

# The development of the gridding system in comics

[Science](#), [Computer Science](#)



“ Comics communicate in a ‘ language’ that relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience. Modern readers can be expected to have an easy understanding of the image-word mix and the traditional deciphering of text. Comics can be called ‘ reading in a wider sense than that term is commonly applied.” For most of their existence comics have been considered a unique form of literature and sequential art. Unlike films and cartoons, comics allow the reader a sense of control as they progress through the story at their own speed. While in film, time is used to progress a story forward, in comics space is utilized the same way, “ Each successive frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space — the screen — while each frame of comics must occupy a different space;” (McCloud, 1993). This is done through the panels and grids within a comic, this act of control is something unique to comics as a sequential art form, it is arguably one of the fundamental aspects of what defines a comic. Eisner argues that “ a comic becomes ‘ real’ when time and timing is factored into creation... it is this dimension of human understanding that enables us to recognise and be empathetic to surprise, humour, terror and the whole range of human experience.”

When a reader opens a traditional comic for the first time, there are multiple aspects of the page that they observe. These include the panel and gutter system, panel density, diegetic (or non-diegetic sound), speech bubbles, color (or lack of it) and the illustrations themselves. The reader is usually unaware that they are observing these different aspects because it happens almost simultaneously. The most fundamental of these aspects is the panel (the border that encompasses the story) and gutter system (the white space

between each panel) that a comic book employs. This allows the reader to experience a sense of time and rhythm within the comic book, allowing them a sense to control while also directing them through the comic, guiding them to start at the top left corner of the page and end at the bottom right. The panel has a multitude of uses, its primary function, as described above, is to control how the reader reads (left to right, top to bottom), stopping the readers eye from wandering further through the story. The frame could also be employed as a narrative device, the shape of the frame can become part of the story itself. Furthermore, the frame may have an emotional function, adding more context to the contents within it. The gutter has one of the most important functions within a comic, it allows the reader to get closure when moving from panel to panel. Closure, in this case, is when the reader uses their own experiences and imagination to fill the gaps between two images (A and B) and transforms them into a single idea. “ The phenomenon of observing parts but perceiving the whole has a name, it’s called closure.”

For a long time, the gridding system in comics was a simple one, a 9×9 panel grid with a gutter on each side of a panel. However, in the 1980’s comics creators started exploring breaking the grid system to enhance their narrative structures. Art Spiegelman’s Maus is one of the most notable comics to have done this. Creating a frame story narrative through different sizes and shapes of panels, and placing panels within panels, instead of just next to them to signify the story travelling from the past to the present and to signify important aspects of the story. One of the reasons Maus was so popular was due to its unique way of conveying time, something that is “ critical to the success of a visual narrative.” This paved the way for comics to

be taken as an art form that could tackle political and ideological issues, rather than just focusing on superheroes. Moving on to the mid-2000's and the popularity of smartphone and tablet technology had changed comics landscape. The rise of social media (e. g. Tumblr) and the simplicity of setting up and owning your own website meant that comic creators no longer had to rely on big comic publishing houses such as Marvel or DC to gain readership, they could gain notoriety by word of mouth. Some of the most notable comics to do this include Cyanide & Happiness and Hark! A Vagrant. Both of these now household names with their collected issues released as books. Furthermore, the rise of self-publishing in the internet age allowed for new genres of comic books to gain popularity among the mainstream. Progressing from the seeds that Spiegelman sowed, comics began to focus on real-life issues and more serious topics (drug abuse, eating disorders, LGBT+ Rights and Equal Rights), creating new genres within the field of comics including Slice Of Life, Biographical and LGBTQ comics. While the webcomics of that time were quite simple in nature, generally keeping to short 3 or 4-panel strip, as web and device capabilities increased, as did the complexity and experimental nature of comic design.

Webcomics started subverting the concrete idea that a comic needs to have a grid and gutter system. “Hobo Lobo Of Hamelin” is a webcomic drawn in a similar style to a pop-up picture book. It encourages the reader the scroll across their screen to access the story, drawn in a similar style to a pop-up picture book. By doing this Stevan Zivadinovic subverts the readers' expectations by removing the process of closure and therefore forcing the reader to see exactly what he wants them to see. Furthermore, by placing

the text outside of the picture panels (instead of inside a panel as the convention traditional comics), it allows the reader to take in each part of the comic individually, rather than as a simultaneous experience. This subverts the control the reader has when reading a comic book, suggesting that they slow down and consider each aspect as a different part of a whole. There is an argument made by some purists that by detracting the gridding and gutter system from comics, it removes the most important part of the comic reading experience, allowing the reader to use their imagination to fill in the gaps between what is happening from point A and point B. If the gridding system, and subsequently closure is removed from comics, what is left to make it different from other forms of sequential art (such as movies, cartoons and animations)?

In 2018 most comics that are viewed digitally are either read on a Smartphone or a Tablet. When reading comics on such a device, it could be argued that the very essence of what defines the medium when compared to other sequential art forms; and what has given it agency in the past, the grid system, is lost. This is due to the fact that comics on this medium do not have pages in the conventional sense. This is to say that a traditional 9×9 grid comic book page is not designed to be read on a digital device such as an iPhone and iPad. One of the original ways to read a comic book on a device was using apps such as Simple Comic, where readers would download . CBR files and have to manually scroll from page to page and pinch the screen to move in and out of each panel. As technology has advanced since the birth of smartphones, two genres of comics read on digital devices have developed: Digital Comics, comics produced or reproduced digitally [but

generally keeping their original form]; and Motion Comics, a form of animation combining elements of print comic books and animation. Apps such as ComiXology and Madefire have given way to comics that are being designed to be read on a device rather than each page being scanned to a . CBR format and being read in the traditional style of printed comics.

ComiXology utilizes a “ Guided View” functionality, where instead of reading a comic as a full page, the app offers the reader a panel by panel view. The reason for this is so the reader can take in all the detail on a device that is not the dimensions of a traditional comic. But one of the downsides of this functionality is that like a horse with blinders on, the reader loses the whole image (the page) in favor of its component parts (the panels), and therefore, the act of closure is compromised. Within Madefire, readers are presented with fade in and fade outs, atmospheric sounds, and text that jumps out at the reader as they move from panel to panel. This essentially makes Madefire more of an animation than a comic in many peoples mind.

Certain comic book creators have started adapting their comics to the medium of smartphones, creating comics that are designed to be read primarily on a digital platform. A good example of this is Ibrahim Moustafa’s “ Jaeger”, a comic that leads the reader on an exciting story of Nazi-hunting through a narrow vacuum of seemingly never-ending panels, accessed by a scrolling down movement on the phone screen. Rather than having multiple panels existing in one visible space, with a gutter connecting them on all sides. Moustafa instead opts for full-width panels encompassing the space of the phone screen with a gutter above and below. This gives the reader a kind of closure that works differently to traditional comics, “ when you turn a

page you are aware of the whole thing rather than just one panel at a time”. While closure in a traditional comic spread is used to help the reader create a picture of the whole page, in Jaeger, each panel can be seen as its own page and therefore, the reader is just connecting the dots between each page. There are times when Moustafa breaks this mold, placing two panels next to each other. These are generally used as a storytelling method, for imposition. In the example below, the split panel with the two images placed next to each other is used to give the impression of two parts of a whole. The gutter is used to allow the reader’s imagination to fill in the gaps and “ it cleverly condenses a visual while creating a new moment in the story.”

On the opposite side of this spectrum, some comic creators have completely disregarded the visible gutter and page structure of a traditional comic for a new medium “ Motion Comics”. In her comic, “ Valentine” Alex De Campi decides to set aside the gutter all together for a more interactive approach to comic books. Instead of a traditional gutter, Campi employs a series of transitions to create a hybrid between traditional comic book and animation. This method is employed, because as well as a comic book creator, Campi is also a film director who “ tends to conceive of Valentine using the same strategies she uses to put together a film: she has pointed specifically to the single-panel-per-frame technique of Valentine as a mode that is “ an awful lot like a storyboard”. Nowhere is the difference between a traditional comic writer and Campi more striking than in the way they describe their comic, with each part of the story being called an “ episode” rather than “ issue” (the more conventional way of serializing a comic). Campi employs two different types of transitions in Valentine, the fade and the pan, to allow the

reader to move through the story. Each transition has a different function, while the fade is used to go from panel to subsequent panel, acting as a replacement for the gutter; the pan is used to link bitesize parts of a larger panel together (similar to guided view but adapted by Campi to be unique to Valentine). These techniques are reminiscent of similar ones used in filmmaking and “ De Campi’s labeling of this as a filmic convention does seem valid, especially in contrast with comics: although paper comics might have accomplished something similar in a sequence of panels, because the sequence can only be viewed through the larger frame of the iPad’s screen and because those panels can only be viewed one at a time instead of alongside each other, these transitions work much more like filmic transitions than traditional comic transitions.”

The way De Campi created Valentine raises interesting arguments about the very essence of what a comic is. If a key part of the comic experience is the gutter and the authorship the reader has by the act of closure, then by removing it, the author diminishes the core aspect of what differs a comic from other forms of sequential art. But arguably, a more serious consequence of this may be the limitation and dismissal of imagination that comes with moving from panel to panel and the closure of that act.