and Cultural Studies with joint supervision by the Universities of Bologna and Leuven, focusing on nostalgia in graphic novels. He is interested in comics studies, narratology, digital culture, mediology, and digital humanities.

Orcid ID: 0000-0002-1901-7254

**Corresponding author**

Giorgio Busi Rizzi

Email: giorgio.busirizzi@ugent.be

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## Abstract

The history of comics has seen countless variations, yet its most fundamental elements have long remained relatively consistent: paper, a combination of text and drawn images, panel layouts, the narrative sequence. Digital comics, however, have more conspicuously hybridized the affordances of the medium, reconfiguring its materiality and semiotic space, possibly integrating multimedia elements, hyperlinks, animations, and game-like features.

In response, certain scholars have strengthened the boundaries of print comics to exclude (some) digital instances; yet the issue invariably confronts the field's longstanding resistance to definition and the polarization of theoretical positions around the elusive idea of *comicsness*.

This paper engages with this debate by proposing a framework for identifying a set of parameterized characteristics that define prototypical comics, situating digital comics at the periphery of the medium in reason of differences in reading protocols and the types of agency afforded.

**Keywords:** Digital comics, prototype theory, transmedial narratology, hypermedia, multimedia

## Introduction

The history of comics has been marked since its beginning by continuous formal and technological experimentation. Far from evolving in the teleological sense, comics have continuously metamorphosized. Certain labor configurations (e.g., the studio system) and technological devices (implying changes in the processes, quality, and costs of printing techniques), certain reading practices (alone or communally, distributed over a somewhat regular time or in a single instance) and distribution channels (newsstands, libraries, online) have marked significant shifts in comics production, access and consumption.

Throughout history, shifts in features and affordances have reshaped the visual grammar of comics and their reception. These changes have relied on the extreme flexibility of the medium, capable of accommodating stylistic and narrative innovations while retaining its core conventions relatively stable. However, something has more consistently changed in the last years: the affordances of digital interfaces have increasingly permeated the realm of comics, reigniting a long-standing theoretical question: what, precisely, makes a comic *a comic*?

Despite decades of theorization, there is little consensus on how to define the medium – a resistance to being framed that reflects the diversity of its historical forms and cultural contexts. When extending the reflection to the digital realm, the debate complexifies, as new forms appear blurring the boundaries with animation, videogames, and interactive fiction. Several scholars have addressed this issue by tracing the(ir) borders of the medium, identifying the formal or technological criteria that would distinguish digital comics from print ones. Less have focused on exploring how comics conventions are transformed, extended, or recontextualized in digital environments. I argue that the question is not merely whether digital comics 'belong' to the medium – and my

answer would be yes – but how to conceptualize the shifting relationship between prototypical and peripheral forms within an expanded comics ecology.

Drawing on narratological, semiotic, and sociological theories, this article revisits the ongoing debate concerning the concept and definition of comics, proposing to reframe the discourse by identifying a set of parameterized characteristics that define *prototypical* comics. Those characteristics are the traits most central to the medium's identity, historically and geographically situated and agreed-upon by a community of creators, mediators and consumers. The article will then consider how contemporary digital comics challenge the definitional limits of the medium by reworking its semiotic logic, yet do so while anchoring themselves in the medium's existing socio-cultural conventions and practices.

## Defining comics, again and again and again

The elusive qualities of comics have been widely acknowledged in contemporary scholarship. As Robert Harvey suggests, the proliferation of “unnecessarily complicated definitions” (2006, n.p.) speaks to the difficulty of isolating essential features in a medium that thrives on hybridity and innovation. Moreover, comics resist essentialist formulations because they are historically contingent. Aaron Meskin (2007) argues that the medium's formal oscillation implies that the search for a definition is inherently flawed, inevitably overgeneralizing or excluding legitimate cases. Instead, he advances the possibility of a historicist approach: understanding comics through their institutional and genealogical contexts, looking at social recognition, artistic conventions and cultural practices, rather than intrinsic formal properties. Yet, Dominic Domsch points out of this approach paradoxically “excludes all those who establish a new art form or genre in the first place”, leaving out not only eccentric specimens, but all early comics, for, “[l]ike most art forms, comics gained their name ... only after they already started

to exist" (2021, p. 31). Meskin himself ultimately proposes renouncing any definition, believing that "[w]hat we need is close examination of the medium, not necessary and sufficient conditions" (2007, p. 376).

Moreover, the historically low cultural capital of the form results in critical operations whose first intention, albeit often implicit, is to circumscribe a canon that allows to patrimonialize (certain) comics, claiming quarters of nobility by establishing boundaries and limits. This can still be seen in relatively recent attempts, such as David Kunzle's quite specific classification of the comic strip as "a sequence of separate images with a preponderance of image over text" (1973, p.2) intended to "appear in a mass medium" and to "tell a story that is both moral and topical" (1973, p. 2). While the emphasis on sequentiality and the didactic intent mean to reflect the culture in which nineteenth-century strips circulated, both the idea of a "preponderance of image" and the purported need for stories to be "moral and topical" significantly narrow the understanding of what a comic (strip) is.

Yet, the lack of a definition (albeit implicit) would blur our understanding of comics, with consequences from both a practical standpoint (i.e., establishing a position in a market) and a critical one (discussing its characteristics and configurations). Indeed, comics practitioners and critics have long sought to conceptualize their object of interest. Rodolphe Töpffer, one of the progenitors of the form, defined comics as the "combination of text with image" (as cited in Harvey, 2006, n.p.), with the aim of distinguishing it from purely pictorial or literary works.

While incorporating this first element, successive attempts at discussing comics have rather emphasized the narrative sequence as the essential constituent of the form. In his 1947 pioneering book, Coulton Waugh identifies three elements:

sequential pictures that tell a story or a joke, words incorporated into the images (usually as speech balloons), and continuing characters (p.14). One may notice the narrowness of some definitory elements (narrativity and humor), and that stressing the need for "continuing characters" is clearly instrumental to excluding all material predating Outcault's *Yellow Kid*, thus favoring a US-centric history of the medium.

The two other elements of Waugh's definition better endured the passage of time. Pierre Couperie (1968), in his *History of the Comics Strips*, similarly foregrounds sequentiality and the combination of text and image, although he ascribes the birth of comics to Töpffer. Aside from European pride, this oscillation in attributing the paternity of the medium finds an explanation in its many genealogies, with different national and international evolutionary lines<sup>1</sup> that repeatedly intersect and diverge over time, only to intersect (and diverge) again in contemporary global markets. Couperie also foregrounds the temporality and narrativity of comics against single-frame images (e.g., paintings), resting on the breakdown of the page into panels and their spatial arrangement, which he calls narration by compartmented subjects (1968, pp. 229–252).

A few years later, Will Eisner will again stress comics' narrativity and its spatio-temporal articulation, by succinctly calling them "sequential art" (1985, p. 5) – a definition Scott McCloud builds on and expands in his *Understanding Comics*. McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1993, p. 9). McCloud's work has become a touchstone for the field, especially in US scholarship, emphasizing the sequence and the spatiality of the visual juxtaposition (in contrast to other media, such as cinema, where such juxtaposition is temporal). The central element of McCloud's theory is the act of "closure", the recipients' engagement in participating in the

<sup>1</sup> Another beginning of comics can be traced back to *The Glasgow Looking Glass*: see Grove (2019).

narration by supplying information between panels, in the gutter (1993, pp. 63–67; see also Gardner, 2012).<sup>2</sup> McCloud's evolutionary line can be traced within US scholarship, for example in Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt definition of comics as "a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right or when combined with text" (2005, p. 423). Yet, foregrounding the sequential juxtaposition of narrative pictures entails several criticalities, amongst which, as John Holbo (2012) observes, setting atemporal, somewhat arbitrary boundaries, which paradoxically might encompass works like the Bayeux Tapestry, but exclude single-panel (and, in the case of Hayman and Pratt, abstract) ones (p.4).

While most Anglo-American approaches consider comics' visual system to be primarily governed by a spatial arrangement and sequential logic, Francophone scholars developed a complementary semiotic tradition foregrounding the network effects stemming from the interrelation of images.<sup>3</sup> This can be seen in Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle's (1976) idea of 'tabularity', which stresses the holistic visual functioning of the page; in Benoît Peeters' (1991) discussion of the possible combinations of page layout, and their effect on rhythm and meaning; and in Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre's (1993) approach, grounded in visual semiotics<sup>4</sup>.

The same approach can be found in Thierry Groensteen's (2007, 2013) ambitious reconceptualization of comics as a system of interdependent images characterized by 'iconic solidarity' – a network of visual relations that produce narrative meaning. Groensteen shies away from giving "a complete and analytical definition of comics" (2013, p. 9), which elsewhere he dubs "the impossible definition" (2009, p. 124). He refers instead to the formula proposed

by Ann Miller, positing that comics "produce meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without text" (in Groensteen, 2013, p. 9). Yet, Groensteen's whole work first reads comics by stressing the latter aspect, that is, as "spatio-topical system" or "spatio-topia" (2007, p. 21), based on iconic solidarity, "the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images" (2007, p. 17). For Groensteen, sequence (which he somewhat clumsily refers to as "restricted arthrology" (2007, pp. 103–143) is important, but what matters most is the networked organization of images, deriving meaning from their relationship to others. This foregrounds the plastic and semantic echoes that comics images "braid" with each other, becoming interconnected even when separated; Groensteen is prodigal with neologisms and calls this mechanism "general arthrology" (2007, pp. 144–158).

More linearly, Pascal Lefèvre (2011) approaches comics, though he refers to "graphic narratives" at large (p. 14), as a medium whose combination of visual and verbal channels results in a unique use of the spatio-temporal dimension, organizing story elements through panel composition, drawing style, and page layout. Unlike film, which simulates movement through temporal succession, comics distribute time spatially, inviting readers to reconstruct narrative continuity through visual cues and inferences. This stress on comics' articulation of time through space lays the premises for the main objection to some digital comics being *comics*, as expressed, for example, by Jakob Dittmar. When they embed audio or animations, Dittmar argues, comics "are no longer comics in accordance with the established definition of this class of media, but animated film or multi-media products. They have to be understood as being another medium" (2012, p. 88).

<sup>2</sup> For a critique of the alleged centrality of the role of the gutter (or better, intericonic space), see Baetens (2020).

<sup>3</sup> This, of course, does not mean that the Francophone critical tradition is blind to the importance of sequential reading.

<sup>4</sup> Baetens will update his understanding of comics' semiotics in a monograph dedicated to the graphic novel, co-authored with Hugo Frey (2015).

To dismiss this objection, a different understanding of comics and mediality is needed. Prototype theory offers an alternative to rigid taxonomies in defining *comicsness* (Wilde, 2015), organizing categories around core features rather than necessary conditions; diverging cases occupy a fuzzier periphery, while still belonging to the overall category. Yet, what would these features be? Pascal Lefèvre and Charles Dierick recur to a very broad prototypical definition delimiting the borders rather than the core of the category, according to which comics are “the juxtaposition of fixed (mostly drawn) pictures on a support as a communicative act” (1998, p. 11). This leaves the door open to non-drawn, non-printed, and non-narrative comics, accounting for the hybrid, heterogeneous nature of the medium; but it tells very little about what *comicsness* is.

Another definition based on prototype theory is Domsch's (2021), which posits sequentiality as the only attribute both necessary and sufficient for an artifact to *work like* a comic, grounding comics meaning-making on the idea of closure. He defines comics as “at least two visual depictions that are understood by the recipient to represent elements from the same (story)world, albeit at different points in time” (2021, p. 16). While this definition is itself quite broad, not only it excludes (again) single-panel cartoons, but it easily dismisses comics experimenting with low narrativity. For example, this would disqualify works such as the short series *Intanto, Altrove [Meanwhile, Elsewhere]* published online by Italian comics author Ratigher (mostly in 2006, although the last installment appear in 2016), which displays a succession of purportedly disjointed panels, each portraying heterogeneous events happening at the same time, yet in different places and to unrelated characters (see Fig. 1).

Despite the difficulty in finding a satisfactory definition, several recurring themes emerge. First, multimodality (the combination of text and images) sits at the core of the medium's features. Second, sequence and panel breakout recur, though

scholars differ on whether they are essential, prototypical, or optional features. Third, changes in definitions reflect both differences in the formal/historical understanding of comics and epistemological lines within the humanities.

### ***Je est un autre*: digital mediation and comics**

Given the uncertainty over defining comics, it is hardly surprising that several scholars see digital comics – or better yet, *some kinds* of digital comics – as a different medium altogether (Groensteen, 2013; Dittmar, 2012, p.88). This reflects the weight of print as the normative support for comics. In fact, most positions include within the realm of *comics* the digital instances that reproduce the staticity, grid layout, and the multimodality of print – we might call it ‘restricted multimodality’ –, based on the coexistence of images and text.

I would rather follow Wilde's argument, alone (2015) and together with Jan-Noël Thon (2016), that digital comics represent not a rupture, but a rearticulation of comics' mediality. The latter encompasses three interrelated dimensions: communicative-semiotic, material-technological, and conventional-institutional. The communicative-semiotic dimension concerns comics' visual and verbal elements; the material-technological one regards the affordances of supports and interfaces; and the conventional-institutional one is linked to the shared perception(s) that make comics recognizable as such. The digital reconfigures all three, but to variable degrees, which I argue still allows to inscribe digital comics within (a broader idea of) *comicsness*.

The material dimension undergoes the most visible transformation, as the print support gives way to the (apparent) dematerialization and potential interconnection of the digital mediation. This results in novel production, distribution and consumption practices: digital creation with drawing software and tablets (and, more recently, AI models), impacting the techniques and gestures implied in drawing, retouching,

0° 15° 30° 45° 60° 75° 90° 105° 120° 135° 150° 165° 180° +11h +10h

# INTANTO ALTROVE

Il primo fumetto in cui accade tutto nel medesimo istante - di Ratigher - Fratelli del Cielo



Figure 1 *Intanto, Altrove* (©Ratigher, 2006)

coloring, and reusing existing images, making these practices faster and unprecedentedly easy (though standardizing the results); digital distribution, linked to online platforms mediating comics consumption by hosting and selling them, allowing to subsidize the artists, coalescing fan communities, and so on;<sup>5</sup> and digital consumption through different devices and screens.

The communicative-semiotic dimension follows from the latter. As different supports and interfaces indeed imply different types of vision, reading practices, and haptic affordances (Boudissa, 2010; Bonaccorsi, 2020). Jayms Nichols similarly discusses the new spatial constraints introduced by the screen(s), as size becomes fluid, reading progression follows new paths, and the codex page becomes a surface to scroll, zoom, or rotate. This entails a reconfiguration of the “raster of reading” (Nichols, 2015, p. 2), the movement of the eye across the page, guided by new “meta-rastic indices”, visual cues embedded in the interface’s design that instruct recipients<sup>6</sup> how to navigate them (2015, pp. 2–7).

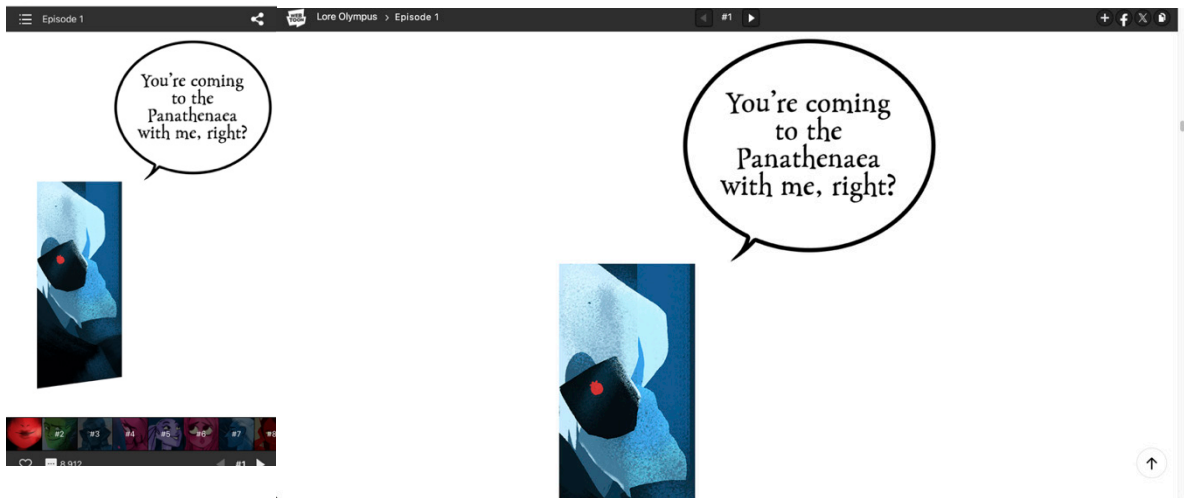
Narrative progression in print comics is anchored in the long-consolidated reading protocols dictated by spatiality of the pages, both as a constraint and as a space of freedom, for recipients, to scan, skip, or anticipate elements across panels. Conversely, digital formats can adopt multidirectional structures, challenging traditional closure and the vectorialization of the gaze, for example by adopting non-linear sequences (see nonetheless Del Rey Cabero [2021], who extensively shows how these affordances are not exclusive to digital objects). This shift is driven by what McCloud called the “infinite canvas” principle (2000, pp. 222–223), the freedom from the material constraints of paper that allows for the potentially endless extension in all directions of digital

comics’ layouts and panels. Despite the suggestive charm of McCloud’s formula, most often the balance between openness and orientation proves crucial: too much of the first might confuse or annoy recipients. Consequently, most digital comics have preferred avoiding polycentrism, preserving unidirectionality (Tirino, 2018, pp. 84–85) and the screen(s) as the maximum extension of single panels. This is exemplified by the scroll format popularized (and epitomized) by Webtoon, whose layout only exceeds the limit of the screen by disclosing, or unfolding, new panels vertically. Nonetheless, the new affordances require creators to make a series of complex choices: to which screen should they weigh the legibility and number of details of their comics? Should they follow the horizontal progression naturalized by the reading protocols of the codex, or the vertical scroll, adopted by websites and digital apps? While the PC screen format had originally been established as the standard (what we might call the ‘implied screen’), it has long been replaced by the smartphone screen as the option of choice (see Figg. 2 and 3).

A most significant change, from a semiotic point of view, concerns the potential temporalization of reading. Thierry Groensteen opposes “the indefinite, abstract time of comics narration” to “the concrete, measurable time of motion and sound” (2013, p. 70). Philippe Marion (1997) respectively calls the two poles *heterochrony* – where reception time is not part of the enunciative strategy, i.e., receivers control the pace of their experience – and *homochrony* – where the enunciation is designed to last for a determinate amount of time. As said though, digital comics may include multimedia and interactive elements dictating the reception pace, which brings us back to Dittmar’s argument that these instances would be “no longer comics” (2012, p. 88). In order to challenge this

5 For a periodization of the entanglement between the digital and comics, see Busi Rizzi, 2023a; 2025. Wershler, Sinervo and Tien’s chapter is an excellent overview of digital comics’ distribution structures (2020, p. 257–263).

6 I will adopt the term “reception” and “recipient” to encompass the diverse actions and roles potentially played by the audience of digital comics, alternating between readers, users, and players.



**Figures 2 & 3** The same panel from the *Lore Olympus Episode 1* on Webtoon, read from a smartphone (left) and PC screen (right) (© Rachel Smythe, 2018). While blank spaces are by design part of the panel balance, the vertical orientation makes them less redundant on a mobile screen

assertion, it will be necessary to navigate the different types of digital comics, which I will do first by surveying existing categorizations; then, to come back to the third element encompassed by the idea of mediality, that is, the conventional-institutional dimension; and eventually, to find a definition flexible enough to resist this objection.

### Understanding digital comics: from formal taxonomies to the conventional-institutional dimension of mediality

It is symptomatic of the difficulty in defining comics that, when confronting digital ones, most scholars refrain from formulating a definition all together, rather positing implicit or explicit taxonomies according to their features.<sup>7</sup>

Some scholars, however, do engage with the definitory enterprise. Jennifer Aggleton (2018) presents a “working definition” (p.393) establishing several core conditions. Some concern digital comics’ visual dimensions: they are published digitally and composed of a single image or a series of “interdependent” images (interestingly, this gives centrality to Groensteen’s idea of “iconic solidarity”, rather than sequentality); they make use of “frames” (that is, panels), “iconic symbols”, like speech balloons and motion lines, and “handwritten style lettering” (pp. 394-400). Some are functional features: Aggleton mentions “narrative rhythm” (although she rather seems to refer to breakdown and layout); “reader agency” (that is, heterochrony); and semi-guided reading pathways, “in which the reader has autonomy over the time they spend reading any particular aspect of the item, and some agency over the order in which they read the item” (pp. 401-03).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey Kirchoff’s distinction between three main categories: remediated comics, repurposing the logics of print comics for digital supports; ergodic-hypercomics, requiring nontrivial recipients’ interaction to navigate; and multimedia comics, combining text, image, animation, and sound (2013). Wilde operates a different tripartition, between webcomics, created for online distribution; eComics, delivered via platforms and reading technologies (such as *Comixology* and its guided view); and digitized comics, i.e., scanned or archived print works (2015, p. 2).

Finally, Aggleton mentions “sociocultural features” (p. 404), summarized in Hague (2014) succinct statement that “a comic is what is produced or consumed as a comic” (p. 27).

Daniel Merlin Goodbrey identifies seven key characteristics of the comics’ form (2017), with the ultimate aim of discussing a specific subcategory of digital comics that he calls “game comics”: “space as time”; the “simultaneous juxtaposition of images” (that is, sequentiality); “closure between images”; “spatial networks”; “reader control of pacing”; “tabloid images” (a term that he use to refer both to the artists’ idiosyncratic styles and to comics’ narrativity); and “word and image blending” (pp. 45– 58). He also advances a taxonomy of digital comics based on format and user interaction, focusing on the three subtypes that he respectively calls hypercomics (branching, multicursal narratives), game comics (which integrate gameplay mechanics), and audible comics (which incorpor sound) (pp. 87–160).

Goodbrey’s framework (and his accompanying practice as a comics creator) tries extending the traditional understanding of comics toward interactive and ludic domains, while maintaining the defining principle that recipients retain control over pace and navigation, which functions as a conceptual boundary. In this perspective, changes in materiality don’t matter, as long as key semiotic affordances are preserved.

However, as anticipated, Wilde and Thon (2016) argued that the identity of comics as a medium depends less on their materiality and affordances than on cultural recognition and institutional framing – the third dimension of mediality, that they call “conventional-institutional” (p. 233). Comics are “conventionally perceived as [a] distinct [medium]” (p. 234) first and foremost in reason of social and institutional consensus. In this perspective, digital comics may constitute a separate medium in a technological and semiotic sense, but they stay within the realm of comics in virtue of the “rhetorical effects” emerging from the cultural discourse around them

(p. 9). Thon and Wilde’s argue that comics’ identity is a “social fact” (2016, p. 234) dependent on cultural conventions and to the practices shaping their production, circulation, and reception. Considering the three distinct dimensions of comics’ mediality thus implies rethinking comicsness as “a historically contingent and evolving set of reading protocols” (Witek, 2009, p. 149) and affordances, a discourse embedded within concrete historical conditions, giving shapes to the medium as a cultural institution (Gordon, 2020, p. 23).

I contend, nonetheless, that this sociological definition, rather than an endpoint, can serve as a platform for rethinking the idea of defining comics by recognizing certain constants both across the print/digital division and within the two domains, following Meskin’s appeal to ground our understanding of comics. Let us consider Holbo’s (2012) perspective, which opposes, yet complements, in a way, Meskin’s critique of comics’ definitions. Holbo distinguishes between *comics as a genus* (a medium characterized by formal properties, which allows for formal definitions) and *comics as a species* (a historically specific tradition, which calls for historical reconstructions) (pp. 4-5). In this view, both perspectives are necessary: a purely formal definition risks sliding into universalism, while a purely historicist one fails to account for the medium’s cross-cultural adaptability (and for its potential future configurations).

## Rethinking digital comics 1: agency

I want thus to propose a flexible definition of print and (subsequently) digital comics, resting on historical positioning and socio-cultural consensus. I contend that a way to overcome the definitional conundrum is to combine the idea of a (situated) prototypicality – at a given time, in a given context – with various possible combinations of comics affordances, seen as parameters of comicness. A work occupies the core of the medium when most parameters manifest clearly; and it otherwise sits at its fuzzy peripheral spaces, bordering on other media.

However, before discussing specific configurations, I contend that the key differences when comparing digital comics to print ones can be linked to two main mechanisms: recipient agency and reading protocols.

Building on Marie-Laure Ryan's (2006, 2011) and Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman's (2003) work, I have advanced a typology that suggests that comics reception (through all material supports) mobilizes four macro-types of recipient agency: material, narrative, interpretive, and social.

Material agency arises from the physical operations and gestures comics recipients are elicited (and choose) to perform. It emerges from the materiality and design of the supports, platforms, and interfaces, and the affordances they configure. In print comics, this mostly entails the act of turning the pages to let the narrative progress, or flipping them back and forth to braid distant visual elements following plastic and semantic echoes (Groensteen, 2007) or weave narrative threads (Postema, 2013). In digital comics, material agency concerns how gestures like tapping, clicking, zooming, and scrolling mediate access to narrative space (Nichols, 2015; Crucifix and Dozo, 2018). As in print comics, this may just involve advancing (by turning the page or clicking/tapping to move to a new panel or have it appear), or it can intersect with interpretive and narrative agency. This depends on the cognitive demands and semantic charge of the required gestures, that is, to the extent to which these physical actions are intertwined with narrative progression and interpretation, and the possibility of being imbued with meaning and having an impact on the plot's unfolding; on whether recipients control the story pace (since, when the pace is dictated by the text, material agency is minimized); and on whether the gestures required are naturalized, as they might range from everyday movements (such as clicking an arrow) to specific, more demanding actions (such as finding hidden hyperlinks).

A good example of how digital comics can creatively leverage these mechanisms is Exaheva's *Still Heroes* (2022). The story introduces the protagonist, Emeline, as a member of a superhero team that quickly disbands; from that point on, the narrative shifts away from genre conventions toward an exploration of Emeline's intimate quest for purpose. Since its incipit, the comic elicits material agency, requiring recipients to perform apparently trivial gestures: the story cannot progress unless they either click on arrows to go to the next panel, or interact with some diegetic elements on behalf of the protagonist. However, as the story unfolds, material agency gradually becomes semantically charged, intertwining with narrative and interpretive agency (Busi Rizzi, 2026). Actions that initially appeared to be mere kinesthetic routines gradually transform into expressive cues laden with semantic charge, mirroring and amplifying the protagonist's affective state, an approach that recalls Mountain Studio's *Florence* (2018) (Busi Rizzi, 2023b).

Narrative agency refers to the degree to which active choices by the recipients impact the story's unfolding (see Busi Rizzi, 2025 and 2026, for a longer discussion of this category). Prototypical comics, while encouraging material and interpretive agency by inviting a consistent co-construction of meaning, elicit little narrative agency, rarely adopting strategies of active intervention on the plot through readerly choices – though, as Kat Lombard-Cook shows in her analysis of *Meanwhile* (2014), even minimal interactivity can radically restructure narrative logic. However, while nothing prevents the adoption of the CYOA (“choose your own adventure”) structure – an example is Jason Shiga's *Meanwhile* (both a print book, issued in 2010, and a mobile app, created in 2011) – it is not a prototypical feature for neither print, nor digital comics.

Interpretive agency describes the cognitive and hermeneutic labor undertaken by recipients, affecting both the narrative and visual level of comics. This encompasses a series of different activities: first, it concerns linear reading, and the possible

interpretive doubts and tensions it establishes. Second, it has to do with the activation of a repertoire of semiotic, intertextual, and real-life references to process three kinds of gaps: narrative ones (ellipses concerning events not explicitly presented, but in need of being inferred); cognitive ones, particularly between panels, that require mental supplementation and projection (closure) to achieve narrative continuity; and visual ones, variations in iconicity – detail, deformation, and abstraction – that recipients must reintegrate for full understanding. Third, it substantiates the act of reading the holistic, tabular effect of a (double) page and braiding/weaving, putting together the interplay of plastic, semantic and narrative echoes to draw connections between non-successive panels. Interpretive agency interlaces with material one when considering the perception and overview allowed to comics' recipients in digital works – that is, whether they can see the whole scene, zoom in and out, and/or access a map or structure of the narrative. Indeed,

the design of digital comics may allow seamlessly moving between global and local perspectives, or conversely, constrain recipients to a sequential reveal of isolated panels.

A representative example of the intertwining of different types of interpretive agency is the webcomic *L'immeuble* (*The Building*, 2019) by Vidu (Victoire Dulon), a combinatorial, navigable narrative, painting a collective story through the interlacing of multiple micronarratives set in the same building. As the opening webpage announces, the story covers a series of events unfolding through “10 minutes, 15 stories, 23 rooms,” which recipients will have to patch together, understanding their causality. After an introduction narrated by the building itself (a narrative device which will reappear in the multiple epilogues), the screen displays one panel at a time (usually, the section view of one of the rooms), while a superimposed interface offers two distinct modes of navigation, spatial and



Figure 4 Screenshot of a scene from *L'immeuble* (© Vidu, 2019)

temporal: recipients can move between rooms by clicking directional arrows that follow the layout of the building, or they can navigate the story chronologically by selecting each minute through the story's brief temporal span. A semi-transparent map positioned in the lower left corner helps recipients orient within the building (see Fig.4). Therefore, not only the webcomic's design encourages a hermeneutic reading aimed at putting together its many scattered clues (as in the tradition of mystery fiction), but it both constrains and assists the recipients' interpretive agency by always situating them explicitly in the space-time.

Finally, social agency concerns all social behaviors and practices enacted by recipients in relation to comics, for example, through participation and dialogue within fan communities – speculating, commenting, sharing interpretations, “shipping” characters and, crucially, rewriting (e.g., through fanfiction or fanart). While this intense fan participation has characterized comics all along their history, the ubiquitous digital mediation that I have linked elsewhere to the “postdigital condition” (Busi Rizzi, 2024, 2025) has intensified such practices, more easily leading to hybrid forms of authorship – I have addressed the question elsewhere through the idea of ‘networked authorship’ (Busi Rizzi, 2024). Indeed, the digital environment enables extensive forms of social agency concerning both digital and print comics, allowing recipients to download, modify, and redistribute content – including liking, reposting, and commenting on forum and social media (Antonini et al., 2020) – offering the fantext unprecedented visibility.

## Rethinking digital comics 2: reading protocols

I have argued elsewhere (Busi Rizzi, 2023a, 2026; Busi Rizzi and Di Paola, 2023) that reading protocols – and the different kinds of agency they elicit – are a particularly effective principle to categorize digital comics. Following this premise, I suggest we can identify three categories of digital comics: homothetic, linked, and expanded.

*Homothetic* digital comics are those that reproduce the visual and structural features of print comics with minimal modification. The category includes digitized scans and skeuomorphic comics, keeping the page (or better, the *planche*) as an ordering unit, maintaining the staticity, panel-grid architecture and sequentiality of print (Priego and Wilkins, 2018). Clicking or swapping to the next page remediates the page-turning gesture that characterizes codex reading (Nichols, 2015), which keeps material agency analogous to reading print comics. In these cases, the digital support serves primarily as a carrier substrate, and narrative and interpretive agency remain homologous to traditional reading. What changes most significantly is social agency, hindering or reframing some practices (e.g., one cannot borrow a digital comic acquired legally, although they can exchange a pirate copy of it). Homothetic comics thus sit quite close to the prototypical core of comics, demonstrating how changes in technology do not imply a discontinuity per se. Yet, even these small shifts in interface introduce subtle renegotiations of spatial awareness and pacing, as screens (which may be quite diverse in size, design, and affordances – particularly in regards to haptics) not only delimit what can be seen at once, but *how* it is seen, encouraging different modulations of image composition, especially concerning the granularity of details (Boudissa, 2010; Bonaccorsi, 2020).

*Linked* digital comics are based on the progressive unfolding of panels scrolling or panel delivery (that is, the appearance of new panels at a click/tap of the recipients).

Scrolling comics, epitomized by Webtoons, employ a single continuous image plane navigated through recipient-controlled movement. The page is replaced by the embedding of panels within a vertical or horizontal axis, which foregrounds the sequence, often suggesting a less fragmented rhythm, recalling that of moving media. This effect – in itself, narrative-oriented – can be made particularly salient: an example is *These Memories Won't Last* by Sutou (2015), a

biofiction where the representation of the author's grandfather's memories intersperse to him being hospitalized in a nursing home because of Alzheimer's disease. Gradually, the panels that have already been read fade away, making it impossible to go back through the story, semantically tying the frustration of this one-sided spatial progression to the fading memory of the elderly protagonist. Another example is *Phallaina* by Marietta Ren (2016), a long horizontal scroll that recounts the story of a young girl suffering from whale-themed hallucinations. The aquatic theme and visual motifs of the story are evoked by the reading progression, which dissolves the inter-iconic spaces, letting each scene fade into the next, thus configuring a watery experience of (narrative) immersion and fluidity.

Panel-delivery comics are based on discrete panels that appear one at a time, in response to clicks or taps. This format emphasizes temporality and control, and ideally suits branching hypertextual structures as well as the remediation of cinematic transitions. Digital comics based on panel delivery comprise three different manifestations. The first is Balak's idea of *turbomédià*, centered on the appearance mechanism (Vidu's *L'immeuble* belongs to this category); the second is the guided view reading mode, which enhances the legibility on small screens by zooming on single (sections of) panels; the third are comics hosted on social media platforms, where the unity is the post, each containing a set of single panels that recipients reveal through clicking/tapping. Social media platforms prototypically limit formats and affordances, encouraging isolated panels (easier to read on small screens) and not allowing multimedia elements.

The key component for the whole category is thus the interplay of material and interpretive agency, augmenting the fragmentation and uncertainty of comics' narrative progression. The unfolding mechanisms lend themselves well to remediate protocols from adjacent media. While narrativity is usually high, narrative agency and social agency vary

significantly (the latter particularly in function of whether comics are hosted on social media).

*Expanded* digital comics encompass works that integrate multimedia, animation, sound, or a game-like playability. This category rests on what I have respectively called 'explorable' and 'enhanced' panels. The first subtype transforms the space within panels into a navigable environment, as in VR comics or playable formats that invite recipients to move through diegetic space. Material agency is solicited in peculiar ways, as can be seen in *XKCD's* special episodes *Gravity* (2022) or *Escape Speed* (2023): in both cases, we're piloting a rocket to traverse the surface of the single-panel format that characterizes the webcomic. The second subtype employs parallax effects, animations, audio elements or AR (Augmented Reality) features, as in the case of Andre Bergs' *Protopia* (2017) or Rob Shields' *Neon Wasteland* (2019). As one can imagine, objects in this category occupy the fuzziest zones of comics mediality, blurring the distinctions with hypertexts, games, and animation. An example is *To Be Continued* by Lorenzo Ghetti and Carlo Trimarchi (2014-17), which also combines, through its various instalments, a wide array of the affordances pertaining to my second category for an analysis of Ghetti and Trimarchi's webcomic, (see Busi Rizzi and Di Paola, 2023).

### **Moving borders: looking for the "impossible definition" of (digital) comics**

In order to understand the stakes and specific of this fuzziness, I believe we need a "working definition" (Aggleton, 2018, p. 2) of (digital) comics, as the best way to address the (dis)continuities amongst diverse comics, between print and digital comics, and between comics and different medial objects. Rather than discarding the definitory enterprise altogether, I hence propose rethinking it as a heuristic, treating it as provisional and context-bound, and grounding it in a socio-cultural understanding of comics as what communities create,

distribute, and read as comics. From this point of view, I will focus on how comics manifest currently, in the first half of the twenty-first century, considering the main sites of comics production and consumption (US, Europe, Japan, Korea, Hispanophone South America).

As said, I contend that, to make sense of comics' heterogeneity, the idea of prototypicality should be reconsidered. While it is difficult to set clear boundaries delimiting where comics ends, it is way simpler to think of examples that would unequivocally be read as comics: they would be our prototypes. However, to avoid the shortcomings originating from closed definitions, my proposal is to view the position within this conceptual space, from the center to the periphery of comicsness, as depending on a set of parameters. Works exhibiting most of these traits at high intensity would occupy the core of comicsness; yet parameters can vary in salience, and even be absent, in a specific configuration (one particular comic), as long as the latter remains overall recognizable as a comic – that is, as long as communities continue labeling it as such.

I propose to consider as key parameters of prototypical comicsness the interplay of written words and drawn images (multimodality); narrativity, first articulated through closure between sequential panels; the spatialization of temporality; layouts resting on the panel/grid framing; the establishment of cognitive networks among panels (tabularity and arthrology); the recipient's freedom of pace and direction of comics' traversal (which I propose to call "browsability"); seriality; a paper support, implying staticity; heterochrony; and hand-drawn, semi-referential images, whose iconicity is modulated through varying degrees of selection and distortion of details.

Firstly, comics are a multimodal medium, in which text and (usually drawn) images coexist, acting synergically in generating meaning – or rather, originating a series of productive

tensions.<sup>8</sup> The visual-verbal interdependence gives comics their distinctive semiotic texture, since the two enunciative channels can result in various effects, both aligning and diverging. Considering multimodality as a parameter (and not a necessary condition) allows for comprising wordless comics within the scope of comics, solving one of the problems originating from closed definitions. The same goes for the idea that narrativity in comics fundamentally rests on the closure established by recipients between juxtaposed sequential panels: positing it as a parameter means acknowledging its centrality, while welcoming less prototypical cases: non-narrative or low-narrative comics (such as Martin Vaughn-James's *The Cage*, 1975), comics based on different kinds of sequences (i.e., only implying navigation *within* panels), and, notably, single-panel comics. The minimal unit of this sequential progression is indeed the panel, isolating a cognitive frame – a moment or a series of moments in time (Gianni De Luca's *Amleto* [1976] offers great examples of how polychrony can be modulated inside single panels). The page layout provides an organizing frame: the grid structures reading order, rhythm, and emphasis; deviations (overlapping frames, borderless panels, splash pages or double) create expressive tensions. Cognitive networks are established through tabularity and, more broadly, by connecting distant panels "*in praesentia*" (Groensteen, 2007, p. 18) through braiding and weaving. This imbues comics' pages with a certain 'browsability', prompting recipients to look for narrative and visual details throughout comics pages.

From a material point of view, despite the success of the graphic novel format, seriality remains the core trait of comics production and consumption. Comics continue to thrive through serial release in magazines, albums, and digital instalments. Graphic novels themselves are often collections of previously serialized content, or serve as instalments within larger series. Further, prototypical comics are characterized

8 Hatfield felicitously called comics an "art of tensions", identifying four fundamental cases: written vs pictorial code; single image vs image-in-series; sequence vs surface of the page; and reading as an experience vs the text as a material object (2005, p. 32).

by static images on a paper support. Unlike cinematic motion, which unfolds in time, printed pages display multiple narrative moments simultaneously across their surface, shaping the medium's narrative logic, which rests on the spatialization of temporality. Since this logic rests on heterochrony, prototypically comics leave recipients the control of the pace and direction of reading, allowing them to pause, skip, reread, and so on. Finally, comics' images are prototypically hand-drawn and iconic. The hand-drawn trace anchors the work's style in the idiosyncratic presence of its author, reinforcing the aesthetic of individuality that distinguishes comics from mechanically reproduced media (see Marion's idea of graphication [2025]). Iconicity derives from it, relying on mechanisms of selection and distortion of details, but also on a balance

between visual metaphors and referentiality (e.g., anthropomorphic animals in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*). However, less prototypical comics might systematically incorporate photographs (e.g., Guibert and Lefèvre's *The Photographer* [2003]) or pre-made images, as in the case of Ryan North's *Dinosaur Comics* webcomic (2003-), where all instalments are made of six-panel strips, only witty, and absurd dialogues (see Fig. 5).

In light of these parameters, digital comics (and particularly what I have called expanded digital comics) emerge as less-prototypical or non-prototypical cases, scattered in a quite heterogeneous periphery of the medium, transposing it into a new material and technological environment and only retaining part of its core semiotic logic, displaying instead instances



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Figure 5 A recent instalment of *Dinosaur Comics* (©Ryan North, 2025)

of hybridization, remediation, and convergence with neighboring forms such as animation, hypertext, or videogames. The affordances allowed by the digital materiality should be seen, again, as parametrized: in order for digital comics to be socially recognized as comics, they must show a combination of these parameters that keeps a sufficient structural proximity to the central constellation of comicsness.

Firstly, the digital support replaces the fixity of the page with the fluidity of the screen(s). As the page format dissolves into the interface, its boundaries give way to potentially infinite directions to traverse. Panels may be connected through scrolling, hyperlinks or animations, originating what elsewhere I suggested to call “virtual arthrology” (Busi Rizzi & Di Paola, 2023, p. 37), which implies a reconfiguration and redistribution of interpretive and material agency: while the printed page affords overview and anticipation, pause and reverse, only one or few panels may be visible within the screen area, and hyperlinks and multimedia elements may hinder or prevent moving freely through the comic. Indeed, the multimodality of print may be supplied by a further multimodality, integrating animations or audio elements – which again, when conceived as a parameter, does not suffice to detach digital works from the realms of comics. Relatedly, the heterochrony of print comics may be replaced by a circumscribed homochrony, introducing a dual temporality, partly spatial and partly chronological.<sup>9</sup> Where should the boundary be set – where does an animation start and a comic incorporating local animations end? While the answer is ultimately subjective – or rather, dependent on the consensus of a community – I firmly contend that, from a parametered perspective, there are no reasons why the presence of one fuzzy parameter should constitute an insurmountable obstacle to comicsness. Finally, the mode of engagement in digital comics often shifts from browsability to explorability,

since the affordances of explorable digital comics may invite a different engagement with visual and diegetic spaces.

## Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have argued that the problem of defining comics (and by extension digital comics) must be approached through a flexible, context-sensitive framework.

By surveying a broad range of theoretical positions, from semiotic to prototype-based and sociological perspectives, I have tried to show how comicsness emerges from a constellation of interrelated parameters rather than from any single necessary condition. Digital comics, in this view, although resting on reading protocols made possible by digital technology, do not represent a rupture, but rather a reconfiguration of the medium’s affordances, and a redistribution of the types of recipients’ agency (material, narrative, interpretive, and social) invited and allowed by comics’ meaning-making.

The framework I have proposed, centered on a parameterized prototypicality, allows for a rethinking of the internal and external boundaries of the medium. Digital comics would thus be situated in one of the peripheries that surround the core of comicsness. Specific works that combine several non-prototypical affordances constitute fuzzier examples that should be discussed case by case (Busi Rizzi, 2025). In this sense, digital forms compel us to rethink comics’ definition dynamically, as an evolving ecology of practices, technologies, and interpretations. The “impossible definition” that Groensteen posited may, after all, become possible, if we formulate it as parameterized, historically contingent, and relational: and this opens to possible future developments of digital and print comics, which may, once again, test and stretch our assumptions on what the medium does.

<sup>9</sup> Yet again, the animations within an otherwise prototypically static surface necessarily obliterate heterochrony? *Protanopia* by Andre Bergs (2017) provides a telling example of the opposite case, leveraging built-in gyroscopes to trigger little movements within each panel as recipients tilt their device.

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