

DEVELOPING THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF COMICS : THE INTERACTIVE POTENTIAL OF JAPAN'S CONTRIBUTIONS

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DEVELOPING THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF COMICS: THE INTERACTIVE POTENTIAL OF JAPAN'S CONTRIBUTIONS

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1. Introduction

Comics (*manga*), animation (*anime*), and video game media often share the same intellectual properties: the characters and stories from comic books. Even though many artists have made attempts to cross or blur the line drawn between each media format, few have been able to maintain the traits particular to the comic's medium. Those who have endeavored to incorporate these traits have done so largely to suggest the visual style of the comic book, but are rarely utilized for their function as narrative devices. These comic book traits could be enhanced by being more thoroughly integrated with the unique traits of these related media. In doing so, these merged traits could be instrumental in the formation of a hybridized narrative medium for digital media devices offering a new type of navigation system capable of interactive stories. Stories could be operated as one might navigate through a computer program. With the increased marketing of digital comics for various multi-media devices (computers, smartphones, tablets, etc.) in recent years, it is obvious that there is a desire for the comic book to evolve from the printed page.

2. The Interactive Qualities of Traditional Comics

The comic book is already an interactive medium to some degree. At the most basic level, one must be able to read the text and perceive an artist's stylized depictions of the world, while making meaningful connections between those two aspects. The reader actively participates in the telling of the comic story by having to conceptually create closure for events as their eyes travel across the

gutter between each story panel of a comic book. The reader infers the time duration of the story events based on the size of each panel (or word balloon) on a comic's page, just as one would read the different notes on a sheet of music. The shape of a comic's panel (or word balloon) may help to direct the gaze of the reader from panel to panel, as well as effect their perception of the content within the panel. A comic story only offers the reader visual stimuli, therefore it is contingent upon the reader to apperceive the other sensations (i.e., sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations) implied by the comic artist's aesthetic depictions of a comic page's visual elements. Beyond these elements, the comic has developed (and assembled) a coded system of symbolic icons that is intended to communicate emotions, sensations, movements, and other connections relevant to the contents of the comic's page (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1994).

A vast array of symbols is acquired over the course of one's life and their coded meanings are often learned through association with their immediate circumstances. As in any living language these codes may change over time and eventually they may be understood without being connected to their origins. Some symbols may be shared between other media (i.e., comics, animation, video games, etc.). The established coding of symbols also varies depending on different world cultures and the many artists who devise them. In order to adequately evolve the comic in a digital medium capable of global communication, it would be beneficial to gain a broader understanding of the comic's medium in other cultures.

There are a few English language publications, which strive to formally indicate the structures and unique codes inherent to comic book media. There are fewer that attempt to identify the aspects of comic books endemic to the cultural regions of the world. Due to the U.S.'s importation of Japanese *manga* (and the closely-related *anime* and video game genres) since the 1950s, Japan's media has gradually become an enormous influence on the

integration of Japan's visual styles with those of modern American comics (animation and video games). Despite the vast amount of appropriation from these sources, not all of the visual codes utilized in Japanese media have translated into the general public's consciousness and only a select portion of dedicated U.S. fans of *manga* are literate in its forms.

3. The Symbols of Japanese Manga

Due to the worldwide popularity of *manga*, *manga* studies have grown and are encouraging publications that formally identify and study the unique traits of *manga* as a literary medium. One area of particular interest is the comic symbols that have developed in Japan independent of foreign influences. An excellent resource focusing on these symbols can be found in the book *How to Read Manga* [*Manga no yomikata*] edited by Manabu Inoue (1995) in the chapter entitled the *Symbols of Manga* [*Manga to iu kigou*]. It is evident that some of *manga*'s symbols are shared due to U.S. and European influences on Japanese comics (i.e., Disney, *Tintin*, *Moomin*). However a great many symbols have distinct Japanese origins and applications.

Japanese *manga* have a large diversity of metaphorical figure symbols called *keiyu* (形喩) that are not considered as words or representational pictures, but act as symbolic adjectives or adverbs to events depicted. *Keiyu* consist of *manga* symbols (*manpu*, 漫符) and effect symbols (*kouka*, 効果). *Manpu* tend to retain their meaning independent of a subject, whereas *kouka* need to be applied to a subject in order to be understood. In Japan's *manga* these symbols are applied to characters or subjects as representational indicators denoting their physical (*butsuriteki*, 物理的) states and/or as metaphorical indicators connoting their psychological (*shinriteki*, 心理的) states (Natsume & Takekuma, 1995).

The body of a character can be marked by a number of expressive *keiyu*. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it will attempt to provide some sort

of structure to organize and discuss the formal aspects of the *keiyu* feature. The head of a character has one of the largest libraries of symbols compared to the rest of the body. The head could be regionalized to make further subcategories: the eyes, nose, mouth, ears, cheeks and forehead. Each of those regions can be broken down into 2 groups; the *keiyu* are either placed as indicators in a local location (on the head) and/or external satellite location (emanating from the head or *eminata*) (Walker, 2000). Depending on the physical place of origin on the subject, the symbols can take on different meanings. Besides the location, the meaning of these symbolic representations of physical or psychological states may vary based on their visual depiction ranging from the representational towards the more abstract. Furthermore, a symbol's relationship with the other circumstances in a scene can change its meaning.

One of the most used *keiyu-manpu* is the drop (*suiteki*, ●) and it is often associated with sweat, tears, saliva, nasal discharge, or water. It can be applied to many parts of the face and based on its placement its meaning can change. The sweat drop (*ase*) or *plewds* can either be represented as a small series of drops dripping down the face or raining off the forehead, or as one giant metaphorical drop floating just off of the cheek (Walker, 2000). Sweat drops may express physical sweat due to heat or psychological cold sweat (*hiyaase*) to represent nervousness, anxiety, stress, strain, exhaustion, surprise, irritation or anger. Sometimes both physical and psychological states are intended. If applied to the eyes, the drop(s) (*suiteki*) become tears (*namida*) that can express sadness or overwhelming joy. The drop can denote or connote other aspects of the character when applied to other physical locations such as saliva (*yodare*) from the mouth; representing hunger, greed, lust or stupidity; or runny nose water (*hanamizu*); representing sickness, fatigue, stupidity or drunkenness. Outside of these applications, the drop may simply represent water (*mizu*), rain (*ame*), being wet, or being devoid of water. Depending on its depiction, the drop (*suiteki*) may or may not be physically present in the

character's reality. For humorous effect, sometimes characters may break the imaginary "4th wall" separating their reality from our own and become aware of an intangible symbol (♠) that is generally meant only to communicate to the reader (Ingulsrud & Allen, 2009; Natsume & Takekuma, 1995).

The most famous and uniquely Japanese *keiyu-manpu* are the blood vessel marks (*kekkan*, 卍) that can be expressed on or off of the forehead. It is a representation of a bulging blood vessel on the temple when someone is frustrated, angry or in a rage, but it has gained an abstracted symbolic status over time independent from its origin. The basic type (*kihon-gata*) is attached to the temple or forehead. The application type (*ouyou-gata*) is sometimes floating above, around, or behind the head. It has been used to signify the presence of an angry character too small to see in the scene or hidden inside of a physical location, like a car. Furthermore, it can be attached to a word balloon (*fukidashi*, 吹き出し, ㊦) to impress upon the dialogue an angry tone of voice.

The eyes are the "windows to the soul" of a character and therefore have several *keiyu* attached to them. A cross (*batsu*, ×) may be applied to the body to signify a physical or psychological scar, but X-ed out eyes or *crottle eyes* (two *batsu*, ××) can replace regular eyes to symbolize that a character is dead, unconscious, or in severe shock (Walker, 2000). Heart eyes (♥♥) can also replace normal eyes or emanate from the eye sockets to depict lust. Sparkles (*hibana*, ✧) or stars (*hoshi*, ☆ or ★) can replace the eyes, gleam in the eyes' irises, and emanate from the eyes or the forehead to symbolize impact, amazement, infatuation, willfulness, beauty, newness, or mysteriousness. Concentric circles for eyes (*doushinen*, ◎◎) can indicate dizziness or being mesmerized. Money symbols for eyes (\$ \$ or ¥) could indicate greed. Flame eyes or similar-types (i.e., 🔥🔥) could indicate an eruption of anger (Natsume & Takekuma, 1995).

Besides *hanamizu*, the nose has some other important *keiyu-manpu* dedicated to it. A sudden bloody nose (*hanaji*) may represent extreme lust for another character; one that is so difficult to contain that the blood pressure rises and ruptures a blood vessel. A nose lantern (*hana-chouchin*) is a large upturned drop coming from the nose indicating the character is sleeping.

4. Applications of Comic Symbols

Some *manga* apply the symbolic vocabulary of *keiyu-manpu* on a regular basis (i.e., the *One Piece* tankōbon series) and other genres tend to limit *keiyu-manpu* usage in favor of a more serious realistic approach (i.e., the *Gantz* tankōbon series). *Keiyu* is often borrowed by other media (*manga* and *anime*), especially those representing stories from *manga* (i.e., the *One Piece anime* series).

Since comic-based media are so culturally prevalent, *keiyu* have been appropriated into other visual literacies of Japanese society. Face marks (*kaomoji*, 顔文字), the *emoticons* of Japanese keyboard expression exhibit a much wider array of symbols including many *keiyu*. *Kaomoji* evolved as a way to give an emotive “face” to the various forms of “faceless” computer and cell-phone (*keitai denwa*) communications. Its grass-roots development may have started with obsessive fans (*otaku*) of *manga* and the youth culture, but now most *keitai* service carriers offer them as preset icons. The most well-known *keiyu* example is the horizontal smiley face (expressed as “(^_^)”) versus the sideways smile (expressed as “: :)”) of the U.S. By adding a “;” as *hiya-ase* (expressed as “(^_^;)”) the smile becomes wry. The “#” sign becomes a *kekkan* (expressed as “(>_<#)”) when applied to a face. The *keiyu* “C= C= (; ' _)” suggests motion with its “C=” shaped dust clouds (*keridashi*) (Cohn, 2010).

5. Comic Storytelling With Digital Media

There has been a decline in printed comic readership in the U.S. over the years. Many American comic book companies including the two major publishers, DC & Marvel Comics, have been moving into digitally publishing comics. Since the 1980s in the United States, there have been *webcomics*, which are comics published on an Internet website and may include animation and/or interactivity. Due to the lack of a printed comic's 2-D format restrictions and the low production costs of this medium, it can inspire a great deal of experimentation. In recent years, it has become increasingly popular to create digital comic versions of print comics for distribution on CDs and DVDs or across the Internet as downloadable content for devices such as PCs, video game systems, smart phones (i.e., iPhone), the iPod Touch or the iPad. Most digital comics are as static as their printed counterparts, but since 1994 some have evolved into a form currently known as *motion comics*. Similar to certain low-budget animated TV cartoons or storyboard animatics, motion comics use the original static artwork of a printed comic book, and enhance it with limited animation, visual effects, camera moves, music, sound effects and actors' voice-overs to bring the story to life. Despite these aspects, they may ignore the visual language of a comic book and most of them lack the interactive element.

In Japan, cartoon content is more visible in multi-media creations and artists have also been blurring the lines between media forms that present cartoon content. Japan's Paper Dramas (*kamishibai*) involve storytelling performances where an individual narrates illustrated boards as they are cycled through and the narrator invites interaction from the audience. Originating as picture scrolls (*emakimono*) in the 9th century, *kamishibai* became a popular entertainment form during the years 1920 to 1950, later to be replaced by TV

anime shows. Many comic artists (*mangaka*) had initially illustrated *kamishibai* and its themes carried over into *manga* and *anime*. Since the 1980s, Japan has revived this storytelling form. In the 1990s, Accursed Toys introduced a *kamishibai* software program for telling stories on the computer.

A similar type of interactive fiction, called a *visual novel*, appears to be another attempt to create interactive comics on the computer and integrate video game elements. They are a very popular genre, but the imagery is generally static or with limited animation and lacks the elements that make them related to the comic book. With all of these new digital media formats, the restrictions of the traditional printed newspaper or magazine formats are invalid and provide cartoonists with the unique characteristics of these other media to explore, such as allowing an infinite canvas area. There is still so much more that could be done with this potential.

6. The Next Level

A reader's level of engagement in a comic's story is dependent on their visual literacy of many of these symbolic icons. As an individual's visual literacy of comic symbols and computer icons is often gained through associations, this learning method should also apply towards allowing *manga* symbols (and structures) to tell their stories in another medium.

Currently, I am developing a comic story that may be read on a computer tablet (or other multi-media device), where the panels of the story progressively reveal the story's development based on the non-linear choices one makes. Potential choices for panel development would be marked by *keiyu* or other comic symbols representing physical or psychological states. If one is unaware of the meaning coded to a particular symbol, by clicking on that symbol it will reveal the next panel and the results of that choice. Though association one can develop an understanding of the symbolic coding of what is signified. The payoff is in the rewarding surprise of revealing the next panel,

as one would open a window on a Christian Advent calendar. Symbol choices could reveal the moral development of the character, character relationships, and general story development.

Furthermore stories would not have to be revealed by turning the page and reading in the typical order (i.e., top to bottom). For instance if comic panels were shaped like a hexagons, the next possible panel could be expanded out from the first in six directions and each progressive panel could expand across an infinite digital canvas. Previously visited panels could disappear or be left behind like footprints left in the sand, building an overall page design. Old panels could be revisited if the reading path crosses back over older paths. The size and shape of panels could change. The panels themselves could be animated, moving to new locations, or the content within them could contain limited animation. All of these possibilities could offer unique storytelling opportunities and experiences not offered by other media forms.

7. Conclusion

In order to preserve comic book storytelling for the next generation, further exploration is needed of the multi-media applications of the comics' symbolic icons (*keiyu* and comics' traits) with the advantages of digital media. By bringing comics into the digital age, one liberates them from the limitations of their traditional printed publications. No longer will one be trapped by linear story progressions that must be read in a left to right (or right to left) and top to bottom order. One may be able to explore a comic story based on choices they make on the physical and psychological circumstances of the scene, while learning new symbolic expressions in relation to these choices.

A comic symbol-based interface would help make navigating an interactive animated comic feel more natural and less intrusive upon the story experience. Due to the inclusion and mixing of different country's unique symbols, this type of storytelling vehicle may promise to deliver a more

universal experience of content and provide a bridge to potentially convey the artistic expressions of cultures that are often lost in translation.

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