

A New Storytelling Era: Digital Work and Professional
Identity in the North American Comic Book Industry

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Table of Contents

Abstract	vii
Statement	ix
Acknowledgements.....	x
List of Figures	xi
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background and Context	2
1.3 Theoretical and Analytic Framework	13
1.4 Research Questions and Focus	15
1.5 Overview of the Methodology	17
1.6 Significance	18
1.7 Conclusion and Thesis Outline	20
Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology	21
2.1 Introduction	21
2.2 Theoretical and Analytical Framework	21
2.2.1 Technological Change.....	22
2.2.2 Comic Books and the Creative Industries	23
2.2.3 The Conditions of Creative Work	24
2.2.4 Comic Book Work.....	28
2.2.5 Work and Identity	29
2.2.6 Managing Identity Tension	32
2.2.7 Discourse	34
2.2.8 A Systems Approach.....	39
2.2.9 Socialisation	43
2.2.10 Capital and Risk	44

2.3 Methodology.....	47
2.3.1 Introduction.....	47
2.3.2 Population of Interest	48
2.3.3 Ethical Considerations.....	51
2.3.4 Data Collection	53
2.4 Data Analysis	62
2.4.1 General Inductive Approach.....	62
2.5 Conclusion	67
Chapter 3 – Understanding Comic Book Production.....	69
3.1 Introduction	69
3.2 Print Industry Structure.....	69
3.2.1 Work-for-Hire	72
3.2.2 Diamond	77
3.2.3 Creator-Owned	80
3.3 Roles and the Production Process	84
3.3.1 The Editor	93
3.3.2 The Writer.....	96
3.3.3 The Penciller/Artist	98
3.3.4 The Inker	100
3.3.6 The Letterer.....	105
3.3.7 Simple vs. Complex Creative Production	106
3.4 Conclusion	112
Chapter 4 - Becoming a Comic Book Worker	114
4.1 Introduction	114
4.2 “Breaking In” and Survival Stories – The Narratives That Drive Expectations.....	114

4.3 Motivations For Becoming A Creator	118
4.3.1 Love of Comics.....	118
4.3.2 Communicators	123
4.3.3 Comics As a Job	126
4.4 Education.....	131
4.5 Breaking In Experiences	141
4.5.1 Showing Work and Becoming Known	143
4.5.2 Social Capital and Networks	146
4.6 Surviving The Comic Book Industry	152
4.7 Conclusion	156
Chapter 5 – The Digital Comic Book Industry	158
5.1 Introduction	158
5.2 The Print Industry Structure	159
5.3 Digital Industry Structure.....	160
5.4 A Chronology of Digital Comic Development	162
5.5 Industrial Transition Factors	169
5.5.1 Digital Piracy	169
5.5.2 Redistribution of Power	174
5.5.3 Resurgent Print Market?	179
5.6 Existing Publishers’ Digital Strategies	182
5.7 New Publishers’ Digital Strategies	192
5.8 Conclusion	201
Chapter 6 Socialising Creators to Digital Comics through the Reactive and Relational Discourse.....	204
6.1 Introduction	204
6.2 ‘Poor Work’	205

6.3 Discursive Framework.....	209
6.4 Reactive Discourse.....	211
6.5 Relational Discourse	215
6.6 Good Work.....	220
6.7 Digital Comics as Venture Labour	226
6.8 Audience Construction	232
6.9 Conclusion	238
Chapter 7 Socialisation of Tensions in Digital Production by Creators.....	239
7.1 Introduction	239
7.2 Pioneer Creators	240
7.3 The Political Economy of Socialisation	243
7.4 Digital Production Tools	247
7.5 New Digital Production.....	256
7.5.1 A Reconceptualisation of Time.....	257
7.5.2 A Stable Core	261
7.5.3 A Continuing Business Model	263
7.5.4 A Development of New Conventions.....	267
7.5.5 A Revitalisation of Older Practices	276
7.5.6 A Contract With The Audience	284
7.6 Conclusion	286
Chapter 8 Conclusion: Technological Change and the Management of Risk by Comics Creatives	288
Reference List.....	301
Appendices	361
Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet.....	362
Appendix B: Interview Consent Form.....	364

Appendix C: Complete List of Participants	366
Appendix D: Conference Data List.....	368
Appendix E.1: Original Interview Questions (Experienced creators).....	370
Appendix E.2: Original Interview Questions (New creators) ...	371
Appendix F: Sample of Additional and Follow-up Questions .	373
Appendix G: Example of Coding Process	374

Abstract

This thesis investigates how creative industries workers adapt to and influence the use of new digital technologies. It looks at how these technologies affect business models, content production and product distribution in the comics industry, and how these changes create uncertainty and risk for creative workers in this industry. It examines the strategies comics creators use to shape new industry structures and the status of digital comics within the wider industry, as well as their own identities as media industry workers.

The study uses data from interviews and historical documents to compare the experiences of editors, writers, pencillers, inkers, colourists, letterers and new digital workers who are creating content at two existing print publishers and two new digital companies to develop a theory of the creators' 'adaptation framework'. The adaptation framework recognises the influence of historically and culturally constructed discussions about what constitutes 'good work' in the comics industry and the influence this has on the adoption of new forms of digital technology for comics' production. Critical judgment and public validation of choices made regarding the use of digital technologies encourages creators to reframe their work identity and the content they produce.

This analytical framework highlights the availability of different professional identity categories, including a 'core' identity and guiding values, plus a supplementary 'pioneer' identity, which acknowledges the creative freedom offered by digital media. Creators also use discursive practices, such as 'reactive' and 'relational' positioning, to manage their identity in relation to the field of comics production and to distance their work from negative evaluations of digital comics derived from historical exemplars of what are now perceived to be 'poor works', and by extension poor work by the creator. Periods of change throw

into relief existing understandings held by workers and consumers of what constitutes a 'good' comic book. Early digital comics projects from the 1990s and 2000s influence creators' perceptions of whether digital technologies can produce such 'good works'.

Pioneers and early adopters take on the role of experts and advocates, engaging in the process of socialising the new discourses and practices into the broader field of comics production. The pioneer identity is correlated with the privatisation and individualisation of risk, whereby creators invest their human, social, and symbolic capital in projects that have uncertain outcomes in exchange for creatively challenging careers and potentially reputation-building work. The pioneers are open to change, but their previous print-based identity often provides stability to their core identity as creators capable of producing 'good work'. Creators rely on these identities to orient themselves in relation to the new norms, practices and routines of comic book work, engaging in identity management to manage the risk that their investment in skill development and time spent producing digital comics will not produce a return on investment measured through financial or social capital recognised in the industry. Adaptation to digital work forces aspects of the creator's identity to change, but their core understanding of who they are, what they do, and why they do it is still a valuable and sustaining element of their identity as a creative worker.

Keywords: Identity, comic books, creative work, digitisation, risk

Statement

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List of Figures

Figure 1 Example of swipe-based storytelling in <i>The Eighth Seal</i> by writer James Tynion IV and artist Jeremy Rock.....	10
Figure 2 Cheque supplied to artist Dick Ayers in 1974 by Marvel.....	74
Figure 3 Breakdown of the print comic book production process.....	87
Figure 4 comiXology homepage with Marvel and DC tabs.....	178
Figure 5 Top search results for 'comics' in iPad app store	179
Figure 6 Completed sequence from <i>Deadpool: The Gauntlet #3</i>	217
Figure 7 Comparison between Character art and final Madefire build.	254
Figure 8 Separated art layers from <i>Houses of the Holy: Episode 2</i> in Photoshop before being imported into the Madefire tool.....	259
Figure 9 Marvel Infinite and Print Comic Script Comparison.....	277
Figure 10 Artist direction to Madefire Builders.....	282