

RESEARCH

With, Against or Beyond Print? Digital Comics in Search of a Specific Status

Côme Martin

Université Paris Est – Créteil, Research group TIES, FR
come.martin@u-pec.fr

What are digital comics? The answers to this question are diverse and often contradictory. Since digital comics were first published in the 1990s, it has not always been possible to gather them under a common denominator, apart from what already defines (with difficulty) printed comics. Many digital comics frequently resort to skeuomorphism, a digital reproduction of printed comics' most salient aspects. This shows a deference of digital comics to print: some scholars see in digital comics only a technological variation of pre-existent means of distribution.

Should digital comics move away from print to earn their own place? Are digital comics lacking a masterpiece that could establish their legitimacy? Should they exploit the potentialities of digital art and offer interactivity, moving images, new formats to gain their independence? This article argues that asking these questions is to try to reconcile the disparities of digital comics and see how scholars, cartoonists and publishers all try to give digital comics a specific status, for different reasons, but sharing a common goal.

Keywords: digital comics; specificity; turbomedia; skeuomorphism; infinite canvas

I started my research for this article with what is, for me, scientifically obvious: a scholar must question the blind spots of his discipline, even (and perhaps specifically) when those uncertain areas resist all serious investigation. The field of digital comics is the uncertain area I will deal with here; the difficulty begins right before one enters it since its very name proves problematic. Indeed, it seems naïve to pretend to be able to precisely define what digital comics are, even though this definition is needed as a basis for exploration. One can start with Anthony Rageul's observation, in 2009, that 'digital comics' is a very vague term:

There is no 'official' terminology to talk about the medium which is our subject here. Conventionally, a series of terms are often used. Édouard Lussan calls his *Opération Teddy Bear* an interactive comic. Laurène Steiff uses the term e-BD, by analogy with the e-mail. Online comics are either called as such or webcomic[s] (incidentally, the website webcomics.fr is French), or BD/I by Thierry Smolderen. One also finds the terms multimedia comics and digital comics (2009: 19, my translation).

Confronted with this obstacle, Rageul was more straightforward in 2014: 'Digital comics don't have the same substance as comics do, but are not another known medium either, they are therefore a new medium' (2014: 18, footnote 19).

To write, in 2017, that digital comics constitute a multiple and shifting form is self-evident and in agreement with the observations of many scholars about digital literature in general. Digital works can be read on a computer screen, on a tablet or a Smartphone, each device changing our way of reading them: Nolwenn Tréhondart notes that they are available as digitized books in PDF format (what is called the 'homothetic form'), as EPUB files, as a form augmented by the addition of different medias, as downloadable applications or as websites in which paratext is more or less diegetic (2013: 42). Those various avatars show that the terminological field is too large and probably should be more limited.

However, there is one constant in all these forms: no matter if they are adaptations, transpositions or creations, because they are designated as 'digital comics' these works cannot completely be separated from the printed medium which preceded them and which, in many cases still, locks ontological questions in a fake duality between print and digital. It is this duality I will first examine; I will analyze the skeuomorphic presence of the printed book in digital creation and show how digital comics today are still mostly conceived *with* the printed medium, and why this is problematic. I will then study digital comics which position themselves *against* print, by displaying devices that stretch the digital medium towards its limits. Limits are what I will discuss last: by presenting the digital comics which are conceived as

something *beyond* print, I will try to determine whether this 'beyond' is reachable and if digital comics can be considered a specific medium.

Digital Comics *With* Print: The Hegemony of Skeuomorphism

Most of our digital reading practices, including reading digital comics, borrow from the skeuomorphic image of the book. This term comes from the Greek 'skeuos' (costume, ornament, decoration) and 'morphos' (form, external appearance); in the design field, skeuomorphism is used to describe 'a visual element whose form is not directly related to its function, but which reproduces in an ornamental way an element that was necessary in the original object; for instance interface elements reproducing physical objects' (Graphéine 2013: n. pag., my translation). On an iOS-powered device, one can find for instance the notebook icon used for the 'Notes' app, the clapperboard icon for the 'Videos' app or the open book icon for the 'iBooks' app.

The form of the printed book is in fact reproduced both in the digital book's appearance, and its navigation. It is significant that digital and printed comics are distinguished only by adding an adjective to the former (the latter is often designated without any adjectives, since it is considered the standard). As Anaïs Guilet writes about digital literature, 'whether we call them *ebooks*, "enriched books" or "augmented books", all these terms show the difficulty of conceiving the diffusion of the text outside of the unavoidable cultural paradigm of the book' (2016: n. pag). Similarly, Anthony Rageul writes: 'The terms "digital comics" are still used to improperly refer to traditional comics which have been digitized, with a more or less significant effort of adaptation, for a distribution in a digital format, and which we should simply call *digitized* comics or *online* comics' (2014: 12). That most of the navigation interfaces of epub and PDF files for a long time—though to a lesser extent today—imitated the act of reading a printed page with the animation of the turning of a page (combined with a sound also imitating paper), is another sign of the dependence of the digital to paper.

Even when such artificial devices are not present, the link with the strip and the page, as they conventionally appear in printed comic books, is still strong: many

contemporary works, whatever their form (from webcomics to apps), continue to imitate formats unsuitable for a computer screen, which is a horizontal rectangle whereas the page is most often a vertical one ('landscape' formats being the exception). Thierry Groensteen summarizes the problem quite clearly:

The 'landscape' aspect ratio of the computer screen allows for the display of a double comics page; the comic can also be navigated half a page at a time, with a format that appears enlarged in comparison to its print version. The cell phone screen, in contrast, which is much smaller, can only display one panel at a time. But not all pages can be so easily divided across the middle into two equal halves, and not all panels necessarily fit into a rectangular format that approximately corresponds to the shape of the cell phone screen. The web publishing of a comic originally intended to be read on the printed page can, then, prove to be inadequate and damaging to the format of the work by forcing it to fit into a frame of arbitrary size and shape that bears no relation to its original proportions (2013: 67).

Since the arthrology of the printed page is so central to Groensteen's work, it is no surprise that for him, digital comics (especially when they are displayed panel by panel) harm 'the principle of the page' and 'all the relationships of juxtaposition, organization, and mutual adjustment that it entails, and all the effects of dialogue, braiding, and seriality among panels' which allow comics to 'still [be] displayed within its own spatio-topical system' (2013: 67). I will further on suggest why we should celebrate what Groensteen deplors; for now I will only note that the notion of the page is already harmed when comics are republished in a different format, especially the pocket editions which, in the 1980s–1990s, revealed that the specific medium of comics was often dependent on a specific *format* (see Lesage 2011). Moreover, things get more complicated when one faces the screen of a tablet which can rotate and thus present the reader with layouts that are more or less (in)complete.

One might ask, then, why formats unsuited for the new means of distribution and navigation continue to be used. It is perhaps through habit, both from the creators

and the readers, since 'reading at the limits of our habits', as Bertrand Gervais writes, is often a difficult thing (Gervais 1998). As Julien Baudry summarizes the problem:

If there is one formal constant in comics distributed in the 2000s, it is their heavy debt to the narrative and graphic norms of printed comics. [...] Up to 2009, digital comics in their entirety are formally conceptualized in relation to printed comics. Of course, there are adaptations: the strip sometimes becomes vertical to be more suited to a scrolling navigation. But the codes that the authors have in mind are definitely those of printed comics (2012: n. pag., my translation).

It is also necessary to consider the editorial advantage of a stable format. Anthony Rageul notes that 'original creation [...] often consists of pages or strips which are simply adapted to the format of the screen and to vertical scrolling, easily publishable in books if need be' (2014: 12), which is another aspect of digital comics' obedience to the print medium. A majority of digital creations are not only created on paper but also destined to come back to it: in France, one can mention the rise of 'blogs BD', whose printed version is for many authors the logical conclusion of the creation and remuneration process today, since paying for digital comics is still the exception. When a strip doesn't fit the anticipated print format, it is the printed form that must be changed, as was the case with Boulet's supplement to volume 6 of his series *Notes*, simply titled *Strips*, which gathered horizontal strips that couldn't fit in the books. But this case remains an exception.

There are exceptions in navigation systems to this type of digital comics which are conceived *with*, and even *in accordance with* printed comics; two of them seem to have become generalized systems. On the one hand, monopanel navigation has developed into different variants, from *Les autres gens* to turbomedia, which Malec presents as 'a mix of comics, cartoons and video games' (qtd. in Gindensperger 2013: n. pag.), to comics specifically created for Smartphones, such as Lewis Trondheim's *Bludzee* (which was nonetheless published as a print book later on). On the other hand, scrolling navigation is divided between vertical scrolling (for instance, Bastien

Vivès's notes on his blog, whose format was changed when published in a book, or Boulet's 'The long journey', a vertical strip 150,000 pixels tall—4 relative meters) and horizontal scrolling, an excellent example of which can be found in Marietta Ren's *Phallaina*, a recent app developed in partnership with France Télévisions (**Figure 1**).

These two types of navigation distance themselves from the canonical form of printed comics but don't really innovate: there are many printed comics with only one drawing or panel per page, such as cartoons collections (which explains why a printed version of these digital creations is so easy) and horizontal-scrolling comics like *Phallaina* which resembles a fresco (although those are rare and there isn't, to my knowledge, any printed comics navigated through vertical scrolling). Therefore, it appears necessary to question what is specific to digital comics, starting with their multimediality.

Digital Comics *Against* Print: Specificities or Other Attributes?

In spite of this slightly provocative title, digital comics, even when they are innovative, are not necessarily positioned *against* printed comics to claim their specificity. However, some critics, scholars, creators and distributors frequently use words such as 'innovative', 'unique' or synonyms about those comics, as if they could only exist as novelties, only by favoring daring forms to qualify as narratives.

This is in part the problem of turbomedia, a form of comics close to the slide show, developed by Balak in 2009 (**Figure 2**).

Malec, one of its fiercest supporters, clearly opposes printed and digital comics through the use of turbomedia: 'Turbomedia allows me to mix comics and animation. It's totally different from printed comics, there is no printed version of turbomedia. But if I was asked tomorrow to make a [printed] comic book, I



Figure 1: Marietta Ren, "Phallaina". © Marietta Ren and France Télévisions, 2016.

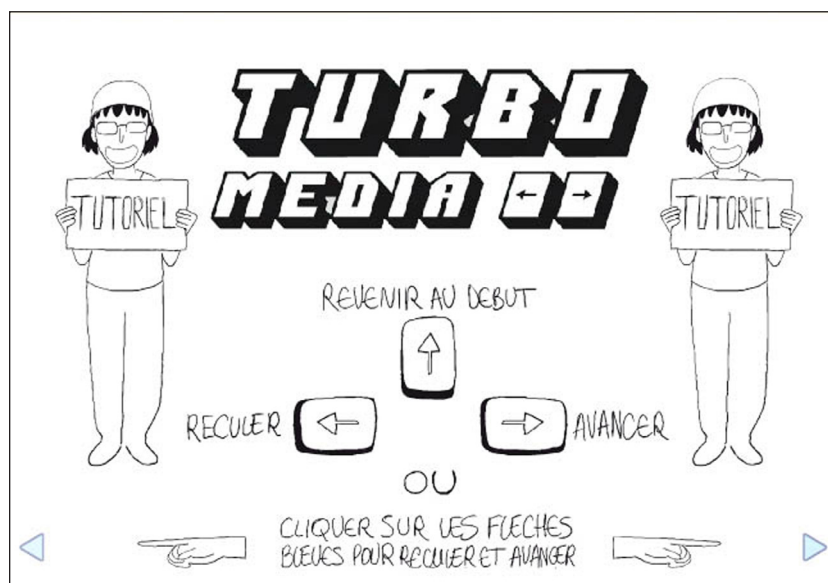


Figure 2: Malec, "Turbo Media". © Malec, 2009.

would!' (quoted in Gindensperger 2013: n. pag., my translation). Besides the fact that the printed publication is once more presented as an ideal, Malec underlines the originality of turbomedia, especially compared to static slide shows: the use of animation. From the moment of its conception, turbomedia has thus appeared as a bridge between comics and animated cinema, as though, when digital comics try to distance themselves from the medium they originated from, it is to better imitate other mediums. For Julien Falgas, turbomedia is 'a format which comes from the audiovisual field, inspired by and destined to comics, and that the art world of occidental comics is adapting to digital screens' (2014: 98, my translation); for him, the weight of the audiovisual is also present in the themes the authors approach and the references they use.

What is at stake for turbomedia is therefore the possibility to position itself as a specific medium, which, according to Anthony Rageul, is feasible thanks to the inherent interactivity of the technique: 'It must remain something you read. Slide shows don't scroll automatically. We are not waiting the end of a "show" (sound, video sequences, long animations). The reader remains in control of her/his reading rhythm. However, it is possible to include very short and cyclical, or inter-page-screen, animated sequences'

(2014: 97). In other words and to use more technical terms, in Rageul's strict definition, for turbomedia not to transform into one of its parent mediums, it should contain only animation loops or heterochronic animations, as characterised by Philippe Marion: 'In a heterochronic context, the reception time is not programmed by the media, it isn't part of its enunciative strategy. Books, the printed press, advertisements, photography, comics: all are heterochronic spaces, meaning that the period of message consumption is not mediatically integrated, it is not part of the emission time' (1997: 82). Marion opposes the homochronic context to the heterochronic context, the former 'incorporat[ing] the time of reception in the enunciation of its messages [...] conceived to be received in an intrinsically programmed period' (1997: 82); this is the case in for example television, radio and film. This distinction is crucial because it allows us to place digital animated comics on the side of printed comics, from which they would only differ in the way they display images without questioning its reading modalities. In the case of turbomedia, one must add the (mild) interactivity of the technique since it is necessary to click or press a key to see the next picture (or series of pictures), a movement similar to moving the hand on the trackpad or the mousewheel to scroll (horizontally or vertically) through a digital strip.

It is obvious that the slide show, in all its variants and particularly in its turbomedia guise, has, ever since its creation, become a new possible standard format. As Anthony Rageul observes: 'Formerly only constraints, recommendations have become rules, conventions; and the turbomedia has become one of the standard formats of digital comics, which has even been exported since Marvel uses it for its digital catalog, under the name of "Infinite Comics"' (2014: 79). Indeed, not only has there been a rise of digital comics using turbomedia but also different versions of the format have emerged, as a member of a digital authors' message board explains:

There are currently three 'schools' of Turbomedia:

1. The first defends narrative sequencing as the basis of turbo[media] and thinks limiting animations and sounds allows for a more comfortable reading experience. The screen remains divided into panels and they

- appear every time you click/tap. The comics reader wants to read, not to watch a cartoon (see for instance [...] Pax Arena, MediaEntity, le Mal-Aimé, everything Marvel Comics currently does in this area, etc.).
2. The second argues that, on the contrary, the use of animation should be maximized, even if it means replacing panel sequencing by a Flash-animated sequences. There is often only one picture—animated or not—on the screen with each click/tap (see [...] the BlogaMalec, Azuria, etc.).
 3. The last one is a global stance: since we are in front of a screen (a computer, a tablet or a Smartphone), we might as well exploit all possibilities of the medium: turbomedia will come with sound, animated effects of all kinds and may even include video-only sequences (this particular type of turbomedia can be associated with what the Americans do with MadeFire) (Hcreach 2015: n. pag., my translation).

There are, therefore, different gradations in the relation between turbomedia and printed comics, from the first school which remains close to conventional navigation within the medium to the third one which attempts to distance itself from the opposition between fixed and animated picture (an opposition which could be defined as comparing comics and cinema) by embracing multimediality.

The addition of sound in particular is interesting because it is not inherent to turbomedia and can be found in other types of digital comics, and also because the emulation of sound has remained a constant of comics since their creation. The use of sounds in digital comics is, even more than for animated images, considered as a duality: either sound lessens the reading experience, or enhances it. This is, in any case, how Thierry Groensteen presents things in *Comics and Narration*: for him, there is a contradiction between ‘the concrete, measurable time of motion and sound, and the indefinite, abstract time of comics narration’ (2013: 70). It is true that sound, in digital comics, is *added* to speech or narration rather than *substituting* them. However, it depends on the type of sound considered: as there are many uses of text in comics, there are also different types of sound uses, from recited text to sound effects to

background music. In the case of *Phallaina*, for instance, the ambient music which accompanies each chapter hardly gets in the way of reading: on the contrary, because it consists of loops, it is also immersed in an indefinite and abstract time and would thus enrich the reading experience if we were to strictly follow Groensteen's logic.

Are digital comics transformed into something else if sound is added to them? I think that answering this question would necessarily imply a subjective opinion as well as reading preferences, or a conflict of definitions which goes beyond the scope of this article. I will simply point out that printed comics themselves evolved from other mediums, like caricature drawing, before they became their own means of expression. Therefore, it is not surprising that digital comics use the devices that preceded them, and Anthony Rageul says the same in the introduction to his PhD dissertation:

Comics are nowadays making their way on digital platforms just like they made their way, before that, on various printed platforms, without changing its nature. More precisely, their 'codes', their system are not radically transformed: transformations happen in the margins or consist in inverting tendencies (like the page format for the album instead of the strip format in a newspaper) but they do not challenge what it means to tell a story through comics' (2014: 16, my translation).

This quote could be read as an admission of powerlessness: because digital comics cannot distance themselves from the printed page, whether they are thought of in its continuity or its opposition, they cannot claim to be part of a fully-fledged medium. To reach this status, it is probably necessary to determine what is specific to digital comics.

Comics *Beyond* Print: Assets and Obstacles to Specificity

In 2002, Scott McCloud, in *Reinventing Comics*, predicted that future technologies would multiply the way a story could be told in drawings. Fifteen years later, it is obvious that, apart from turbomedia and the systemization of a couple of interactive devices, digital comics have hardly imposed their specificity. Is it because they continue getting closer to or imitating other medias? Many scholars, amongst them Elsa Caboche, think so:

The way digital comics want to add multimedia devices presents a serious problem: it adds new perceptive dimensions to a medium which doesn't need them to tell a story. Sounds, movement, cut scenes or playability run the risk of turning comics into something they're not: a cartoon, a clip or a video game. A corrective use of multimedia to alleviate a supposed deficiency of the reading experience can turn out to be playful, but doesn't have a lot of narrative interest, and will have trouble avoiding awkward integrations from an aesthetic point of view (2014: 48, my translation).

Of course, those are only problems if one considers comics to be mainly narrative, which is another discussion entirely. Moreover, the risks Caboche evokes are maybe less important for comics which are, after all, a hybrid medium by definition, than for literature which doesn't usually involve pictures. If a story in pictures can make do with the intrusion of text, why couldn't it handle the inclusion of sound or movement?

To move away from these questions and try to reach a point *beyond* this issue, I would like to conclude by evoking two possibilities that digital technology offers comics and which don't seem to be borrowed from other medias or uses, like video games. Indeed, in *Bande dessinée et narration*, Thierry Groensteen lists several strengths of the digital, among them the infinite canvas, and the appearance.

The infinite canvas was theorized by Scott McCloud in *Reinventing Comics*: 'In a digital environment, there's no reason a 500 panel story can't be told vertically – or horizontally [...] or [...] in virtually any size and shape' (2000: 223). One could thus go beyond the constraint of the rectangular page and imagine every possible way of navigating through the story, from progressive zooming to scrolling to branching-out narratives. To use the infinite canvas is to remember that the screen (tactile or not) is only a virtual one, contrary to those that the printed form imposes, and that its porous limits can and should be questioned. A striking example of the infinite canvas used through this lens is found in one of Randall Munroe's strips on his website *XKCD*, which frequently uses digital devices to produce Oubapian webcomics (**Figure 3**).

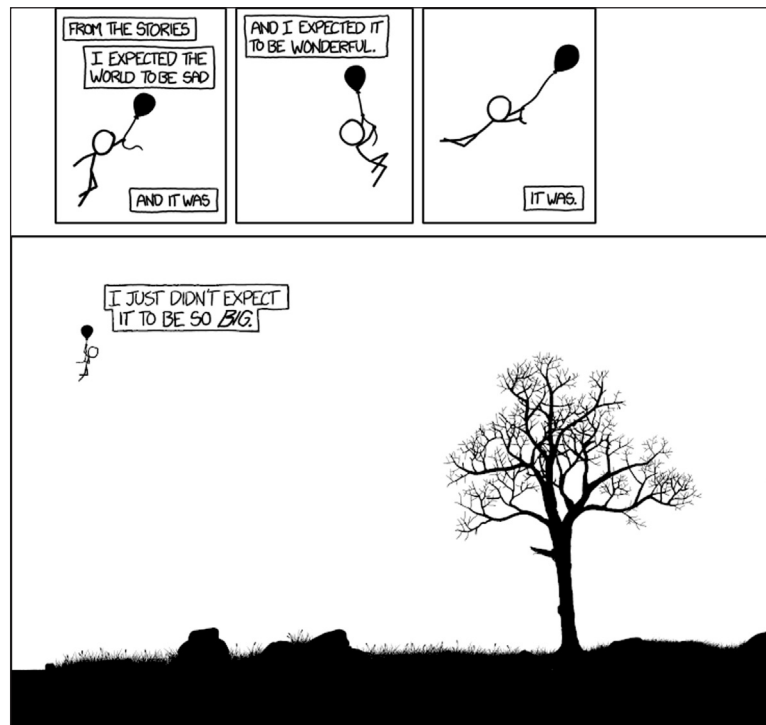


Figure 3: XKCD, "Click and Drag". © Randall Munroe, 2012.

In the strip entitled 'Click and Drag', the reader first thinks she is reading a perfectly conventional strip until the title entices her to try and drag the last panel. Only then does she realize the digital strip doesn't exactly obey the same codes as the printed strip, since its last panel measures roughly 43 relative meters by 21; but the humongous image remains circumscribed in a panel too small for it, which underlines how important frames (and framing) are in comics. It is also interesting to note with this example that the infinite canvas, though theoretically a limitless space, is in fact necessarily limited by the amount of content a cartoonist will choose to put in it (Munroe's strip being the largest example I could find as of February 2017).

The appearance devices described by Groensteen also use the very nature of the digital screen. More precisely, Groensteen distinguishes appearance (of a new detail, of a panel...) from variation, a distinction he describes as follows: "Thus, the reader could choose to see the same panel in colors or black and white, or as a sketch. The work of the cartoonist can be further documented if a click gives access to the

photo or archive document it could be inspired by. We have here a glimpse of a possible critical edition hidden underneath the work itself' (2011: 79). The adjective 'dissimulated' is particularly interesting, since what is at stake here is the surface of the screen. Indeed, if a book's volume can sometimes be foregrounded, for instance in Jean-Paul Eid's *Le Fond du trou*, a comic book pierced by a hole from cover to cover, this volume is still present but dissimulated in the case of the digital. Many scholars specialized in this field oppose, in this case, the notions of surface and fluidity, as Luc Dall'Armellina does, to stress the fugacity of any content displayed on a screen (since a click or a tap can make this content disappear) (2003: 325). Bertrand Gervais reveals another opposition when he notes how navigation functions in a digital work: 'One navigates the sea; that is, one remains on the surface of a place which still has a density and depth, even if they are different from dry land. It's essential to learn not only to navigate but also to dive and explore the shallow seas, to do something else than just register texts' (2002: 14).

One doesn't navigate *through* but *on* a digital work: in contrast with print content, which one can touch, digital content remains protected behind a screen whose surface can only be brushed. For digital comics to be separated from printed comics, maybe they would, paradoxically, need to get closer to them and offer their reader, thanks to a technology yet to be invented, the possibility to wander and get lost, deeply, into the works.

Conclusions

In the end, what are digital comics? The question may remain unanswered because the potential answers, like the media they refer to, constantly mutate. What seems more tangible, however, are its links with printed comics, an ancestor difficult to ignore, with which it keeps struggling. Anthony Rageul reminds us that the printed medium was never completely stable and that it is therefore unsurprising that the same instability is at the heart of the digital paradigm:

Historically, all transitions from one printed medium to another have had their share of consequences on the forms, the narration and even the content; among other things, because every different printed medium

implies a different editorial paradigm, which influences the comics medium. The newspaper only has space for a strip, daily or weekly. Because of the periodicity and pagination of the comics magazine, short stories stand alongside 'to be continued' serials. Comics conceived for a book can do without the chaptering necessary to the serial. Different mediums mean different stories told in a different way. But the transition to the digital implies more radical changes which turn the medium into something more experimental (2014: 82, my translation).

Those practices, which end up deconstructing the 'principle of the page' dear to Groensteen (2013: 72) by questioning the text-image opposition and the concept of the page's site, need to be encouraged, because it is by experimenting them that digital comics can find their specificity.

I'm not sure, however, if this specificity is yet to be created; it is difficult to know whether somewhere in the depths of digital space, a work like this doesn't already exist, since there are so many. What digital comics lack, in fact, are maybe not the masterpieces that could be brandished as ideal examples of its singularity, but scholars and critics able to find them. If there truly is one distinct aspect of digital comics, it is the timorousness with which, contrary to their elder, they are today considered by medias, whether they are generalist or specialized.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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