

# Visual Communities: Comics in Interaction

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## ABSTRACT

A growing number of online communities create or share visual imagery. In a few of these communities, visual imagery is used to support interaction. However, studies of online communities have often focused on text exchange. In contrast, this study describes a community centered on web-based comic strips created and shared by its members. These comics provide a unique mechanism for interaction. The discussion analyzes emergent themes and suggests design considerations for facilitating interaction in other visual communities.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.3 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces – *Web-based interaction*.

## General Terms

Design, Human Factors.

## Keywords

Visual interaction, virtual community, digital comics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of online communities has traditionally relied on the study of textual interaction. However, as users of the web have become more sophisticated, the use of visual imagery has expanded. Increasingly, individuals are using images to engage others on the web in ‘conversation’. Kurlander et al. [4] saw evidence that users were using graphics for online communication and, notably, not merely to augment or enrich a conversation. Rather, like the early LucasFilm’s Habitat [6] shows, Kurlander et al. [4] recognize a trend where graphics serve as a “first-class form of communication”, “essential, not merely ornamental”.

Today, it is clear that visual imagery as a primary form of communication under-girds a number of community supporting platforms (photo-sharing, webcams, online games, and visual blogs). Kurlander et al. envision great communicative potential in comics, from chat rooms to instruction, interaction, collaborative fiction, MUD-interfaces, and agent-interfaces. Has this been realized today? And if so, what lessons can it teach us about designing for online communities that use a visual medium, that is, what lessons are there for visual communities?

Our site of study is an online community where members create and exchange online comics. The site supports comics as well as traditional text interaction among the members. We describe some key features of this community. This description grounds the subsequent discussion of members’ interaction. We illustrate how interaction flows between the traditional text and comic modes. We identify general themes in comics and interaction and close

with design suggestions for considerations for facilitating interaction in this and other visual communities. This work adds to existing work on digital comics [4,5,8].

## 2. CHOICE OF SITE

We sought out online communities that use comics as a “first-class form of communication” [4]. Our interest was to examine the impact of the comic-form on interaction. We defined ‘interaction’ as any pattern of statement and response between two or more participants. A key element of such a site is the capacity for *anyone* to create a comic, irrespective of artistic ability. Given this criteria, we targeted sites with automated comic generation tools. We found a handful such places: Comic Chat [4] IRC servers, flickr accounts with comics generated by Comic Life (a desktop application by plasq), and websites that allow users to generate comics via forms (Stripcreator.com uses stock images from well-known webcomics; Gnomz.com allows users to compose characters from parts—features, clothing, gender, etc...).

Although these sites all used the comic format, they were largely dissimilar. First, the use of comics was different: Some –Comic Life, Stripcreator, and Gnomz– focused on comics as a publication. Some –Gnomz again and Comic Chat– clearly afforded interaction via comics. Secondly, the feature sets were varied: Comic Chat was a synchronous chat system. It analyzed the chat text and automatically positioned the cartoon characters and their expressions. Comic Life allowed the use of photos, and comics typically fell in the photo-comic genre. Stripcreator fixed the number of panels and stock characters. Gnomz had highly custom characters in comparison and had strips of arbitrary length. Finally, the amount of interaction was different: only Gnomz had a noteworthy number of comic-based interactions. Comic Chat servers were largely empty. Other sites had many comics, but few to no responses to their posted comics. In interest of observing interaction, we chose not to study Comic Life or Stripcreator. We chose to study the Gnomz site because of the amount of interaction in it. We believe that our findings in this site represent instances of comic-interaction that can occur on these other sites and are emerging as patterns of visual interaction.

## 3. METHOD

We chose participant observation [2] as our method of inquiry to permit us to discover and observe unexpected forms of interaction. On one hand, this is a narrow definition: we sought merely to record interaction rather than produce a comprehensive ethnography of the community. However, due to the visual (rather than textual) nature of the medium, there was a broad range of possible interaction patterns. The software did not have an explicitly coded “response” for comics the same way that forums,

listservs, or Usenet have for text messages. Therefore, more quantitative methods were not appropriate at this stage of inquiry. The community was visited daily for a 30-day period. Each day, we made field notes on the most recent comic posts and new forum messages, using a lens of ‘interaction’ as described above.

## 4. THE GNOMZ SITE

Gnomz is a web based community that allows members to create customized comic strips using prefabricated characters and backdrops. Members can share their comics, discuss them in forums, and leave comments for one another.

### 4.1 Creating a Comic

In Gnomz, members create and post web comics publicly. To create a comic, members use a web-tool to create strips one panel at a time. The comic’s author can select a backdrop and up to two characters to appear in the panel. Gnomz provides premade characters or the author can create custom ones. Members can vote and comment on the comic. Published comics can be emailed to friends, copied, and posted to other web pages. Members who like the work of a specific comic author can subscribe to him.

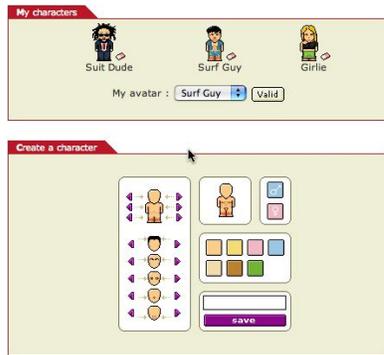


Figure 1. Create an avatar or a new character.

### 4.2 Character Creation

Each member can create an avatar to represent himself in the community. In Gnomz, the avatar accompanies every textual utterance. All text appears in a speech bubble from author’s avatar. Users create avatars through a web page dialog (Figure 1). The same page and controls used to create avatars permit the user to create a cast of custom characters for his comics.

## 5. INTERACTION WITH COMICS

Gnomz has been in operation since August 2004. By March 2005, members had created a total of 1,138 comic strips. As of June 2005, the English version was hosting an average of 66 newly published strips a day and has over 33,000 community members registered. Members appear primarily European and fairly young in age, mixed in gender. Ages range from the tweens to twenties with some in their thirties. The English users appear primarily from the UK, and French users from France.

The Gnomz community is a place to meet, share things in common, and interact with friends. Members join to spend time here, play games (e.g., rhyming games, role-playing), flame or defend one another. There is a mutual support network. A few members have advice forums that function like “Dear Abby”, answering questions and providing advice about love, sex, parents, and friends. So far, observed interaction uncover three

ways in which the community used comics to interact. (1) **Identity:** Comics include members’ avatars and their friends’ avatars. (2) **Comics-to-Text:** Comics initiate conversations. (3) **Cross-Mode:** Comics continue conversations started in the forums and pass the conversation back to the forums.

### 5.1 Identity in Comics: Self and Other

Prior research on online identity [1,7] recognize the potential for users to invest themselves deeply in their online avatars. In Gnomz, this investment is manifest in their textual and visual identities. Usernames and avatars can reflect real life names and personal interests. Gnomz members change their avatars, share tips, and share techniques with select friends on customization – a mark of seniority is to have an avatar that regular users cannot construct using the default web-tool.

Notably, we found that the users involve their friends (and enemies) via comics: recreating others’ avatars manually and inserting them in a comic. This is a highly intimate use of another’s identity. The impact of this behavior is in how personal it is: the author is literally putting words in another’s mouth and making them act. Unlike graphical MMORPGs today, this is not a case where multiple players play a quest together, each one in control of their actions. Rather, this is akin to the collaborative storytelling found in early, text-based MUDs [3]. The author generates a group manuscript, engaging others in textual and visual play (with or without their permission). The comic excerpt in Figure 2 shows *Geeksquash* (all names anonymized) invading a castle with his friend, *MARIOKong*. *bonky1* and *bonk34* are also members of Gnomz, but are portrayed in conflict with the other two. As the author of this comic, *Geeksquash* made decisions on how to portray (ennoble or ridicule) others using their own avatars. Avatar insertion, together with storytelling, appears to be a provocative way of interacting visually. Other examples of such insertion include “mockumentaries” of other people, comic gifts, and insults, in addition to this group-story example.

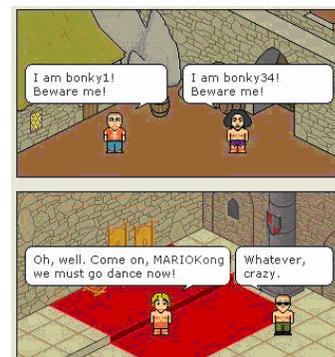


Figure 2. Comic excerpt with avatar insertion. The writer is on the left side of the lower panel.

### 5.2 Comic-to-Text Interactions

A comic can initiate a conversation that continues in text. Members respond to a comic through comments and forum posts. In one example, *macguyver* wrote a comic to insult another member, *Tetonic\_Afterburner*. The initial comments both applauded and derided the comic. The comments continue with a relatively long flame war, all framed by the topic of the initial

comic. We observed discussions of artistic technique, plagiarism, and comic critiques, initiated by comic and continued in text.

### 5.3 Cross-Mode Conversations

More complicated conversations are those that migrate among comics, comments, and forums. Here, the users appear to seek the best medium for the moment, such as forums for conversation and comics for storytelling. For example, *brusselsprout* wrote a comic inserting himself and another member, *allison12*. In the comic, he threw a virtual parade for *allison12*, depicting her in it. Here the conversation started in the forums (“alli did you read my comic for you?” [forum post]), moved to the comic (“Today i have given you alli, a very special treat!” “I just want to say how grateful i am! Thanx bs!” [comic panel]), and returned to the forum (“yeah its good thnx” [forum post]). Notice *brusselsprout* wrote *allison12*’s dialogue in the comic, we discuss this later.

### 5.4 Comic-to-Comic Conversations

We expected members to respond in comic form to others’ comics. No comic-to-comic conversations were observed, likely because this was not afforded and we found no workarounds.

## 6. ANALYSIS

Our observations focused on a virtual community that showed emergent trends of interaction. We have seen two overall themes. These shape understanding of the impact of comics on interaction.

The first theme is of visual identity. There is a strong connection between the character-driven nature of comics and the use of avatars online. Members used the affordances of the software to create personalized avatars and insert self and others into comics.

Secondly, all our examples of comics-interaction have a narrative, story-telling element. Due to form, comics have a natural, narrative progression: one panel proceeds another, portraying one moment to another. Moreover, with respect to narrative, comics are often authored by one voice. This norm of a single author, in concert with the software affordances, prevails in comic-interaction. What emerged was a sub-form where the speaker has exclusive control over how he portrays others. In a sense, the writer is communicating with others by speaking *to* them and about them *in third person*. *brusselsprout*, in the example above, is not merely giving *allison12* a gift; but, by authoring her dialogue (“I just want to say how grateful i am! Thanx bs!”) he is also deciding on and writing out her response for her. And, in her own words, *allison12* does respond in kind (“yeah its good thnx”), though maybe with less enthusiasm. This “puppeteering” raises questions about how recipients will respond to a visual message with their face and someone else’s words for added for them. It is a technique also present in many photo-comics (e.g. those authored by Comic Life); and needs further investigation.

Also, in this community, we see clear examples of interaction that crosses modes. A visual community can be multi-modal, leveraging different formats for different purposes. Thus, while comics-as-interaction may not be as versatile as text or other visual forms, its affordances can be called upon when needed.

## 7. DESIGN SUGGESTIONS

Given our analysis, we give design suggestions for this and other visual communities in support of the noted behavior.

- *Facilitate greater customization and sharing of avatars.* Staying sensitive to novices, expand the avatar tool for greater options (pets, expressions, etc...). Also, a ‘buddy list’ recognizing reciprocity among two or more members could provide a mechanism to signify that a case of avatar insertion was authorized. This can add levels of trust in comics-interaction.
- *Facilitate cross-mode interaction without losing the reader.* For example, provide the ability to embed comics into forum threads, or permit the “response” to a comic to be a new comic.

Additionally, one might design features that facilitate additional genres of interaction exploring how the comics-form and software-affordances interact. For example, support multiple authors, each writing for characters under their control or sharing panels in different stages.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In visual communications, specifically comic-as-interaction, this is an investigation of an existing online community, Gnomz, where such comics-interaction is emerging. We have identified three types of interaction: identity in comics, comic-to-text, and cross-mode conversations. We have contributed to the understanding of how norms about comics align with communicative software affordances to facilitate a *character-driven* and *narrative* form of interaction. Finally, we close with some future-looking design suggestions.

This initial study is a starting investigation of the comics form and visual interaction. It exposes behaviors previously unrecognized. Future research can now examine these behaviors in greater depth: systematic surveys (e.g. how often do authors insert self and others in comics?) and deeper inquiry in participant motives. Visual forms facilitate emergent genres. As these visual genres develop, we hope to chart their course.

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