

Images in Space – The Challenges of Architectural Spatiality in Comics

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Abstract

A selection of hypercomics that extend the concept of the Infinite Canvas are examined to address the challenges of architectural spatiality. As comics gradually leave behind the trappings of the printed page, the language and tropes unique to print are slowly being modified and replaced by new structures native to the screen. *Infinite Canvas* comics have expanded and made explicit the spatial network at the heart of the medium. The hypercomic form has introduced new approaches to the creation of branching, multicursal narrative structures. Videogame tropes and game spaces have merged with the comics medium, creating distinct new hybrid forms. As the medium becomes increasingly distanced from its origins in print, it becomes essential to consider other forms comics could potentially adopt as a result of this shift in their underlying tropes and processes.

The chapter takes as its primary case study an architecturally mediated hypercomic created as a practice-lead inquiry into the workings of the form. Alongside comics theory, the paper draws on the study of narrative space within videogames and new media. It considers the use of tropes appropriated from digital comics and explores the tension between fixed sequence and freeform exploration inherent in architecturally mediated works. Ways in which the relative position in three dimensional space between reader and panel sequence can be used for narrative effect are explored. An analysis of how spatial depth impacts on the reader's experience of panel sequences is included whilst considering the narrative and navigational roles played by perceptual tags. Lastly, the importance of site specificity in architecturally mediated works is examined.

Key Words: Hypercomics, architectural space, spatiality, digital comics, videogames, installation art, practice.

1. Introduction

A hypercomic is a comic with a multicursal narrative structure.¹ This means the reader of a hypercomic must make deliberate choices as to the path they take through the comic's narrative. Typically, these choices may influence:

the sequence in which events are encountered, the outcome of events or the point of view through which events are seen.²

In an architecturally mediated hypercomic, this multicursal structure is designed to inhabit and be navigated via a real world, three dimensional environment. In his book *Comics Art*, Paul Gravett asserts that a ‘wide-open space for multicursal comics was provided by the white cube of the art gallery.’³ Referring to this emergent form as ‘gallery comics’⁴, Gravett notes that these are typically works ‘made specifically for exhibition and not necessarily for [traditional] publication.’⁵

My own focus as a comics practitioner began in explorations of digital space and experimentation with various different forms of screen-based hypercomic. Over time the scope of the work widened to include a number of architecturally mediated pieces. This led me to the discovery that many tropes of screen-based comics could also be usefully applied to real world, three dimensional spaces. It also caused me to wonder how the reader’s relationship to the comic form was changed or disrupted via these acts of architectural mediation. To explore these ideas in more depth I began a practice-led inquiry into architecturally mediated comics. This culminated in 2013 with a public experiment into the potential of the medium.



Image 1: Black Hats In Hell.

The hypercomic *Black Hats In Hell*⁶ was installed in the *Framework Gallery* at the *University of Hertfordshire* in April 2013 (Image 1). A second version of the comic was then installed a few days later in the entranceway of the *Platform Theatre* at *Central St Martins* in London. The plot of *Black Hats* was that of a western. It told the story of two rival cowboys and the cycle of violence that led to both men’s eventual descent into Hell. The comic was a site specific work that drew direct influence from the layout of the *Framework Gallery*. The later version installed at the *Platform Theatre* was an adaptation of the original work that used a new configuration of panels based on the layout of the theatre’s entranceway.

The analysis of the comic has been structured across five interrelated areas. These are: the use of digital comic tropes; the navigation of spaces; the role of links, looking and signifiers; comics across three dimensions; and adapting work to new spaces.

2. Digital Comic Tropes

In *Reinventing Comics*, Scott McCloud proposes that ‘the monitor which so often acts as a page may also act as a window’⁷ on to significantly larger arrangements of panels. This idea was taken up by early digital comic pioneers⁸ and soon became known popularly as the *Infinite Canvas* approach to comic creation. In an architecturally mediated comic, a wall typically offers a space much larger than a standard page and as such draws on a collection of tropes similar to those found in the *Infinite Canvas*. While a wall remains more fixed and finite than an equivalent digital space, both media present a creator with a reduced set of spatial constraints. This allows for greater experimentation with the spatial relationship between panels and builds on McCloud’s conception of comics as a ‘temporal map’⁹.



Image 2: Panel Spacing.

In an *Infinite Canvas* comic, changes made to the spatial relationship between panels can influence the reader’s interpretation of the passage of time within the comic’s narrative.¹⁰ *Black Hats* makes use of this phenomena, keeping to a standard spacing between the majority of its panels and then varying the distance and positioning in certain sequences to achieve specific effects. A larger space between panels in one sequence (Image 2) was used to indicate a longer period of time passing between the depicted events. Parallel to this earthbound narrative, another sequence set in Heaven runs higher up the wall. Here all the panels are

positioned much further apart to suggest a more gradual perception of the passing of time. Elsewhere an isolated panel is separated in space from the rest of its sequence (Image 1). This suggests a longer period of time passing without any further events taking place, leaving the reader to dwell on the single depicted image.

In an architecturally mediated comic, the relative position in space between reader and panel sequence can also be used for narrative effect. In *Black Hats*, the parts of the story that take place on earth are primarily displayed around eye-level, locating the reader on the earthly plane. The reader then looks downwards towards sequences set in Hell and upwards towards sequences set in Heaven. The idea of Heaven as a higher plane and Hell as a lower one is reinforced through their spatial positioning relative to the reader.



Image 3: Visual Onomatopoeics.

Digital comics pioneer John Barber identified the concept of ‘visual onomatopoeics’¹¹ where the animated movement of a panel matches the action depicted within the panel. In *Black Hats*, visual onomatopoeics can be seen operating in sequences that show the characters rising or falling through space. Events such as climbing a mountain, ascending towards Heaven or falling into Hell are mimicked by rising or descending sequences of panels. To read a sequence

showing the fall of the cowboy into Hell (Image 3), the reader must tilt their head to follow the panels down the wall. This physical movement on behalf of the reader reinforces the dramatic nature of the fall depicted within the panels.

3. Navigating Spaces

When reading a traditional comic our eyes follow a linked path from panel to panel across the page that allows us to understand the narrative contained in the sequence. Comics theorist Jayms Nichols describes this path as ‘the raster of reading’¹² and further notes that:

Although the raster varies depending on the cultural norms and differs from location to location, in western culture it usually runs from left to right, top to bottom across the page.¹³

In contrast to this fixed reading raster, games theorist Michael Nitsche asserts that three dimensional space:

implies the option of a different turn at any moment, a new choice or a different perspective that outweighs traditional nodes and links.¹⁴

Architecturally mediated comics exhibit a clear tension between the freeform exploration inherent to three dimensional space and the fixed progression dictated by the arrangement of panels in a sequence. Further complicating this relationship, architectural spaces may also impose their own raster of reading on a sequence of panels. This can at times be counter to the left to right, top to bottom raster of the traditional western page.

*PoCom*¹⁵ was an architecturally mediated, collaborative hypercomic created for the *Concourse Gallery* at the *Institute of Contemporary Art* in 2003. The 17 metre long work was installed into a space that acted as an entranceway into the rest of the building. As a result, the majority of foot traffic through the space moved from right to left. The comic was therefore designed to be read from right to left, so that the audience could progress through the comic at the same time they moved deeper into the building. This decision impacted not only on the reading order of panels but also on their content, which featured characters chiefly moving through the frame from right to left rather than the more traditional left to right.

The *Framework Gallery* that contained *Black Hats* featured a similar flow of right to left traffic. Accordingly the comic used the same approach taken in *PoCom*, matching the raster of reading and flow of action internal to the panels to the primary flow of people through the space. However, *Black Hats* was intended

for installation across multiple walls and occupied a space that was significantly more varied in terms of layout. I became concerned that this could lead to choke points in the gallery if all in attendance were funnelled to read the story from the same starting point. The solution to this problem was to tell the story using a looping narrative structure.

This approach was influenced by another architecturally mediated hypercomic, Dave McKean's 2010 work, *The Rut*.¹⁶ The narrative of *The Rut* loops and branches multiple times around the room in the *Pumphouse Gallery* for which it was created. Gravette notes that the work came presented with 'no instructions or set order... [leaving visitors] ...to their own devices.'¹⁷ As such the layout encouraged readers to chart their own paths of exploration through both the room and the story it contained. In constructing *Black Hats* without a single clear start or end point, readers could move into the space and choose their own point at which to enter and follow the narrative loop. This approach built both on the nature of three dimensional space to empower the reader with choice and the nature of the hypercomic to create narrative pathways locally unique to each reader.

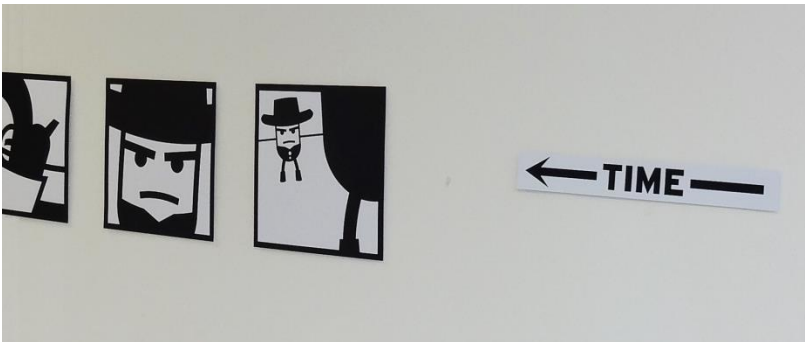


Image 4: Arbitrary Tags.

4. Links, Looking and Signifiers

To make clear its reading order, *PoCom* made use of another *Infinite Canvas* trope identified by McCloud; the trail.¹⁸ Trails are lines that serve as navigational aids by linking together panels in the order they are intended to be read, making the raster of reading visually explicit. Sometimes (as with *PoCom*) trails also include an arrowhead or similar device to further reinforce the direction of reading. However, given the looser, looping structure at work in *Black Hats*, I decided to forgo the use of trails as an explicit signifier of reading order. Instead, positioned at several points around the room were arrows to indicate the flow of time in the narrative (Image 4). This approach presented the reader with a direct choice; to

read with the flow of time or against it. The arrows also serve as an example of what theorist Alan Peacock describes as a ‘perceptual tag.’¹⁹

In discussing the role of perceptual tags in locative media, Peacock divides their use into two groupings. Embedded tags are ‘things that exist already in the environment and are appropriated as signs’²⁰ by an art installation or locative work. Arbitrary tags (such as the time arrows) are ‘deliberately placed and carefully designed’²¹ signifiers that have been added into the environment. Another prominent set of arbitrary tags used in *Black Hats* were the thick black panel borders that framed each image in the comic. Thierry Groensteen notes that the frame around an image in a comic ‘is always a sign of something to be read.’²² This readerly function of the frame sits alongside the functions of closure, separation, rhythm, structure and expression identified by Groensteen.²³ Accordingly the thick panel borders used in the piece act as a key signifier for the audience that what they see on the walls is not just a collection of images. Rather they are a narrative sequence; a story told using the medium of comics and intended to be read as such.



Image 5: Embedded Tags 1.

The site specific nature of *Black Hats* meant that embedded tags could also be incorporated into the narrative. In one sequence, a cowboy arrives home to discover his homestead has been set ablaze (Image 5). The panels were arranged so as to incorporate the fire alarm and emergency action instructions that were already present on the gallery wall. Elsewhere in the space a pre-existing emergency exit sign was similarly appropriated (Image 6). In this instance the image of the doorway in the sign carries across thematically into the nearest panel, which shows the doorway of a saloon. The addition of the word “time” to the sign also draws a connection between this embedded tag and the time arrows, further re-enforcing the flow of time within the narrative.



Image 6: Embedded Tags 2.

While written words are present in some of the perceptual tags used in *Black Hats*, the comic panels themselves are silent and feature no words or word balloons. On the page, a comic reader is familiar with the act of reading word balloons as part of a sequence of panels. As part of the process that Groensteen describes as ‘plurivectoral narration,’²⁴ a reader absorbs the words without visually losing track of the sequence of images the words form part of. However, in some architecturally mediated comics the larger scale of the panels on the wall means reading a sequence involves a physical turn of the head to view all the panels. This can potentially introduce a discontinuity between the focused reading of text in a word balloon and the appreciation of this element as part of the sequence as a whole.

By avoiding the use of written text in its panels, *Black Hats* avoids this problem. Although by allowing the images to carry the narrative on their own there is also potentially some trade-off in clarity. Robert Harvey cautions that wordless comics can ‘ooze ambiguity and inexplicable action.’²⁵ The intent with *Black Hats* was for the larger sequence of panels to cancel out any unwanted moments of ambiguity that might occur in individual panels. Another approach to the use of text in architecturally mediated comics can be seen in Luke Pearson’s contribution to the *Memory Palace* exhibition at the V&A.²⁶ In Pearson’s *Infinite Canvas* styled sequence, the conversation between two characters is shown in a separate block of text beneath the related image sequence. By simply separating out word and image, the conflict between reading the written text and consuming the larger image sequence is neatly circumvented.



Image 7: Blind Corners.

5. Comics Across Three Dimensions

In examining *The Rut*, comics theorist Jason Dittmer noted how the three dimensional quality of the work ‘shifted the narrative from being a thread to follow through the comic to be being emergent from the space of the exhibit itself.’²⁷ One of the goals of my public experiment was to further explore this potential of the gallery as a three dimensional space for comics display. In describing his experience of *Black Hats*, Gravett notes how the comic ‘uses a corner like a page turn’²⁸. Just as with the turn of a page in a traditional comic, blind corners can hide surprises for the reader or suggest a progression in time between the events depicted on the two joining walls (Image 7).



Image 8: Facing Corners.

Corners between two facing walls provide other opportunities. In one sequence (Image 8), one cowboy is shown advancing menacingly on the wife of the other. Here the relative position in space between the panels helps to foster the suggestion of eye contact between the two characters, heightening the tension of the scene. Another key sequence in the comic (Image 9) extends the idea of eye contact between panels even further. A pair of parallel walls depicts a classic western

showdown between the story's two protagonists. The sequences are anchored together by parallel middle panels that depict the two characters staring out at each other across the space of the gallery. In this manner the layout of the space situates the viewer directly within the sequence of panels as the events of the gunfight unfold. Readers find themselves caught 'inside a gunfight, between the two cowboys' synchronous points of view'²⁹.

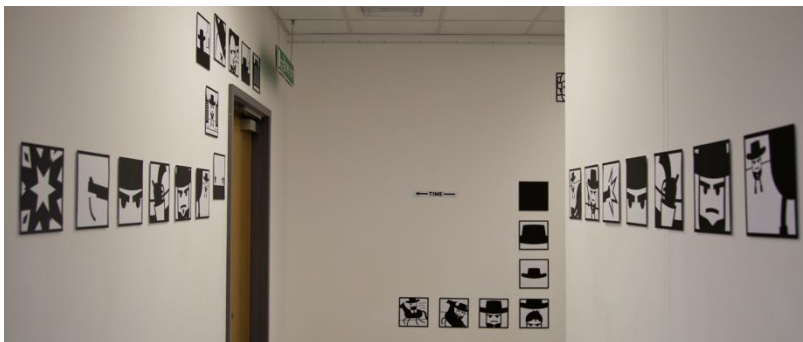


Image 9: Inside a Gunfight.

While given specific focus during this showdown sequence, the idea of being inside a comic is central to much of *Black Hats*. By considering the comic in what Groensteen describes as its 'dechronologized mode',³⁰ the reader can explore its spatial network separately from the vector of the narrative. Through explorations of the gallery space, the reader can adopt multiple different points of view within the 'panoptical spread'³¹ of the comic. In this way the reader is free to chart their own discovery of the juxtapositions, repetitions and symmetries of layout that exist between thematically linked sequences within the story.

Conversely, the inherent freedom of three dimensional spaces can also be deliberately subverted. Nitsche describes the use in videogames of "narrating architecture" that enforces a certain vision through the limitation of the spatial practice within it.³² In Frank Laws' contribution to *Memory Palace*,³³ we see an example of this idea at work in an architecturally mediated comic. A series of panels depicting surrealist urban constructions are arranged inside a tight pentagon of walls. The reader can only view the work from outside the pentagon through narrow gaps at each of its corners. This limits the field of view of the reader so that each corner brings the focus to a different panel in the sequence. In *The Rut* this technique is taken even further, with a sequence of masks placed in fixed positions around the room. By looking through the eyeholes of each mask, previously

unreadable elements of the comic's sculptural centerpiece become readable. As Dittmer notes:

the reader/viewer of this comic is positioned in space such that they, for a moment, embody one perspective of this fragmented tale of violence and regret.³⁴

6. Adapting Work to New Spaces

The more an architecturally mediated comic embraces its site specific nature, the more difficult it becomes to successfully transpose that work to a new location. This limitation of the medium became readily apparent during the installation of the second version of *Black Hats* in the entranceway of the *Platform Theatre*. The new location was configured in a significantly different layout to the *Framework Gallery*, with the forking nature of the entranceway meaning that foot traffic naturally flowed in two different directions through the space. The looping nature of the narrative remained intact but the right to left flow of the raster of reading no longer aligned as perfectly to how the space was used. In the new version, rather than the flow of traffic through the space being mirrored in the flow of the narrative, the right to left flow in the narrative became the major element leading readers in one direction through the space.



Image 10: The Missing Doorway.

Elements of layout in the comic that were made in response to architectural features of the original gallery space were also problematic. The sequence depicting the cowboy's retreat to a secluded mountain and eventual plunge into Hell (Image 3) was originally designed around an open doorway in the *Framework Gallery*. At the *Platform Theatre* the same sequence had to be laid out against a

blank wall where no such doorway existed (Image 10), robbing the arrangement of some of its visual impact.

However, in transposing the work, new synchronicities and interactions between the comic and its environment also suggested themselves. For example, in the sequence showing an angel looking down on proceedings, the nearby wall lights added a bright glow to the artwork that reinforced its heavenly setting (Image 11). The increased space available at the *Platform Theatre* also allowed room for the incorporation of a series of comic strips by other artists that served as tangents to the central narrative. These additional story branches served to enhance the hypercomic nature of the original, providing divergent and parallel viewpoints on the landscapes of Hell and the Wild West.



Image 11: New Synchronicities.

7. Conclusion

As an experimental, practice-led inquiry into the potential of architecturally mediated comics, working on *Black Hats* proved to be an invaluable experience. The work has given me the chance to examine the parallels between digital and physical manifestations of the hypercomic form. It has provided a context in which to identify useful strategies for the incorporation of perceptual tags and textual elements in architecturally mediated works. It has allowed me the opportunity for a creative exploration of the use of three dimensional space as a narrative device within the medium of comics. Lastly, it has helped bring into focus some of the issues raised in the adaptation of site specific works to new locations.

Notes

- ¹ Goodbrey, Daniel, 'From Comic To Hypercomic', in *Cultural Excavation and Formal Expression in the Graphic Novel* ed. Jonathan Evans and Thomas Giddens (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 291.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Gravett, Paul, *Comics Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 131.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Goodbrey, Daniel, *Black Hats In Hell*, Comic installation, 2013.
- ⁷ McCloud, Scott, *Reinventing Comics* (New York: Paradox Press, 2000), 222.
- ⁸ Campbell, T, *A History of Webcomics* (San Antonio: Antarctic Press, 2006), 115.
- ⁹ McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, 207.
- ¹⁰ Goodbrey, Daniel, 'Digital comics – new tools and tropes', in *Studies in Comics* 4, no. 1 (2013): 191.
- ¹¹ Barber, John, 'The phenomenon of multiple dialectics in comics layout' (Master's thesis, London College of Printing, 2002).
- ¹² Nichols, Jayms, 'Digital Pages: Reading, Comics and Screens', in *Cultural Excavation and Formal Expression in the Graphic Novel* ed. Jonathan Evans and Thomas Giddens (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 304.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Nitsche, Michael, *Videogame Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), 28.
- ¹⁵ Brooks, Brad, Gauld, Tom, Gravette, Paul et al., *PoCom*, Comic installation, 2003.
- ¹⁶ McKean, Dave, *The Rut*, Comic installation, 2010.
- ¹⁷ Gravett, Paul, *Comics Art*, 132.
- ¹⁸ McCloud, Scott, 'I Can't Stop Thinking! #4', 2000, accessed November 11, 2013, <http://scottmccloud.com/1-webcomics/icst/icst-4/icst-4.html>.
- ¹⁹ Peacock, Alan, *Report on the Theatre Beyond Walls Project to the Technology Strategy Board* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire, 2009)
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Groensteen, Thierry, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nyuyen (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 53.
- ²³ Ibid., 39
- ²⁴ Ibid., 108.
- ²⁵ Harvey, Robert, *Celebrating the 10th Annual Comic Arts Conference* (San Diego: Comic Arts Conference, 2002)

²⁶ Pearson, Luke, 'Digital prints, pen and ink', in *Memory Palace*, Comic installation, 2013.

²⁷ Dittmer, Jason, 'The Rut by Dave McKean: Hypercomics: The Shape of Comics to Come, Pump House Gallery, London, 12 August - 26 September 2010', in *Studies in Comics* 2, no. 2 (2011): 381.

²⁸ Gravett, *Comics Art*, 132.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 147.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Nitsche, *Videogame Spaces*, 106.

³³ Laws, Frank, 'Ink and acrylic on paper, plaster, hessian scrim, emulsion, timber, steel', in *Memory Palace*, Comic installation, 2013.

³⁴ Dittmer, 'The Rut by Dave McKean', 383.

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