

Augmented reality – the future of comics

Science, Computer Science



The rise of mobile technology with camera integration has given way to a new type of communication and understanding of the world, Augmented Reality (AR). AR is defined as “ a technology that superimposes a computer-generated image on a user’s view of the real world, thus providing a composite view.” Gaining popularity with apps such as Snapchat, it is now integral to our everyday lives with many people using it on Facebook, Pokemon Go, SpotCrime, Spotify and in the near future, even Google Maps. There is a possibility that the future of comics may lie within the realms of Augmented Reality. This technology has the capability of marrying the reading experience of both digital and printed comics, allowing for the convergence between the mediums. Essentially letting readers not only read a comic from panel to panel but also allowing for panels to be read above, below and even within the narrative of other panels. Of course, there have been printed comics that have broken traditional panel structure, and have used panels within panels to convey different narratives (notably Maus, mentioned earlier). However, the reader is still reading the comic within the printed page left to right, and the panel can only ever take up the amount of space designated to it on said page. AR allows creators to break this convention because they would be able to give a panel the full width of a phone screen within the augmented reality layer. Therefore allowing readers to access another narrative structure that has been unavailable with printed comics.

A pre-AR example of using a hidden narrative layer in a traditional comic book is Warren Ellis’ SVK. SVK is a comic book with layers on top of the printed comic written (and drawn) in invisible ink. These layers are only

viewable to the reader through a special UV light that is provided with the comic when it is purchased. Interestingly, what Ellis' achieves through this method is a sense of double closure. The first being when the reader reads the initial printed page, understanding the subtleties and narrative of the story, and a second closure occurs when the reader accesses the hidden UV layer and recontextualizes what they had read previously into their new understanding of the story. This is a similar technique to how Augmented Reality has been used within comics, "Modern Polaxis" by Stuart Campbell (Sutu) uses this technology to create an immersive user experience. By keeping the traditional comic book structure, Sutu enhances the story's narrative through a thoughtful and measured use of AR. When a reader buys "Modern Polaxis" they are provided with the physical printed comic book as well as a link to download the app to access the hidden Augmented Reality layers.

The story of "Modern Polaxis" follows a paranoid time traveller who believes that our reality is a projection from another astral plane, and he needs to find the projectionist. The comic that the reader is presented with is Polaxis' personal notebook filled with all of his recordings from his adventures.

However, because of his paranoia, he keeps all of his most secret information in an augmented reality layer. What's interesting about the way that AR is used in Modern Polaxis is that it gives the reader the same sense of closure as a traditional print comic. This is done by laying out the printed pages in full panel colour and then having the hidden AR layer encompassing that same space. On certain pages, the AR layer's function is as simple as changing the narrative by crossing out the information the reader has just

read; essentially marking it as a delusion of the reader's imagination, therefore, making the reader mark the information as false and discard it. Essentially, Sutu has managed to create an act of closure within the AR layer, without a traditional gridding system seemingly existing. This is different to what Ellis does in SVK as it is as more naturally in Polaxis, due to the fact that the augmented information and images are 'floating' above the printed ones, therefore, subverting the readers understanding of the information, rather than solely adding to it. Essentially, through AR, what Sutu does is hides the printed images rather than just add to them as Ellis does in SVK. This idea of layered information to create a second narrative that is only accessible to the reader through AR creates interesting possibilities about how creators develop and how readers interact with comics in the future. It would allow comics to enter a third dimension that has previously been unattainable through the static image of printed comics.

One of the most important arguments for the use of AR is that it would reinstate and invigorate the use of the imagination when reading comics. This is something that has been lost through the rise of digital and motion comics, and something that is, arguably, employed in a standard way when reading traditional comics (due to the constrictions of the page). AR would allow creators to mix the two separate universes of digital and printed comics and let them push the boundaries to create a synonymous experience between the two. As argued in previous chapters, comics seem to have lost their souls. With the lack of a prominent grid and gutter system, the lines between a comic and other sequential art have been blurred. AR would allow creators to keep the traditional comic book form intact and allow

the readers to get the closure that makes comics so enjoyable to read.

Comics would be even more inviting with the interactivity of AR technology adding hidden layers, narratives and meaning to a well-established art form, comics would become more relevant in the ever-changing landscape of technological advancements, therefore appealing to an ever-changing audience of young readers, who from infancy are accustomed to interactive reading experiences when growing up around tablets and smartphones.

The current bubble of superhero movies and comic book popularity will only last so long. After it bursts, if comics do not advance alongside technology, while still keeping their long-lasting identity and the characteristics that make them different to other types of sequential art; comics run the risks of no longer being relevant when faced with another current, more interactive modes of entertainment. While comics purists may disagree with this point, their readership will eventually decrease, and who will pick up the gauntlet afterwards, in the words of Greg Smith "...When a medium borrows an effect from other existing media, the borrowing medium often evolves and gains expressivity. Adaptation across media is necessarily a process of translation since one cannot merely import forms from one medium to another. The work of adaptation transforms the original content because the new medium cannot simply duplicate the old."