

## Going Digital : Comics and the Internet era

<b>Title</b>	Going Digital
<b>Subtitle</b>	Comics and the Internet era
<b>Lead-in / Abstract</b>	The main topic of my paper is the impact the virtual environment and the Internet have had on comics during the past 10 or so years. The aim is to show an aspect of how does a recently emerged medium relate to an already existing art form.
<b>Participants and speakers</b>	Laaniste, Mari (EE)
<b>Short biography of participants</b>	Mari Laaniste (27) is a writer/art and film critic/comics scholar working in Tallinn, Estonia.
<b>Full text</b>	This paper addresses various aspects of the impact that the new technology is having on comics – Estonian comics in particular - some of which are positive, some that are not so positive and some that are just curious.

Comics as an art form has its roots in the 19th century and it went through a phase of rapid development in the first couple of decades of the 20th century. Virtually all the expressive means particular to comics – “cutting” the story into single images and arranging them into reading order, emphasizing the visual elements essential to the story through various viewpoints (also known as using “frames” and “camera angles”), using different speech and thought bubbles and fonts to add extra information to the “spoken” words, using “sound effects” conveyed by purely visual means, etc. - were already fully formed by 1930, if not before that. Since then, comics have obviously changed, some might even say dramatically changed, but this process has in fact almost exclusively concerned the formal side, since the basic tools and vehicles of comics as a narrative-conveying medium have remained the same – albeit one might argue the artists are now making better use of them than most of the ones working in 1930 ever did.

Despite the changing looks one thing was always the same with comics – the paper. Comics were born on paper and spread all over the world on paper, either as comic strips in newspapers, in the shape of monthly comic books or magazines or softcover books. The whole existence of the art form was always tied to cheap, mass produced and widely accessible printed paper - up to about a decade ago, when something apparently even cheaper and even more accessible came along – the Internet. And with it came the speculations that sooner or later printing on paper would become obsolete, and everything so far read on paper would soon be read on computer screens.

Now, about a decade into the Internet era, this still mostly works in theory. Everything that was printed on paper 10 years ago is printed still, although nowadays newspapers have alternative online editions and some books can also be bought in digital versions that are meant to be read onscreen. The main problem that is stalling the move into the digital domain seems to be the financial one. People are obviously open to the idea of getting information and entertainment from the Internet, but it has proven difficult to make Internet surfers pay. They are used to getting things there for free – and if they come upon a website that demands payment for access to its contents, they normally go to the millions of other websites out there and get something else that is available for free.

Paper as the traditional sellable option has therefore kept its dominant position. This also applies for comics. Most comics with any commercial ambition only use the Internet for promotional purposes, for instance uploading a limited amount of samples onto a website, and continue doing real business on paper.

Thus, most of the full works that can be found on webpages are by aspiring comics authors, who are not yet selling much of their work “for real”. They perceive the

option of taking their comics to the web as a cheap, accessible, albeit not totally satisfactory solution for reaching the audience without having to print their work on paper independently, which can be laborous and costly from the viewpoint of an individual, plus the results might prove difficult to distribute. In most cases, finding a real publisher and getting one's work into print someday nevertheless remains the true aim and non-profit web publishing is regarded only as a promo vehicle that serves this cause (despite the fact that it might never happen). This means that the form of most comics published on webpages remains totally traditional and this presents a whole problem in itself.

There is an obvious difference between the typical page from a comic book and the computer screen – they're both rectangular, but whereas the former is a vertical rectangle, the latter is usually horizontal. (So far only very few lucky people possess and use rotateable computer monitors.) This difference affects the reading process and thus, the overall experience the reader gets. Reading a comic on a computer screen is not the same as reading the same work in book form. I'll explain this using material from an Estonian independent comics website [koomiks.ee](http://www.hot.ee/koomiks) ([www.hot.ee/koomiks](http://www.hot.ee/koomiks)).

Fitting the whole vertical comics page onto the limits of the horizontal screen usually means that the image becomes too small for reading the text in the speech bubbles. So in order to make the text readable, the webpages normally use larger images. That means the reader is not getting the chance to appreciate the page as a whole and has to scroll it up and down instead, always only seeing a part of the whole image at a time. Thus, as the reader has trouble even viewing the full layout of a single page, the interaction between neighbouring pages, in particular so-called "splash" pages where a single large image covers two pages, cannot be appreciated at all. This seriously diminishes the artistic impact of the work. Besides that, the process of reading longer works this way, always downloading a new webpage for viewing the next page, can be rather tiresome.

Realizing that the traditional comics do not adapt to the computer screen very well has led some people among those who are taking their comics to the web, most notably the American comics artist and researcher Scott McCloud, see this as an opportunity, if not a forced need for comics to evolve into something that fits not only the screen, but the whole different logic of virtual environment better than the common page format of the traditional printed comics. The result of making do with the new environment are scrollable comics, read from top downwards on a single webpage. As you can see at [www.scottmcccloud.com](http://www.scottmcccloud.com), this concept seems to work rather well at least with McCloud's simple and cartoony style that is more reminiscent of a traditional newspaper gagstrip than ambitious and detailed large-scale artwork of European comics albums. This format would however never do justice to artists like Enki Bilal or Miguelanxo Prado. So it offers, at best, only a part of the solution.

Another problem with adapting to the new environment as Scott McCloud suggests is the question "why stop there?". Besides making comics web-friendly and scrollable, and developing ways to get the Internet surfer to pay for seeing them – for instance McCloud is using a sort of a "pay-per-view" system that bills the reader's credit card - there's plenty of possibilities for developing "compucomics" further. For instance, McCloud is toying with ideas of creating moving and even interactive comics, where the development of the storyline depends on the choices of the reader. This, however, brings up another question: how far can this development go before the works in question cease to be comics and turn into something else entirely? Since one of the defining features of comics is conveying movement through static images, it seems at least to me that any actual movement in images would be undermining the basic concept of comics as we know them. And the idea of readers actively controlling and developing the story seems to be conflicting with the whole idea of comics as a narrative, author-driven and author-controlled medium.

Although digital technology has so far proven not to be perfect for mediating comics, the art form as such has certainly benefitted from it. For instance, the possibilities of digital colouring have brought a never-before-seen richness of colour shades to the pages of comic books. However, there is a downside. A part of the charm of this art form used to be its accessibility – all anybody needed to make comics were some paper and a few pencils and pens. But these days more and more of the comics' artists with any real ambition don't use pencils and paper for anything more than making preliminary sketches. But modern tools like Wacom tablets that enable digital drawing and software like Photoshop, not to mention computers one needs to use them with, literally cost thousands of times more than paper and pens ever did. Even the artists who do choose to continue working on paper need access to a decent scanner at the very least. Thus, the digital era has made comics as an art form less accessible to possible creators.

On the other hand it could be said that Internet has enabled comics to be more accessible to readers than ever before. But it seems that the "unlimited audience" offered by the web often proves to be little more than an illusion – almost certainly for those who are still seeking their fame. Obscure unpublished comics aren't really among the most popular phenomena on the web. (It should be mentioned that only a fraction of the people who read famous and popular comic strips in daily newspapers ever bother to look at them when reading the online versions of the same papers.) However, internationally famous and high-quality comics are sought after: although the official homepages at best offer a few free samples of the artist's work, it is not difficult to find and download good scans of whole albums and series from other people's computers, using the Internet's common file-sharing engines. This form of web piracy obviously does not make any publishers happy, but can please people from places with limited access to actual printed comics – one of such places happens to be Estonia, where there's hardly any other honest way to obtain comic books and graphic novels than buying them over the Internet from other countries. Thus, for someone with enough time and determination, the Internet is in fact a good place for satisfying one's interest in comics – the Internet shops give a chance to buy them legally and the file-sharing programs a chance to get them for free. Whether the latter option creates new fandom and growing readership, or in fact pushes even the so-far faithful paying comics customers into trying to get their treats for free, is a source for argument. Since the international industry's overall sales balance hasn't changed much in the recent years, it probably works both ways.

One field the option of publishing comics on the web has certainly helped are international contacts within the world's comics community. If you live in an obscure little country and make a webpage presenting your comics, it is quite likely that the people from other countries who bother to come and see have common interests with you. A good example of this is the Stripburger group from Ljubljana, Slovenia, who started out about a decade ago with little money but a lot of enthusiasm and ambition, relying heavily on their website, and have now evolved into a publishing house with the power to determine what the rest of the world knows about Eastern European comics. With the help of the Internet, Stripburek has built a network of contacts covering a huge area of previously uncharted comics territory from Estonia to Serbia to Kazakhstan, and has granted to the best comics artists from those countries a chance to get their works printed in book-shaped anthologies like Stripburek or Warburger, that are then distributed all over the world. The attention gained through those has for instance given two of the best Estonian comics artists, Veiko Tammjärv and Zildre (both of whose works you can see at the [koomiks.ee](http://koomiks.ee) website, run by Zildre) a chance to show their work on exhibitions in Paris and Berlin, and Zildre will soon be presenting his work at the 2004 Helsinki Sarjakuvafestivaali.

However, this too has a downside. In a country like Estonia where there's little tradition of printing local authors' comics in book form, and the little there was has literally died in the past decade, gaining professional success abroad via having a website gives the artists no particular reason to make an effort and try to get their work into print in their homeland – where hardly anybody is interested. In fact, the best artists now tend to focus on giving their work more chances to get understood abroad: either writing the texts in English or opting for "silent" comics, like Zildre's "Little Warm Hearted Guest" or Tammjärv's "Still Life" and "Connections" (all of those have been published abroad in different Stripburger group's books). So although the Internet has given Estonian comics artists a chance abroad, the situation at home hasn't improved at all. In fact it could be said that the Internet and the available option of having a website has prevented the Estonian comics artists from building a self-publishing tradition – because this would need more effort, it would cost more and why should one bother, if there's no audience interested in buying the results? If we would have had the chance to start building that tradition about a decade before the Internet became an option, like the Finnish did, then maybe we would now enjoy an audience interested in local comics and willing to buy them, and therefore publishers willing to print them just like the Finns do. But now it's too late. From the viewpoint of Estonian comics, the Internet works like an "iron lung" – a vehicle that keeps one from dying, but being forced to rely on it isn't much of a life either.

#### Related internet addresses

<http://www.ljudmila.org/stripcore/warburger>  
<http://www.scottmcloud.com>  
<http://www.hot.ee/koomiks>