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

By

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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The study uses data from interviews and historical documents to compare the experiences of editors, writers, pencillers, inkers, colourists, letterers and new digital workers who are creating content at two existing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 privitisation 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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Date

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis investigates the impact of technological transition on media workers with particular focus on those working in the comic book industry. The Internet and other digital technologies have modified the production, distribution and consumption of media content, which has altered the experience of work for media professionals, including those working in comics. Tablet devices and the continued growth of smartphones have been catalysts for a renewed focus on the future of the comic book industry and the role of digital technology in that future. I examine the public and private discourses of comic book creators who work in the American comic book industry to understand how media workers self-understanding, their professional identity, helps them to understand and adapt to periods of media change. This thesis is particularly interested in how comic book workers influence and are influenced by digitisation in the comic book industry. The comic book industry is important because the work of comic book publishers and creators has a cultural impact that exceeds the confines of the industry, having a particular influence on the content produced in the film and television industry.

The thesis employs a professional identity framework to explore these issues because questions such as ‘who am I’, ‘who do I want to be’, ‘what is important to me’ and, most importantly when looking at work, ‘how can my work advance these values’ (Ghassan, Bohemia, & Stappers, 2011) are increasingly significant for understanding the place of work in late modern society. The relationship an individual has to their work is important. As Kenny et al. (2011, 70) say:

> One of the first things that people in modern societies tend to ask strangers in a social situation, such as a party or a business

> function, is: ‘what do you do?’ The job that we do…is one of the most defining aspects of our identities. In other words, what we do is intimately linked to who we think we are.

Questions and answers tied to work form an individual’s fundamental understanding of self-identity (Du Gay, 1997), which then acts back through a process of structuration to influence changes in the industries that provide the context for these working lives (Giddens, 1979). This analysis of the labour experience of comic book workers and their response to the employment risks associated with the shift to digital production can be applied across media industries. It helps us understand how periods of change are not technologically determined in any simplistic sense, but influenced by individuals who interact with technology via particular self-identity characteristics. Analysis of these experiences helps us explore the tensions in creative work and the way creators internalise the risks of media work during a period of digital change.

This chapter presents an overview of the thesis. It introduces the aims of the research and the second section explores the background of the topic to provide context and a deeper rationale for pursuing this line of inquiry. The third section briefly introduces the study’s theoretical framework, which guides the analysis. The fourth section introduces the guiding research questions and focus of the study, while the fifth section discusses the methodology utilised. The sixth section establishes the significance of the research presented. The final section outlines the structure for the rest of the thesis.

1.2 Background and Context

The comic book industry has shifted from a mass medium, with circulation ranging from 756,000,000 to one billion issues in the 1950s

(Lopes, 2009, 57) to a niche one, where the top 300 comics sold a combined 84.51 million copies in 2013 (Miller, 2014). Previously served by a limited network of comic book shops, known as the direct market, the print-based comic book industry is looking increasingly towards new digital formats and platforms for growth.

Tablet devices, initially viewed with trepidation by technology journalists due to their lack of telephone functions or support for Adobe Flash (Dilger, 2011 and Schlender, 2010), are now expected to boast a global install base of 905 million devices by 2017 (Forrester Blog, 2013). Smartphones were similarly viewed with trepidation by the comic book industry, but their increased screen size and improved image quality make them also a more attractive and potentially lucrative avenue for distribution. The app-based market of mobile devices has attracted content producers, including the comic book industry, because, as comScore reported in May 2012, app use among mobile users had surpassed web use on their devices (Perez, 2012). Gardner and Davis's (2013) 'app generation', youth who are increasingly connected and consuming digital content through apps are the new valuable audience for content producers.

Apple's App Store now features over 1 million approved apps that users have downloaded over 60 billion times, providing US$13 billion in payments to developers (Ingraham, 2013). Currently, over 700 million iOS enabled devices have shipped worldwide. Google's Play Store features over 1.2 million approved apps, achieving roughly 80 billion downloads (Yale, 2014) and providing payments of over US$5 billion to developers (Bonanos, 2014). Together, reports state that there are over 3.5 billion Android and iOS powered devices alone (Yale, 2014). For a niche industry like comics, access to this large market, which has displayed a willingness to pay for content, is a boon to the industry.

After the iPad's launch Eric Stephenson, publisher at the third largest comic book company Image, stated:

> I think there's tremendous potential for the iPad to make comics available to a much wider audience than we're currently reaching. Paper comics will no doubt be around for a long time to come, but I think this is an important step in making comics more accessible than they've ever been. (Rogers, 2010a)

Before the introduction of mobile devices publishers pursued other digital models without conspicuous success. This thesis focuses on two of the early formats, webcomics and motion comics. These formats, and the new tablet-based digital comics, challenge not only the established business practices of the comic book industry but our understanding of what a comic is and how it works as a form of storytelling. Definitions of the comic book format are not the goal of this thesis, but it is necessary to engage with the comic studies literature to establish the previous conceptualisation of print comics.

Meskin characterised comics as a hybrid art form that combines drawn images, prose storytelling and printmaking (2012, xviii). Through this combination, comics rely on space to represent time, with Chute (2011, 108) stating comics carve "punctual moments out of the space of the page". Comics organise images into units (panels), laid out in succession on the page. The reader comprehends the image as a distinct moment in a sequence of events and as part of a larger structure, the page and comic as a whole. Through this arrangement comics are a medium of tension, juxtaposition and closure where, "The page functions both as sequence and object, to be seen and read in both linear and nonlinear, holistic fashion" (Hatfield 2005, 32). Researchers have assessed and analysed these structural characteristics of comics in relation to printed long form, serialised

comics, which have become what Noah Berlatsky would call the “things which are accepted as comics” (2010).

Webcomics and motion comics are also hybrids; with Samanci (2009) highlighting the way these digital comics combine traditional comic methods and practices with digital methods. This combination can lead to the remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) of the print format as well as new formats that combine comic book storytelling with interactive animation, sound, and games. The experimental digital formats challenge the core of comic book storytelling; relying on space to represent time and allowing the reader control over the narrative progression. For the purpose of this thesis I consider all digital comic formats part of the umbrella term comics, following Derek Badman’s (2008) use of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ‘family resemblance’ concept. This focuses on the similarities and relationships across a category, such as comics, which helps us to think of them as familial and connected in some way. It is this familial relationship that comic book creators and publishers seek to reference when they implement discourse to tie their new digital comics closely to our understanding of print comics.

Webcomics utilise the Internet for distribution, remediating the printed comic strip and comic book format as well as Samanci’s hybrid format. Content is generally released on a weekly basis, one page or strip at a time, in comparison with the monthly 22-28-page comic book. Independent projects have been particularly successful, and in some cases profitable, by using an advertising and merchandise supported business model[1], but webcomics have struggled to form part of the publishing strategy of the industry’s major companies.

[1] For examples see *Penny Arcade*, *PvP*, and *The Oatmeal*.

Motion comics, which combine print storytelling with digital technology to create a hybrid of comics and animation, formed part of Marvel's and DC's early digital publishing strategies. Motion comic projects remediate existing print content while new content has also been commissioned for the format. Distribution and monetisation strategies for motion comics echo film and television by focusing on DVDs and downloadable episodes available from digital stores like iTunes. Despite offering clearer opportunities for publishers to generate income motion comics did not gain widespread acceptance and uptake among audiences. The motion comic's relationship with time and control could explain this. Motion comics adopt films' diegetic time, they have a screening time and the motion comic scenes or panels elapse in "real time" (Pratt, 2012, 151). They manage the "watching time" for the viewer, as film does, and force the viewer to experience the comic at the "rate of succession of the frames" (Pratt, 2012, 153). Print comics, instead, drop film's sense of diegetic time, as the reader handles the pace of the narrative progression and is free to move back and forth in the narrative (Pratt, 2012, 160). It is this association with time, and a lack of control that the reactive discourse, discussed later in this thesis, is set against, seeking to distance the new digital comics from motion comics.

This existing digital and print history influences the development of the new digital formats. As Wurtzler (2007) argues, media do not just 'happen'. The introduction of sound to the medium of film was not a smooth transition that made clear sense at the time. Instead there were a variety of political, economic, technological and cultural developments that took place long before the release of the first audible film. The success of a new medium or format is not assured. Therefore, through a particular focus on the creators (the people who actually make comics), this thesis looks at a range of developments that can influence the ultimate end form of digital comics and why social agents promote particular formats as the 'future of comics'.

The current tablet-based digital comics market is fragmented and experimental, but also fast growing. The industry was attracted to tablet devices' colour and high-definition screens that are roughly the same size as one comic book page. This led to the widespread remediation of print content. Tablet devices also offered access to customers who have accounts with tablet manufacturers Apple, Google, Amazon or Microsoft, allowing quick and easy one-click content purchasing. Smartphones, with their increased screen size, also represent a potentially lucrative market for comic book content, but this thesis is predominantly oriented around tablet devices.

Estimates show that the market for digital comics in North America has risen from US$25 million in 2011 to US$90 million in 2013 (Miller, 2014a), although it is unclear how much of the market these estimates cover, such as individual app purchases, in-app purchases, web purchases, and purchases through Apple and Google's digital book marketplaces. Unlike the print market, digital distributors and publishers do not release individual sales figures. Instead comiXology and other services focus on overall download numbers, which do not breakdown paid sales and free downloads (see Flamm, 2013 and Edidin, 2014). Publishers also frame their discussion on digital growth (Lacher, 2013) and breaking sales records (see Macdonald, 2011 and Marvel.com, 2011) without supplying supporting data. A similar lack of reporting characterises digital content platforms like Netflix. The company argues they do not need to release viewer numbers, like a conventional TV station, because their business model does not rely on advertising (Stenovec, 2015). The remediated print comics and new, digital-first comics have also removed advertising, creating a similar environment in the digital comic market.

New content and formats are also emerging, which go beyond the reproduction of print content and present further challenges to the existing structures of the comic book industry. This thesis analyses these new formats, which are dubbed digital first comics because they take advantage of the storytelling opportunities offered by digital devices that print could not easily replicate, “You want to work with the medium, you don't want to try and cram comics onto a digital screen and hope it works out” (Mark Waid in Fischer, 2013). Specifically the thesis focuses on individuals working on Marvel’s Infinite Comics, DC Comics DC² (pronounced DC Squared and standing for DC Dynamic Canvas), Madefire’s Motion Books, and Thrillbent’s swipe comics.

Currently there is only limited knowledge of the processes and people behind comic book production, the culture of the workforce and the impact industry structures have on the experience of work (see Duncan and Smith, 2009; Lopes, 2009). Focusing on the new content formats, we can see how the workforce changes to encompass creators with skills in the traditional production roles of print comics – editors, writers, pencillers, inkers, colourists, and letterers – and expands to include layout artists, builders, sound designers, and many other non-credited technical roles. A new digital comic workforce is emerging that mixes creative professionals who have had a long career in the print comic book industry, creators who have only recently entered comics, and individuals from a variety of related fields, such as animation, games, and IT. Comic book publishers and new media companies need to manage the goals and motivations of these different groups of workers, because the companies rely on these creators to develop the content that fuels their new projects.

While remediated tablet comics are emerging as a financially viable new format (ICv2, 2015) experimental digital comics that are trying to ‘stand out’ face many of the same issues as other digital comics,

namely gaining the acceptance of creators and audiences. The formats focused on in this thesis offer new storytelling tools and techniques, including landscape presentation[2], limited motion, interactivity, sound, music, and new swipe effects that allow the creator to control the flow of information to the reader, such as the expansion and subtraction of panels and the addition and removal of dialogue boxes (see Figure 1).

[2] Digital first comics have been produced in portrait format, particularly at Madefire, but the dominant strategy has been landscape.

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Figure 1 Example of swipe-based storytelling in *The Eighth Seal* by writer James Tynion IV and artist Jeremy Rock. Each arrow represents a swipe by the user.

Source: http://thrillbent.com/blog/thrillbent-101-the-eighth-seal/ (accessed 6 May 2014)

Figure 1 shows different examples of the swipe-based storytelling used by Thrillbent creators. The user swipes to reveal new information,

which is added or subtracted from a core image[3], but the creator has power over what is revealed with each swipe. For instance, in the second example the image of the woman in the left-hand panel remains the same, but each swipe reveals more dialogue, sound effects, changes in the positioning of the hand, and eventually shows that the woman is in the bathroom. These swipe-based progressions show a passage of time, yet the pacing is different to a print comic book. To replicate these features a print comic would need to use many panels arranged over several pages. Creators have classed digital comic storytelling as looser because what constitutes a single page or 'screen' is now dependent on the flow of the story and not the size of the page. Each of the three examples in Figure 1 represents one page or screen yet their pacing and progression is vastly different.

These new features lead to debates about their status as comics. Pratt (2012, 151) has already argued that the inclusion of motion and sound, via electric comics, would stretch the category of comics to the breaking point. To manage the introduction of the new digital comics, and help shape the response of creators and fans, those commissioning the projects have stated that they are:

> Look[ing] for innovation in ways that are organic to the storytelling and not gimmicky. It's about giving the readers more control of the reading experience while letting the comics stay true to being comics. (Diane Nelson, DC Entertainment President, cited in Graser, 2013)

Analysing these new projects is important because it allows the thesis to explore how comic book creators react to periods of media change,

[3] Core images or screens are the base unedited or non-layered pieces of artwork that form the basis of the sequence. In the third example three core images were created for a five-screen sequence.

with the new digital formats acting as a microcosm of the wider digital changes impacting not only the comic book industry, but the media industries more broadly. Digital formats challenge previously held definitions and understandings of work and production. As Marvel's CB Cebulski explains:

> These days the definition of publishing is really different. Creating a comic and putting it online is being a published creator. (Breaking Into Comics "The Marvel Way", 2013)

Digital technology has provided people with easier, affordable access to production and distribution technologies. While individuals now have many options to distribute their work, the existing business models are not easily transferred to the digital market, making it harder for creators to find paying opportunities. Again Cebulski describes the current environment:

> The good news is it is easier to break into comics than ever, easier to get your work seen and get it out there through social media etc. The bad news is it's harder to get paid than before. Because right now, with self-publishing, with webcomics, with digital comics, and the internet it's a double-edged sword because a lot of people out there are looking for stuff for free. They don't want to have to pay for it and you often have to start working for no money or little money to work your way up to the paying gigs. (Breaking Into Comics, 2013)

The digital projects that are the focus of this thesis represent new forms of content that challenge the existing identity of work in the comic book industry by requiring new roles, skills, and understandings. The projects also test new business models and strategies, meaning these

projects may not only change the output of the comic book industry, but the production and compensation of work. This places an emphasis on the risks of media work, where creators are faced with uncertainty over the reception and rewards for their digital projects.

1.3 Theoretical and Analytic Framework

Several key areas of theory inform the theoretical and analytic framework that guides the findings of the thesis. These include: the management of professional identity; the relationship between identity and content; the socialisation process of professional identity; the role of discourse in identity management; the role of creative systems theory and Bourdieu's theory of capital during media change; literature on the experience of work in the creative industries; and literature on the history and experience of work in the comic book industry. These theories provide frameworks of analysis for the thesis's focus on digital comics production and the experiences of work during a particular historical moment characterised by the digitisation of the comic book industry. This section outlines the way these theories contribute to the understanding that has informed my approach to this research, especially data collection and analysis.

The identity literature provides a suitable framework for analysing creator responses to periods of digital change because, following Gee's (2000) definition, identity is an ongoing process where the individual interprets himself or herself as a particular type of person. Identity gains value through external recognition (Brunton and Jeffrey, 2013), but the particular context of that recognition influences the identity. Given this framework, digitisation presents a new context for work and identity formation. As part of the ongoing identity process the comics creators reinterpret their identity to adapt to this context. As the industry is changing, the recognition of the creator's identity may be impacted because the important external sources for validating identity

(Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2011) are also reinterpreting their understanding of comic book work. Creators must use identity management strategies to justify their investment of human, social and symbolic capital (Neff, 2012) to those external sources. This emphasises the privitisation and individualisation of risk in creative work where the creators invest in digital's uncertain future (Gill, 2011; Neff, 2012).

An analysis of the literature reveals that while the comic book industry and its workers form part of the creative industries there is minimal research on comic book workers in both creative industries and comic book studies research. A small, emerging body of mostly historical research has looked at the experience of comic book creators (see Rendace, 2000; Carpenter, 2002; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003; Lopes, 2009; Gabilliet, 2011). This research reveals that the freelance and organisational split of creative industry work as well as the creator's contractual relationship of work-for-hire and creator-owned identities structure comic book work. These historically grounded identities influence the way comic book creators approach their work and the way they think about the future of the industry and their place in it. The discourses associated with these identities form part of the socialisation process[4] of the comic book industry, establishing the stereotypes about work held by members of the profession (Cohen, 1981). Digitisation challenges these long-held stereotypes while also generating new public and private discourses, which can form the basis of the socialisation process for the next generation of creators.

Existing literature has explored socialisation and media work, particularly in journalism, by focusing on the experience of entrant media professionals (see McDevitt et al, 2002 and Shardlow, 2009)

[4] Socialisation is the process of becoming a competent member of a particular community of practice and internalising the norms, role expectations and values of that particular community (Wenger, 1998; Baquedano-López, 2001). It acts as a form of control, directing workers to adopt the accepted values, skills and identity of the community to allow them to survive (Gravengaard and Rimestad, 2014).

and the role of the workplace in socialising views (see Gravengaard and Rimestad, 2012). Gaps exist in relation to the socialisation of new technologies, but work by Taylor and Kent (2010) begins to explore this issue. Taylor and Kent (2010), focusing on the role of industry texts in the education of public relations students, criticised the lack of balance in texts aimed at socialising public relations professionals to the role of social media in the profession. This lack of balance can lead to a false sense of what public relations work actually entails. Similarly, I analyse the industry texts and discourses of digital creators, which form the socialisation process of digital comics. The research contributes to the socialisation literature by examining how workers respond to change and how workers use discourse to challenge the existing stereotypes related to digital work. This avoids a technologically deterministic view of media change by highlighting the agency of people who shape the way we look at, embrace and use certain technologies.

1.4 Research Questions and Focus

The core research questions of this thesis are not designed to explore or define the 'reality' of the comic book industry. Instead, they look at how ideas, connected to larger changes, are filtered through the public and private discourses of the comic book industry. People cope with changes, which may challenge the creator's existing values and expectations, by crafting new stories related to work. These stories highlight the existing views and expectations regarding digitisation held by the field that need to be addressed through the socialisation process. Therefore, the research questions ask:

1) How do creators' existing views of technology influence the socialisation of digital work?
2) How is the comic book industry's adaptation to digitisation shaped by the ways that individuals in the industry adapt to the new technologies and the business models that they require?

In exploring these questions the thesis addresses the relationship between the structures of the comic book industry and the identity of comic book creators. It is not possible to explore changes in creator identity without first establishing what this identity might be changing from. The core research questions are also influenced by a particular social, cultural, and historical context where comic book creators understand their experience of work within an imagined past and projected future, constantly referring to where the industry was and where it is going to go. This highlights identity as something that is not fixed or exact, but instead something that is continually developed over time, influenced and shaped by the experiences of the individual as well as the discourses and experiences of others. The specific context of digitisation generates certain discourses, which allow creators to understand who they are and what they do. Creators have agency to accept or reject the available discourses, influencing the development of their identity and the profession.

The research questions address the lack of previous research on comic book creators and allow the thesis to discover who the comic book creators are and identify key influences on their identity development. Through the questions asked we gain evidence of who makes comics, what is important to them as professionals, the impact industry upheaval has on workers' self-understanding and the structures that guide their experience of work. Focusing on how creators adapt to digital comics exposes the inherent tensions and risks during periods of change that challenge a particular workforce's existing understanding of their work. Technology does not just impose these changes. They are contested and challenged by social agents, such as the creators, publishers, and audiences. This thesis looks at how comic book creators are able to influence digital change through their relationship with the audience, the content and other creators and their use of discourse to shape and manage their identity.

1.5 Overview of the Methodology

This study focuses on those comic book creators working on the new digital formats who are directly involved with the changes associated with the move to digital content. To explore the impact of digitisation, interviews were conducted with those creators working on new digital projects. These interviews were primarily administered online, via email, due to my distance from the US based industry under study. The Methodology section discusses the ramifications of this further. Interviewing did not allow me to analyse the creators actual work practices and lived experience, but instead allowed me to focus on the creators' feelings, attitudes and perceptions of their work and the discourses they utilise to describe and manage the perceived risks of digital change. Specifically, interviews also act as a site of identity work allowing respondents to 'create' a version of themselves through the interview process (Alvesson, 2003 and Albrow, 1997).

Observations and conversations with industry professionals during a short research trip to New York Comic-Con 2013 and the offices of new comic book publisher Madefire located in Berkeley, California were also recorded. Additionally, I developed a database of secondary sources. This included interviews with comic book professionals conducted by the comic book fan press and transcriptions of industry panels from comic book conferences. These interviews and panels focused not only on discussions of the new formats and projects, but also more generally on the experience of work in the comic book industry.

My time in America yielded five face-to-face interviews. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. A further 28 interviews were conducted online via email and from the 33 total interviews another 6 follow-up interviews were generated. The interviews covered the creators' experience of working on the new digital projects from Marvel,

DC, Madefire and Thrillbent and the creators' more general experience of working in the comic book industry and how that experience has changed over time. Analysis of the data was conducted using a general inductive analysis approach. An inductive approach was chosen as the purpose of the research reflects the nature of inductive analysis, which is to "obtain an understanding of a phenomenon, rather than to test a hypothesis" (Jebreen, 2012, 170). In accordance with the general inductive method of analysis I engaged in a deep, close reading of the transcribed data before creating a series of categories and refining those categories to account for overlap or redundancy to create a model that incorporates the key categories. Microsoft Word and the QDA Miner software were used to help in the management of the data.

1.6 Significance

This research is significant for numerous reasons. The thesis contributes knowledge to an area of comic book studies that is under-investigated; research grounded in the perspectives of comic book creators and the experiences of their daily working lives. It also provides a framework for understanding how comic book creators adapt to periods of media change, which could prove valuable to the field of comic book studies and the wider field of media and creative industries research. This study contributes to our understanding of the way work has evolved in the comic book industry and further explores key creative industry work theories, using comic books as an example. Research based on interviewing and engaging with comic book creators is lacking in the field and, outside of auteur studies[5], the actual lived experience of comic book creators in all the credited creative positions is similarly an area that is under-studied. Through the

[5] Auteur theory attributes authorship of a work to a particular controlling individual, such as a director, which is representative of their singular vision, style or technique ignoring the collaborative nature of much production (Uidhir, 2012). Analysis of comic book creators has similarly applied auteur theory (see Ault, 2004; Wolk, 2007; Smith, 2012) while texts that recognise the contribution of one particular creator to the medium follow an auteur approach i.e Annalise Di Liddo's (2009) *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*.

exploratory, interpretive nature of this study one of the main benefits is the way it develops a vocabulary and framework to understand periods of transition and change in the media. Situating the project during the change allowed the thesis to capture the process creators used to come to terms with the changes. It also seeks to understand how the changes affect workers, exploring the way they adapt their identity to carve out their place in the new digital environment of the comic book industry.

The research described in this thesis does not argue that the digital formats focused on will become the industry standard or that tablet devices will continue to shape the future of the comic book industry. Instead, it contributes to knowledge through its examination of the processes of becoming a comic book worker and formulating an identity, exploring the relationship between identity, content and the audience in relation to the creator's identity, and for making visible the identity management strategies utilised by comic book creators to manage the transition from a print-based industry to a digital one. Not only comic book creators but also other media professionals could use the thesis's findings to help understand how the processes of media change impact the lived experience of media work and challenge their identity as a certain type of media professional. By looking at the way creators managed the ongoing digital transition the thesis helps us to understand how creative workers understand and adapt to the evolving risks of media work. Finally, the findings provide useful knowledge to help publishers understand how to better manage and support creators, particularly during periods of flux and uncertainty. Content remains important, but who makes that content and their values and desires is continually changing.

1.7 Conclusion and Thesis Outline

This chapter has provided an overview of the project, which explores how the industry is changing and how comic book creators are adapting their identity to manage and survive this period of media change. The remaining seven chapters explore the experiences of comic book workers, highlighting the main changes to comic book work and how comic book workers adapt to the new industry structures. Chapter Two establishes the theoretical framework and outlines the research method utilised in this thesis. Chapter Three presents the framework for how the print comic book industry works, covering key aspects of production, distribution, and content. Chapter Four explores the process of becoming a comic book worker and the development of core identity characteristics that influence the creators' approach to digitisation. Chapter Five introduces the new forms of comic book production. It mirrors the structure of Chapter Three to demonstrate the key changes in comic book production by looking at the new producers, formats, and production models. Chapters Six and Seven explore the tensions created by media change and the discourse and socialisation strategies used by comic book creators to adapt and manage their identity in the new media environment. Finally, Chapter Eight sums up the findings of the study and discusses the implications of the research for creators, publishers, and researchers, while mapping out areas for future study based on the conclusions drawn and opportunities discovered.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The theoretical basis of this thesis includes ideas on identity, socialisation, the creative industries, creative labour, digitisation, Bourdieu's capital, Giddens structuration, and McIntyre's application of Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity. After establishing the theoretical and analytical framework this chapter introduces the methodology used and explains how that methodology, and its associated data analysis, are suitable for exploring the experiences of comic book workers during the current period of digitisation. In particular, it justifies the use of a qualitative approach to investigate these experiences, specifically the use of interviewing in identity projects and the differences in-person and email based interviews elicit. The methodology is presented as a journey, providing an opportunity to reflexively comment on the methodology chosen and present myself as an active participant in the gathering and interpreting of the data.

2.2 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The theory presented in this chapter covers those theories that inform my approach to work in the comic book industry and the theories that form the basis of my analytical framework of how comic book creators respond to the changes of digitisation. Work in the comic book industry is analysed through literature that focuses on the experience of work in the creative industries, literature on the history and experience of work in the comic book industry, and an understanding that an individual's work plays an important role in their identity. It is particularly informed by the literature on the management of professional identity; the relationship between identity and content; the socialisation process of professional identity; the role of discourse in identity management; the

role of creative systems theory; and Bourdieu's theory of capital during media change.

2.2.1 Technological Change

It is easy to view periods of media change through a technologically determinist lens, where technology drives social progress towards an inevitable outcome. Technological evolution is not predefined (Paterson and Domingo, 2008). Instead, when looking at the introduction and impact of new technology it is important to consider, "Who uses it, who controls it, what it is used for, how it fits into the power structure, how widely it is distributed" (Finnegan, 1988, 41). Technology presents many opportunities, but it must be accepted and integrated into the work processes of those individuals who represent a particular field (Green, 2001), such as the comic book industry. That process of integration involves 'accelerators or brakes'; actions by social agents to push forward or slow down the adoption of a particular technology (Winston, 1996). Jones and Salter (2012) argue that those who have a vested interest in the status quo, seeking to control or curtail the adoption or even engage in outright resistance, usually apply the brakes. Publishers, but more importantly comic book creators, have power to apply the accelerator or brakes to digitisation in the comic book industry through what they do with technology. Technological integration can be difficult because workers have developed their identity in relation to one particular way of working. They have developed their own wants, desires, motivations, and goals that may be at odds with the new digital content economy. Similarly, it may also provide an opportunity for the creator to realise those goals and desires because what people do with technology can disrupt the status quo. This thesis adopts a framework where digitisation and the adoption of technology represent an uncertain future that is influenced by the way people socialise and interact with technology.

2.2.2 Comic Books and the Creative Industries

The comic book industry and comic book workers are relatively small areas of research in comparison to the growing body of research that focuses on defining the comic book medium and content analyses of select comic works and authors. These areas are most commonly associated with comic studies. The field lacks an extensive body of work that examines comics as creative and media industries, although some examples of work that looks at the way the comic book industry operates and the experiences of comic book workers do exist (see Rendace, 2000; Carpenter, 2002; Norcliffe and Rendace, 2003; Lopes, 2009; Gabilliet, 2011). Studies also exist which examine the growth of webcomics and the wider topic of digital comics, but again very few of these projects look at these aspects from a practitioner focus where the experience of work and changes in the comic book industry are the main object of inquiry. This project makes a major contribution to knowledge by focusing on the experiences of comic book workers as well as analysing how media workers deal with digital change through an identity framework.

While a creative industry approach has been lacking in comic book studies comic book workers clearly are part of these industries, because they generate an income through the creation of content and intellectual property. The term creative industries was popularised in the UK's *Creative Industries Mapping Document* series (1998, 2001) published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The term describes "those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property" (DCMS, 1998). The document combined activities from the traditional arts field that had long been called the 'cultural industries' (art and antiques market, craft, design, performing arts, and publishing) as well as newer areas (interactive leisure software, software design, and television and radio) (DCMS, 1998). While not specifically listed the comic book

industry is covered through the inclusion of publishing. The concept of the creative industries was introduced to show the importance of artistic, creative activities to new economic development, growth, and increasing employment opportunities (Garnham, 2005, 25). The policy documents painted a specific view of work in the creative industries:

> Just imagine how good it feels to wake up every morning and really look forward to work. Imagine how good it feels to use your creativity, your skills, your talent to produce a film […] or to edit a magazine. […] Are you there? Does it feel good? (Department of Media, Culture and Sport/Design Council/Arts Council of England 2001, 1)

2.2.3 The Conditions of Creative Work

The way media workers experience and build discourse surrounding creative work is influenced by the overriding structures of work in the creative industries, which are both positive and negative. These structures then influence the development of the standards, values and norms of their work and how they identify with them, which is discussed more in the rest of the chapter.

Creative workers are predominantly employed on short-term, often casual contracts on a per-project basis (Deuze, 2007; Randle and Culkin, 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Creative work in general is seen as providing individuals with more meaningful work and more autonomy than traditional work, while freelance work is even more closely tied to this positive view of flexibility and autonomy (Davies and Sigthorsson, 2013). The growth in freelancing and networks of small and large creative organisations has been seen as providing workers with increasing employment opportunities (Randle, 2011) and an environment where in-demand talent can command a premium fee, i.e star actors/actresses (Davies and Sigthorsson, 2013). The workers

have flexibility to choose those projects that appeal to them, working in a portfolio, project-based career where the worker makes decisions over where and when they work (Taylor, 2010). While there is definitely positive appeal to creative work and Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, 220) point out creative work rarely involves gruelling physical demands, performance of dangerous tasks or work that others may find disgusting or disdainful, this positive view of creative labour has been challenged by projects that show the many difficulties associated with creative work.

The freelance model of work, promoted by writers such as Daniel Pink (2001), champions the self-directed individual who is free from the restraints of the organisation and is an autonomous entrepreneur who auctions off their services to the highest bidder or, increasingly, starts their own venture. Their loyalty to the organisation is replaced with loyalty to themselves. This free agent workforce is global (see McRobbie, 1998; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Deuze, 2007) eschewing the relative security and benefits attached to salaried, organisation based work for the high risk, high reward freelance lifestyle that is marred by insecurity and an unstable, precarious nature. Global competition for work creates a buyers' market where prices and deadlines for freelancers are compressed (Randle and Culkin, 2009) and many creative workers take a second job to earn a living (Bridgstock, 2005; Gill, 2011; Randle, 2011). At other times creative workers engage in unpaid work, which has been viewed as exploitative and privileges those individuals who come from a specific class background and can afford prolonged periods of unpaid work (Randle, 2011). Digitisation has generally added to this sense of precariousness, as organisations look for new efficiencies by eliminating certain roles or demanding workers bundle multiple skill sets (Jones and Salter, 2012).

The free agent ethos of media work is part of what Gill has called the 'individualisation of risk' (2002, 81). The individual has become responsible for their own career and identity as they assume the costs of continued training and development, provide their own health and retirement benefits, and must find their own work. Gill's work is part of a wider body of work about the culture of risk, where economic risk has become increasingly privatised and individualised (Beck, 1992). Gina Neff (2012) argues that while risk has been privatised it is also social, as factors that are outside the individual's control, such as the ongoing demand for certain skills, the continued growth of the industry or success of the company, influence the level of risk. Despite their social nature their repercussions are privatised, forming part of the individual's success or failure. The conditions of the market or society do not fully determine the individual's experience or restrain their ability to act. Instead the individual and society function and influence each other in both subtle and overt ways. Despite this the individual must now ensure they have the right skills, networks, and experience to succeed.

The individual must also be able to adapt to the relevant discourses of the creative industries, such as the discourse of flexibility. This discourse is often used in reference to a creative worker's ability to have control over when and how long they work for yet this is not always the case. Gill (2002) argued that the project and its deadlines determine the hours worked, overriding the creator's flexibility and choice. Further, this flexibility can also be gendered because the difficulty for women in gaining access to permanent work contracts meant that instead of being a choice working from home became a necessity. Bain (2004; 2005) looks more closely at the role of place in creative work and the connection to gender.

Two principles guide the individualisation of risk, "it's all down to who you know" (Gill, 2011) and a person is "only as good as their last

project" (Blair, 2001; Leadbeter and Oakley, 1999). The individual must rely on their professional network, or social capital, to secure new work, a process utilised across all levels of the industry as "the means of navigating risk" (Lee, 2011, 550). Through these often-informal networks creators gain valuable information about new projects while also being able to promote themselves and their work. These networks and their informal hiring practices, as discovered by Gill (2002), can be highly gendered with women feeling discriminated against due to the 'old boys network' nature of media work. Here those in power, typically men, provide contracts less on merit and open competition and more on informal contacts and personal recommendations. Despite not focusing on gender it is necessary to consider how comic book creators frame the flexibility and networking practices of their profession and how their practices may create conditions that exclude certain groups from the industry.

More than just being a vehicle to secure new work, Saundry et al (2006) find that networks, among a freelance creative workforce, also help to build a sense of collective identity because the network incorporates individuals who share an occupational or industrial identity. Promoting themselves through their network highlights the role of reputation in media work where you need to be known for producing good work while also cultivating an image of being good to work with (Deuze, 2007; Jones, 1996; Lee, 2006). Gill (2011) synthesises these core ethics of the individualisation of risk, the emphasis on the last project, and the importance of networks and who you know for creative work in the words of one of her participants. Life for media workers is a pitch where you never know when, where or who your next project will come from:

> New media work calls forth or incites into being a new ideal worker-subject whose entire existence is built around work. She must be flexible, adaptable, sociable, self-directing, and able to

> work for days and nights at a time without encumbrances or needs and must commodify herself and others and recognize that…every interaction is an opportunity for work. (Gill, 2011, NP)

Networking provides workers with opportunities, but they must also have the correct skills, a proposition made more difficult by digital technology. 'Keeping up' (Gill, 2011, NP) has become important with media workers responsible for their own training to update their skills or even re-skilling to survive a major industry change, creating anxiety and fear over being left behind. This fear of being left behind is driving the reskilling of traditional media workers, such as multi-skilled journalists and film/TV crews, as technology requires new skills and the understanding of new norms and practices. Studies of new media workers (Gill, 2002; 2009; 2011), video game workers (Deuze et al, 2007; Kerr, 2011; Banks, 2013), film and television (Caldwell, 2008; Christopherson, 2008; Miller, 2011), journalism (García Avilés et al, 2004; Deuze, 2005; Hammond et al, 2000; Wallace, 2013; Wiik, 2008) and the media industry as a whole (Deuze, 2007) have focused on the impact technological changes have on employee skills. With the increased integration of technology in the production and distribution of comic books it is vital to explore what 'keeping up' means for comic book workers and, more importantly, the strategies being implemented to ensure the viability of the individual's career.

2.2.4 Comic Book Work

Histories of comic book work show that, rather than being new, this freelance model of work has been the dominant form of employment for 'creatives' since the industry's inception (see Duncan and Smith, 2009; Gabilliet, 2011; Lopes, 2009). Freelance contracts have primarily been given to the symbol creators and technical production roles while the creative management and administration roles are salaried, organisation workers. The freelance model of work is further structured

by the contracts of comic book work, work-for-hire or creator-owned, which determine the ownership of the work produced. Claims of ownership have caused tension in the comic book industry, as the publishers have exploited the intellectual property for continual gains while the creators received comparatively low per-page remuneration. Publishers deliberately favoured a Fordist production line method because it obscured the contributions of the numerous creators and made it harder for individual creators to claim ownership (Lopes, 2009). McAllister (1990, 59) argues that this structure initially linked remuneration to the speed of production and placed a degree of organisational restraint over the content of the early comic book industry because experimentation and initiative were not adequately rewarded financially. The projects analysed in this thesis use the work-for-hire and freelance contracts of the print industry and it is necessary to consider how these contracts structure the creators' experience on the project. The history of comic book work challenges the idea that changes highlighted in recent creative industry research and the privitisation and individualisation of risk are recent phenomena.

2.2.5 Work and Identity

Identity has been defined as:

> The character and the role that an individual devises for himself [sic.] as an occupant of a particular social position. More intuitively, such a role-identity is his imaginative view of himself as he likes to think of himself being and acting as an occupant of that position. (McCall and Simmons, 1978, 65)

An identity framework was chosen to analyse media change because during periods of change the imagined character and role of the social position of comic book worker is challenged. Following on from the previous section, the new technologically influenced forms of content

and ways of working cause the creator to revaluate their self-understanding and devise a new, compatible role-identity. Taking an identity approach also enables the impact of technology to be analysed through the social experiences of comic book creators, avoiding the potential for technological determinism discussed in the previous section.

Identity, in relation to work, also consists of a mix of person-based and role-based self-categorisations (Elsbach, 2009). The role-based identity includes the "goals, values, beliefs, norms, interaction styles, and time horizons" (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007, 11) associated with that role independent of who occupies the role. The person-based identity refers to the personal qualities, traits and abilities of the individual, which can impact on the enactment of the role-based identity. Periods of media change can alter the individual's role-based self-categorisation, as the understanding of their role and its expectations change to accommodate the new production context, while the person-based self-categorisation may clash with these changes creating identity tensions.

Creative industries research has also expanded the definition of identity to account for the influence of media consumption on the formation of the individual's identity. Wimmer and Sitnikova (2012, 157) define professional identity as:

> A mostly mediated self-concept of an individual as a member of a certain professional group, followed by a strong sense of coherence with professional life and understanding of and behaving in accordance with professional standards, values, and roles.

Their definition accounts for the role of media consumption in shaping identity, arguing that media workers would have an interest in their field before they enter it, shaping their views. They would also continue to consume media content to stay abreast of the latest trends and developments, maintaining an awareness of the changing context of their field (Wimmer and Sitnikova, 2011, 7-8).

Wimmer and Sitnikova also highlight the shift in the literature, where previous definitions, such as the one presented by McCall and Simmons (1978), presented identity as a male construct. Instead, gender remains an important aspect of work and identity, presenting a subject position to analyse the possibilities for action, obligations, and rights offered to an individual (LaPointe, 2010), but is presented as one of many ways to analyse identity. Hardin and Shain (2006) used a gendered identity framework to analyse the experiences of female sports journalists, arguing that women have a more fragmented professional identity because they must "both eschew and embrace gender role expectations" (324). The comic book industry is predominantly male and to explore the factors contributing to this would take an entire thesis on its own, meaning gendered identity is not a specific focus of this project.

While the framework does not specifically account for the role of gender it does adopt the view that identity is an ongoing process where individuals interpret themselves as a certain type of person, and seek to be recognised as such, within a particular context, such as work (Gee, 2000). Giddens (1991) argued that traditional, secure identity categories, such as class or family, have declined, leading Du Gay to claim, "Paid work significantly shapes the lives of most people in late modern societies. Indeed, who and what we consider ourselves and others to be is frequently articulated in relation to 'work'" (1997, 288). The growth of work's importance to identity is part of the wider

discourse of neo-liberalism, where individualism and enterprise are key ideals. Identity is shaped by individual intention and aspiration, an opportunity and a responsibility for the individual (Taylor and Littleton, 2012). This neo-liberal view is challenged by researchers who view identity as actively constructed in a social context (Pratt et al., 2006) through interaction with discourse and practice (Watson, 2008). The ability of the individual to freely choose or determine their identity is questioned (Banks, 2007). Instead, researchers such as Taylor (2011) and Taylor and Littleton (2012) propose that identity is influenced by the individual's use of local resources, such as educational, family or work environments, in the construction of their life narrative. The approach is regarded as 'synthetic' by Wetherell (1998) for the way that it positions speakers within an existing larger social formation yet they remain active and able in their identity work to position themselves or negotiate a new positioning, albeit within the constraints of the social formation (Taylor and Littleton, 2008, 279). In this thesis identity is not just interpreted in relation to work, which is influenced by local resources, but a changing notion of work. The creator's view of change is shaped by a particular social context and interaction with available discourse and we need to consider how creators articulate and understand this change in a way that is compatible with their identity.

2.2.6 Managing Identity Tension

This thesis views tension as a key feature of identity. Shardlow (2009) found tension was an agreed upon aspect of professional identity, emerging from the individual's personal identity and their professional role-playing. The individual strives to manage this tension through negotiating a balance between their "personal self-image and the occupational roles they feel obliged to play" (Shardlow, 2009, 18). The literature on beginning teachers defined tension as, "internal struggles between aspects relevant to the teacher as a person and the teacher as a professional. Such tensions may challenge a teacher's personal feelings, values, beliefs, or perceptions and, as a consequence, they

are often not (easily) resolvable" (Pillen et al, 2013, 86-87). These tensions may arise due to the conflicts between what the profession desires and what the individual experiences or defines as good (Beijaard et al, 2004). This tension is commonly experienced when creators enter the industry, as their expectations are challenged and they must adapt to the demands of the industry. The tension experienced in the creator's identity can come from a number of other sources and the literature on identity, particularly identity in the creative industries, has highlighted many sources where tension can be found in professional identity. Most relevant to this thesis are the contradictory pull of specialisation and multi-skilling in creative work (Christopherson, 2008), the transition from student to professional (Shardlow, 2009), the competition between professional and organisational identities (de Bruin, 2000; Russo, 1998), the art versus business relationship of creative work (Gotsi et al, 2010; Hackley and Kover, 2007; Mallet and Wapshott, 2010; Wei, 2012), the rise of user generated content (Banks and Humphreys, 2008; Lewis, 2012; Banks, 2013), the relationship between work and the artists physical space (Bain, 2004), the practice of second jobbing (Bain, 2005), and the collaborative creative process (Beech et al, 2012; Elsbach and Flynn, 2013; MacDonald and Wilson, 2005).

Within this framework of identity tension we can also view the impact of new digital formats on the comic book industry and the identity of comic book creators as an example of identity tension. The continued digitisation of the comic book industry presents a new possible identity for the creators, yet the introduction of new identities can lead to tension when those identities are seen as conflicting or incompatible (Kreiner et al., 2006). This thesis is concerned with identifying areas where this new identity may come into conflict with the existing identities held by creators, and exploring the strategies used by creators to deal with those conflicts. These strategies involve identity work.

Identity work refers to an individual's active construction of their identity in a social context (Pratt el al., 2006) through interaction with discourse and practice (Watson, 2008). It challenges the previously essentialist view of identity as static, singular, and fixed by arguing for an understanding of identity as multiple and changing with awareness for the temporal and contextual nature of identity. Identity is, "an ongoing, always incomplete negotiation of the possibilities and constraints given by established meanings and available subject positions" (Taylor, 2011, 357). Identity work positions identity construction in relation to others (Beech et al, 2012) where there can be pressures to conform (Mallet and Wapshott, 2012). The individual may be pulled in multiple directions, causing tension that requires identity work (Beech, 2011; Ellis and Ybema, 2011) so the individuals can project a positive identity to external sources (Thomas, 2009). The digitisation of comics is framed as such a tension, which can pull workers in multiple directions, as they seek to manage their existing identity with the pressures to conform to the establishing understandings of digital comics. This thesis proposes that during this period of change comic book workers engage in a process of identity work to distance themselves from negatively viewed identity attributes (Costas and Fleming, 2009). Creators use discursive resources (Musson and Duberly, 2007) to socialise the field to the new forms of work they are pursuing so their new identity can be accepted. This highlights the process of resistance in identity work as creators adapt or reject available discourses and subject positions in favour of new discourses to guide and orient their practices (Taylor and Littleton, 2008; Reed, 2013).

2.2.7 Discourse

The specific analytical framework of this thesis, informed by the understanding of identity work, proposes that comic book creators use discourse to manage the impact of digitisation on their work and identity. Creators are influenced by the "opinions, observations and discourse" of their peers (Hearns-Branaman, 2014, 26) during the

transition from print to digital where they seek to re-establish cohesiveness with the changing professional field and their identity. By looking at the public and private discourses utilised by comic book creators we can understand how, in line with Wimmer and Sitnikova (2012), creators see themselves as "behaving in accordance with professional standards, values, and roles" (157) demanded by their professional group. This thesis uses Watson's (1995, 814) definition, made in relation to the organisational context of managers but relevant nonetheless, where discourse is:

> A connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitutes a way of talking or writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way in which people understand and respond with respect to that issue ... [These statements] function as menus of discursive resources which various social actors draw on in different ways at different times to achieve their particular purposes – whether these be specific interest-based purposes or broader ones.

Discourse is a suitable framework for studying creators because it provides vivid insights into the creators' understanding of their working context. Specifically, it is necessary to consider discourse's role as a 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1977) that influences identity construction and the ways individuals see themselves. Viewing discourse as influencing identity construction relies on the view that identity is performative and the product of language (Taylor and Littleton, 2006; LaPointe, 2010; Reed, 2013). This view questions the pre-discursive, essential identity or inner self of the modernist view (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006) by arguing identities are in flux and multiple because individuals can use or be influenced by multiple discourses (Reed, 2013). These discourses can be public and private; the discourses creators use at industry panels and in trade interviews, which present

their identity as part of the cohesive comic book industry. There are also those they deploy in private conversation, which can more outwardly challenge the status quo. The interviews conducted for this thesis consider this private discourse and analyses the crossover between the public and private discourse, demonstrating the different between the sanctioned and unsanctioned views of digitisation in the comic book industry.

Individuals attempt to stabilise and fix meaning to their identity through talk, but the research that captures this talk is a snapshot or fragment of the flow of their identity. Cultural and industrial conventions and rules change, and digitisation represents a particularly large and ongoing process of transformation, which the circulation of various discourses seeks to influence and affect (Reed, 2013, 79). Acceptance and reproduction of the dominant discourses or resistance helps shape the development of the creator's identity as well as the comic book profession. These discourses, and the language of the creators, actively organise, construct, and sustain social reality, but they also act as a disciplinary mechanism by creating 'appropriate' identities and conducts (Brown et al., 2010, 529) that individuals control themselves to 'fit in with' (Reed, 2013). Studying language and discourse during periods of change allows us to see how creative workers construct new 'appropriate' identities and conducts and manage the conflicts in crafting what it means to be creative, competent, and productive in the new environment. This enables the creators to resist the existing, dominant structuring discourses and understandings of what comic book work should be.

Comic book workers, following the research of Thomas and Davies (2005) and Brown and Lewis (2011), are able to gain agency through exploring the multiple, competing discourses. The analysis conducted in this thesis focuses on identifying the different discourses used by the

creators to understand themselves and their work during this time. In particular it identified the ‘reactive’ and ‘relational’ discourses, as new discourses that guide, define, and organise the new practices (Taylor and Littleton, 2008) and reception of their identity during this period of transition.

The reactive discourse comes from Sherry Ortner’s (2013) study of independent film. She suggests creative workers, through their talk, position themselves and their work in opposition to other forms of work. They establish who they are by establishing what they are not. I add the relational discourse to Ortner’s reactive discourse, which is based on McLuhan’s (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) “rear view mirror effect” where workers seek to positively relate their work to other forms of work to maintain or enhance their identity. The creators are trying to insert new stories and understandings into the public discourse. By circulating new discourses the creators recognise the social nature of identity where it is important to normalise new ways of perceiving the comic book world that are compatible with digital work (Hardy and Thomas, 2013).

The negotiated nature of professional identity is not only related to the multiple available discourses, but the “internal-external dialectic” where identity is constantly negotiated because “who we say we are requires validation from external sources” (Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2011, 210). Individuals want their work and identity to be positively evaluated and how others feel about their work influences the way the individual views their work (Brooks et al., 2011). Audiences and other creators, constitute the field of comics’ production and represent important external sources. Audiences allow the creator’s identity to be socially accepted and legitimised (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008). Kirschbaum (2007, 188-9), in his study of jazz musicians, describes the process as:

> An artist's career would correspond to his or her talent development and *recognition* [emphasis added] . . . The way a new musician is recruited, introduced to the field and advances in his trajectory may be objects of appraisal by his peers, record critics and producers . . . [This] symbolic capital conveys the legitimacy of one's practices and persona [i.e. identity] within a field.

Edinger (2002) and Williams (2010) found creators oriented their identity in relation to other high-profile artists within their field because those creators know what to look for. Creators want to identify with groups that an audience positively perceives and, as Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) found, the responses from stakeholders directly influence members of a profession as they shape their identity to mirror that feedback. As a result, Brunton and Jeffrey's find that individuals "are eager to identify with institutions that are positively evaluated by outsiders" (2013, 43), and they will reject those identities that are viewed as negative. If an occupational group's professional identity is not recognised by outside groups and stakeholders then there is little value in the identity (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2013, 42). This refers to the importance of reputation and image to identity proposed by de Bruin (2000). The perception of digital comics impacts the creator's identity because creators not only need recognition from their peers, but during this period of change they also need acceptance of the digital formats they are working on. The proposed framework analyses the reputation and image of digital comics in the comic book industry and how creators use discourse to socialise the field to accept digital work as valuable. In comics, and other content producing creative industries, the audience can legitimise the creator's identity through the consumption and acceptance of content as well as its associated discourse.

2.2.8 A Systems Approach

The validation of the creators identity and discourses by internal and external sources occurs within Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity, particularly McIntyre's (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2012) applications of the model to a variety of creative practices. Specifically, the systems model argues creative goods are produced when the field, domain, and individual converge, in contrast to the Romantic idea of the creator being struck with a moment of creative genius:

> For creativity to occur, a set of rules and practices must be transmitted from the domain to the individual. The individual must then produce a novel variation in the content of the domain; the variation then must be selected by the field for inclusion in the domain. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, 315)

The acceptance of the creator's identity and new discourses is facilitated by the field, which consists of other agents who have access to the domain knowledge relevant to that field (McIntyre, 2008, 43) and ''whose job involves passing judgement on performance in that domain'' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, 42). The field then, according to Sawyer, is "a complex network of experts with varying expertise, status, and power" (2006, 124). Media owners, other creators, creative managers, and the audience make up any given field. By passing judgement on creative works they also validate the creator's identity.

According to Wei (2012, 446) content is representative of the creators' artistic values and tastes, which are "important parts of their artistic identities". Creating work that meets these ideals gives the individual a positive sense of who they are and what they stand for. The projects that meet these goals become evidence, both personally and socially, of who they are as creators and "that they are who they claim to be" (Wei, 2012, 454). The acceptance of this work by the field can lead to

acceptance of the creator's identity and the new ways of working promoted by the alternative discourse.

Research has referred to this as 'showing', producing work and then releasing it or showing it somewhere so it can be critiqued by internal and external stakeholders (Elsbach, 2009). The act of showing allows the creator to differentiate themselves from non-professionals by providing an opportunity for the work to be declared legitimate and valued by society, important aspects of the creator's identity. Showing can more simply refer to having identifiable completed objects made available for sale. It is an important feature as Fletcher's study of corporate creative professionals found that "creative people are judged and prefer to be judged by their output rather than by their personality" (1992, 42).

Studies have more generally looked at the impact of producing work that does and does not meet the artist's values and the impact this has on their experience of work (Brennan, 2011; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Reinardy, 2011; Wei, 2012; Kantola, 2013). Notions of doing good work are important not only for the way they relate to the reception of the creator's identity, but also to the practical experience of working in the creative industries where "you're only as good as your last job" (Blair, 2001). It is not only the creator's identity that is judged based on good work, but perceptions of their employability. Creators need to manage their work on digital comics so it can be viewed as good work and not damaging to their reputation.

The transition to digital comics can cause difficulties because the agents of the field compare digital to print work and their understanding of the print domain of knowledge. This emphasises Fulton and McIntyre's (2013) claim that the systems model aligns with Anthony Giddens (1984) theory of structuration. Structures determine action and

agency refers to the individual's ability to make decisions or choices. Structuration proposes a symbiotic relationship between the two:

> Social actions create structures, and it is through social actions that structures are produced and reproduced, so that they survive over time . . . structures make social action possible, and at the same time that social action creates those very structures. (Giddens in Haralambos and Holbern, 1995, 904)

The field represents the social structures, which influence and can be influenced by the individual. During periods of change the field's domain knowledge and wider understanding of comics can become a constraint, which the digital creators must act against through their content and discourse. The adaptation framework proposes the creators make production choices, based on their knowledge of the field and domain, but they also make choices in how they talk about digital comics. As Becker states (1982, 26-8), art is bounded by the ability of existing institutions to assimilate a given work. Digital comic book work challenges the ability of institutions, grounded in print comics, to assimilate and creators must play a role in this assimilation. They renegotiate their identity to craft one that is more readily accepted by those external sources because digital comics also play with our expectations, in relation to something called a comic. As the content produced by the creator changes it will take time for the audience and other important stakeholders to adjust to these changes so the creator uses discourse to show how these new or altered conventions are a successful innovation and not an unsuccessful innovation that is the "province of the crank" (McIntyre, 2012, 54).

The other aspects of the systems model, the domain and the individual, are also useful for understanding how comic book creators adapt to the new digital industry. The domain represents the cultural structures that

the individuals must immerse themselves in (McIntyre, 2011). The creators must learn the rules, conventions, techniques, and procedures before they can produce a creative product. Conventions constrain creative options, but also allow opportunities to play with expectations and avoid the need to invest in developing new conventions on every project (Becker, 1982). Individuals must acquire the necessary knowledge and skills through a process known as domain acquisition, which can be done via formal or informal training and immersing oneself in the domain. It also includes all the previous works, “the created products that have been accepted by the field in the past” (Sawyer, 2006, 125), which the producer must also be aware of. This is similar to what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) calls the *field of works*, which is distinct from fields and represents the accumulated cultural work completed in a particular field. This heritage can act as an enabling or constraining structure for the creator, eschewing the idea of total freedom in creativity for conditional agency where the individual is not free from constraint but instead applies their knowledge of the cultural and social structures to make choices (Fulton and McIntyre, 2013, 21). During this period of media change the digital creators gain some freedom from convention, but also risk alienating the audience.

The digital creators are informed by their existing identity and bring their background, such as their familial position, class, gender, formal education, and personal attributes to the system, as they learn the rules and procedures of the domain and the preferences of the field to produce a new creative product. Knowing the field’s preferences is important because “the ultimate test for a creative work is whether or not it’s accepted by a broad audience” (Sawyer, 2006, 126-127) meaning the creator must be aware of who their audience is. Given the audience’s role, where creators seek their acceptance and approval, creators “internalize an anticipated reception of their work as a part of the process of production” (Robbins, 2007, 84).

2.2.9 Socialisation

The adaptation framework proposes that by using discourse, along with a process of socialisation, creators have the potential to enact change in the industry through influencing the reputation and perception of digital comics. This thesis understands socialisation as the process of becoming a competent member of a particular community of practice, acquiring the necessary practice-related skills as well as the set of values, which guide those skills (Cotter, 2010). Further, individuals also acquire a sense of identity characteristic of that field (Moore, 1970; Cohen, 1981). Samuel and Stephens (2000, 476) argue that creators mould themselves to the identity of the profession:

> What constitutes a professional identity and a role is thus a 'percolated' understanding and acceptance of a series of competing and sometimes contradictory values, behaviors, and attitudes, all of which are grounded in the life experiences of the self in formation.

By internalising the norms and values of the profession the creators also adopt the stereotypes held by the workforce (Cohen, 1981). This socialisation normally occurs through education or in the workplace where the individual acquires the specific knowledge and skills for their professional role while they also develop new values, attitudes, and self-identity components based on the profession (Hall, 1987; McGowen & Hart, 1990). The characteristics of the comic book industry (lack of specialist education and freelance workforce) make the available industry texts (interviews) and public discourse of creators (industry convention panels) a more powerful tool (Stahl, 2013). As Taylor and Kent (2010, 212) claim, "all experiences, good and bad, socialise members into the norms of the field" building their understanding of what that field is and what members of that field do. These texts and discourses are sources of anticipatory socialisation,

developing the creator's view of work before they are employed (Taylor and Kent, 2010).

This thesis proposes that during times of change a pioneer group of creators, who are exploring digitisation, guide the socialisation process of digital comics. Those pioneering creators, who have invested heavily in the new formats, are trying to socialise other creators to a particular way of doing and seeing things that may be at odds with the previous identity of comic book creators. They use discourse as a socialisation tool to alter the perception of digital comics, derived from earlier unsuccessful web-based experiments, before engaging in further socialisation of the new practices, routines, and norms that orient digital production.

The negative perception of digital comics has been developed through the consumption of earlier digital content and discourses surrounding the prior digital formats, which acted as a form of anticipatory socialisation (Taylor and Kent, 2010). The new digital creators' socialisation counters the prevailing negative stereotypes of digital comics to develop a better sense of what working on the digital projects is like (Taylor and Kent, 2010). They invest time in socialising other creators to digital formats and methods of production because, following Gina Neff's (2012) venture labour thesis, they invest their human, social, and symbolic capital in the digital projects.

2.2.10 Capital and Risk

Expanding on Rosalind Gill's individualisation of risk concept Gina Neff (2012) argues that the uncertain future of creative projects makes the creators investment of capital a risk that they may not fully benefit from. Many times the creator of the content and the owner of the copyright are not the same person. Conversely, it is also a creator's investment of

human, social, and symbolic capital that can work to manage and minimise the risk surrounding the project.

For instance, the creators invest their social capital through the time spent promoting the company and their work to their personal and professional networks, gaining information and support that can be helpful to their company or project. During times of media change the creator's social capital becomes a vehicle for socialisation, because it allows them to promote their new digital comic projects to help garner more support and acceptance for the project. Without this acceptance from their social network they risk the project being rejected.

The creators are also developing new cultural structures or what McIntyre would call domain knowledge for the digital comics. Learning and developing the new conventions and rules requires an investment of human capital, the time it takes to acquire the new skills and knowledge to complete the work. As Neff (2012) argues, these new skills are gained on their own time and at their own expense in the hope that they will provide them with work. Hacker (2006, 78) classifies skills as a specific investment, tied to a particular technology or type of work, which represents a risk to the individual:

> Skills are not costless to obtain, nor do they come without risk. Skills are an investment, and often what economists calls a 'specific investment' – an investment that is tied to a particular line of work, industry, or technology. And the more specific the investment, the greater the cost and dislocation if that investment is left 'stranded' by economic exchange.

When this is a specialist skill, that is not easily transferable, the risk is greater and Hacker again (2006, 75) states, "the educated rise farther,

but increasingly they fall farther, too". Creators need to socialise others to invest their human capital and learn the new digital understandings and conventions.

To make the investment appear less risky, this theoretical framework proposes that creators, following Bridgstock's (2013) adaptive career identities, rely on a stable core identity. Bridgstock's work looked at the arts entrepreneurship in tertiary arts education and her theory follows the view of identity established already, where identity is not fixed throughout the creator's lifespan, but instead reacts to past experiences, future imaginings, changing needs and new experiences. The adaptive career identity relies on a strong sense of self, where the creator has firmly established core values and career needs, but the identity is open and flexible so the creator can recognise rewarding career opportunities (Bridgstock, 2013, 131), such as the emerging digital comic book industry. This proposed adaptive career identity would allow the arts students to manage the often-conflicting demands of art and commerce. In this framework creators adapt their identity to the new production process, format, and industry structure yet their work is still guided by certain core values, which they come to rely on to help understand what digital comics are and what creators do on digital projects.

Finally, my theoretical framework adds symbolic capital to Neff's venture labour. Symbolic capital is the amount of prestige; honour or recognition one has gained in a field (Thompson, 1991, 14). The awards and recognition given by agents of the field confers the individual's symbolic capital, but so too does the creator's long experience and accumulated professional knowledge (Wiik, 2009). As Schultz (2007) argues, there would be more importance behind a senior editor labelling something a 'good story' than an intern. This demonstrates how the accumulation of symbolic capital allows

individuals to consecrate other works or artists. Bourdieu (1993) used the example of art dealers, who invest their reputation and status, or symbolic capital, in artists through choosing to sell their work. They transfer their symbolic capital to the work in the hope it will reap economic reward later. In this transaction the dealer risks their symbolic capital because they rely on other members of the field, art critics or historians, to similarly judge the work as good and invest their symbolic capital or their reputation may be damaged. Comic book creators, who have established careers, similarly invest their symbolic capital in the digital projects to help legitimise them while less known creators see digital as a way to gain symbolic capital, through having their contribution to the field recognised via their exploration of new styles (Kirschbaum, 2007).

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 Introduction

Given the theoretical and analytical framework outlined above, which focuses on identity, socialisation, discourses and the investment of capital by comic book creators, the thesis uses an exploratory qualitative methodology. Qualitative research allows the researcher to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them" (Jones, 1995, 2). The project seeks to understand the experiences of a certain group of people during a certain time, which is an inherently qualitative approach. "Qualitative inquiry deals with human lived experience. It is the *life-world* as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings that is the object of study" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 84). The project engages with the people who are involved in the production of comic book content to explore their experience of digital change to their work in the comic book industry. In line with Streubert-Speziale and Carpenter (2003) it views these experiences as part of multiple realities, where each individual

can perceive truth and reality differently but there are shared understandings and experiences, which combine to reveal a particular portrayal or interpretation of digitisation, during this point in time, rather than an exact picture (Shardlow, 2009).

2.3.2 Population of Interest

This project focused on the American comic book industry to manage the scope of the project, but also due to the specific focus on changes to work in the 'comic book industry'. Aaron Meskin (2012) argued that comics are a hybrid form where the structural conventions vary between the different cultures and comic's traditions. These different cultures and traditions include Japanese manga, French bande desinee, and North American comic books. The traditions differ not only in their formal qualities, but also in their reception and production (Meskin, 2012). I have situated the 'comic book industry' in the specific locational and production context of mainstream and independent publishers in North America and analysed the changes in work within this particular context.

The North American comic book industry was also chosen due to my familiarity with the content of American publishers, the ease of access to supporting documents and greater visibility of members of the industry. Access to members of the industry is important because the primary focus of this thesis is how individuals manage a digital media transition with a particular focus on how they construct and enact identity during these times. The Australian comics industry by comparison, is very small and not easily studied as an 'industry' with recognisable standards and practices. In fact there is much debate, between industry members, on whether Australian has what can be referred to as an 'industry' and for further discussion of the specifics of the Australian market and the difficulties it presents for research see Maynard (forthcoming). It should also be noted that whilst I focused on

the North American comic book industry to narrow the thesis's scope this only relates to the publisher's and projects I chose and the specific historical and cultural context they are situated in. This did not mean I only looked at American creators, but a range of those creators who were employed by the American publishers including Canadian, English, Filipino, Italian, Mexican, Scottish, and Spanish creators.

Within the context of the North American comic book industry the population of interest was further narrowed by the focus on digitisation and new formats. Suitable projects were identified following Ortner's (2013) study on independent film, where she immersed herself in the field of works. Immersion in the field allowed Ortner to be more informed for her interviews, as was the case in this project, but it also allowed me to identify the relevant people working in the field by examining the credits pages of digital comics. Crediting identifies those creators involved in the production process but, while industry crediting-standards have improved (Duncan and Smith, 2009), comics do not mirror the full crediting practices of film, with many roles uncredited. Deuze et al (2007) cited the lack of adequate crediting practices in the video game industry as particularly worrisome for the way it marginalises the contribution of workers who sacrifice much to be in the industry and hold a deep connection with the work they produced. This lack of crediting meant the roles were obscured. Despite being aware of many new and old 'invisible' roles, such as interns, art directors, and software engineers, the thesis focused on those workers with identified roles. While this represents a limitation on the thesis, the lack of research on comic book work in general means there is still much to learn about the credited roles this thesis covers. New and old roles were identified, including the writer, penciller, inker, colourist, letterer, editor, assistant editor, editor-in-chief, publisher, builder, sound designer, musician, layout artist, digital production manager, chief creative officer, character creator, and engineer. The credits reveal the primary symbol creators, creative managers, and many of the technical

roles (Hesmondhalgh, 2007) involved in digital comic production. At this point it is also necessary to state that when I use the term creator I am focusing on the direct production roles involved in creating the comic who could claim authorship [6]of the content. This separates the creators from the indirect roles, like lawyers and accountants, whose contributions to the publisher enable the publisher to function and therefore have an indirect role in enabling individual projects to happen, but they do not produce any of the content nor do they have grounds to claim authorship.

By immersing myself in the content, four publishers were identified who produced new "digital first" content on a consistent basis, making these new formats a key part of their publishing business. Many temporary organisations were also identified; groups of specialists who come together for one project before breaking up and regrouping for the next (Bilton, 2011). These temporary projects that occur outside the main publishers are often engaged in innovative and risky work, which is then 'mainstreamed' into the bigger organisations. However in this thesis I opted to focus on permanent companies for the ability this gave to me to make comparisons with the previous print industry structure. The research focused on the digital comics produced by traditional print publishers Marvel and DC, as well as new companies Madefire and Thrillbent. These publishers were chosen because they are located in the American market, produce new digital content, and represent very different business models, organisational structures and visions for the comic book industry. I would also argue that the new companies Madefire and Thrillbent emulate the innovativeness of temporary project-based groups by bringing together many different groups of creators to work on projects for a short period of time without the legacy structures of the existing comic book publishers. As the thesis will

[6] I say 'could claim ownership' in recognition of the prevalence of work-for-hire contracts in the comic book industry, which strip creators of their claim to authorship.

demonstrate, their innovativeness and expertise is then mainstreamed through collaboration with the larger legacy publishers.

While the four publishers all produce digital comic content the differences in ownership, organisation and vision would result in different experiences for comic book creators. Researching a multitude of experiences within a specific geographical framework is important, because comic book creators often engage in multiple working relationships due to their status as freelance workers. To survive in the industry creators mix work-for-hire projects at the major publishers, such as Marvel and DC, with creator-owned work at smaller publishers, such as Thrillbent. These different experiences would then play a role in shaping the dominant industry discourses and narratives, which the sample has attempted to capture. From the digital work produced by these companies a list of interviewees was developed and, where possible, they were contacted via email to introduce the researcher and the project. Other interviews with the listed participants were obtained at New York Comic Con and at the offices of digital publisher Madefire.

2.3.3 Ethical Considerations

The interaction with the creators followed the University's requirements for ethical conduct in human research. There is an intrinsic power inequality in the researcher/researched relationship through the researcher's interpretation and theorising of the researched's claims (Benton and Craib, 2001). The researcher has an ethical obligation to protect the participants who allowed the researcher to enter their social world (Johnson, 2001), particularly when the findings may be disseminated within that social world with far-ranging effects and consequences (Hardy et al., 2001). Several of the respondents were interested in whether the results of the research would be published and where, indicating an interest in reading the findings and seeing how their responses fitted with the wider responses. To limit the potential

consequences for the participants, yet maintain the direct ties to the social world the respondents were identified by their publisher and role, but not their name.

The ethical considerations also have a practical component where it is necessary to consider how access is gained, data is collected, processed, stored, and analysed and the findings are written up in an ethical, responsible fashion (Saunders et al., 2009). Gaining informed consent is a vital stage in the research process, but Reed (2013) questions whether informed consent can be fully promised, because participants may discuss and name other third parties who have not provided consent. The participants were given a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A), approved by the University of Adelaide ethics committee that detailed the nature of the project, what would be required of the participant, how the data would be managed, and assured them that they could withdraw from the project at any time. The participants were asked to read this sheet before filling out the Consent Form (Appendix B). The participants were offered a choice in how they would be addressed in the project and while anonymity was offered to provide protection to the participants (Easterby and Smith et al., 2008) many of the respondents opted to be referred to by their actual name. After conducting the data analysis I decided it would be best for all participants to be referred to with part anonymity based on their affiliation with the digital companies, which was the specific reason they were chosen. The participants were referred to via company name, role, and numerical code indicating the interview transcript and participant (see Appendix C for full-list). For instance Madefire Writer 1.1 refers to the first interview with Madefire participant 1 who was a writer. Where necessary references to other project participants were changed to reflect their participant code. The names of the specific projects the creator worked on were also removed, but their role on the project was maintained to deepen our understanding of how different roles experience change. Due to the public nature of the other documentation

used for analysis, the panel transcripts and published interviews, names and projects were not changed.

2.3.4 Data Collection

The exploratory nature of the project meant that data was collected in a number of ways. Primary data was collected through interviews with the creators conducted in-person and via email, while secondary data was collected from the available industry sources, such as websites and industry panels that interviewed the creators.

The secondary data gathering or historical document research was conducted first because it acts as "an introductory strategy for establishing a context or background against which a substantive contemporary study may be set" (Gardner, 2006). The study used existing interviews with comic book creators and transcriptions of industry panels, which focused on the experience of work, to establish the background for the study. A total of 17 industry panels were documented and transcribed, including panels I attended at New York Comic-Con 2014 and panels viewed online (see Appendix D). These panels were generally conducted at industry conventions like New York and San Diego Comic-Con and focused on the creators' public narratives and discourses surrounding breaking into comics and their experience of working in the industry. These panels, as well as the interviews with the trade press and posts on creator's blogs, represent what Caldwell (2008) calls the "deep texts", artefacts produced by the industry that contribute to meaning making and self-understanding. These texts are produced and disclosed to different audiences as part of the "complex and varied ways…personnel broach, barter, discuss, employ, explain, and contest ideas" (Caldwell, 2008, NP) about the field. It is through the deep texts, as well as creative practice, that creators are socialised to the ways of thinking and working that are

compatible with the field and it is through these texts that change is supported or contested.

The historical document research provided valuable insight into comics production, acting as both a resource and a source of background information to develop my own interview questions. The historical documents also offer a way to expand our understandings of each case context, and according to Gotsi et al (2010, 786), “offering insights that might refute or reinforce our findings”. The published interviews and panel transcripts provided valuable extracts to further enhance themes identified in the primary data while revealing the wider industry view of the current state of the industry. As Cornea found when looking at the use of interviews in film studies, pre-existing secondary interviews with creators allow the research to “sidestep the long process of chasing down interviewees and transcribing recordings, and can steer clear of the responsibility of how best to represent the material created during an interview” (2008, 118). This time saving aspect was beneficial, but more importantly it allowed the thesis to include perspectives from creators I could not contact myself, adding more depth and variety to the data.

The primary data gathering required access to the ‘inside’ of the comic book industry. Obtaining access to the ‘inside’ of a particular industry is a constant issue for researchers who are looking at a specific community (Grindstaff, 2002; Zafirau, 2008). Gaining access has been an issue in anthropological studies of the film industry (Caldwell, 2008; Ortner, 2010) with Hortense Powdermaker (1966, 216) reflecting on her landmark study, *Hollywood the Dream Factory*:

> I never knew the top level of the Hollywood hierarchy, as I had known its equivalent in all other field work. I was well aware of

> the lack of direct contact with the most powerful segment of the social structure, but all efforts to include it were rebuffed.

The issue of access is not exclusive to the film industry and Elefante and Deuze (2012) find media research grounded in “everyday lived experience” to be quite rare (Elefante and Deuze, 2012, 10) due to the difficulty in obtaining access to suitable respondents in the population. To address some of these concerns regarding access I attended New York Comic-Con 2013 to gain access to subjects identified as part of the population of interest. New York Comic-Con is a comic book convention that brings together fans and creators as part of what Rendace (2000) calls a periodic social economy. It allowed me to gather secondary data through attending panels on working in the comic book industry, but more importantly provided an opportunity to make contacts and conduct interviews. These contacts allowed me to arrange a visit to the office of digital publisher Madefire. I had contacted the publisher before the research trip, but did not receive a response. Attending the show, where the publisher was set up, allowed me to engage in the necessary relationship building that facilitates qualitative research. Where emails prior to the event had elicited no responses, the industry show allowed me to communicate directly with members of the Madefire team and arrange the visit to the offices in San Francisco to record interviews with Madefire employees. By attending New York Comic-Con I was able to conduct five face-to-face interviews. These interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to 45 minutes. In addition to face-to-face interviews I also conducted email-based interviews with comic book creators.

Interviews are a suitable methodology because the research questions are inherently qualitative, seeking to go deeper into discovering the changing processes in work and the construction of identity for comic book workers. The goal of interviews is to improve our understanding of

social and cultural phenomena and processes as opposed to producing *objective* facts about *reality* to make generalisations to given populations (Fidel, 1993; Pettigrew et al., 2001; Wang, 1999). In Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) study of creative labour they use interviewing as a methodology and explain its use through Rom Harre's (1979) distinction between 'intensive' and 'extensive' research design. Intensive research allows the project to investigate a small number of cases to discover explanations for the production of certain objects, events and experiences, as opposed to extensive research that aims to generalise the findings to a population (Sayer, 1992, 2-4). This definition of intensive research design is suitable for this study. Challenges of interviewing not only include the previously discussed issue of access, but the time necessary for both the interview and transcription, as well as the potential costs associated, such as travelling from Australia to America (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Those respondents who did participate in the project were provided with a standardised open-ended interview (Turner III, 2010). The participants were each asked a similar standard group of questions, which were worded in a way to provoke open-ended responses. These questions were developed in relation to the research questions and through the preliminary readings of the literature and secondary sources. I initially wrote out every possible question before grouping them around identifiable themes. I then crafted one or two questions, which were representative of the questions grouped together under that theme.

Some deviation in the questions did exist and this was based on the individual's role and their relative experience in the industry. Those I knew to be new to the industry, through consultation with the historical documents found online, were asked slightly different questions than

those who were more experienced (see Appendix E.1 and E.2 for complete list of original questions for experienced and new creators). Over time I also added new questions, based on the growing set of data already collected to explore emerging themes and conducted follow-up interviews with certain creators to address these new questions (see Appendix F for additional and follow-up questions). The use of standardised open-ended interviews was chosen because it "allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire" (Turner III, 2010, 756), particularly in this case detailed information in the participant's own words. This focus on detailed, narrative responses generated by the open-ended questions can lead to difficulty in the coding process as the researcher is presented with responses from many people potentially making it difficult to "fully and accurately reflect an overall perspective of all interview responses through the coding process" (Turner III, 2010, 756).

Identity studies have also specifically looked at the suitability of interviewing as a methodology. Alvesson established that the interview was a site of identity work (2003). This is due to the opportunity interviewing provides respondents to engage in 'creating' themselves (Albrow 1997) through a 'reflexive interaction with the research engagement' (Linstead and Thomas 2002, 17). Respondents are able tell the story of their firm/themselves and reflexively co-construct their own sense of organizational identity (Gudmundsdottir, 1996) and professional identity. Discourses and discursive resources became a valuable tool for the individual to construct and present certain identities within the social context of the interview (Reed, 2013, 97). Talk becomes an important tool for individuals to discuss their identity tensions, allowing them to reflect on the changes or difficulties causing the tension. In this thesis the interviews conducted with comic book professionals, as well as the secondary interviews conducted with the comic book fan press, allow the comic book creators to reflect on their career and this specific period of media change. This process allows

the creator, in their own words, to identify the tensions apparent during this time.

Interviewing also allows for an analysis of the professionals' everyday language and provides an opportunity to gain knowledge of their professional practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984). More importantly, this thesis seeks to understand how comic book creators adapt to periods of digitisation and the impact this has on their understanding of their particular social world. Through interviews the thesis is able to gain first-hand perspectives (Gravengaard, 2012) from creators on how they conceptualise their social world and the changes taking place. Finally, basing the analysis on the tangible language of professionals enables the research to show "how speakers produce and reproduce particular social identities through their language use" (Gravengaard, 2012, 1065).

Critiques of interviewing and identity research have focused on the relationship of talk to identity (Taylor, 2011). On the one hand, critical discursive writers argue that "identities are assumed to be constituted in ongoing talk" (Taylor, 2011, 44), while in a more conventional qualitative analysis the individual's talk is seen as expressing and reflecting an already existing identity. This project is more closely aligned to the critical discursive view of identity and talk, because it is interested in how comic book worker's identities are constructed and re-constructed during this period of digital transition.

Before discussing the data analysis process it is also necessary to comment on the methodological differences between online interviews and face-to-face interviews. Online interviews, which collect original data via the Internet to provide evidence for the research question (Hewson, 2010), can be conducted via email, online chat platforms, and recently through voice-over-Internet protocol (VOIP) services, such as

Skype, that allow for online video and voice calls. This project utilised email to conduct the interviews to allow the project to overcome the issue of time, because I was based in Australia and the respondents were located in North America, Latin America and Europe, creating a time difference. It also helped avoid any difficulties for freelance workers who might have trouble finding time to sit for a 30-60 minute interview. Meho (2006) found that email interviews allowed the participants to take their time with their responses, as well as allowing the participant to conduct the interview in a familiar location or with the growth in smartphones, tablets and laptops potentially on the go. This leads to a lack of spontaneity with email-based interviews and more carefully constructed answers, which could reflect the participants greater concern with social desirability (Hanrahan et al in Nunes, 2012, 61). In identity-based studies this extra time and construction to the answers can be beneficial with James and Busher (2006, 405) finding that email based interviews provide participants with the ability to:

> Explore and revisit their insights into their developing professional identities, allowing them to move back and forth through their narratives, thinking about their responses, drafting and redrafting what they want to write.

Email interviews provide participants freedom by allowing them to answer the questions in their own time and in their own words. This freedom is tempered for the researcher by the time it can take to collect the interview data. The data may be gathered in a week or it may take several months for the responses to be returned. This is linked to costs associated with the recruitment of the participants, because the email is never read or responded to (Meho and Tiboo, 2003). Participants can become distracted or forget about their involvement in the project, leaving the researcher limited options to follow-up on an active interview. This was clearly the case in this project: many times

participants were identified and sent introductory emails, which were never responded to despite several follow-ups.

Those participants who did respond were then provided with an information sheet, which included the researcher's ethical clearance, a consent form to be signed and the interview questions. Several participants completed and returned the interview promptly, but many of the participants required several follow-up emails to remind them of the interview. In these instances the participant often directly referenced the nature of their work, such as an increased workload, as impeding their process with the interview. There were also several instances where a participant had been recruited, supplied with the interview and, after several follow-up emails, no response or completed interview was received. Other issues that impacted the timeliness of the responses were the technical problems highlighted by McCoyd and Kerson (2006) as a disadvantage to email interviews. The participants would respond with an apology, explaining their responses had been deleted or lost through a technical fault. After conducting some initial data analysis I also contacted several participants to ask follow-up questions. Although only a few participants were contacted there was generally greater success with the follow-up interviews. This can probably be attributed to the degree of trust that was established with the participant through the initial interview.

Email interviews should be characterised as a renegotiation of control between the researcher and the participant, with Meho arguing email interviews provide participants with increased control over the flow of the interaction through choosing when and how they would respond or participate in the study (2006, 1291). I experienced this change in control through conducting in-person and email based interviews on the same project. The in-person interviews generally resulted in the collection of more data despite not necessarily asking as many

questions. The in-person interviews also elicited greater media richness. Media richness refers to the ability of a communication medium to foster interaction and feedback while permitting people to communicate with many kinds of cues and through multiple senses (Panteli, 2002; Robert & Dennis, 2005). The e-mail interviews prohibit the interviewer from reading facial expressions, body language, making eye contact, or detecting changes in tone or voice. Selwyn and Robson (1998) argue that these important visual or nonverbal cues, which help to interpret the data, may be missed online.

The use of email interviews also restricts the ability of the researcher to informally interact with the participant, both before and after the interview. In the in-person interviews the process of data gathering did not begin and end with the formal recording of the interviews. Instead, the talk before and after helped to add new data or influence the interpretation of the interview. In particular the participants were interested in the project, how I had got to this level of interest in the topic, what my plans for the future were and similar personal, experience-based questions. Answering these questions about the project and my career in effect helped to construct my identity as a researcher. This sort of reflexive interaction between researcher and participant was not evident in the email interviews. This is why the project utilised a mixed approach of face-to-face interviews, email interviews, and analysis of industry ‘deep texts’. Each modality covers parallel patterns of topics, but there are differences in expression, leading to differences in the richness of the data (Nicholas et al., 2010). By utilising a mixed approach to data collection my data sample as a whole becomes richer through the various ways the creators express themselves and how these different sources can be contrasted, compared and corroborated.

2.4 Data Analysis

2.4.1 General Inductive Approach

This project used the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006; Saunders et al., 2009) to analyse the interview data. The general inductive approach is a "systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data in which the analysis is likely to be guided by specific evaluation objectives" (Thomas, 2006, 238). An inductive approach allows for the development of "a suggestive theory of the phenomenon that shapes the basis for further inquiry" (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). The purpose of this thesis is to explore the experiences of comic book workers during a particular period of change and develop a framework, or theory, to explain and structure their response to digitisation, which could also be applied to the experiences of other creative workers making the inductive approach suitable.

In an inductive approach, the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in the raw data are allowed to emerge without the restraints imposed by more structured methodologies. The themes and categories are not imposed on the data prior to collection and analysis (Patton, 1980, 306; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). One criticism of the inductive approach is the assumption that themes, categories, and understandings emerge on their own (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2007). While the researcher may not impose themes and categories on the analysis at first they are guided by what they want to find and how they interpret what the data is telling them (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2007). The researcher may be guided by the inductive approach, but data analysis should be reflexive and iterative with "multiple rounds of revisiting the data as additional questions emerge, new connections are unearthed, and more complex formulations develop along with a deepening understanding of the material" (Berkowitz, 1997, NP). This study sought to combine this inductive and iterative approach, allowing themes and understandings to emerge from the data yet also

acknowledging the questions and connections the analysis generated, which forced me to revisit the data.

General inductive analysis follows the description of qualitative data analysis laid out by Miles and Huberman (1994, 10-11), where the three main tasks are: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Where general induction differs is in the development of clearer and more detailed procedures for data analysis and reporting.

The first step in general inductive analysis involved preparing the raw data files. The recorded interviews were transcribed and the e-mail interviews were reformatted so the Word documents utilised the same font and size. In both cases the questions I asked were highlighted to separate them from the respondent's answers. This was necessary as the interviews were predominantly conducted online, meaning the respondent completed the interview on their own chosen word processing program.

After preparing the raw data files I performed a close reading of the text. This close reading, which involved multiple readings, allowed me to develop an understanding of the content in the interviews and what some of the emerging themes may be. As part of this stage I also utilised the approach used in the qualitative analysis guide developed by Dierckx de Casterlé et al (2011) and began to highlight certain phrases and statements that made an impression on me and recorded notes related to those phrases or statements. This began the actual data analysis process whilst my ideas took shape.

The coding process then followed this initial analysis. Emerging categories and themes were identified, building on the notation in the previous step. The categories focused on recurring terminology and

imagery, which were taken to indicate the speaker's use of the available 'discursive resources' (Taylor and Littleton, 2008). The discourses focused on the way creators discussed digitisation and their wider experience of comic book work. Identification of the discourses was also informed by Ortner who refers to discourse as the "vocabulary of terms, tropes, and styles distinctive to a particular social universe" (2013, NP). This is labelled cultural ethnography through discourse, which focuses on, "the ways in which people spontaneously seem to say or write the same things in many different contexts" (Ortner, 2013, NP). When different people repeat statements of similar intent it is logical to assume that a relatively established discourse exists in the particular social universe. Ortner's use of discourse, which focuses on the way individuals talk about the same things in different contexts, can be seen as adopting a similar view to Oswick et al (1997, 6), who assert, "language does not merely 'name' or passively describe reality, but frames it, and in so doing promotes particular attitudes and discourages others". For instance, the identifying of the reactive and relational discourses through the coding and data analysis process revealed the way comic book creators frame this period of digital change and socialise the important external sources, such as other creators, to this new form of digital work.

The categories and themes were informed by my specific research aims, which were more general codes, while more specific categories were also identified through *in vivo* codes. In vivo codes are those developed using the participants' own words and are common for inductive coding (Thomas, 2006, 241). Coding the interviews provided structure to the 'raw data' (May, 2001; Fielding and Thomas, 2001; Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). Certain codes were more abstract and representative of the data as a whole (meta-themes), while others were more specific (sub-themes). By structuring the data in this way the initial codes allowed me to think about the data in new ways, outside the chronology of the interview (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), as well at

different levels of specificity (Cassell et al., 2005, 10; Attride-Stirling, 2001, 388-389).

Once the initial coding was completed the codes were compared to look for “similarities, paradoxes, patterns and themes” (Reed, 2013, 116). Through this process similar codes were condensed into superordinate categories to begin refining the data into a series of key categories that form an explanatory model for how comic book workers adapt to the process of digitalization (see Appendix G for example). One difficulty was the feeling that everything was important to the research project. While nearly all the text was provided with an initial code, it was important to consider Thomas’s (2003) description of inductive coding, where not every piece of data may be assigned a category or code because it is not relevant to the research project, and McKee’s (2003, 75) claim that during the data analysis process the researcher’s responsibility is:

> To pick out the bits of the text that, based on your knowledge of the culture within which it’s circulated, appear to you to be relevant to the question you’re studying.

In conducting the refining process of data analysis I paid particular attention to ascertaining the links or relationships particular categories may have with each other. Searching for these links and relationships is a key part of the inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). Developing and linking themes allows the data to be reshaped into a “new and coherent depiction of the thing being studied” (Thorne, 2000, 68).

The links found were not necessarily part of a hierarchy or causal relationship, but instead formed part of a network where the categories may influence and interact with each other. For instance the categories

of the Reactive and Relational Discourse have a clear connection to each other, forming part of the framework for how comic book creators deal with the process of digitisation and changes in content by distancing their work from certain formats and associating it more closely with others. These categories were also influenced by the creator's relationship with the audience. In the category *Identity Recognition*, creators spoke about the positive relationship they have with the audience. Having the audience like and enjoy their work was important to them, it validated their identity, so the category of Identity Recognition is also linked to the Reactive and Relational Discourse.

The coding process was also open to alternative explanations and negative codes to provide validity and reliability to the research. These were instances where the experience of a creator countered the experience of the majority in the category and presented an alternative framework. For instance the coding of creators' education experiences painted a predominant image of comic book workers being educated, but not in comics, leading to the category of *Making Comics*. Instead of receiving a specific comics education the creators taught themselves, an attitude that formed part of the creator's core identity, as 'Making Comics' was vital to breaking in and exploring the new digital formats, and the lack of education also meant the creators were not socialised into comic's work until they entered the industry. Still, there were some creators who went to specific schools that offered comic book courses and they found their education vital in helping prepare and direct them for their comic book career. They learned valuable skills and had a clearer idea of what to expect in the industry.

Further processes to ensure the validity and reliability of the data collected and analysed were based on Robson (2002). Participant error, participant bias, observer error, and observer bias can threaten a study's reliability. Allowing the participants to conduct the interview via

email, where they could take their time with their responses, provided an opportunity to reduce participant error. Providing confidentiality, as well as complying with institutional ethical guidelines, was intended to limit participant bias by providing protection so the participants could move beyond socially desirable answers. As stated, few of the respondents opted for confidentiality. While it is hard to determine whether this suggests bias in their answers it does place them more firmly within Taylor's (2012) finding that identity is constituted through talk over time, placing the responses in conversation with their existing industry identity constructed in interviews with the comic book and popular culture media. Observer error and bias was also reduced through conducting the majority of the interviews online, preventing systematic errors related to issues like tiredness (Saunders et al., 2009). The use of archival, secondary data also reduced bias through providing access to a wider set of responses on the topic, which could provide dissenting or alternate views on the findings.

Once the codes had been identified and refined into a set of core categories that represent the framework for how comic book creators are responding to this period of digitisation the next step was to write up the findings. Reporting data in a literary style rich with participant commentaries is one of the core assumptions and attributes of qualitative research (Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2003, 6). It was particularly relevant to this study because its goal was to analyse this period of change through the experiences and narratives of comic book creators. Extended extracts are used throughout the reporting to highlight the findings as being grounded in the experiences of the creators.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has established the theoretical framework of the study and the corresponding methodology utilised. Previous research established

the individualisation of risk as an important factor influencing the experience of work in the creative industries. Identity is also framed as adaptive and contextual while individuals have used discourse as a valuable tool in the process of socialisation and managing identity. This study is designed to determine whether this is the case or not in the comic book industry under the current conditions of technological transition. Given this structure and the research questions of the project the qualitative research approach focusing on a population of comic book workers was justified. In particular it focused on the suitability of interviewing to identity research. This also provided an opportunity to comment on the experience of face-to-face and email-based interviewing, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the techniques individually and when compared to each other.

The next five chapters detail the findings of this research design. Chapter 3 establishes the structures of the print comic book industry and the overriding themes that characterise print production. Chapter 4 examines the breaking in and survival narratives of comic book creators to reveal how creators internalise the structures of comic's production and also how the experience of breaking in and surviving reveals core identity characteristics that influence the experience of digitisation. Chapter 5 introduces the emerging digital comic book industry and examines how existing structures are altered and discusses the potential impact of new structures on the experience of work. Chapter 6 and 7 explore the tensions experienced by comic book creators during this period of digitisation and analyses the strategies creators' utilise to manage and influence the way comic books are digitised through a socialisation and discourse framework.

Chapter 3 – Understanding Comic Book Production

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to ground comics creators' responses to digitalisation in their experiences and their understanding of the existing industry structure. It centres on the dominant business models of the comic book industry, identifying the major figures in the industry that are impacted by digital change and are also in a position to influence that change. Further, it places media work at the centre of media industry analysis by focusing on the processes and roles involved in the creative process. The thesis is able demonstrate what the comic book industry is transitioning from by establishing the main characteristics of the print model. This chapter highlights key areas of tension arising from the intersection of the goals and motivations of publishers and creators.

3.2 Print Industry Structure

The US comic book industry shares organisational similarities with other media industries. Philip M Napoli (2003) outlines two ways that media generate revenue: selling content to consumers and selling audiences to advertisers (2003, 2). The comic book industry adds a significant addition to Napoli's model; revenue generated through the licensing of intellectual property for use in other media. For instance Robert Kirkman's comic *The Walking Dead* has been licensed as a popular TV show, video game series, book series, board game, collectible toys and other merchandise. The comics industry also acts as a licensee for properties from other media with TV show Orphan Black, the video game series Tomb Raider and *Game of Thrones* novels licensed for comic book production. In Marvel's last public revenue filing before being acquired by Disney the company's reported net sales for the nine months, ending September 2009, were licensing US$181.5 million, publishing US$89.5 million, and film production US$147.9 million

(Business Wire, 2009). Therefore, the revenue sources and major players that structure the industry have changed over time due to fluctuations in the relative importance of these different sources of revenue.

The comic book industry sells content in a periodical, weekly market. Each week different serialised monthly comics are released. Collections of single issues known as trade paperbacks and longer, original content known as graphic novels are also part of the industry. Until recently, a network of retailers known as the direct market was the primary outlet for the sale of this print content. The direct market encompasses specialty comic book shops, with over 2,600 stores currently holding accounts with distributor Diamond in the US (MacDonald, 2013). The direct market emerged as the dominant retail market for comics because the stores placed non-returnable pre-orders, a change from the returnable newsstand model, which guaranteed sales for the publishers (Lopes, 2009). This created a fundamental shift in the distribution of risk in comic book distribution from the publisher to the retailer

The newsstand model has continued as a minor secondary outlet and publishers also distribute print content through bookshops, big box retailers, such as Walmart and Target, and through online e-commerce stores, like Amazon. Newsstand distribution, which was the dominant distribution model from the industries inception in the 1930s till the 1970s, now represents a tiny portion of the industry. For instance it was only acknowledged in December 2013 that Marvel had ended newsstand distribution two years prior (Reid, 2013). Bookstores represent a growing segment of the industry, selling collected trades, graphic novels and some single-issues, but the wider trend of bookstore closures in America has slowed this growth. In particular the bankruptcy of Borders, which resulted in the closure of 625 stores in America by

September 2011, stifled the growth of the market. Marvel also announced they had ended single-copy distribution to bookstores in September 2013 (Reid, 2013). Nevertheless, industry-tracking firm ICv2 reports that bookstore sales have returned to positive growth despite the setbacks (ICv2, 2013a). The impact big-box retailers such as Walmart or online stores like Amazon have on the sales of print comics is unknown. Figures from these markets are rarely reported, leaving sales to the direct market and bookstores as the largest known components of comic book sales.

The print industry's structure has led to a high degree of concentration at the point of distribution. A few firms act as gatekeepers to consumer markets, characterising print comics as an oligopolistic market. Publishers Marvel and DC make up the print oligopoly, which, according to Doyle, is the most common form of market structure for media industries (2002, 9). Marvel and DC Comics are each owned by one of the six conglomerates (Disney, General Electric, National Amusements, News Corporation, Sony and Time Warner) that dominate media production and creative work in the US and globally (Schatz, 2008). Disney purchased Marvel in 2009, but the publisher previously had a long history of corporate ownership dating back to its inception in 1939 as Timely Comics, part of Martin Goodman's Western Fiction Publishing. DC began as National Allied Publications in 1934 and, through a series of mergers and acquisitions, is now owned by Time Warner operating as part of a multi-layered structure under the recently formed DC Entertainment (2009), which itself is part of the Warner Bros. Entertainment.

In oligopolies there are a few sellers in the market, but competition exists between them. Marvel and DC routinely control over 60% of the direct market between them, both in terms of units sold and dollar value (Comic Chronicles, 2015), with many small firms making up the

remaining 40%. Oligopolies also limit choice as their control of the marketplace means they do not need to pursue product diversity (Bettig & Hall, 2003, 46). Marvel and DC consistently release the most comics and graphic novels per month, drawing on the vast libraries of characters they own tied to the superhero genre and the resources of their corporate owners. The two publishers' lack of product diversity, outside the superhero genre, has shaped the perception of the industry and its fans (see Abad-Santos, 2015; Fagan and Fagan, 2011; Lopes, 2009).

The two publishers compete and use advertising to build brand loyalty (Meehan and Torre, 2011), but Betting and Hall argue firms in an oligopoly share common interests that allow them to "more easily agree on standards and practices" (2003, 46). This agreement stems from the firms' size and interdependence where they are each large enough that the decisions they make can alter the market conditions. Marvel and DC have maintained similar industrial production practices and set standards for the amount of story pages and advertising pages in each comic, but the publishers' shared interests, to generate revenue, also mean decisions are not easily agreed on. Instead they make decisions in relation to each other's actions. For example, in 1981 DC announced a royalty program for creators and Marvel quickly followed suit to avoid losing creators to DC and protect its position (Gabilliet, 2010). Then, in 2010 DC used an increase in the price of Marvel's comics to $3.99 as part of their marketing to differentiate the two publishers (Allen, 2010). This interdependence of the industry's oligopolies should be considered when analysing digitisation's changes to the structure of the industry.

3.2.1 Work-for-Hire

Creative work at the two largest publishers is freelance and precarious because creators sign work-for-hire agreements on a project-to-project

basis. The legal identification of work-for-hire in America was solidified in the Copyright Act of 1976, which stated work-for-hire was:

> (1) a work prepared by an employee within the scope of his or her employment; or (2) a work specially ordered or commissioned for use as a contribution to a collective work, as a part of a motion picture or other audiovisual work, as a translation, as a supplementary work, as a compilation, as an instructional text, as a test, as answer material for a test, or as an atlas, if the parties expressly agree in a written instrument signed by them that the work shall be considered a work made for hire. (17 U.S.C. § 101)

Work-for-hire agreements see the creator assign ownership of the content produced to the publisher. Comic book publishers utilised work-for-hire agreements when they commissioned freelance comic book creators to produce new content during the industry's formative years. Before the Copyright Act of 1976 publishers claimed ownership under the 1909 Copyright Act where the publisher's employed freelance contractors at their own instance and expense and controlled and supervised the freelancer's work. In the absence of explicit work-for-hire contracts (Figure 2 shows the previous practice of Marvel stamping the back of the creator's paycheck) creators such as Jack Kirby and Joe Simon contested[7] Marvel's ownership of popular characters they were involved with, prior to the introduction of the 1976 Act, on the basis that they were not produced under work-for-hire agreements.

[7] See Hart (2011) and Howe (2012) for more on the legal disputes surrounding work-for-hire in the comic book industry.

NOTE:
This figure/table/image has been removed
to comply with copyright regulations.
It is included in the print copy of the thesis
held by the University of Adelaide Library.

Figure 2 Cheque supplied to artist Dick Ayers in 1974 by Marvel

Source: http://seanhowe.tumblr.com/post/34095584805/pictured-one-of-marvel-comics-infamous (accessed 6 May 2015)

Through work-for-hire agreements Marvel managed to accumulate a library of over 8,000 characters (Marvel.com, 2014). When Disney purchased Marvel for US$4 billion the publisher's vast library of characters was cited as a key reason for the deal, allowing Disney access to new licensing opportunities and sources of revenue (Marvel.com, 2009). The true value in the comic book industry has moved beyond the sale of individual comic books to the licensing of comic book characters. In 2012 the US comic book industry was estimated to be worth US$805 million, including both print and digital sales. In comparison, the US domestic box office for the 2012 films *The Avengers*[8], based on characters owned by Marvel, and *The Dark Knight Rises*[9], based on characters owned by DC, totalled over US$1.07 billion while their worldwide box office totalled over US$2.6 billion. Furthermore, Disney and Time Warner were listed as the number one and number seven retail and merchandise licensors respectively and, while breakdowns were not provided, Marvel and DC-owned characters would contribute heavily to the combined US$46.9 billion in licensing sales the two corporations earned (Lisanti, 2014).

Comic book creators, working on these characters, traditionally have not shared in most of the additional revenues generated. Creators receive per-page payments and, after underground and independent publishers started offering alternative ownership contracts in the 70s and 80s, now qualify for sales based royalties (Duncan and Smith, 2009; Gabilliet, 2010). Writer Mark Waid also explained that post-1980 DC instigated creator equity agreements. Under these agreements writers and artists were granted a small percentage of revenue generated by new characters they create. Unofficial practices have also existed whereby creators were compensated for story elements that were subsequently licensed through other media, even those stories

[8] The Avengers US domestic box office US$623,357,910, worldwide box office US$1,518,594,910 (BoxOffice Mojo, 2014)

[9] The Dark Knight Rises US domestic box office US$448,139,099, worldwide box office US$1,084,439,099 (BoxOffice Mojo, 2014)

that involved existing characters (Waid, 2013). This practice (characterised as a courtesy by Waid) was supported and administered by DC publisher Paul Levitz and ended after Levitz left the company (Waid, 2013). According to Waid, Marvel has something similar, but the result for creators is different. Creator Len Wein developed characters at both Marvel and DC. At DC his character Lucious Fox was featured in the recent Batman film trilogy and the royalty payments were considerable (Molloy, 2013). At Marvel Wein co-created Wolverine and despite the character appearing in six films Wein only received payment for the sixth film due to contractual rules established by the publisher where the film must be named after the character to receive payment (Molloy, 2013).

Work in the industry has changed as creators have benefited from opportunities outside of work-for-hire contracts. Writer Mark Waid has highlighted that work-for-hire projects provide an opportunity to build reputations (Waid, 2013b) and writer Jonathan Hickman also stated work-for-hire projects provide exposure to a large audience, which can benefit other creator-owned work (Smith, 2014). Robert Kirkman, the creator of *The Walking Dead*, captures the change in the view towards work-for-hire projects where:

> The really important thing to note there is that Marvel was a stepping-stone; it wasn't the be-all, end-all of my career. I always recognized, from day one, that no one has ever retired from Marvel Comics. You're there, they pay you for a little while, and then they fire you. That's your future: getting fired by Marvel Comics. There is no gold watch, there is no retirement package, and there is no dinner where they usher you off in the golden age of your life. They go 'Well, you're not selling comics anymore for us, buddy. Goodbye, now go away. (Kirkman quoted in Irving, 2013)

3.2.2 Diamond

Despite the widespread acknowledgment by comics creators that work-for-hire contracts have often proven disadvantageous to them, Marvel and DC have dominated options for a career in the US comic book industry. Their sheer size has meant they have provided the majority of paying work and access to the market through the distribution networks that they also dominate. Access to distribution is important because the media industries have been built on scarcity (Mansell, 2004) and the control and ownership of industry bottlenecks (Evens and Donders, 2013). Distribution forms part of the 'hourglass structure' of the media industry outlined by Terry Flew (2012). In the hourglass model there are a large number of content creators, the individual artist or singer, and a small number of "highly concentrated and often multinational distributors" (Flew, 2012, 91), who restrict access to a potentially large audience of consumers, creating the necessary bottleneck.

Diamond Comic Distributors emerged as the sole major distributor for comics to the direct market in the US and owner of the distribution bottleneck after the so-called distribution wars of the 90s (Lopes, 2009). Three major distributors had previously served the direct market in the US: Capital City Distributors, Diamond Comics Distributors and Heroes World Distribution. In 1995, during the speculator market's decline[10], Marvel purchased Heroes World to facilitate in-house distribution. Diamond and Capital City responded by competing for exclusive contracts with Marvel's rivals. Diamond secured deals with DC, Dark Horse, Image and Archie Comics and in 1996 purchased Capital City Distributors. Marvel's ownership of Heroes World was short lived

[10] The Speculator Market refers to the period of growth in the comic book industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s and subsequent bursting of the bubble from 1993 to 1997, when Marvel filed for bankruptcy. The speculation bubble came to an end through a mixture of too many collectors entering the market, publishers flooding the market with poor quality content, and distribution issues (see Lopes, 2009 and Last, 2011)

because the publisher faced fulfilment issues and backlash from comic book stores who, according to industry veteran Chuck Rozanski, disliked “the hassle of having to place two new comics orders each month (sometimes at a lower overall discount), plus paying freight costs on Heroes World shipments” (2004). By 1997 Marvel had abandoned Heroes World to sign with Diamond giving Diamond a monopoly on the distribution of comics in North America.

Diamond’s rise demonstrates the power of the hourglass structure of the media industry. By signing more publishers to exclusive deals Diamond tightened the distribution bottleneck, as retailers relied increasingly on Diamond to fulfil orders while the distributor’s strength meant it could provide greater discounts than those offered by its competition, further increasing the retailers’ reliance on Diamond. This eventually led to the removal of Diamond’s competition, providing them with near complete control over how print comics were distributed to the direct market in America and other international territories. Due to Diamond’s position as the sole distributor of comics in North America the company was investigated by the US Justice Department for possible antitrust violations, but in 2000 the investigation was closed with no charges made. The investigation found that while Diamond may enjoy monopoly distribution of comic books in North America they did not control the distribution of all published material and, therefore, were not a legally defined monopoly (Duncan and Smith, 2009; Rhoades, 2008). The decision is evidence of the cultural understanding of comics as a genre, like fiction or science fiction, instead of a distinct medium and industry (Berlatsky, 2012).

Diamond controls the distribution of content, acting as the gatekeeper between creators and audiences, but the hourglass structure also applies to the production of content. Here Marvel and DC act as gatekeepers between creators and distribution based on their ability to

fund creativity. They are able to employ networks of creative freelancers on work-for-hire contracts. Producing a printed comic may not entail the same costs as producing a film or a video game, but these publishers have the ability to pay their freelancers and supporting organisation staff while they are producing the content and finance the printing and distribution of large print runs of comics. They are also able to finance a large quantity of different titles per month to spread the investment risk. The creative industries are characterised by what Richard Caves (2000) calls the 'nobody knows' principle. The reception and returns on creative content is uncertain because it is an "experience good": people cannot know whether they will like it until they try it, and therefore the risk is quite high. Flew (2012, 99) identifies strategies to minimise the risk associated with creative production that include the development of high-cost marketing, the star system, content taxonomies and production of a catalogue of content. The development and implementation of these risk management strategies, according to Flew, helps lead to industry concentration as it raises the costs of entry and production, and causes talent to cluster around the established industry leaders (2012, 99).

The direct market system, which has come to dominate comic book retailing, also provides certain advantages to Marvel, DC and Diamond. Previously, when comics were distributed primarily through newsstands, comic books were returnable. The system was filled with corruption because retailers exploited the returns policy to claim the refund whilst still selling the comics[11]. The direct market system, established in 1973 by Phil Seuling, removed returns and instead opted to keep excess issues as 'back issues' for the growing collector market (Lopes, 2009). Publishers benefited from the lack of returns and the guaranteed sales through the direct market's pre-order model. Diamond, as the largest distributor, produces a monthly magazine titled 'Previews', which allows

[11] Retailers were only required to tear off the cover page of returnable comics. The retailer would then sell the coverless comic to consumers (Lopes, 2009).

the retailers to place their order three months in advance. Publishers then only print as many copies as retailers order through the 'Previews' magazine. The direct market has worked as a system for comic book publishers because it shifted the risk from the publisher to the retailer. The downside, for the industry, is that comic book stores have to order what titles they think will sell and how many copies based on their own judgement, prior sales and pull list orders from customers[12]. Marvel and DC benefit from the brand recognition of their characters, which have not only been built up over time, but are being reinvigorated by the production of TV shows and films based on their characters (Virtue, 2015). Following Flew's (2012) examination of the creative industries, ordering more of these known properties reduces the risk of the retailers at the expense of smaller orders for less well-known and newer titles. The direct market system has also contributed to the niche status of the comic book industry with comic book stores only serving a limited portion of the population, restricting access to comic book content.

3.2.3 Creator-Owned

Despite the oligopolistic nature of the comic book industry, creators and audiences are not completely dominated by Marvel, DC and Diamond. The industry is also characterised by a growing group of independent publishers who compete with the 'Big Two', as they are referred to in the industry, for talent and market share. These independent publishers include Dark Horse Comics (created 1986), Image (1992), IDW (1999), BOOM! Studios (2005) and Dynamite Entertainment (2005). Together their market share totals nearly 38% according to tracking by ICv2 (2014a). It is also a growing share, with Image Comics increasing its average share from "6.57% in the first four months of 2012 to 9.34% in the first four months of 2014" (ICv2, 2014a). The independents have previously risen to challenge the 'Big Two' with the combination of

[12] A pull list is a standing monthly order a customer holds with a comic book store or online service. Previously pull lists played a large role in comic shop ordering, but stores now base orders off audience reaction, personal taste, and actual sales (Harper, 2014b).

Malibu Comics and Image briefly overtaking DC as the number two publisher in 1992 (Lopes, 2009, 116) before Image split-off to publish its own comics.

Independent publishers have found success by offering creators more creative freedom and greater ownership of the content they produce. Independent publishers offer creator-participation deals, where the creator and publisher share ownership of the work produced, or the even more desirable creator-owned contract, where the creator maintains full ownership of the work produced and the publisher charges a small fee to the creator to publish the work. Creator-owned work represents a different risk proposition to that of Marvel and DC's work-for-hire. In work-for-hire the publisher assumes the risk through financing the creative team, printing, distribution, marketing, and infrastructure of the publisher. The creator is paid either way and, in return for assuming that risk, the publisher maintains control of the work produced so they can maximise the returns on those projects that do succeed. With creator-owned work the creator foregoes the short-term payments offered by Marvel and DC for either part or whole ownership of their work. The publisher agrees to publish the series in exchange for part ownership or a fee from the creator. The publisher reduces the risk associated with publishing an unknown series by transferring the creator's pay to the success of the series as opposed to paying upfront. Independent publishers increasingly mix creator-owned work with licensed comics because licensed comics, with their built-in brand awareness, provide a degree of security and reliable returns. By mixing creator-owned work with licensed comics, based on properties like Star Wars, independent publishers can spread their risk across multiple projects in the same way as Marvel and DC.

Writer Jim Zubkovich has published detailed write-ups on the economics of creator-owned comic book work for his series

Skullkickers, demonstrating the risk it presents. On average, 11% of a print comic's cover price is left after retailers, printers, and distributors have taken their cut (Zubkovich, 2012). That remaining 11% is then used to pay for any advertising costs, publishing fees or expenses and, finally, provide payment to the creator. On a print run of 5000 comics, common for many new creator-owned comics not from a star creator, Zubkovich states there may not be any money leftover for the creative team. Launching the series in Q1 2011 with print single issues and eventual trade paperbacks, hardcover collections, digital reissues and special issues, Zubkovich reported that *Skullkickers* only hit profitability in Q1 2013 (2013). Zubkovich's experience highlights the risk of creator-owned work, where the money earned through *Skullkickers* was not enough to support the creators full-time, plus Zubkovich had to pay the other members of the creative team, the colourist and letterer. This leads to the mixing of work-for-hire and creator-owned projects whilst the creator attempts to manage and survive the economic conditions of the industry. Work-for-hire projects provide the short-term security needed to allow the creator to work on their creator-owned projects, which they hope will pay off in the long run.

Despite the risks associated with creator-owned work, creators are attracted to the work through the successes of others and the ability to control their work. The power of the creator-owned identity was established when Image launched in 1992 and capitalized on a perfect storm of pre-bubble collecting, star power and direct market access. The Image creators were responsible for the creation of high-selling Marvel titles *X-Men* #1 (8.1 million copies), *X-Force* Vol 1 (4 million copies), and *Spider-Man* #1 (2.5 million copies). They had considerable star power, which Hesmondhalgh (2007) found usually enables stars to negotiate for greater autonomy and control of the production, distribution and marketing of media products, while also demanding greater financial rewards for their work. The Image creators tried to negotiate for better royalties and increased creative freedom and

autonomy at Marvel (Lopes, 2009), but their star status gave them the power to leave the publisher when they were denied these improved contract terms. They established an independent company, which solidified the creator-owned identity in the company's organisational charter. It stated that creators would own the work they produced and that no Image partner could interfere creatively or financially with the work of another Image partner, in effect providing creative autonomy free from central editorial control. The creator-owned model was solidified when Image co-founder Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* #1 sold 1.7 million copies following its publication in May 1992 (the most for an independent comic at that time (Spawn.com, 2014) with all proceeds going to McFarlane.

The successes of properties like McFarlane's *Spawn* and newer properties like Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* have helped to promote creator-owned work in the comic book industry. When I asked creators what their future goals were, many highlighted a successful creator-owned project. As several creators explained:

> Ideally I'd like to come up with a creator-owned property that catches on with a big enough audience to sustain itself and keep my wife and daughter fed. (DC Colourist 1)

> I'd like to create and own something a large audience knows about. The other dream is for comics to somehow make me enough to buy my own house. I think the quickest way to that at this stage is to impress a large audience, so it all ties together. (Marvel Writer 1)

These extracts suggest that owning one's work is desirable and important to the creator's identity for the potential financial benefits it

provides. A successful creator-owned book not only validates the creative aspect of the creator's identity, but it also justifies the creator's choice of career by providing financial security to continue to create, and support loved ones.

The desirability of creator-owned projects not only comes from the potentially lucrative financial benefits, but from the increased sense of autonomy and creative freedom that creator-owned work provides. In the creator-owned identity creators feel like the need for negotiation is removed. The extract below highlights the creative freedom discourse in relation to creator-owned comics:

> I have my own stories I want to tell, in my own way and on my own terms. Obviously all that might not necessarily fit with any work for hire projects I end up doing. I also like being in full control of the process from initial concept to final execution and eventually design and print. (Madefire Artist 1.2)

It should be noted that this increased control and financial reward in creator-owned comics still favours a star system where writers and artists receive more of the attention due to their status as the creator of the idea/story. These roles accrue more symbolic capital in the industry and, as Chapter Six will show, this means the creators in those roles have more potential to influence the industry's attitudes towards technology, but, conversely, they risk more on the projects.

3.3 Roles and the Production Process

This structure of conglomerate media companies, independent publishers, and powerful distributors determines the conditions under which print comic book production has been conducted in the last three decades. Establishing how comics are produced under the print model

and how previous digital changes have impacted the performance of creator roles allows us to better understand the impacts that digital change has had on creator identity. Research dealing with the professional, working aspect of the comic book industry is limited. McAllister (1990), Rendace (2000), Carpenter (2002), Duncan and Smith (2009), Lopes (2009), and Gabilliet (2010) provide the basis for this thesis' understanding of comic book work and the structures which guide production. While these sources describe and define the various roles involved in comic book production they only form the basis from which my own research, involving primary interviews with current creators and available secondary interviews, extends to create a more practitioner-centred understanding of the roles that different people play in comic book production.

Previously it was established that comic book production is oriented around the development of content that is sold periodically on a monthly basis. This is the production schedule common to the mainstream and independent publishers. While monthly titles have long been the industry norm, there has been a recent shift towards both double-shipping [13] and weekly titles from the 'Big Two'. DC is currently producing three weekly print titles while Marvel has been double-shipping books since 2008. The trend towards increased production frequency highlights two important characteristics of the comic's field: that production is reliant on speed and collaboration.

The production of print comics at the 'Big Two', and many of the independents, relies on a collaborative division of labour to advance a comic from an idea to a product on store shelves (Rendace, 2000: Duncan and Smith, 2009). Duncan and Smith call this the industrial process of comic's production, echoing Caves (2000) "complex creative

[13] Double-shipping refers to the practice of shipping a previously monthly title twice a month

good" model where a team of artists with diverse talents are utilised to produce the work. Comic book production progresses through the following steps:

Steps of Production	**Description**
Editorial Conference	Collaboration between the editor and the writer to discuss and develop ideas
Plot Summary/Scripting	Develop a script or plot outline for the story
Penciling	Layout and draw page according to script or at their own choice as per the 'Marvel Method' (Discussed below)
Inking	Draw over the artist's work giving it detail
Lettering	Add in the various written texts of the comic including dialogue and narration
Colouring	If printed in colour the colourist adds appropriate colour to the completed drawings
Post-Production	Check for errors, perform touch-ups and assemble the book
Printing	Books sent to the printer for printing and binding
Distribution	Printer ships books to distributor

	roughly two months before release. Distributor sends books out to various retail channels, mainly the direct market
Retail	Comic is available for purchase

Figure 3 Breakdown of the print comic book production process.

According to Duncan and Smith (2009, 115), a comic can take roughly six months to go from an idea at the editorial conference stage to first issue on store shelves. Once the idea and series plan is established it takes roughly six weeks to produce a comic. For example, at BOOM! Studios an overall series summary is developed and an issue beat-sheet[14] drawn up before writers get two weeks to develop their script. The artist is then given four weeks to draw the issue (Editing Comics The BOOM! Studios Way, 2013). In Stanford Carpenter's (2002) thesis on comics culture he also found that the average comic takes six weeks to produce with the various production roles overlapping to meet the standard six-week deadline.

The production process appears linear, but involves constant feedback and revision. For example, editing is an ongoing process, particularly on 'Big Two' titles, ensuring the book is free of errors or continuity faults before it progresses to the next stage. This process of constant feedback and revision is particularly common in the 'Marvel Method' of production. In the Marvel Method, popularised by the team of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the writer develops a basic plot for the artist instead of a detailed script. The artist is then given more freedom to interpret the outline as opposed to sticking to the detailed breakdown and description of the script. Once the artist has pencilled the pages the writer goes back and scripts the comic and provides direction for the

[14] A beat-sheet highlights the key moments that take place in each issue of a comic book storyline during the planning stage

letterer on narration and sound effects. It is in the process of providing feedback and applying revisions that the geographically dispersed comic book workforce engages in collaborative practice.

Within the comic book production process there are several credited core creative roles that contribute to the production of the comic. These are the editor, writer, artist/penciller[15], inker, letterer, and colourist. In the industrial process of mainstream comics these roles are likely to be performed by different people. As stated before, people employed under different terms and conditions, namely freelancers and organisation workers, perform these roles. Stanford Carpenter (2002) applies Daniel Pink's (2001) *Free Agent Nation* thesis to the comic book industry. Like Hollywood, which Pink argues was the template for the free agent model due to the decline of the original Hollywood production model in the 50s, comics also has a long history of division between free agents and 'organisation men'[16]. Despite Stan Lee's promotion of the Marvel Bullpen, an organisational image based on Marvel's primary creators like Jack Kirby and Gene Colan working together with Lee in Marvel's offices, freelancers in their own homes were producing most of Marvel's work by 1965 (Howe, 2012). This image of comic work persisted though with artist Dean Haspiel stating:

> The fantasy I had growing up was the Marvel bullpen. Stan Lee and all those guys, and the idea that they were sitting in a room making things happen. These comics came out every week. I've never had that experience. That was what I wanted. That was the Rat Pack I wanted to be a part of. And then you find out, no, that's not how it went down. That was just hype. That was just PR. These people are amazing talents and provocateurs of ideas -- the House Of Ideas. That was just made up. They didn't sit in a

[15] Artist refers to creators who pencil and ink their own work.

[16] 'Organisation men' is the term utilised by Pink (2001), a more accurate term is organisation worker, which accounts for both men and women.

> room together and make this stuff up. There were bullpens. Production staff. (Spurgeon, 2013)

In comics the division between freelancers and organisation workers is quite clear. Free agents predominantly occupy the primary creative and craft roles of writers, pencillers, inkers, colourists, and letterers. Organisation workers occupy the production and business roles of editors, publishers, publicists, accountants, and lawyers.

In Pink's model organisation workers clock-in at the offices of the publisher, working something close to the standard nine to five workday, five days a week. Comic book free agents are found not only across America but also across the globe, working from their homes or studios (Rendace 2000). This would be one criticism of Pink's work, because it is presented in a way that establishes the free agent as a distinctly American phenomenon. The very tools and trends that Pink highlights as assisting in the growth of free agency in America also facilitate the growth and adoption of free agency on a global scale. Mark Deuze (2007), in establishing his ten key concepts that characterise media work, paid close attention to the global, freelance nature of media work. He defined media work as taking place in global production networks with an international division of labour. Media companies take advantage of outsourcing, offshoring and subcontracting opportunities, increasingly facilitated by digital technology. Media workers are responsible for finding their own work within this network, a proposition that can be both exploitative and beneficial to the worker who is connected to more opportunities for work but also increased competition for the work that is available. The US-based publishers included in this study utilised a workforce that was spread across the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Mexico, and Canada.

The free agent model presented by Pink and Carpenter is impacted by the 'individualisation of risk' (Gill, 2002, 81). The individual has become responsible for their own career and identity, because they assume the costs of continued training and development, must self-finance the benefits organisation members are entitled to (such as pensions and health insurance), and maintain a steady stream of work that is sufficient to provide a living income. Creators have attempted to improve this state of economic precariousness, which comic book creators have endured since the industry's inception (Lopes, 2009; Gabilliet, 2010), and have had some success in gaining royalty payments, exclusive contracts[17], and greater ownership through the creator-owned identity. Still, economic precariousness and the individualisation of risk remain in the comic book industry with comic book workers at the convention panels identifying this risk as the 'freelancer fear': that the work will run out and the creator would be forced back into a non-comics role or to take any project offered regardless of what it might mean for their reputation and image. This concern about picking the wrong project echoes Leadbeater and Oakley's (1999) finding that creators felt they were 'only as good as their last project'. Reputation is in an important aspect of identity, where the creator wants to be recognised as being good and producing good work, but the freelancer fear and individualisation of risk can restrict the creator's ability to make career decisions that are beneficial to their identity. Chapter 4 addresses the management of the career and the survival experience of creators.

Survival is an ongoing process for comic book creators when they navigate the structures of the industry to carve out a career, especially whilst attempting to adhere to the industry's demand for timely completion of work of the required quality. Creators experience the "bulimic" work style identified by Pratt (2002) and Gill (2011):

[17] Exclusive contracts guarantee a creator a certain amount of work at a publisher for a set period of time and, more importantly, generally restricted the creator from working for certain rival publishers, but these contracts are rare.

> The alternating periods of rush work closer to deadlines, and of dead waters between jobs. I'd much prefer a constant flow of work, with the possibility of knowing ahead when (and if) you'll have holidays, when you can rest, etc. The downsides of any freelance job – unclear hours, unclear fiscal position, etc. (Thrillbent Artist 2)

Freelance creators engage in intense periods of work, where they work for long hours to meet their deadlines, and can then find themselves with no work if they have been unsuccessful in finding new clients. The interviewees highlighted the uncertainty of the freelance career as a major difficulty. This is where creator-owned work and digital distribution can help to reduce some of the risks of freelance work because as long as the comic continues to sell the creator continues to receive revenue from the projects even after they finish working on them.

The comic book industry's focus on speed comes from its monthly and increasingly bi-weekly or weekly production schedule. Will Eisner (2008, 128) presented comics production as changing, going from individual to team production due to the industry's time pressures, but team-based production involving bull pens and workflow models has existed since the early stages of the industry in the 1930s. Publishers have strict deadlines that must be met for publication (Howe 2012, 157). Publishers can receive financial penalties for missing agreed printing dates. Furthermore, in a market long characterised by a few publishers producing similar content, missed deadlines could lead to customers dropping one series in favour of another. In cases when books do not meet previous deadlines Howe (2012, 157 & 184) found it common for publishers to assign more creators to a project to speed up the process. If a series has missed multiple deadlines, the team member seen as responsible for slowing production is replaced with someone more

capable of meeting the demand. The demand for speed has developed a long hours culture (Gill, 2011) in the comic book industry:

> It's so much work that you, ya know cause I wanna spend a lot of time making it look good but ya know you have to do it on these pretty short deadlines and so I don't have nearly as much time to do all the drawing I want, but also anything else. Like I work 14 hours a day, like ya know, there's not much time to eat or sleep in that schedule and that's like and that's not I work 14 hours a day once a week, that's every day and then usually a few hours like, like I might, I've worked straight through weekends half the time and it's kind of a bummer I don't get to see my friends as often as I'd want to or ya know do social things or anything else besides drawing and that can be a real bummer. (Marvel Artist 1.1)

The need for long hours places tension on the creator's work/life balance where artist Freddie Williams II claimed, "all my personal relationships have suffered greatly from my career in comics" (Breaking Into Comics, 2013). The creators only provided a snapshot into their work/life balance, but deadline pressures were a real concern. Many comic book creators break into the industry because of deadline pressures and the industry's demand for speed, taking advantage of the opportunities that filling in to meet publication deadlines presented, albeit at the expense of a fellow creator. Even when a creator has a project they are still in a risky, precarious position if they cannot maintain the quality of their work and manage their time effectively.

The split between freelancers and organisation workers is one of the major characteristics of comic's production and a source of tension in the industry. Where a creator falls on the divide of freelancers and organisation workers will impact their experience of work in the comic

book industry. As stated, freelance workers need to take a more active role in the management of their career through the individualisation of risk. Organisation workers face pressures through the organisational hierarchies of their employer, in particular the corporate commercial orientation of the major comic book publishers. The divide between freelancers and organisational workers further contributes to the identification of comic book creators where freelancers work on work-for-hire contracts and are paid on a per-project basis. While these contracts provide short-term financial stability the conditions of their employment place the responsibility for retirement funds and long-term financial stability in the hands of the individual. Creators pursue a second identity, working on creator-owned projects as a way to prepare their long-term financial security, as well as fulfilling their creative values by owning and controlling their own work.

3.3.1 The Editor

Turning now to a closer examination of the roles commonly found in comic book production, according to Rendace (2000) the editor serves as the gateway to a career in the comic book industry. Editors are responsible for assembling the creative teams and accepting submissions from creators. After assembling the team, former Marvel editor Nicola Boose described the role as, “to work with creative teams to manage all the logistical aspects of putting a comic together and seeing the final product off to print” (Knox, 2012). In this role editors provide a mix of organisational and creative services, including story suggestions, quality control, and deadline maintenance. They ultimately operate as the liaison between the interests of the publisher and the creative personnel. It is a role that is increasingly important as publishers employ and interact with a global, dispersed network of freelance creators.

A comic editor is a good example of Hesmondhalgh's (2007) 'creative manager'. Creative managers are intermediaries between the profit driven imperative of owners and executives and the potentially conflicting desires of creative personnel whose idea of success may not be profit centred, but driven instead by peer recognition of quality or originality. Many creators spoke positively of the relationship between the editor and the creator in my interviews, highlighting their close relationship with editors over other higher management people at the publishers and media companies. Through mediating the commercial and artistic demands, editors establish the structures that determine the production of the comic. As one of my interviewees explained, they set out to make "the best comic it can be that sells as well as it can" while also "getting books done on time…while trying not to sacrifice any quality" (Marvel Editor 1.1).

Creative managers can also occupy creative or technical roles. In comics the level of involvement by editors in the creative process again relates to the type of project. Works from Marvel and DC are more likely to have editorial influence on the story or plot as well as licensed works produced by smaller independent publishers, such as the Star Wars comics at Dark Horse. Those works, which fall under the creator-owned and alternative umbrella, are likely to have little influence from the editor on the story. The editor's role on those books is instead to help the creator realise their own vision, working as an advocate and as the creator's first reader to provide feedback.

The editor's level of involvement in the actual production of the comic is a source of tension in the comic book industry because of the influence this can have on the creative team's autonomy. At New York Comic Con's "Editing Comics the Boom! Way" panel (2013) writer Grace Randolph stated that the editor should not want to be the writer on the book they are working on. Editor Dafna Pleban highlighted that editors

need to remember that they hired the writer, artist, etc., because they felt they were right for the project (Editing Comics the BOOM! Studios Way, 2013). For creators, the editor's role is to provide the space for the creators to do the job that they were contracted to do, enabling the creator to produce content that the audience will recognise as creative, entertaining, good and, ultimately, worth paying for. When the editor's role starts to influence story development too much then the editor risks alienating the creative team, a situation seen multiple times at DC Comics with high profile creators leaving projects due to editorial interference (see Williams III, 2013 and Fialkov, 2013).

Editors operate in a hierarchical environment at publishers. Books are assigned multiple editors with varying levels of authority, depending on the organisation. Larger publishers have larger editorial staff while smaller presses sometimes only have one or two editors for their entire line. The editor-in-chief heads up the editorial operations. Beneath the editor-in-chief there are line-editors, in charge of a particular range of books, sub-editors, who aid the line-editors, and editorial assistants. Editor Jordan D White explained the breakdown as follows:

> Nick Lowe is my boss—he's a Senior Editor here, and he's in charge of all things X-Men. On the books I assist him on, like Uncanny X-Men, Wolverine & the X-Men, etc…he's the editor. He's the one plotting the course for the ship (with the writer, of course) while I'm the one running around making sure we're following that course. (Morris, 2012a)

The editorial staff, regardless of position, highlighted that the primary role of the editor is to get their books out on time. Ensuring the book comes out on time is as much about having people who are fast as it is about having a creative team who can work together and collaborate

effectively. Assembling the creative team, according to editor Jordan D White, becomes, “the most important part of our job” (Morris, 2012a).

3.3.2 The Writer

Writers are responsible for pitching stories to editors. Depending on the publisher, writers pitch interpretations of existing characters or their own original ideas. The writer then develops the overall series plot, issue breakdowns, and individual plot scripts or summaries.

Along with the artist the writer can be considered the primary creative personnel who are also known as the symbol creators for their role in actually conceiving the ideas that make-up the final product (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). These primary creative personnel are often provided more autonomy because they are more closely associated with superstar status. Hesmondhalgh characterizes the stars as those people who receive large financial rewards for their involvement in creative products because the industry places a premium on “name recognition as a way of distinguishing individual cultural products from the many being released” (2007, 199-200). Due to the huge investment companies make in attracting a star name to a project they will then benefit from an increase in marketing and publicity, which they are often at the centre of, as the company attempts to recoup the sunk costs.

While the primary role of the writer is to develop the story, the level of detail required in the actual issue scripts can vary greatly. This is influenced by the production method chosen and the artist the writer is partnered with. For instance, if the writer chooses the Marvel Method they develop the basic story outline and provide little instruction regarding panel layout or composition, instead relying on the artist’s sense of storytelling. More common in print is the development of a comic script, which looks similar to a film script and breaks the overall

plot down into individual page and panel blocks. Script detail can also vary, with Alan Moore known for his extremely detailed panel descriptions. Rendace (2000) suggests the detail in the script is determined through conversation between the writer and editor. Reputation appears to play a large role, with the attachment of a high profile penciller to a project potentially resulting in less detail from the writer. Writer Brian K Vaughn explains the relationship between the writer, the artist and the script as:

> When you're writing for film or television, those scripts always look pretty much the same, you know, because they're being disseminated to hundreds of different workers: to electricians, to actors, to producers, and everything in between, so it has to be this sort of familiar, recognizable object. Whereas when you're working in comics, and you're writing to your artist, sometimes the artist will be the *only* other human being who will ever take a look at that script. So you're just tailoring each story to them, so it's just this little love letter that you're dashing off to your artists. (Sava, 2012)

The practice of scripting in comics therefore allows for a great deal of flexibility, with some writers even developing thumbnail sketches to accompany their script (Rendace, 2000; Eisner, 2008). An increasingly common position for the writer is to co-write a series. Co-writing reinforces the idea that comic book production is collaborative, relying on the successful organisation and collaboration of a team of creators. The level of involvement when co-writing depends upon the project and the individual, with writer Ed Brubaker explaining:

> Well, it's different with every writer you do it with. That's the problem with co-writing. Sometimes co-writing is practically just being an extra editor on the book. Sometimes co-writing is doing

> more than half of the work. And then sometimes it's pretty smooth and easy, where you evenly divide it up. (Sava, 2011)

The role of the writer has benefited from the ease and convenience of technology in a number of ways. The development of file transfer systems and online communication platforms, such as email and social media, make collaboration between geographically dispersed teams easier (Rendace, 2000). The internet also provides easier access to story research materials through Google and databases like Wikipedia and one writer also discussed the benefits of second screening, which allows the writer to see the artwork and the script on separate devices (Marvel Writer 1).

3.3.3 The Penciller/Artist

While the writer is responsible for the comic's story it is the penciller who is responsible for the comic's overall look. As stated, the penciller's role could be no more than depicting the detailed panel description or thumbnails of the writer or it could involve something much closer to 'visual storytelling'. Artist Francis Manapul highlighted that it is important for an artist or penciller to be both a good illustrator and a good storyteller (McKay, 2011).

According to Will Eisner (2008, 135), pencillers should contribute to the 'writing' of the comic through the freedom to choose a wide range of visual devices and compositional innovation. The success of the penciller in aiding the storytelling often comes down to their composition of the panels on the page. Their backgrounds and characters must not only make the reader feel connected to the story, but there must also be a flow in the action and development of the story. Rendace (2000) discusses the establishment of the "rhythm" of the story as the most important aspect of the penciller's work. The penciller must also be aware of comic book conventions, such as the ability for the reader to

look ahead at the story, when considering the placement of panels that lead to a major story reveal. Will Eisner argued that due to the primarily visual nature of comics, artists spend much time developing their skills related to “style, technique and graphic devices that are designed to dazzle the eye” (2008, 128).

Pencillers have benefited from the ease and convenience of digital technology. Pencillers now have more options open to them when developing their pages. Traditionally the art would be drawn with pencil on Bristol board. Pencillers can now draw their work digitally utilising art software, such as Photoshop, and hardware, like Wacom Cintiq drawing tablets. Traditional methods are not rendered obsolete by these tools, with many artists combining digital and traditional methods in their work process, but digital technology provides advantages in an industry built on speed. One artist stated that the planning of a comic and the reproduction and manipulation of images is made easier with digital tools like Photoshop (Madefire Artist 2), while another explained that with his process:

> Although my line art is produced traditionally on paper with pencils, pens and brushes, everything else is digital. It would be possible to do the digital stuff in an old school analogue fashion, but it’s easier and more convenient to use software. (Madefire Artist 1.1)

The artist further highlights a point that will be addressed later on in the thesis. The development of digital tools may make the production of art easier and more convenient, but this is only realised when you understand how the programs work. Artists now not only need to learn how to draw, but how to draw digitally.

3.3.4 The Inker

Comic book production also has roles that come under Hesmondhalgh's category of technical workers who are expected to perform a technically orientated set of tasks efficiently. Technical workers are not involved in the conception of ideas, but they do perform specific creative skills. Defining workers as 'technicians' rather than 'creatives' allows publishers to offer different rates of compensation based on the worker's perceived value to the production (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, 64). Both the editor and artist can sometimes fall into this category depending on the definition of their role for the specific project, but it's a category more commonly related to the inkers, colourists and letterers on a comic.

The recognition and knowledge of the work these creators do is not widely studied. The job of the inker was originally integral to the production process, as the printing press could not recognise pencil lines. While this is no longer the case, inking has developed into its own art form. The Inkwell Awards are a relatively recent award in the comic book industry to acknowledge the role and craft of inkers. Creator of the award, Bob Almond, described his motivation as:

> Having artwork un-inked was becoming more common place. The long practice of ink artists being credited in solicitations and covers was no longer the rule. This affected others as I noticed that online and printed reviews (or art identification efforts) weren't listing the inkers either. And even the industry's prestigious Eisner Awards didn't have its own inker category due to confusion about the contribution of the role of the inker and decided to combine it with the penciller one. (Sellner, 2010)

The inker, as the name suggests, utilises pen, ink, and brushes to go over the pencil lines of the penciller's drawings. The role extends

beyond notions of tracing, as the inker is able to add depth, shadows, and textures in an attempt to enhance the overall artwork. Inker Scott Hanna stated in an interview that, “my job is to improve the artwork” (Video Interview, 2007). Art Thibert, another inker, further explained what inkers bring to the artwork:

> I think movement, dynamics, line weight, those are things I really concentrate on trying to bring to each and every job. Bring an element of fun, dynamics, clarity to the work as much as possible. Yeah, it’s not just tracing. Sorry Kevin Smith but it’s not. It’s way more than that. It’s interpretive, it’s bringing energy, life, boldness. Bringing a new dimension to the work that the pencils can only do so much. If you’ve ever seen pencils, even the best penciller, it’s still a little flat. With the inks we can just bring that dimension out of it and we can just really make that, the pencils, 3-dimensional. (Furth, 2010)

The inker is especially important in those instances where the book is black and white. Rendace also highlights the fact that the amount of detail required in the inking is dependent on who the penciller is (2000, 78). Inker Mark Morales describes it as, “sometimes you are basically taking a bare bones layout and adding everything (weight, shadows, texture, depth, etc.) and other times you are taking really highly detailed pencils and trying to meticulously translate that into ink” (Morris, 2014).

Inking, like pencilling, has been opened up to a range of digital art software and hardware, yet from the few interviews available with inkers, the traditional method of inking remains popular. Many inkers spoke of their continued use of traditional tools, such as pen, ink, brushes and markers, to perform their work. Digital tools instead aided in more post-production work allowing the inker to touch-up and clean up the art. For Art Thibert digital technology provides a way to:

> Clean it up to… an extent that I could never do by hand. So I can blow things up and I can see if the line's frayed a little bit. I can tighten things up; I can tweak lines a little bit too. So I do go in digitally, not a lot, but I do go in and tweak up lines… the computer really helps a lot with the bleeding. So I can go in there, I can zoom it up, I can clean all the lines where they kind of spiderweb out and bleed. So that has been an amazing tool for that. (Furth, 2010)

While inkers spoke of continuing to do their work with traditional tools the future of this practice is uncertain. Inker Mike Gray summed up the feeling currently prevalent in the industry: "I can see a day that I'll get a call asking if I can ink a project on a computer tablet, quickly, or I'll not get the gig" (quoted in Savage, 2010). Inking, as its own specialisation, also appears to be one of the most vulnerable in the comic book production chain due to technological changes as well as pencillers seeking more control over their own work, edging more towards the artist identity. While artists may want to exert more control over their work the nature of comics production, which values speed, will continue to determine the way production is organised. Specialist inkers allow comics to meet their rigorous monthly production schedule.

3.3.5 The Colourist[18]

Colouring has been a feature of comics since their inception, but more so than other roles, the role and responsibility of a colourist really grew with the development of digital art software and hardware:

[18] The American spelling is used in quotations, but Australian English spelling elsewhere

> Technology created my job. Prior to technology, color wasn't really considered as art (and in some places it's still not, sadly). Once Photoshop came around and opened up potential for color and the internet made it possible to download and upload files instead of FedExing CDs or DVDs, it again changed the life of color artists. (Thrillbent Colourist 1.1)

Digital programs provide colourists with a wide variety of tools to perform their work. As colourist Alex Sinclair says, "When we incorporated Photoshop, we went from a palette of 372 colours, to millions of colours" (Wacom, 2014). Furthermore, digital art programs have also removed the need for printers to interpret the colourist's work meaning, "what I do is what shows up" (Marvel Colourist 1). This contrasts with the pre-digital method of colour guides where the colours were open to interpretation by the printer when being made into printing plates. For the participant this meant they now have more creative freedom to express their own ideas.

Colourist Jordie Bellaire described the role and importance of the colourist as, "colorists create form for figures and their environments, mood, tone and "Effects" like, blurring, flares, glows, color holds, etc. If any of this is done badly or doesn't give clarity to an artist's work, the artwork fails" (2013). Importantly the colourist is able to provide a sense of consistency to a series when inkers and pencillers change. As colourist Brian Reber explains, "It helps make the book identifiable even when other members of the creative team are being cycled. Shadowman for example has had a ton of artists already, but you can pick up any issue and they will all have the same feel" (Morris, 2013).

Colourists also work together with another, uncredited technical role in comic's production: colour flatters. Flatters help to break down the page for the colourist, separating the line art and the shapes that will become

coloured objects. When the art has been flatted the colourist is able to easily change the core tones of the artwork and colour sections without having to worry about accidentally colouring other areas. For colourist Val Staples flatting is a vital step in the process yet “flatters never get the gratitude they deserve” (Morris, 2012b).

The role of the colourist has grown in recognition, but their contributions are still not fully understood. Colourist Jordie Bellaire highlighted the lack of respect given to colourists when she wrote about an unnamed convention’s refusal to designate colourists as guests at the convention, which would have made the cost of attending the convention much easier (2013). Val Staples also spoke of the recognition colourists receive, stating:

> Frankly, I’m shocked that after almost 20 years of digital coloring reshaping what comics look and feel like, colorists are still mostly unknown. You don’t see colorists much in solicitations or interviews about creative teams. They don’t always get cover credit. And you don’t see as many colorists in convention signings and panels in comparison to writers, pencillers and also inkers. (Morris, 2012b)

Both Bellaire and Staples’ comments highlight a key theme of this thesis, that the identity of comic book creators is tied to positive identification from external stakeholders. For colourists to feel like their identity, as a colourist, is valid they need external recognition from important stakeholders including fans, reviewers, interviewers and conventions. Through these stakeholders the identity of a colourist gains legitimacy as well as the art of colouring comics. The colourist’s identity struggles provide a template for exploring the emerging digital comics identity.

3.3.6 The Letterer

Lettering has gained slightly more recognition but is also a highly understudied field. The letterer is responsible for the dialogue balloons, captions, and sound FX. Together these devices are used to tell the story clearly and many letterers talk about having a design background as beneficial to meet this goal of storytelling clarity (Bradley, 2014; Morris, 2012c; O'Shea, 2011).

Todd Klein's lettering in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (1989-1996) series drew attention to the practice of letterers and garnered critical acclaim for the way he developed distinctive dialogue balloons and lettering for each of the characters. It showed that lettering could itself be an art form. Letterer Troy Peteri explains the role and importance of lettering:

> I think people commonly believe that as long as the words are in balloons and on the page, it's as good as done. They're not taking into account how word balloons should lead the eye to the appropriate reading order in the panels, or how too much/not enough negative space in the balloons themselves can also make things look amateurish. Same goes for sound FX that look like they're merely words typed out and dropped on the page. I honestly think that good lettering can make an amateurish effort look less so, similar to the way good visual FX in an otherwise low-budget movie can make that movie feel bigger and better. (Marz, 2012)

Lettering was initially done by hand, directly onto the artwork, but is now done via computer. This has sped up the process of lettering considerably, meaning fewer letterers are required to letter the same amount of books. To adapt to this changing environment letterers also

develop their own unique fonts. One participant stated, “A big thing for letterers is the fonts. We use our own, custom fonts that aren't available to the public. That provides some insulation as well” (Marvel Letterer 1). While letterers felt their role would always be vital to comic’s production they also recognised digital has changed the career for letterers, “As long as there are comics, they will need people to letter the books, but it has turned into an entry-level position that doesn’t sustain careers any longer. Now it just provides work for a few years” (Marvel Letterer 2).

3.3.7 Simple vs. Complex Creative Production

Comic book production lends itself to either simple or complex production (Caves, 2000). The individual creative roles discussed here—writer, artist, inker, letterer, and colourist—can be performed either by one person or multiple people. Whether a project utilises the simple or complex production model often depends on the contractual agreement of the project. Self-published, autobiographical comics are likely to be produced by one person, following Caves (2000) simple creative production, whereas super-hero comics for the mainstream publishers Marvel and DC predominantly utilise the strict division of labour of complex creative production where each role is performed by a specialist. This difference in production methods has been the source of some tension among established comic book professionals. Will Eisner argued that the writer and artist should be one person based on a medium specific analysis of the technology necessary to produce and distribute a comic (2008). Comic books require few resources for their production, unlike film and television. Eisner (2008) argued that single-author artists have a better understanding of storytelling and produce better work and artist Gene Colan similarly viewed single-author production necessary combination for comics to be taken seriously:

> The comics have endured despite the innocuous pap which the writers have contributed over the years. Comics is a medium in which I think it was intended for the artist to be the story-teller, not only through pictures but through the prose as well, because writers who aren't artists have never done anything except fill space. The only worthwhile things have been done by artists who either controlled the writing or did the writing themselves. (Tong, 2010)

Alex Toth similarly claimed, "there's something about having that total vision, control" when discussing the production of comics (Cooke, 2003). This is in comparison to the Fordist-like production line method that the mainstream industry has maintained. This model is utilised to ensure the key theme of speed is realised while historically the assembly-line nature made it easier for publishers to alienate creators from their work, making it difficult to claim ownership when so many people had made contributions (Lopes, 2009; McAllister, 1990; Rendace, 2000).

The dominance of the complex creative model has led to the idea of collaboration and collaborative production being closely associated with the nature of comics production. At the Dublin International Comic Experience's 'Breaking Into Comics' panel (2012), then Marvel editor Lauren Sankovich spoke about the need for social skills because of comic's collaborative nature:

> Another huge thing is communication, is talking to your editor, building a relationship with them, talking to your writer talking to your team. I firmly believe that comics is a collaborative process and you have to have your team talking to each other, you need people to be able to work together. I don't care if you don't like each other that much but as long as you can work together and

> create a product that you're proud of and can put out the door, preferably on time, that's a great thing.

Creators need social skills to guide their online communication and collaborative practice, but panellists also highlighted the continued human element of comic book production and collaboration. Marvel's and DC's continued focus on creative retreats where editorial staff and creators, predominantly writers, gather to plot the major cross-over storylines that will structure their respective comic book universes, and the growth of comic book conventions emphasise the need for non-digital social skills. These social skills are necessary to build the relationships that allow creators to survive in the industry.

The further categorisation of comics workers as freelancers who predominantly work on work-for-hire projects also reaffirms the dominance of the complex, industrial production process. The organisation of the industry pushes publishers to adopt complex creative production because it values speed as both a requirement of the industry and of the individuals who work in that industry. The creators do not own the work they are producing and are paid on a per-page or project basis, and therefore spread their risk across multiple projects and clients. One participant described the risky nature of comic book work as a rollercoaster where the peak of success can soon be followed by failure (Madefire Artist 2). The creator learnt from their earlier approach, where they relied on one publisher (a situation described as "suicidal"), and now pursues multiple sources of revenue to manage the risk of one project failing. While this helps the creator to manage risk it can create situations where the creator engages in 'bad work' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) described good work as both process and content with good practice, such as security, fair pay, and work-life balance helping the

production of quality content. When these conditions are not met it can become difficult to produce good work.

In a survey of comic book artists website Multiversity Comics found page rates can vary from US$17-$100 on creator-owned projects and US$50-$150 on smaller work-for-hire projects to US$300-$500 on 'Big Two' projects (Harper, 2014a). Artist Matthew Southworth described the hard decision creators have to make:

> A lot of times in comics it comes down to 'can I afford to make $60 a day? Will I go broke doing that?' And in that position, you have to start considering ways of working that will make it possible. If they're paying $60 a page, you have to consider doing 3 pages a day, and then you're in the position of doing work that doesn't satisfy you or the other collaborators or the audience. (Quoted in Harper, 2014a)

Craft roles pay considerably less meaning they are presented with a different level of risk than the primary symbol creators. The colourists, inkers, and letterers need to focus even more on having multiple projects to survive, which compresses the amount of time they are able to dedicate to each project, "Right now I have to take on several books to make a living, and scheduling those can be a headache" (Thrillbent Colourist 2). Traditionally, their risk has also been increased because the craft roles have been left out of the distribution of royalties, even on creator-owned projects. Image Comics Erik Larsen caused controversy in 2010 when he said colourists and letterers did not deserve royalties because they did not improve the sales of a book (Johnston, 2010). DC Comics, the second largest publisher, only began paying colourists royalties in 2014 (MacDonald, 2014) while letterers do not receive royalties at either of the major publishers (Pak and Van Lente, 2014).

Specialising in one aspect of production allows creators to take on more work yet still meet their deadlines. Even those creators who own their work often engage in complex creative production. The returns from creator-owned work are uncertain and owning a series does not ensure that the creator will earn enough money to survive. The creator will manage their risk, like the publisher, by working on multiple projects that are both work-for-hire and creator-owned to maximise their chance of earning a living. Specialising in one role and engaging with a team of creators again allows the creator to meet their deadlines, but at the expense of paying a collaborator or granting part-ownership.

Still, creating work the creator owns and is able to share in the financial success of is crucial to the creator's identity because it reduces the need to make these hard decisions. In this way the new digital comics, despite presenting their own risks, become part of the creator's risk management. They are responsible for the management of their own career so they must pursue new opportunities when they arise that can enable the creator to achieve career stability. Digital work-for-hire projects create another source of income while a digital creator-owned project could be the 'big break' that provides the success they desire. At the moment the digital projects have not taken over their print work, even the co-founder of Thrillbent balances the risk by continuing to write print comics, but they provide hope for the future of the industry and the creator's own career, justifying the risk of their investment.

In talking to comic book creators about the future of the industry, several artists highlighted a desire for comics' production to shift more towards Eisner's ideal of a singular comic book creator in the future. We will see tension between the identity comic book creators want for production and the reality of production in the current digital environment when exploring the changes in production with digital comics, where new roles and skills are necessary to produce these

comics. It should be noted that these comments largely come from those, such as artists, who would benefit from this change and was not necessarily reflected in my interviews of colourists, inkers, and letterers, who felt they would continue to contribute in the industry's future.

Creators also spoke positively of the creative collaboration they experience when working in these teams. As one writer framed it, collaborating with other artists was the most rewarding aspect of the job because they "love the different ways artists will interpret the roadmap I made, and I like trying to tailor stories to them" (DC Writer 1.1). While the creator highlights this as a positive feature I would argue it also establishes the negotiated nature of the industrial model. The creator tailors their output to relate to a particular artist. This is in contrast to Rendace's (2000) characterisation of creators as 'neo-artisans', highly skilled workers with the ability to directly influence the outcome of their production through the use of innovative and creative tools. Rendace further characterises neo-artisans as "free of any outside management decisions" (2000, 14). Creators do directly influence the outcome of their production, but they also negotiate editorial influence on work-for-hire titles, where management of the corporate properties imposes creative limitations, and a negotiation of the collaborative nature of comics production. While each member of the team can directly influence the outcome of the production they do this in conversation with the other members of that team to ensure the final comic achieves a unified vision. As colourist Jordie Bellaire explained, "I am into advance notes, direction, thoughts and reference from just about everyone on the team – including the editor" (Harper, 2014c). With new roles and skills required in the new digital formats this negotiated, collaborative characteristic of comics production continues as creators actively learn how to work in this new environment. Chapter Seven looks at how the creative roles collaborate on the new digital projects and how certain roles, including the new builder roles, have greater impact on the development of the digital formats.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has established an understanding of how the comic book industry is structured and how production is organised within that structure. Firstly, it characterised distribution and production in the print comic book market as an oligopoly in an hourglass structure, which is found in many creative industries (Flew, 2012). This illustrates the control a few powerful companies have had over the comic book industry by controlling the financing of creativity and distribution of content. Secondly, it established that work within this structure demands speed and collaboration. The periodic nature of comic book production, which sees serialised content released monthly and increasingly bi-weekly and weekly, requires the contributions of many creators to meet the strict publishing deadlines. The idea of survival—being able to produce content on schedule as part of that team—becomes vital to ensuring the creator has a successful career in the comic book industry, and forms the main subject of Chapter 4. Thirdly, it was established that work in the comic book industry takes place under specific contractual conditions, mainly the split between work-for-hire and creator-owned contracts and freelancers and organisation workers. These contracts demonstrate the tensions and risk inherent in comic book work, where creators are exposed to Gill's individualisation of risk. These contractual relationships continue to influence the creator's experience of work on the digital projects.

Comics work is precarious, the returns are uneven, and the creator's ongoing development is their own responsibility. It is from this current industry production model and structure that the new digital formats are emerging. It is also from this production environment that comic book workers are transitioning. Understanding how creators and the industry worked in the past enables the thesis to explore the ways creators are filtering the influence of technology through their existing understanding.

The next chapter, titled ‘Becoming a Comic Book Worker’, explains how the ‘breaking in’ and ‘survival’ narratives of comic book workers reveal core features of the creator’s identity, which in turn influences their response to the new digital production model.

Chapter 4 - Becoming a Comic Book Worker

4.1 Introduction

Comic book creators' 'breaking in' and 'survival' narratives act as important resources for the creator when constructing their sense of self. They act as a form of socialisation, demonstrating how creators took their assumptions of what it meant to be a comic book worker and applied them to the field. Building on Taylor and Littleton's (2012) claim that the continuity of an individual's career narrative plays an important role in the ongoing construction of their identity I argue that a creator's breaking in and survival narrative reveals important core identity features of the creator, which are constructed through the socialisation process of 'breaking in'. Their stories rely on the development and promotion of certain discourses, which shape the appropriate identity of entrant creators. These core identity features then become a resource that can influence their experience of digital change. It is the argument of this thesis that an analysis of media changes must account for the experience of media workers, who actually have to negotiate the proposed changes. Therefore, this chapter explores how the breaking in and survival narratives of comic book creators reveal professional identity characteristics that can impact and influence the creator's response to digital change. When faced with changes, comic book creators interpret and respond to this new situation through their pre-existing work identity characteristics, such as their motivations, education and socialisation experiences, established during the process of breaking into and surviving in the comic book industry.

4.2 "Breaking In" and Survival Stories – The Narratives That Drive Expectations

The 'breaking in' panels and career-based interviews focus on what Taylor and Littleton (2012) have called the 'big break' narrative. In the big break concept the creators work towards the one moment where their years of work pays off with exceptional success through monetary

reward and recognition, validating their life choices and work. The comic book workers' narratives highlight the creator's transition from free work to paid work, but this transition has become more difficult due to the changes in the market related to digitisation. As Marvel's CB Cebulski explained, digital tools make it easier to get your work published and seen, but more difficult to get paid because of the change in expectations from the audience (Breaking Into Comics, 2013). The landscape of the comic book industry is changing as media companies and workers negotiate the influence of digital technology. There are now fewer barriers to entry in the comic book industry. Anyone can post a webcomic online at little cost and potentially reach a large audience. A reduction in barriers does not guarantee success, but it allows more people to compete for fewer paid opportunities.

While useful the 'big break' narrative misses the difficulty in maintaining a career after the break. In the freelance comic book industry one paying gig does not guarantee future work and Cebulski highlights a developing survival discourse: "I think it was Scottie Young, we did one of these panels, he was the one who said breaking into comics is rather easy, it's staying in comics that is difficult" (Breaking Into Comics "The Marvel Way", 2014a). The creative industries have long been associated with an oversupply of labour where there is a "reservoir of workers ready to work without the need to pay them wages" (Miège, 1989, 30). Many opportunities come at the expense of an established creator and with the potential pool of creators ever increasing through digital tools it remains important for creators to consider the decisions they make, as they are only as good as their last project:

> Well one of the easy, one of the best ways to break in and ya know my story, my Marvel breaking in story is sort of a test of that is, a lot of times you get hired because some guy who had your job before you got canned because they screwed up, were

> a jerk, turned in bad work, blew deadlines. So it's kinda the, it's both breaking in and staying in because, it's a cliché but there are guys nipping at your heels behind you trying to take, ya know, your job you just got. And there are certainly people on the rise who would happily do your job if you won't do it. (Fred Van Lente, Writer, Breaking Into Comics "The Marvel Way. 2010a)

It takes time for the creator to establish their reputation in the industry and their status determines their ability to bounce back from a poorly received project. As Marvel's Axel Alonso clarified, competition is high but the industry is not quite as mercenary as it sounds:

> If you're professional you're more likely to have us watch your back. If you're professional and you help us out, and we do this all the time, we'll go out of our way to find you a bridging assignment or a cover or this or that to try and keep you in play because it's a quid pro quo. It's a give and take and so that's where being professional is that little extra wildcard that incentives us to ah ya know scratch your back too. (Breaking Into Comics "The Marvel Way", 2014b)

It is possible, through the creator's reputation as a professional worker, to overcome a bad project or situation and survive in the industry. The uncertainty of comic book work means the identity resources utilised in breaking in and the skills necessary to survive become important throughout the creators career. This chapter analyses how these identity characteristics influence the creator's approach to and understanding of the new, relatively unknown and uncertain digital work and what it may do for their career.

The uncertainty of comic book work is enhanced by the lack of a clear career path. The breaking in narrative is important, but the career path discourse highlights the difficulty of saying this is the process to break into comics. As CB Cebulski frames it: “breaking in to comics is like breaking out of jail. Once somebody finds a way to do it that way becomes closed and you have to find another way” (Break In, Stay In, 2012). Creators compare the industry to other careers, such as doctors and lawyers, to show how a career in comics is different. These professions have a more defined path for a potential worker, which identifies necessary steps such as schooling, specialisation, internship and placement as well as long-term career markers, such as making partner or gaining a residency. In contrast the freelance nature of the comic book career offers little guidance on how to break in and more importantly how to maintain a career in the field. This uncertainty and lack of guidance is further heightened during a period of digital change, when the established structures of the industry are altered and creators have to find new markers to measure their success and achievement of a career in the comic book industry.

Creators use the career path discourse to focus on the unique nature of each individual’s breaking in experience. This micro-level focus, which looks at the specifics of how someone broke into the comic book industry should be replaced by a meso-level analysis that focuses on the experiences of many creators and their narratives of breaking in. A meso-level focus reveals common discourses in creators’ breaking in stories. These discourses, grounded in the creators experience and language, represent the important, stable, core aspects of the creator’s identity (Bridgstock, 2013) that were necessary to become a successful member of the professional comic book community. This chapter explores the key discourses in the creators’ breaking in and survival narratives, which form the stable core of the creator’s identity and could be used to ground understanding of who they are and what they do during digitisation.

4.3 Motivations For Becoming A Creator

The participants in this project were asked what motivated them to pursue a career in the comic book industry. The responses were varied, but certain identifiable themes were found. These themes constitute the available discourses that creators mobilise to show they belong to the occupational world and were able to adapt to the disciplinary control of the constructed 'appropriate' identity (Fournier, 1999; Dent and Whitehead, 2002). These discourses enable or constrain identity work because they pre-exist any particular occasion of talk (Taylor and Littleton 2006). Comic book workers display three key motivations for wanting to work in the comic book industry: a love of comics, identification as a communicator, and an attraction to the idea of comics as a job. These motivations become core features of the creator's identity and influence the creator's approach to digital comics and their implementation of identity management strategies.

4.3.1 Love of Comics

Several participants exemplified the "love of comics'" discourse, referencing their early enjoyment of, interest in, and passion for comic books:

> Comics is something I've loved ever since I was four years old, and it's always been a part of my life, every day. (Thrillbent Writer 1)

> I've always loved them. As a kid it was comics that first got me reading and imagining. I was a typical only child fantasist, was there ever a better food for the daydreamer than comics? Heroes, explosions, drama and excitement. Comics are storytelling with volume turned up. (Madefire Writer 1)

Taylor and Littleton (2012) found creative workers in general referenced a similar repertoire they called ‘prodigiousness’ (p. 48). They highlight the use of the word “always”, evident in the extracts listed above, as an indication that creative pursuits were presented “as a recurrent and prevalent feature of participants’ early life experiences” (Taylor and Littleton, 2012, 49). The discourse allows the creator to construct a sense of coherence and continuity between their past and present lives. In Taylor and Littleton’s study creators referenced a more *general* creative identification and only developed a specific field interest later in life, whereas the comic book creators referenced a lifelong interest and love for comics. Not only had they been interested in creative pursuits, but also they had *always* been interested in comics as a creative pursuit.

This deep love for comics, which has always been a feature of the creator’s life, is necessary as CB Cebulski highlights:

> We don’t just do this as a job, we live and breathe comics. I mean we work from 9-5 or 9-9 but comics is really, there’s a quote on my wall it says ‘Comics is like the ER, its 24/7’. We are always living and breathing comics. And it’s like we hang out at Marvel, we work all day and then we go and we drink, on the weekends we go to Nick Lowe’s pig roast. You (Mark Doyle) were just saying you go hang out with Scott Snyder and his wife. We become friends, we become family, we are a part of each other’s lives in more ways than just the job and that’s the people we want to hire. (Break In, Stay In, 2012)

While Cebulski highlights the commitment required in a positive sense, showing that the shared love and passion for comics results in a family-like situation, the freelance nature of comic book work opens up comic

book workers to exclusion and exploitation. The comic book workforce is geographically dispersed within America and around the world due to the development of digital communication technology. As a result not every creator has equal access to this positive aspect of their commitment to comic book work, as a 24/7 job, as those creators who can live and work close to the geographic hubs of comic book work in New York and Los Angeles. For those creators comics remains a 24/7 job and Cebulski again highlights the other aspect of that realisation where:

> Every day you have to finish a certain number of pages but it doesn't end there, then you have dinner and then you go online, you're reading other books, you're researching other comics and it turns some people away actually. (Breaking Into Comics, 2013b)

Talk of *turning people away* highlights that comic book creators need to have a love of comics to help them commit to the expectations and actual experience of being a comic book worker. It is a job that demands long hours to ensure the work is produced by its deadline and it is the creators' love for comics that sees them persist and survive through these projects. While the analysis of the comic book industry in Chapter 3 made it evident that speed was a key feature of the industry, many of the creators did not expect the deadline pressures and pace of the industry. When asked what creators thought working in the comic book industry would be like, the deadline pressures were commonly highlighted as unexpected:

> Before I started, I figured it would be all fun and games. I don't think I realized how much time goes in to each aspect and stage of comic books. I certainly didn't think that I would be pulling all-nighters or working on weekends. (Marvel Letterer 1)

> Perhaps I was a bit naive when I thought the job of a penciler was to simply draw the best drawings one can. In that regard it's still true, but it has the added caveat of drawing the best drawings you can in the shortest time possible. And then to complicate matters further, to do it day in day out, month after month regardless of whether you feel creative or not. (DC Artist 2)

This experience of time is largely in response to the client-creator relationship of comic book work, where the publisher determines the structures of the work:

> Being a freelancer also means you work according to the needs of the client, so if Marvel hands me a book on Tuesday and says they need it back Wednesday, I have to get it done even if it means working all night. It can be quite grueling at times. (Marvel Letterer 2)

The love of comics is also important because getting paid to make comics can be a long process. One participant spent seven years writing comics before receiving their first pay cheque (Marvel Writer 2). Angela McRobbie (2006) has referred to this as the 'pleasure-pain' axis of creative work. Creative workers find 'pleasure in work' and develop a passionate attachment to what they call their 'own work', because it allows for potential self-expressiveness through the work. While these positives represent the pleasure side of the 'pleasure-pain' axis they also form the basis "for tolerating not just uncertainty and self-exploitation but also for staying (unprofitably) within the creative sector and not abandoning it altogether"(McRobbie, 2006, 5).

The creators' love of comics not only motivates them to enter the industry and sustains them during the difficult process of breaking into comics; it also forms part of the discourses utilised by the pioneer creators to socialise the digital transition. These discourses are discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, but their general purpose is to manage the previously negative views towards digitisation in the comic book industry and allow the pioneer creators to influence the view of the new formats through distancing them from undesirable digital formats and relate them closer to the print tradition. For the pioneers though the process of digitisation is not just about maintaining print traditions, but an opportunity to explore and introduce new storytelling conventions. These new conventions alter comic book storytelling and act as an implicit critique of the print format and its inherent creative limitations. Creators, such as writer artist Jeremy Rock, may use their love of print comics to protect themselves from criticism. Rock critiqued the fact that print comic book storytelling allows the reader to look ahead at the narrative, which has forced creators to develop print storytelling conventions to address this:

> I mean I love print comics but there was, there's always been that thing in the back of my head where I wish I didn't get, ya know, a little spoiled at times with ah the way some of that format works. (Making Comics, 2014)

Digital offers an opportunity to alter this print convention, which is an attractive proposition for the creators. However they must also utilise a repertoire of love to avoid alienating fans or other creators. On the Thrillbent website it is stated that, "This is NOT an attempt to "kill print." Mark, John and their collaborators all love print comics. Mark alone writes what seems to be about one out of every three published these days" (Thrillbent.com, 2015). As Chapter Six will demonstrate, publishers need creators to make their digital projects work, but

creators do not want to be associated with projects that other creators and fans may view negatively. Creators are trying to socialise other creators to the digital industry while justifying their investment of social, symbolic and human capital to the digital projects. The ‘love of comics’ discourse utilised here helps to showcase digital as something worthwhile, adding to comics without detracting from what the creators and audiences love about the medium.

4.3.2 Communicators

Identifying as a communicator characterises the comics creator as someone who has an innate desire, ability, or attraction to creative work and storytelling. We can see the utilisation of this theme in the following statements:

> I'm a storyteller at heart, and there are worlds I want to create and explore. When I was a kid, it was the worlds of the big two superhero universes, and as I got older I discovered how much more was possible in comics. The big strange Science Fiction, Horror, and Fantasy concepts in my head could all fit in this form and be brought to life with incredible artists. The second I had the opportunity to jump into this world, I took it, and I haven't looked back yet. (DC Writer 2)

> I like to tell stories, and I also like to draw and paint. It's a good fit for my personality and skillset. (DC Artist 1.1)

Here, creativity and a desire to do creative work are presented as integral to the creator’s sense of self. Storytelling is a part of who they are and their work needs to reflect their sense of creativity. Finding the right environment for their creativity is important for the speakers. The respondent (DC Writer 2) speaks about his prior pursuit of prose

storytelling and advertising because he thought that working in comics was implausible or impractical, whilst still regarding comics as the medium where “the concepts in my head could all fit”. This comparison between comics and other mediums, focusing on the suitability of comics for creative realisation and satisfaction, is explored further in the following extract. Given the complexity of the comparison it is necessary to quote at length from the creator:

> My background is advertising and graphic design, primarily as an art director which I enjoyed very much, but after a few years I wanted to try and use whatever abilities I had to do something more interesting than shift product, though comics are product as well of course, there is no real difference. Both primarily exist to generate revenue for interested parties, comics can be more than that, but so can advertisements. Both can be art in my opinion. The only divergence is in terms of the end user. The end user of a comic is the reader, the end user of an ad is not the person reading the ad, but responding and consuming the advertised product or service. Comics are creatively an end in themselves, which makes them creatively more satisfying. (Madefire Artist 1.1)

In this extract the discourses of creativity and storytelling are placed in conversation with the creator’s previous identity in advertising and graphic design. The creator characterises working in advertising and working in comics similarly, with each focused on selling products yet capable of being *art*. The difference lies in their relationship with the audience, because comics are ‘an end in themselves’, while ads serve to direct you towards something else, a product or service to be acquired. Through this relationship with the audience, comics provide the speaker with an opportunity to use their skills in a new way, to create a product people want to read, and use their abilities in pursuit of

that goal. For the speaker, the removal of the need to direct the audience elsewhere and be evaluated by the success of that direction leads to the creative satisfaction comics provides. This relationship with the audience is an important aspect of identity formation and validation.

It is here, in their identification as communicators and storytellers, that we can see the idea of the creator's motivations for entering the comic book industry forming part of their core identity, and thus influencing their response to digital production. Ruth Bridgstock (2013) argued that identity should not be considered a static concept. Instead it should be viewed as flexible and adaptable, being comprised of a stable, core set of values and beliefs, yet also being able to adapt to changing circumstances to take advantage of those opportunities on offer (Bridgstock, 2013, 131). Bridgstock applies adaptive identity to an entrepreneurial view of identity, but it can also be applied in a broader sense to periods of media change. Creators adapt their identity to the new production process, format, and industry structure, while relying on their core values and needs, but remain open to learning new skills and responsibilities, which are outside their original identity. The extracts below highlight the continuance of storytelling as a core identity feature in digital comics:

> The process is the same, but the tools are slightly different. I'm still telling a story visually, imagining in my head how I want the words and events delivered to the reader, I just have different methods at my disposal to achieve what I want. (Madefire Writer 1)

> Well, obviously, a lot of the storytelling is the same either way. You still need a fun, engaging story, good interplay between the characters, and so on. (Sholly Fisch, Writer quoted in CranfordTeague 2013)

Storytelling has become part of their core values and their sense of self, guiding their work regardless of whether they are working on print comics or digital comics. This is why the experience of working digitally can feel the same. A digital comic requires a good story, compelling characters, and engaging dialogue just as much as a print comic does and the creator remains motivated by that goal.

4.3.3 Comics As a Job

Finding the correct creative environment to express the individual's storytelling and creative personality was not only tied to finding the right medium, but also about finding an environment where their storytelling could be rewarded financially. This is highlighted in the excerpt below where, in response to the question 'why did you want a career in comics', the speaker explains:

> So that I can survive. I would be creating comics regardless of whether I was being paid to do it or not. I have a desperate need to create and I have never been able to tolerate any job that doesn't utilize that skill. I understood at a young age that if I was going to continue to live I absolutely needed to find a way for someone to pay me for it. (DC Artist 2)

The speaker not only identified as a 'communicator', through highlighting their *desperate need to create* but also ties this into the theme of being attracted to 'comics as a job'. McRobbie (2006) established that creative workers have a greater sense of emotional attachment to their work and experience or strive to experience a greater sense of fulfilment through their work. Through this framework we can see the love the creators have for the medium and their desire to be creative as understandable motivations for entering the comic

book industry. What was less expected, given the debate surrounding the art versus commerce mentality in creative work (see Taylor and Littleton, 2012), was the way certain speakers displayed an attraction to comic book work as a job. Instead of framing the pursuit of commercial motivations as 'selling out' (Taylor and Littleton, 2012) the creator's understanding of comics as a job provides a justification and direction for their interest in comics. Further, being able to identify the people who made comics was a turning point in the direction of the creator's career, because it provided a goal or pathway to aspire to:

> I was a comic book fan because my parents would always buy me comics whenever we travelled on the subway (I grew up in New York). I was immediately hooked, and the idea that someone actually drew these things was fascinating to me. I wanted to do it too. (Marvel Colourist 1)

> It was around 8 years old when I was looking at a Dan Dare strip drawn by Dave Gibbons. I looked at the credits and came to the conclusion that people made this stuff and it must be some kind of job. I was pretty good at art and realized this was going to be a job I wanted to aim for. (Madefire Artist 2)

The speakers were attracted to comics as a job, at a young age, and this attraction helped to orient their development, it became something they *wanted*. This attraction to comic book work not only occurs at a young age, but also can occur at a later stage. Here the attraction to comic book work comes through the creator's perceived lack of their suitability for other work:

> It's something I can do and I'm good at doing. I don't have to get up in the morning, I don't have to be particularly organized, I can

> make my own hours and dress code; essentially, all the things that made me unsuited to other kinds of work don't really matter. Which narrows it down to writing of some kind, and out of the various mediums and genres, I'm most used to this. (Marvel Writer 1)

The creator demonstrated an attraction not only to comics as a job, but also to the routines and conditions comic book work offers. For the creator the fact comic book work is done under a freelance model, where the creator has the freedom to set their own hours, dress code and place of work, made comic book work highly desirable and something they could identify with as opposed to stereotypes of other, more formal jobs and work.

More specifically, the identification of comics as a job crossed over with the creators' love of comics to explain their pursuit of work-for-hire projects. The creators grew up fans of the medium, highlighting particularly characters as important or influential. Working on these projects, despite the restrictions of the publisher's commercial interests, fulfilled certain creative and aspirational desires:

> Working on characters I grew up with, adding my own little bits to them that'll outlive me. That's huge for me. (Marvel Colourist 1)

> And most of all, at least for me, knowing that I'm being allowed to give back to characters who meant the world to me as a kid. (Thrillbent Writer 1)

Working on these work-for-hire projects acted as validation for the creators' imagined identity from childhood.

The commercial motivation continues to influence the creator as part of their sense of self when considering the new digital projects. The extract below highlights the commercial motive as part of the creator's reasoning for working on the digital projects:

> I was hired by a DC Comics editor. Partially because I've had experience making comix that cross-platform print to digital. What convinced me was the creative collaboration and my desire to make a regular living in comix. (DC Artist 3)

The opportunity to get paid played an important role in the creator's decision to work on the digital projects. As a freelance workforce, getting paid is important for continued survival in the industry and by offering another opportunity for the creator to earn money and make comics the digital projects fit within the creator's established identity.

While creators positively identified with comics as a job there were still those external sources that questioned the creators chosen career and identity:

> Less often, people who know me since my PhD days ask me if I'd prefer to stay at university, implying that an academic career would be worthier than one in comics. (Thrillbent Artist 2)

> Our neighbour, this building next door, he's some old British professor that bought this building and he and his wife they were at our last story night and we were talking about and he was like how did you get into comics and I gave him the nutshell story, college blah, blah, blah and the guy's first response was like 'oh,

> I bet your parents were disappointed' and it was like wow, really? His wife was like why would you say that, 'well I bet they were' and like and it's like that sort of attitude is still there. (Madefire Editor 2)

The digital comic book creators' search for legitimacy and validation of their identity within the field is illustrative of comics continued search for acceptance amongst the wider external culture. The basis of comic book content for many successful transmedia properties is helping to change the outside perception of the industry, but many negative stereotypes continue to influence the reception of the creator's identity.

Taken together the motivations for creators to pursue comic book work, and increasingly digital comic book work, represent powerful resources in the identity of a comic book creator. From the data we can see that those who manage to enter the industry as paid creators have a love for comics, a strong desire to be storytellers and, to some extent, an affinity for creating comic books as work. The motivations guide the creator's entry to the workforce and construct core aspects of the creator's identity. These core identity features then become valuable resources when the creator experiences periods of change, such as the digitisation of comics, acting as the stable core of their adaptive identity.

While these motivations were common, not every creator adhered to them. As Taylor and Littleton argue, there are "multiple ways to construct any identity" (2012, 51) and we can see an alternative in the following extract, where comic books were not a driving force:

> I've always loved cartooning. Peanuts was the thing I connected to most as a child. I wanted to grow up to be a syndicated cartoonist. Super hero comics seemed a doorway into cartoons

> in a way. It was available to me and seemed better than working at an advertising agency until I could get syndicated. (Marvel Letterer 2)

Countering the idea that comic book creators love comics and are attracted to comics for its storytelling, the extract presents an alternate account where a comic book career was meant to be a pathway to something else. In this case the close proximity of comic books to comic strips meant that comic book work was more in line with their creative identification than advertising work would be. As working in comics was not the speaker's goal they were able to develop an outside view when looking at the comic book industry. For instance, when asked what the creator knew about the industry when entering he highlighted that he did not know a lot. Despite not knowing a lot, in comparison to those who were fans of the medium, the speaker saw problems as "so many of the people were fans before they got into the industry and they had no real qualifications for their jobs except they loved comics and read them as a kid" (Marvel Letterer 2). The creator highlights two key ideas, that the creator's motivations for entering the industry can become a constraint on their identity and creative growth, as well as the role and value of education to a comic book career. The motivations displayed here, where comics was not the initial goal, may be more characteristic of the new digital work force, as the work requires creators from a variety of backgrounds including animators, musicians, and software engineers.

4.4 Education

Education plays an important role in shaping identity in Shardlow's (2009) professional socialisation framework. Prospective workers acquire the necessary skills through education and also have their comprehension of the profession's values challenged, altering their understanding of the profession from naive idealism to a more

pragmatic understanding. Professions, such as doctors and lawyers, have also traditionally used education as a form of closure and control to determine who is qualified to work in that profession (Freidson, 2001; Perkin, 1989). Although art schools and creative industries programs have proliferated, education has not been utilised to guard creative work. Instead, it maintains a sense of openness to education, which members of the industry highlight as a positive:

> The thing about comics is there is no career path, everybody comes in a different way. With a lawyer you have to pass the BAR, with a doctor you have to go to medical school. With comic artists there's no way, you come in any way. You don't even have to have gone to art school. Sometimes people just pick up a pen and learn to draw. (Cebulski, Breaking Into Comics, 2013b)

In the interviews creators reflected this view of the industry both positively and negatively when discussing the role of education in a comic book career. The openness of the comic book industry and the ability of people to enter the industry without any qualifications can be a problem, which can be labelled media overreliance. Media overreliance describes the way comic book creators' love of comics causes them to only reflect what is already being done in the medium, instead of exploring and utilising a variety of influences developed through education and consumption of other media. The media overreliance theme is explored in more detail in Chapter Seven. The more positive view of the industry's openness in regards to credentials and education can be seen in the following extract:

> The professional world of comics, and many other creative industries from what I understand, require the skill and knowledge to perform the job and has no restrictions placed on

> how you've acquired those abilities. This is something I strongly believe in and am deeply grateful the professional world supports. (DC Artist 2)

The speaker focuses on the acquisition of skills and directly contrasts this with the idea of a formalised education providing those skills. Where Shardlow (2009) finds education to be important for preparing journalists for what working in the industry will be like and, by extension shapes their identity as journalists, comic book creators utilise other methods to prepare themselves for a career in comics. This is despite being a generally highly educated population. Many artists completed an illustration or fine art degree while writers and editors came from a more mixed background including English, Advertising, Film School and History degrees. Yet when asked about the role this education played in their career many viewed it as having minimal impact:

> Occasionally, I would have an English course where we discussed a comic as part of the syllabus, but I've never taken a pure comic book writing or history class (although I absolutely would have if the option had been open to me). My education in comics has always been a self-inflicted thing. I try to constantly hunt down works from different countries and different corners of the industry to see what people away from the mainstream are doing. I want to see the possibilities of the medium stretched in every possible direction, and I want to study what works and what doesn't. I'm always trying to absorb new information about comics. (DC Writer 2)

> Very little. In terms of the nuts and bolts of making comics I'm entirely self taught. (Madefire Artist 1.1)

The extracts highlight the discourse of ‘making comics’. As their education is not focused specifically on making comics the creator needs to learn the skills for themselves. The act of making a comic becomes an educational one, directed by the individual. Editor Scott Allie argues writers need to see their work drawn to fully understand the medium of comics. According to Allie, when a writer sees their work drawn their entire preconception about how to write a comic changes (Editors on Editing, 2013). Similarly, artists need experience drawing a complete comic to understand what is expected of them. Artist Steve Kurth, who had a formal art education, described the following experience:

> I spent a good ten years, I graduated college with an illustration degree and I was all like “I’m awesome I’ve done a whole like 5 pages in a row so I’m ready” ya know I had this sense of entitlement and naivety and I just thought where’s my job Marvel, hey I’m right here. And really I sucked and it took a good decade of just persistent work, being willing to be impoverished so you have the time to put to your craft to, I think that’s the biggest thing of breaking in. (Breaking Into Comics “The Marvel Way”, 2010a)

For the creator immersion in the practice of making comics was important for learning how to make comics effectively. This dissatisfaction with formal education was also found in Gill’s (2011) new media workers who adopted a ‘do-it-yourself’ approach to education. Developing this ‘DIY’ mentality becomes vital to the creators survival because of their need to keep up with changing demands for skills.

It should be noted that a few of the respondents did feel their education benefited their career. These creators attended specific comic book

schools, such as The Kubert School[19], or completed comic book degree programs at the Savannah College of Art and Design. Here the courses are taught by current industry professionals and cover all aspects of comic book production as well as the experience of working in the industry. The chance to complete a comics-specific education socialised the creators to the values, practices, and work routines of the deadline focused, long-hours comic book industry. This industry grounded socialisation process was valuable to the creator's preparation for working in the industry:

> I thought I'd be a superstar penciler who would slave over a drawing table for twelve hours for little to no money. The reality is that I am a writer and letterer who slaves over a computer desk for twelve hours a day for a decent pay check. We were told in the Kubert School not to expect much salary-wise. The joke was if you wanted to make a good living, don't work in comics. (Marvel Letterer 3)

> It really let me focus on the art while I was there. My skill level jumped dramatically in the course of a few years, literally going from some of the most horrendous amateurish crap you've ever seen, to a decent level of quality that was really close to professional level. Also it taught me a lot about taking criticism, and working on deadlines that helps out a lot too in a professional setting. (Thrillbent Artist 1)

Education provided beneficial socialisation processes for these creators, but there was also recognition of the importance of the "making comics" discourse and the idea of informal education:

[19] The Kubert School, founded in 1976 by comic book creator Joe Kubert in New Jersey, USA, is a specialist art school focusing on animation, commercial illustration, and cartooning/comic book art (Kubertschool.edu, 2014).

> It's more that all great artists have some sort of learning behind them. Whether they've self taught by reading books and observing life, or whether it's tutelage from a professional, or even by being in a small community of other creators, You can point at any artist/creative and with a little background point out where it was they learned something about art. It never comes from a vacuum, it's not a magical gift we were born with, it comes from study, practice, and observation. (Thrillbent Artist 1)

The practical "making comics" mentality of comic book education becomes a vital part of the creator's identity, aiding their survival in the industry during the transition to a digital first industry. For certain older, more experienced creators there was a need to reinvent themselves to adapt to earlier changes in production, which introduced computers and digital technology into the production process. This is explained in the following extracts:

> I've made the jump from that to computer coloring as most companies started to make that transition, so I've seen a lot of talented people fall to the wayside because they weren't prepared. (Marvel Colourist 1)

> Computers have become a greater and greater tool in the making of comics. There have been many times I thought I would be out of a job, but I tried to make myself invaluable. I learned to create fonts, find better methods of work and Marvel noticed and partnered with me because they need someone like that. (Marvel Letterer 2)

For these creators in the more craft-like roles of letterer and colourist, there was a sense of inevitability to the transition from hand-production methods to digital. They needed to learn these new skills, on their own time, to remain employable, because the hand-production methods could not match the speed, efficiency and range of creative options that the emerging digital tools could provide. For other creators (mainly artists), digital production is not necessary, but it has still gained in popularity. The extracts below highlight how artists, transitioning to digital production, have done so by following the 'making comics' discourse:

> When someone who doesn't use a computer hears that I do art digitally, I think they picture in their mind that I just pick up a microphone that's hooked up to the computer and say, "Draw Batman," and then I go, "Draw him better" *(laughs)*. It was a very gradual process, one that is still evolving for me even today… I would say that it was probably 60% of my own trial and error, just making stuff up — the other 40% was guided with previous experience and my time with Photoshop from Hallmark. (JH Williams III in Wilson, 2010)

> I simply couldn't bring myself to read the phonebook-sized manual that came with Photoshop (or Painter), so I jumped in blind -- learn as you go. I'm always finding out new things about the program -- accidentally, mostly. I've a long way to go before I can really utilize the power contained in the software. (Greg Capullo in Spawn.com, 2006)

In either case, learning these new processes becomes the creator's responsibility due to the dominant model of work in the media industry (casual, freelance, or self-employed work), where the burden of maintaining and obtaining those skills falls on the individual (Gill, 2002;

2009; 2011). Through the ‘individualisation of risk’ thesis (Gill, 2002, 81) it is the individual’s responsibility to continually maintain the relevant skills that ensure employability. The fear of being left behind and no longer being valued as a good worker is a common and ongoing discourse in the creative industries. As writer Frank Tieri explained, “We’re always learning ya know, I think you’ve always got to be not afraid to learn and ya know evolve” (Breaking Into Comics, 2013a). Adapting to new technology, through skills training or reskilling, becomes part of the creator’s wider need for creative growth.

Acquiring these new skills was beneficial to the creator, but learning these skills in their own time and at their own expense made it a risk. As one artist acknowledged, finding the time to progress their artistic ability is difficult in a deadline-focused industry (Thrillbent Artist 1). Investing in new skills is also a risk because industries are capable of changing, leaving the specific skills learnt by the individual untransferable (Hacker, 2006). There was no guarantee the digital-production processes learned would become the industry standards they are today.

Neff (2012) classifies this acquisition of skills as part of the individual’s human capital, made up of their existing skills and commitment to learning new practices. Creators then invest these skills in the projects they work on, benefitting the company who employs them. For instance, the creator’s acquisition of digital production and communication skills allowed comic book publishers to reduce costs in these areas, such as the postage of scripts and pages between creators. Creators are similarly investing their time to understand the new digital comic technologies, develop the new storytelling techniques, and renegotiate the relationship between the creative team on these projects. They face similar risks over the uncertainty of the formats’ success and the failure of motion comics to become the new industry standard acts as a reminder of the risk involved.

Acceptance of this risk is part of what I call the “pioneer identity” of digital comic workers. The creators are attracted to the opportunity to develop the new conventions and practices of the digital formats, which will be recognised by the field:

> I think in ten years we’ll be reading textbooks about the digital pioneers, and I wanted a footnote in there somewhere. (Marvel Writer 1)

> It’s fun to be able to, yeah, to be the few in the beginning who are exploring it. Maybe, possibly laying down groundwork. (Jeremy Rock, Artist, in Making Comics, 2014)

> One of my favourite parts about this is ya know I kind of get to write the rules ya know. It’s not like, ‘oh Jack Kirby did this better’. Jack Kirby didn’t do this s*** man. (Reilly Brown, Artist, in Siuntres, 2014)

This open experimentation and ability to help determine the structures and conventions of a new format drive the creator, engaging their creativity and excitement. They learn and develop the new conventions and practices through making the digital comics. Adopting the pioneer identity justifies the creator’s decision to work on the digital projects because it allows them creative freedom and autonomy, even within work-for-hire contracts, and an opportunity for important external observers to acknowledge their identity. This justifies the risk of the project by placing the creator “at the centre of control and choice” (Neff, 2012, NP). The pioneers chose to work on the project because it gave them creative control and an opportunity to grow their reputation as a digital pioneer, which is important to the entrepreneurial, survivalist

aspect of their identity.

Autonomy, the ability to have control over career decisions and the ability to make independent decisions relating to the creative process (Deuze, 2007, 92), has always been important to creators, but publishers also recognise the importance of autonomy to their business. Banks calls this negotiated autonomy, where publishers provide a level of autonomy to ensure successful creative products are created (2010, 252). Ryan (1992, 114) argues that if they do not, the consequences are undesirable, because "[a]ny attempt by employers to reduce the necessary component by demanding less time and devotion by the artist, runs the risk of a shoddy or mediocre and hence unsaleable artwork". The pioneers derive a sense of autonomy to shape the practices and conventions of the digital projects, but their autonomy and ability to elicit change is influenced by the prevailing negative stereotypes surrounding digital work the creators must work within. How creators address these stereotypes is discussed in Chapters Six and Seven.

The pioneer identity is also representative of a change in the creator's career orientation. Rodrigues et al (2013) argued that career motivations can be stable over time, but they can change because of contextual influences. For instance, the creator's shift from wanting to work on the characters they grew up with to wanting to work on projects they own represents a shift in their motivations. The fundamental motivation to make comics remains stable, but what they want to achieve through making comics has changed to reflect new contextual influences and career priorities. As stated by one respondent (Marvel Writer 1) in Chapter Three, he wants to be able to buy a house and creating something he owns that a large audience reads can help him to achieve that. Similarly, the pioneer creators who are working on the digital projects are adapting their motivations and career orientation to

align with the influence of digital technology yet there remains stability in their career orientation and values.

The change in their motivations is necessary because creators now engage in a boundaryless career (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). Instead of marking their career through salary growth and promotion in one career cycle the boundaryless career proposes that workers move through continuous career cycles that promote a focus on continuous learning and maintaining a state of employability (Rodrigues et al, 2013). In this model, the new digital ways of working represent a new career cycle where the creators maintain certain core, primary motivations, but they are also driven by a desire to build their reputation or learn new skills that will enable them to remain employable through to the next career cycle. This mix of motivations is reflected in the creators' adaptive identity, which is the focus of Chapter Seven.

4.5 Breaking In Experiences

The lack of comics-specific formal education means 'making comics' plays an important role in the education and socialisation process of comic book workers. It is necessary to explore what other factors (including networking, talent, professionalism, luck and persistence) influence the creator's experience of breaking in and how they relate to the experience of digital comics. This thesis follows the claim of artist Declan Shalvey that, "You're always breaking in, it could be with a different editor, a different company, it could be a different creator" (Break In, Stay In, 2012). The creator must continually bear the risk of investing in their career and the new relationships necessary to survive (Neff, 2005).

Breaking into the creative industries is a difficult process. Their perceived desirability as career destinations means they are characterised by an abundance of potential entrants for relatively few

paid positions (Menger, 1999). Large multinational corporations with the capital to commission work, employ organisational members (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Flew, 2012) and connect creators to audiences (Hirsch, 2000), have traditionally controlled access to these paid positions. Evans (2004, 9) defined this relationship as “whales and plankton”. The corporations (whales) need the creatives (plankton) to provide content, but the corporations have the power to filter the creatives and determine who gets paid.

The Internet and digital technology have eased some of the restrictions previously placed on access to audiences, but the focus of breaking in has gone from finding distribution to finding reliable sources of income. Creator-owned contracts and new digital models offer potential alternatives, but they are still highly risky. Traditional gatekeepers like Marvel and DC continue to exert power through their ability to offer immediate payment via their per-project work-for-hire contracts. Publishers, such as Marvel, recognise their position in the industry:

> We always say we’re like the New York Yankees. You have to work for someone else before you come to work for us. You have to work your way up the ladder because we’re at the top of the heap. (CB Cebulski in Breaking Into Comics, 2013b)

The extract displays the hierarchy in the comic book industry, which provides structure and a sense of shared experience to the process of breaking in. Marvel and DC exist at the ‘top of the heap’ where they have high expectations for the candidates they take. Creators need to prove they have the required skills because, just like not everyone can play for the Yankees not everyone can work for Marvel or DC. The socialisation process at Marvel and DC is not focused on how to write or draw a comic, but what makes a good Marvel or DC comic (Simmons in Editors on Editing, 2013). Many creators followed this career path of

proving themselves elsewhere before gaining work at one of the major publishers:

> During the time I didn't know much about inking, but he [a fellow artist] did and he needed some inking work done and trained me on how to ink instead. He guided me for a few years until I was ready and the next thing I knew, I was inking backgrounds on a Topcow book and that was how I broke into the industry. (Marvel Inker 1)

> I kind of pretty quickly started doing my own webcomics and self-publishing my own black and white fanzines and various other terrible endeavours…I mean what I did, I basically did Phonogram and passively I just thought about coming up with ideas and getting my work out there and just doing it and the work begat other work and when it started it was basically me doing a 5-page story, another artist saying "hey I like your stuff we should do something together sometime" and that led to another 5-page story, then a 10-page story, led to Phonogram. Phonogram led to other things and the work begat other work. (Kieron Gillen, Break In, Stay In, 2012)

4.5.1 Showing Work and Becoming Known

Making comics was not only a form of education, but also a process to build a reputation and claim the professional creator's identity. As Kieron Gillen says:

> Worrying about breaking in is not the problem; the problem is being good enough. Because why would you want to be doing it if you're not good enough to get the work, ya know what I mean? That's really the thing to stress about and it involves an honest

> conversation with yourself. I mean I didn't pitch anyone, for like 5 or 6 years, because I knew I wasn't good enough. I mean even when I was doing my own small press work. So yeah, just really worry about your craft and I think that's kind of like almost everything else is secondary. Because when you're good enough they'll come to you, as long as you've actually got work out there. (Break In, Stay In, 2012)

While Gillen describes a rather idealistic situation, which does not account for the role of networking and 'who you know', publishers finding creators when they are good enough does reference the role of reputation, portfolio building and the importance of self-categorisation to identity. Creators build a portfolio of work to build a reputation or their symbolic capital, which proves that they belong in the industry (Kirschbaum, 2007; Zafirau, 2008). As Deuze claims (2007) it is now necessary to be good and create an image of being good. The creators become protean workers utilising each new project to acquire new skills and network for future job opportunities (Bridgstock, 2005). Each project builds their reputation and strengthens their claim to a professional creative identity. By producing and showing work, for the field to evaluate, the creator can claim the professional creator's identity (Bain, 2005; Elsbach, 2009; Wei, 2012). The content produced is representative of the artistic values, tastes, and aesthetic ideals held by the creator and producing projects that meet these goals become evidence, both personally and socially, of who they are as creators and "that they are who they claim to be" (Wei, 2012, 454). Producing work, which builds the creator's reputation and leads to work at a major publisher, highlights the social recognition of the creator's assertion of their identity as a comic book creator:

> Producing a comic serves many purposes. Not just that it shows us how you are as a writer, you can hire an artist, how you tell a

> story but also that you have the motivation to be in comics. You took your own money and your own time and invested it in yourself and that goes a long way. When we see people who have been publishing comics for years we know that they are dedicated, they want to be in this industry and that goes a long way. (CB Cebulski, Break In, Stay In, 2012)

> It was a calling card, it was a drawn and lettered comic book that I had written. It was a concept, stories, characters that I had come up with. It demonstrated not only that I was decent enough at dialogue and pacing and all that kind of stuff to make a comic but that I could also dedicate myself and complete a project on my own. I could, I had the capacity to be able to work with other people. I could stop talking about wanting to make comics and actually sit down and make the comics themselves. (Sam Humphries, Breaking Into Comics "The Marvel Way", 2013)

Publishers, editors, and other creators need to see that the aspiring creator has similarities with the other accepted members of the profession. It forms part of their self-categorisation, where it is necessary for creators to display similar skills, work ethic, goals, and values to the ideals of the profession (Brooks et al., 2010). Making comics allows creators to achieve this.

The connection between reputation, protean careers, content, and identity also influenced the recruitment of creators to the new digital projects. Certain creators had the opportunity to make other digital comics, including webcomics and motion comics, as well as precursors to the swipe/tap comics[20] implemented by Marvel, DC and Thrillbent.

[20] Swipe/tap comics refers to the way digital comics utilise the reader's swiping or tapping of tablet and smartphone screens to advance and reveal aspects of the narrative. This storytelling style will be discussed in more detail throughout the thesis.

Creators spoke about the benefits of prior experience making digital comics in the extracts below:

> The main artist for the series, Reilly Brown, I chose because he had a lot of experience and excitement for Infinite Comics. He had done one of the AvX Infinite stories, and had also done his own comic, Power Play, which uses the same techniques as Infinite Comics. (Marvel Editor 1.1)

> My background in helping launch the original Digital Comics project at Marvel.com. I just seemed like a good fit considering both my technical know-how of how they're constructed, as well as familiarity with the team at Marvel who are producing them. (Marvel Letterer 1)

These pioneer creators had already begun establishing a reputation as digital workers through projects in their portfolio that provided them with the necessary skills. To the publishers and editors these creators had the skills, values, and beliefs of the emerging prototypical digital creator (Brooks et al., 2010). Through their portfolio and reputation they had already begun to claim the identity of a digital creator and these further projects confirmed that identity. For the pioneer creator it then became important to frame their digital work as the right project to build and protect their reputation and aid their pursuit of the next job (Neff, 2012).

4.5.2 Social Capital and Networks

Personal and professional networks are important resources in generating leads for future work in the creative industries (Bridgstock, 2005) where “it’s all down to who you know” (Gill, 2011, NP). In comics this applies to aspiring and established creators alike. The principles behind networking when creators break in continue to be important

throughout the creator's career. At first the creator networks and builds connections to become known. Artist Declan Shalvey explained:

> You could be the best artist in the world, amazing, but if you're just sitting in a room drawing and nobody sees it then nothing is going to happen for you. You need to come and make connections. (Breaking Into Comics, 2013b)

This networking and connection building forms part of the characterisation of the comic book industry as a community, a small industry where the creators keep connected. CB Cebulski explains the benefit of this to creators:

> It's an extremely small industry and everybody knows everybody else. There's not even six degrees of separation in comics there's two degrees of separation. Anybody you want to get in contact with, you can get a hold of. Everybody talks, ya know there's probably messageboards or there's direct messages on Twitter or there's Facebook… So if someone read your stuff, liked it and it got a positive buzz, I'm not averse to looking at it or telling another person "Hey I can't use his work at Marvel but you might want to check it out to do this smaller book at another publisher". It's building those opportunities for yourself and taking advantage of those opportunities. (Breaking Into Comics, 2013a)

Networking and relationship building has evolved with colourist Jordie Bellaire detailing how the internet proved beneficial in building connections, which eventually led to work in the industry:

> And it's just, I think what made it work is that I had the right connections but I have to say a lot of that came from Twitter and

> having a good blog and being friendly, and being excited and eager to take new work and to just learn. So when I was doing that I was on Twitter and I had the right relationships…just having the perseverance, no just try to work and learn and ya know keeping your internet persona up there. (Jordie Bellaire, Colourist, Breaking Into Comics "The Marvel Way", 2014a)

This thesis is not concerned with economic geography, but Rendace (2000) has previously discussed new technologies influence on the increasing geographic dispersal of creators from the traditional production hubs of New York and Los Angeles. While the Internet and the periodic social economy of comic book conventions have become vital tools to maintain and build networks (Rendance, 2000) creators can still benefit from living in those production hubs:

> I have the benefit of living in Hoboken so I'm right across the river from the office. So I can just pop in the office every now and then, which I like to do just to say hi to people, shake some hands, show them the new things I've been working on and I do that through email too but there's nothing like being able to actually see the guys, go out for a drink with them and stuff like that. (Marvel Artist 1.1)

Creators who lived outside of those production hubs spoke of their situation positively and as an advantage of the digital industry:

> The simple fact that I get to work from home and interact with my collaborators via email is huge. This is the only comic industry I've ever known but just a few years before I broke in, creators still had to move to New York if they wanted to make comics. (Marvel Writer 2)

Future research could look at the continuing change in the geography of comic book work and how that impacts the creators' networking because networking remains important after breaking in. Creators are always on the look out for the next project and the next job, driven by what creators referred to as the 'freelancer fear':

> There's always the worry, I'm constantly worried what's going to happen next, what's the next project, is that going to be good for me, is it going to be bad for me or should I do this. (Declan Shalvey, Breaking Into Comics, 2013b)

Most distressing for creators is the fear that they may have to leave the comic book industry and return to work outside of the industry. Artist Nick Roche summed up this feeling, stating:

> Every time you come to the end of that project, no matter how well received that last one was, we're kind of like "oh no here it comes again, back at Tesco's stacking shelves." (Breaking Into Comics, 2013b)

This precariousness (Deuze, 2007; Kennedy, 2010; Gill, 2011) means networking and relationships play an important part in the creator's survival and their ability to secure new work. Many of the creators ended up on paying digital comic projects through their personal and professional networks:

> Marvel EIC Joe Quesada and I have been friends forever, and he knew I was developing Thrillbent at the same time he was trying to launch Infinite Comics, so he asked me aboard to help

them figure out how it all should work. (Thrillbent Writer 1)

> He [Madefire Founder 1] and his wife …were talking about who they want to be in editorial and she brought it up "well what about [Madefire Editor 1], you love working with [Madefire Editor 1] and ya know you got a long really well with him." "Oh we could never get him away from DC" and that kind of thing and again it's very flattering to hear and ya know it's about relationships. You do what you think your job should be to the best of your abilities and you treat people the right way and, ya know, it comes back to you, ya know hopefully…not hoping "oh maybe if I'm nice to this guy I'm gonna get a job someday" ya know just try to treat everybody well. (Madefire Editor 1)

Building up and maintaining their networks over time helped the creators secure their role on the digital projects. Following the individualisation of risk thesis, life is constantly a pitch where you never know where the next job will come from, so every interaction becomes an opportunity for work (Gill, 2011). Nevertheless, the second extract highlights the difficulty that proposition presents some creators. Networking can begin to feel like an obligation (Gill, 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). For the editor, networking needs to be more than being nice to others in order to get work, rejecting the term because it had connotations the creator did not like:

> Networking, networking sounds kind of sleazy and sort of weird, ya know what I mean, some like scumbag fake movie producer "hey, hey I met Billy Zane one time he's got this idea" and you're like what? Um it's just it's about relationships more than it is about networking. (Madefire Editor 1)

Honesty in relationships fits better with the image presented earlier of the comic book industry as a community. In this communal view, creators may start by networking to break in, but this changes into relationship-building and friendships based on a mutual love of comics. The creator's status as an editor does provide a different view on networking to freelance creators. Even in a salaried position networking is crucial for his or her own personal career development: it was through networking that the editor left DC for Madefire. Editors also need to network to fill jobs, building relationships with creators to find the right talent for each project to allow the editor to successfully do their job. The freelance creators are constantly pitching and networking for work, a key distinction. Not maintaining those networks can be detrimental to the creator's work. Editorial positions have a high turnover and artist Reilly Brown highlights how on one occasion he neglected his relationships with Marvel's editorial department and discovered that all the editors he knew had left, leaving him to start again building contacts at the publisher (How to Break Into Comics, 2010). Networking is a constant process for comic book creators and even when they have stable work the individualisation of risk demands that they maintain connections at multiple publishers to ensure future stability in their career.

It should be noted that beyond networking feeling like an obligation (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) there are other criticisms to the informal networking practices of the creative industries and their impact on hiring. Research has found these practices to be exclusionary to women and minorities (Deuze, 2007; Gill, 2011), and capable of undermining the role of merit in creative success (Lee, 2011), because whom you know can become more important than what you know. Current workers, particularly white males, can have difficulty in identifying sources of inequality that impact the ability of women and ethic minorities to succeed (Lee, 2011). Female and minority representation in comic book production has gained attention in the

industry press (Hudson, 2011; Hickey, 2014) and future research should address how the informal networking practices of the industry contribute to this inequality.

4.6 Surviving The Comic Book Industry

By analysing the creators' "breaking in" experience, and applying those findings to this period of digital change, we see certain core identity characteristics influencing the way comic book creators interact and respond to the new digital industry. We can add survival to this core identity, as comic book creators display resilience through the strategies developed in response to the freelance nature of the work. Adapting to digital changes can be seen as part of that survivalist identity.

Survival recognises the commercial, business aspect of comic book work. It goes beyond the 'art for art's sake' discourse where commercial success is shunned in favour of producing work the creator is emotionally attached to (Bourdieu, 1993; Caves, 2000). Instead, survival places the creators within recent research on the art-commerce tension where creators balanced the need to be artistic as well as commercially successful (Beech et al., 2012; Elsbach, 2009; Gotsi et al., 2010). While creators were motivated by comics as a job and recognised the need to survive, the commercial aspect of their identity was socialised once they started working in the industry. When asked about their expectations or image of working in the comic book industry creators responded that:

> I think it's pretty different than I imagined. Turns out most people's families are right; it's hard to make a living as an artist. I was pretty full of myself in college and knew basically nothing about comics- I sort of imagined that if I just started producing

> good work, the money would take care of itself. That did happen, but it took lots of lean years. (DC Artist, 1.1)

> I suppose I thought work would come more often than it ended up doing. It was about five years before I could get work on a regular enough basis to quit my day job, and even then I had to regularly supplement my income by packing boxes in a warehouse every so often. Then, when I started working in the US industry, the NDAs, voucher systems [21] and rules and regulations were a little hard to get used to after years working in a much less formal environment. (Marvel Writer 1)

Comic book creators' underdeveloped understanding of business can have severe consequences for their survival:

> They don't teach artists enough business stuff, so you really kinda have to learn the hard way on how to do everything. I took a couple of business classes and that prepared me a little bit and it's frustrating because other artists haven't even had as little education on that as I have and so you have to compete with them when they don't even know what they're negotiating or they don't even read contracts. It's like what? Like I've got a friend who like he never reads a contract, he just signs it and I'm like do you have any idea what you just signed, like you can't do this or you just have to ask, like they're not going to care if you change this part and this is really important to you. Like ya know it's just common sense but no one ever told you to do it so you don't think about doing it. (Marvel Artist 1.1)

[21] NDA refers to Non-Disclosure Agreement. The voucher system refers to the forms or vouchers work-for-hire creators filled out to get paid for each project.

The lack of business education is not only detrimental to those uninformed creators who sign bad deals, but also impacts those creators with a degree of business understanding who must compete with them for jobs. Gill (2011) found a similar feeling amongst new media workers where the learning of business and entrepreneurial skills may not be helpful to freelancers as the competitive nature of the projects forces creators to agree to lower prices than necessary. Still, the recognition of the necessity of more business or entrepreneurial training was also found in the comments of the colourist Chris Sotomayor who works for an online comics training company called Comics Experience. In an interview Sotomayor echoed the above comment when discussing some of the curriculum at Comics Experience:

> I also teach some of the business side of things too. Because this is, above all, a business. Publishers have to get books out (with or without you) and managing deadlines is a serious skill that needs to be developed. I've seen a lot of people come and go because they couldn't meet a deadline or manage their workflow. They don't teach that stuff in art school. You learn that stuff the hard way. Treat yourself as a company, and make decisions on what's best for your company. (Añé, 2012, NP)

What Sotomayor is highlighting is a discourse of professionalism or professionlisation. Professionalisation creates "'appropriate' work identities and conducts" (Fournier, 1999, 281) for workers to aspire to. These appropriate identities act as a form of control, which aim to shape the identity and practices of aspiring and practicing creators in the industry. The professionalism discourse can also lead to self-exploitation because of the expectations and behaviours attributed to being a 'professional'. Being professional and surviving in the industry means meeting client deadlines. As one letterer previously explained,

freelancers need to meet the client's deadline even when it involves working all night on a short turn-around. The creators have been socialised by other members of the industry to accept these behaviours as part of being professional, influencing the construction of their identity (Anderson-Gough et al., 1998), and, in turn, add their own voice to the socialisation process. This is because discourses of professionalism regulate the actions of workers. Hearns-Branaman (2014) argues, the purpose of professionalisation is to allow workers to understand "the limits of their craft, the rules of the trade, and if they cannot follow the rules or master the tools then that means they cannot be part of the profession" (27). It is deemed appropriate to work long hours on short deadlines and meeting this criteria allows the creators to claim a *professional* artistic identity and differentiate themselves from the amateurs. When asked how they have managed to survive in the industry the creators highlighted several necessary qualities from the discourse of professionalism that form the survivor identity:

> They say that to have a long-lasting career in comics, you have to have at least two of these three qualities: a) be good b) be fast, and/or c) be reliable. I've also heard that you can substitute any of those for "be likable." I don't know about the "good," but I know I'm fast and reliable, so that's why I've been able to get steady work in an industry that is always running tight on deadlines. (Marvel Letterer 3)

> Mostly being an organized and diligent worker. There's a joke or saying that you have to be at least two of the following three: good, fast or pleasant to work with. I put an effort toward trying to be all three. (Marvel Letterer 1)

The survivor identity, which the creators have been socialised to through their experiences in the industry, forms another aspect of the

creator's stable, core identity that orients their approach to the digital project. Survival is a constant process and while the digital projects provide new opportunities for work they need to be approached with the same mentality of professionalism and survival to ensure the creator maintains their place in the industry.

4.7 Conclusion

The breaking in and survival narratives of comic book workers reveal identity characteristics that, following Bridgstock's adaptive identity thesis, form the stable core of the creator's identity. As the following chapters will show, the core identity characteristics of the narratives influence the way that comic book creators have approached this period of digital change. The findings of this chapter, where comic book workers rely heavily on their identity and experiences grounded in their previous print work, have implications for comic book publishers and other media companies looking to implement digital changes. The comic book workers were motivated to enter the industry because they love the medium and identify with the storytelling opportunities it provides. This love is crucial because it drives the creator during the difficult periods of breaking into the industry and surviving in the creative industries. Creators ground the reactive and relational discourse through this "love of comics" repertoire, which is the focus of Chapter Six. They love comics, but they also realise digital can add something new and different without fully detracting from why they fell in love with comics in the first place. The "love of comics" repertoire also ties into the pioneer identity of digital comics, where creators were excited to explore the possibilities of digital comics although that enthusiasm was tempered by a respect for print and the print audience who is an important early market for digital.

The findings of this chapter are also useful to educators, because they highlight a lack of comics-specific education among the creators despite

being a highly educated sample. In lieu of a comics education the creators taught themselves by making comics, experimenting and taking risks in their own time. The creators utilise the “making comics” strategy on the new digital comics, learning through making digital comics and identifying as industry pioneers. These pioneering creators benefit from the opportunity to explore and shape the development of the digital comic form, establishing the conventions and routines of digital comics production. While this sense of freedom and autonomy is important, translating their experiments into paying work fulfils the last part of the creators’ core identity, through which creators recognise the need to get paid for their creativity as part of a survivalist mentality. Risk has been privatised and individualised meaning creators are beset by the freelancer fear, always wondering where the next project will come from. By broadening their skills to digital comics the digital creator’s attempt to provide added resilience to their career, but the digital projects also present their own set of risks.

Chapter 5 – The Digital Comic Book Industry

5.1 Introduction

This thesis proposes that the macro level changes to the comic book industry related to the new digital formats create new structures, which orient and impact comic book work. The new structures change the context of comic book work and creators must engage in identity work to actively construct their identity in the new context (Pratt et al., 2006). This thesis argues that the creator's construction of their identity is based on an adaptive identity where they have a stable core that allows them to deal with uncertainty and shifting opportunities (Bridgstock, 2013; Lingo and Tepper, 2013). This chapter establishes the historical chronology of digitisation, which provides the context for the new digital structures and the creators' identity work.

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the consistencies and changes from the print structure outlined in Chapter Three, which have the ability to influence and shape the comic book creators' experience of work. It situates the current digital changes in the wider historical context of digitisation in the comic book industry, analysing how these developments helped establish the structures surrounding the new digital projects. Following this historical view of digitisation it analyses the industrial transition factors, which have influenced the structural changes in the comic book industry. Finally, it frames these industrial transition factors in relation to particular transitions in content form on four digital comic platforms. Digitisation threatens the existing print-based business models resulting in experimentation from publishers and creators. Digitisation also impacts the way comic book workers do their work, the established norms and practices, as well as the conditions the creator works under. Comic book creators still largely rely on their relationship with publishers to generate an income so any changes to the way publishers have traditionally generated revenue will have an impact on the experience of the creator. This chapter explores

the changes to the structures of the comic book industry through digitisation in general and through the specific new digital platforms that are the focus of this thesis.

5.2 The Print Industry Structure

As Chapter Three established, media industries have traditionally generated revenue through controlling and influencing distribution. This allows the publisher to recoup the high-fixed costs of production, manufacture and distribution of creative content in an analogue format, such as print (Flew, 2012). The comic book industry adhered to this principle with publishers operating in a tightly controlled print market, extracting revenue through the sale of content to consumers via retail stores and the sale of audiences to advertisers.

Controlling distribution is important because the high-fixed costs of creative production are coupled with Caves' (2000) "nobody knows" principle, where the success of a project is shrouded in uncertainty. This leads to a high risk/high reward environment. Reproduction costs after the generation of the first copy are low, and copyright laws, which are designed to allow copyright owners to exploit successful projects long after the initial release or distribution, have traditionally protected content. Through copyright successful projects provide lucrative returns to the rights holder. By controlling the copyright of the successful content publishers can cover the cost of spreading their risk across multiple projects and increase their chance of finding a hit (Elberse, 2013). Elberse found this blockbuster mentality growing as media companies realised more of their profit from large-scale blockbusters, fuelling a continual desire to find the next piece of intellectual property with long-lasting blockbuster potential. Who owns the copyright can be a contentious issue and the comic book industry demonstrates that those who create the work can be alienated from the product and the division of returns.

By owning the copyright the publisher can control its distribution, leading to print being characterised by artificial scarcity. The rights holder seeks to control where, when, and how consumers can consume their content; you can only consume this product from here, in this way, for this amount of time, at this price. Artificial scarcity has benefited the industry, but it can also be a constraint. The publisher is able to reduce some of the risks associated with content production (Flew, 2012 and Hesmondhalgh, 2007) because they only print the required amount of copies to meet comic book shop orders. This restricts the number of copies printed and where they are available. This fuels the act of comic book collecting because consumers are encouraged to buy comics on the release day or risk missing out leading to purchases in the secondary market at potentially increased prices. It has also constrained the market by narrowing the audience of comic book content from a mass one to a niche that is dominated by the superhero genre. By controlling distribution and generating artificial scarcity the existing print industry structure influences work, determining which projects are produced and the opportunities available to creators.

5.3 Digital Industry Structure

Digital and mobile distribution platforms that offer new business models and networks of power and control have disrupted this model. As Flew reported, digitisation opens up new opportunities for individuals by providing greater access to distribution and reducing the cost of production tools (2012, 165). Publishers' and creators' navigation of this period of digital change has led to experimentation in content and challenges to the fundamental understanding of work in the comic book industry.

By removing issues of access and reproduction characterisations of the digital age have focused on the emergence of an era of abundance

(Even and Donders, 2013). Distribution has evolved to include the 'long tail' of digital distribution (Anderson, 2006). Reductions in storage and distribution costs make it feasible for digital retailers to sell more niche products, which in turn can find success in the new global market where audiences look for content that appeals to their individual tastes. The strength of the long tail comes from lots of small sales adding up, eventually eroding sales from the blockbuster hits, as the long tail grows longer and fatter.

Researchers have challenged this positivist view of the Internet and this thesis still sees value in the findings of Robin Mansell (1999; 2004) and Robert McChesney (2002). Mansell (2004, 97) argued that there is "continuing evidence of scarcity in relation to new media production and distribution". Media companies are still capable of exerting considerable power and control in the digital environment, because they must seek new ways to constrain this abundance or risk losing their market leading position (Mansell, 1999). McChesney (2002) argued that the power of large media corporations is not extinguished by digitisation because they maintain certain advantages, which allow them to exhibit control over the digital industry. They do this by finding new "choke points" (Anderson, 2010) to control, such as new proprietary standards and creating scarcity through the allure of higher quality services (Mansell, 2012). Other choke points include the enforcement of copyright, utilising paywalls, promoting obsolescence, and supporting or favouring certain new media or platforms over others. Elberse (2013) also argues that while one aspect of the long tail has been realised with more content in more niches finding distribution, blockbuster culture is yet to decline as a 'winner-takes-all' strategy continues to dominate. Established media corporations also have advantages in capital, being able to fund the production of new content for digital platforms, while new entities may not have access to the same sources of capital. Control of valuable and recognisable intellectual property also provides them with a built in audience for their content. This chapter explores the impact digital

technology has had on the distribution and sale of comic book content, highlighting the ways the existing power brokers have sought to control the new digital industry and also the forms of resistance to the dominant business models of the comic book industry.

5.4 A Chronology of Digital Comic Development

The emerging digital comics industry has been influenced by the development of different distribution and content formats, as well as their associated business models. This section establishes the historical chronology of digital comic development before analysing the industrial transition factors that influenced the development of these forms.

Digital distribution was initially pursued through webcomics. Eric Milllikin's *Witches and Stitches* (1985) was one of the first webcomics, which utilised services such as CompuServe[22] to share content. The development of graphic based web browsers, such as Mosaic in the early 90s led to increased usage and webcomic development. These comics, developed for digital display and freely distributed online, remediated the comic strip format but explored different genres with content based on Internet and video game culture particularly successful. Webcomics operated in what Anderson (2009, 29) calls a nonmonetary market, meaning the creators distributed their content for free with no expectation of payment.

The independent webcomic *Argon Zark!* (1995) was considered one of the first true digital comics because it was designed for reading on screens and utilised digital production tools. It also embraced HTML interactivity, animated segments and Flash interfaces when they became available (McCloud 2000, 165-166), challenging the

[22] CompuServe was a major online service provider during the 1980s to early 1990s, allowing subscribers access to specific content and services hosted by the company's private computer network

established understanding of what a comic is and how it works. The experimental format and storytelling of *Argon Zark!* represents a small percentage of the webcomic market. Long-running series' *Piled High and Deeper* (1997) and *Penny Arcade* (1998) utilised the gag-a-day comic strip format, while *Sluggy Freelance* (1997) and *PvP* (1998) experimented with connected, long-form narratives distributed on a daily basis.

Independent creators developed their own websites to distribute their content or submitted their content to webcomic portals[23] like Big Panda. Marvel Comics began publishing digital comics through a partnership with Internet provider America Online (AOL) in 1996. The content was only available to users who had a subscription with AOL. The Cybercomics, which were new content, were not webcomics, but an early hybrid of motion comics (Wershler, 2011). The panels would change or animate when the user clicked on them. In 2002 Marvel began repackaging print content as PDFs on CD-ROMs and later DVD-ROMs for distribution (Wershler, 2011). This model provided a clearer revenue stream than the AOL partnership, because users paid for the CD and DVD-ROMs.

Independent webcomics continued their development in the early 2000s. Scott McCloud's book *Reinventing Comics* (2000) proposed that creators and consumers should embrace digital as the future of comics, arguing that webcomic creators could potentially earn a greater living through the opportunities for control that Internet-based distribution provided. While McCloud focused on micropayments, which at the time struggled to materialise but now dominate web commerce, webcomic portals like Keenspot and independent webcomic creators developed successful online business models. Using the complementary product

[23] Webcomic portals featured content from many creators, acting as a launching pad for unknown projects. They made it easier for readers to find content through collecting a variety of content in one place.

and services model (Regner et al., 2009) Keenspot paid its hosted creators quarterly through a small number of premium ad-free paid subscriptions, online advertising, print publishing and sales of other merchandising (Keenspot Press Release, 2004). The webcomic content promotes the intellectual property and the creator, providing opportunities to generate revenue in other related areas (Harvey, 2011; Levine, 2011). Webcomics also gained cultural recognition within the comic book field. The new format was recognised at industry awards including the UK-based Eagle Awards in 2000 and the independent comics' Ignatz Award in 2001. The Eisners, the largest comic book award, added a Best Digital Comic Category in 2005.

Webcomics provided a growing source of revenue and exposure to a new generation of creators, but their unpredictable income model limited the investment of existing publishers (Salkowitz, 2012). For instance, in 2003 Keenspot's combined revenue streams, from 446 million page views, only generated US$188,475 (Keenspot Press Release, 2004). Existing media companies became complacent because they had benefited from access to traditional business models, which supported their high fixed overheads through predictable and lucrative revenue sources (Jones and Salter, 2012). Publishers experimented and tinkered with digital, but they actively defended the existing sources of revenue that independent creators have generally been shut out of.

This defensive attitude towards their lucrative print business can be seen in the next wave of corporate investment in digital comics. In 2007 Marvel released their web-based subscription service, Marvel Digital Comics Unlimited. The service offered a selection of content for free, encouraging the purchase of a subscription to access the full library. Despite its promise Marvel structured the service so that it would not encroach on the existing print revenues with new content only added six

months after its print release. Marvel promoted the service as an early attempt at curtailing the digital piracy of the company's comics (Wershler, 2011). Subscriber numbers were never released, but the service has continued and evolved. It now forms the basis of a new subscription-based app from the publisher, Marvel Unlimited, which contains over 15,000 Marvel titles.

Marvel's model focused on protecting their print revenue by releasing remediated print content months after its initial release. In the same year, 2007, DC launched its own webcomics imprint called Zuda Comics with the goal of discovering the "next generation" of creators (Allen, 2007). Instead of featuring content based on its valuable intellectual property the imprint published new content in a variety of genres. This content was published through a variation of the webcomic portal model, operating a competition system. Readers voted for their favourite title, with the highest voted comic receiving a contract to finish the series and print publication by DC. While the service was meant to focus on the next generation, Todd Allen from the website Comic Book Resources (2007) commented:

> The vast majority of the initial creators here have already done print comics. Multiple print comics for the most part, and the majority go back a few years... This does not look like ushering in a new generation.

Zuda was closed in 2010 as part of DC's digital restructure to focus on app-based distribution. Again numbers were not reported, but several Zuda titles received critical acclaim with Jeremy Love's *Bayou* winning multiple Glyph Awards and garnering an Eisner nomination (Reid, 2010).

The strategy of remediation continued as both publishers pursued motion comics. Early attempts included Marvel's Cybercomics and the independent production *Broken Saints* (2001). However the term motion comic was popularised by DC's *Watchmen: Motion Comic* (2008) and Marvel's *Astonishing X-Men* (2009) motion comic. These motion comics were released via digital distribution services, such as iTunes and Hulu, before being released on DVD. Motion comics provided a clearer monetisation strategy than webcomics through their paid episodic and DVD release. Chapter Six addresses the field's negative response to motion comics, which impacted their development.

Around this time the digital discourse shifted from individual webcomics or webcomic portals to the development of what many referred to as an iTunes for comics (see Brothers, 2009; Holden, 2009; Rogers, 2009; Ellis, 2011; Comics Worth Reading, 2006; McMillan, 2009a; Richards, 2009). The discourse referred to the iTunes store, which was added to the iTunes media player in 2003. Together the iTunes store and media player provided a centralised distribution and consumption platform. iTunes started selling music, but grew to sell books, movies, games, and apps. In its first week the iTunes store sold 1 million songs (Apple, 2003) and by 2013 it had sold 25 billion songs (Apple, 2013), while boasting 800 million accounts, many with credit cards attached to allow for easy purchasing (Clover, 2014). In exchange for developing and maintaining iTunes, Apple took 30% of each item sold through the store. Imitating the iTunes store by providing a platform to both buy and consume digital comics was seen as a way of growing the audience for comic book content.

Several start-ups entered the comic book industry with proposals that imitated the iTunes store. comiXology, founded in 2007, grew to be the biggest by developing a connected digital comic platform that included digital pull lists for comic book readers (2008), tools for brick-and-mortar

retailers (2009) and a digital store and comic book reader to purchase and consume digital comic content (2009). The digital store and reader were initially released as a mobile app on the iPhone and iPod Touch in July 2009. Users who created a comiXology account were able to make in-app purchases of comic book content and then read it in the same app using the company's Guided View Technology[24]. comiXology utilised a cloud-based digital rights management model. Users purchased access to the digital comics, which were synced to their cloud-based account, but they did not own or receive an actual file. They could then log into their comiXology account to access their content on a growing range of apps including an iPad app (April, 2010), Android apps (December, 2010) and a web-based version of the comiXology reader and store (June, 2010). comiXology grew to become the dominant digital comic distributor in a market that grew from US$1 million in 2009 to US$90 million in 2013 (Miller, 2014).

ComiXology's growth and market dominance mirrored Diamond's emergence as the dominant print comic distributor. ComiXology secured exclusive digital distribution deals with various publishers including Valiant (Comic Book Resources, 2012a) and DC and Marvel for the sale of their new and classic single-issue comics (Cheredar, 2012). They also partnered with DC, Marvel and other publishers to launch branded apps built on the comiXology platform. ComiXology's David Steinberger highlighted that branded apps were designed to make the content more discoverable for users, which was attractive to publishers like Marvel and DC (Ha, 2010).

In 2013 the comiXology app was the highest grossing non-game app on the Apple app store (McMillan, 2014). comiXology's emergence as the

[24] Guided View was developed to allow comic books to be read on the small iPhone and iPod Touch screen. Instead of cutting up the comic into individual panels Guided View maintained the comic book page, focusing on one individual panel, and, on the swipe, guided the reader to the next panel mimicking the process of looking and moving across the page.

largest digital comic distributor led to its purchase by Amazon in April 2014. The comiXology app was soon altered to align with Amazon's wider corporate strategy where in-app purchasing is removed to allow Amazon to avoid paying Apple the 30% fee on the purchases made within the app. Instead users purchase their content externally, through the comiXology web store, and then log into the app to download and read the purchased content. The move was unpopular with fans because it removed the very purchasing convenience of iTunes that comiXology CEO David Steinberger highlighted in 2010 (Alverson, 2010) and the full ramifications of this decision are yet to be seen. It was not clear how the extra 30% would be distributed between comiXology, the publishers, and creators.

While this thesis focuses on the experiences of comic book workers who are engaging with projects and platforms that are found within the iTunes model of digital distribution it is also necessary to recognise that this model is already being challenged. Subscription-based services, which are commonly described as 'Netflix for comics' (Alba, 2015; Harris, 2015) and provide readers access to large digital libraries for a monthly fee, are now emerging. New companies have entered to provide access to content from multiple publishers (Scribd) while individual publishers (Marvel Unlimited and Thrillbent) have launched their own digital subscription apps. The subscription model not only challenges the iTunes business model, based on purchasing access to individual issues, but how creators are compensated for their work. Amazon, within their Kindle Unlimited subscription service, has begun trialling a per-page payment system for self-published authors where the share of revenue is calculated based on the amount of pages users read instead of the amount of times the book is accessed (D'Orazio, 2015). Mark Waid of Thrillbent commented that Thrillbent's subscription model would pay creators based on traffic due to the ability of the app to track how many times each comic is being read in that month (Future of Digital Comics Platforms, 2015).

These historical developments have shaped and provided the context for the digital projects that are the focus of this thesis. The second half of this thesis goes into more detail about how the new digital projects fit into the history of digital comics. However, before exploring this it is necessary to look closer at the industrial transition factors that are influencing the digitisation of comics.

5.5 Industrial Transition Factors

5.5.1 Digital Piracy

Concerns over digital piracy have influenced the transition from a print-based comic book industry to a digital one. Illegal access to content by users through torrents and peer-to-peer file sharing networks has created a great level of anxiety and fear in the media and creative industries. Piracy threatens the ability of content producers, large and small, to extract financial returns from their content. Corporations have used piracy to explain declining revenues and as justification for the restrictive digital rights management protocols implemented in producer backed digital content systems. There is much debate over the wider impact of digital piracy and whether digital piracy has directly led to decreases in revenue (see Liebowitz, 2007; 2008; 2011)[25] or whether other factors have influenced the decline (see Lessig, 2004 and Oberholzer-Gee and Strumpf, 2010). As Lessig argues, it is the fear of piracy that leads to attempts at ever-increasing control (2004). This fear prevents incumbent media companies from "embracing digital formats as logical steps in an industry driven by technical innovations" (Bell and Stevens, 2012). Instead they seek to tame new technology into submission to maintain control over who produces, sells, distributes, and consumes copyright (Gillespie, 2007).

[25] Liebowitz (2007; 2011) in particular challenges many of Oberholzer-Gee and Strumpf's findings and analysis of the literature.

Content producers' eventual attempts to build digital infrastructure to enforce their copyright are challenged by powerful technology and digital communication companies, such as Apple and Google, who have provided new tools for consumers to access media content (Levine, 2011). These new players disrupt the existing producer-distributor-retailer relationships by replacing the existing networks of small displaced retailers and large distributors, like Diamond, with one central, powerful distributor and retailer who has enhanced bargaining power (Apple). In other instances, the content produced by media companies becomes the content for new information based companies who generate revenue through advertising, which is unevenly redistributed to the original content producers (Google). Robert Levine (2011) argues that the eventual attempts by content producers to enforce their copyright in a digital environment come into tension with a discourse that stipulates digital content should be free or as close to free as possible. The free model runs on the complementary markets and services model discussed previously.

Over the past decade digital piracy has also impacted the comic book industry through the practice known as scanning (Delwiche, 2014). Individuals purchase issues of comic books and scan the pages, uploading the composited comic to file sharing websites. Simmons (2010) argues that in relation to piracy, comic book publishers do not enforce their rights due to a lack of motivation. This lack of motivation stems from the financial structure at many comic book publishers, where the majority of their income is derived from licensing and not the sale of individual comics. Pursuing the pirates would generate adverse publicity so content pirates are instead pursued in the secondary licensing markets, which are the prime revenue generators. The publishers do not completely ignore comic book pirates, sending cease and desist letters to intermediaries, the websites facilitating the spread of pirated material (see Polo, 2010). Marvel and DC were also supporters of the controversial Stop Online Piracy Act, which targeted

websites and other intermediaries as opposed to individual users (Sunu, 2011). Finally, Wershler (2012) argued that the development of Marvel's Digital Comics Unlimited program was also an effort targeted at curtailing piracy. The publishers' support of comiXology and other digital distribution services can be viewed in the same way, providing a way to sell protected digital content.

Publishers seek to control piracy and the process of digitisation as a whole, because, following the digital structure outlined in section 5.3, the idea of scarcity is removed. This abundance threatens their existing business models, particularly when they cannot control it due to piracy. Only through controlling abundance can they see value from the reduction in costs associated with the replication and distribution of content and the easier access to a global marketplace. The publishers support initiatives, which provide them with the tools to realise this goal.

Comic book creators have taken a mixed stand on the issue of piracy. Writer Mark Waid countered the often-cited theory that each pirated comic equals a lost sale, instead stating that:

> You cannot stop pirating of comics. It's like trying to push the tide back with a broom. You can either be angry about it, and resistant, and fight and clamp down harder, or you can find ways to make that tool work for you. (Melrose, 2013)

In Waid's case that meant controlling the way the content is pirated. High quality versions with links to direct the reader back to where the content originated were disseminated in the hope that it would direct readers back to the source. Other creators, such as artist Colleen Doran, highlighted the impact on creators as the real cost of piracy. Doran (2010) challenged the idea that piracy provides exposure to the

work, which can turn into sales, arguing:

> I made my comic series, *A Distant Soil*, available as a free webcomic less than two years ago. Despite assurances that the many sites pirating my work were doing me a favor with their "free advertising" I never saw a single incoming link from them, saw no increase in traffic, and made virtually no money.

Creators centred the piracy debate on control. When artist Steve Lieber found out his comic *Underground* was being posted page-by-page on the online forum 4chan he chose to join in the conversation on the forum instead of taking legal action. Engaging with the 4chan audience led Lieber and co-creator Jeff Parker to make the comic available on their own website. They encouraged the 4chan readers to donate money through the site or purchase hardcopy versions of the comic, experiencing significant sales and donations during this brief period. Lieber's experience became a pro-piracy narrative yet it is an experience that is hard to replicate because it relies on the social aspect of digital networked markets. 4chan, unlike peer-to-peer filesharing networks, allowed the agents, including Lieber, to interact, communicate and influence production and consumption decisions (Potts et al., 2008). Lieber provided information that allowed the users to make a choice (Potts et al., 2008). The experience highlighted timeliness to the social network, because Lieber stated that the sales and donations were a temporary increase due to the difficulty in continuing the conversation after the initial popularity subsided (Cronin, 2011). Creators may benefit from these actions, regaining control of their content and profiting, but publishers are struggling to adapt it to a predictable business model.

Technologically influenced changes in distribution, both legal and

illegal, impact the experience of the creator and, in turn, the creators shape the digitisation of comics. Doran's post was written in support of a bill aimed at stopping Google and other search providers paying advertising royalties to sites that host pirated material. Waid's comments were made in response to his decision to pre-package Thrillbent material for download and distribution. The decision by each creator about whether to support a specific model or a bill that attempts to restrict piracy, helps to shape the way the comic book industry is digitised.

The creators' experience of piracy also highlighted the importance of control to creator identity: Waid highlighting the benefit of controlling the quality of the work distributed by pirates and Doran highlighting the loss of control over how and where her work is displayed, and who is compensated for that work. These issues of control stress the connection between identity and content. The content produced by a creator acts as evidence of who they say they are; it reinforces their claimed identity as a comic book creator (Wei, 2012). When the mechanisms that link the creator to that work, such as a credits page or attributed links, are removed the claim can be undermined. The creator is unwillingly disassociated from their work or, in the cases where the quality of the scans are low, the creator and their work can be misrepresented, harming their identity. As much as the piracy argument may focus on revenue and business models, it should also be framed in terms of identity and the way previous systems were shaped over time to provide a connection between the creator's identity and the content they produce. As Steve Lieber's experience highlighted, what was important was establishing that a real person made the content the pirate was consuming (Cronin, 2011). Lieber re-established the connection between the audience, the creator and the content, allowing his identity to gain validation and recognition. Publishers and platform owners need to ensure they can offer this same opportunity to creators,

whose identity is closely tied to their work.

5.5.2 Redistribution of Power

Amazon's purchase of comiXology and the subsequent changes to the comiXology app demonstrate the redistribution of power in the comic book industry. Diamond, the powerful print distributor, was slow to act in the digital environment due to its need to find a model that would not alienate its print partners. The distributor partnered with one of the new digital comic distributors, Comics+, to launch Diamond Digital in July 2012 despite the iPad launching in April 2010 and comiXology releasing their iPad app at launch and a similar retailer program in August 2011. Diamond Digital closed in February 2014 after it failed to gain enough traction in the market. Diamond's print success was built on securing exclusive distribution of the major comic book publishers' content. The move to digital required new distribution deals and Diamond's failure to act in a timely manner meant that other distributors had a chance to sign exclusive digital deals. This resulted in Diamond's program lacking the content necessary to succeed. Diamond Digital revealed the distributor's priority; protecting the retail stores that make up its customer base. Users could not buy comics through the app, but instead had to buy download codes from stores or purchase comics through individual store websites. Diamond still maintains its print distribution monopoly, but the distributor's attempts at transitioning this to digital comics failed, giving control of the new digital comics market to a group of new companies.

While comiXology may have emerged as the dominant digital comic distributor it does not hold the same monopoly status that Diamond does in print. Independent publisher Dark Horse has its own digital store, iVerse Media has developed the Comics+ app and Madefire has recently begun selling content from third party publishers. Apple and Google also sell collected trades, graphic novels and some single-issue

comics through their respective book marketplaces. Increased digital options can loosen the distribution bottleneck that leads to the hourglass structure of the industry, but digitisation also provides opportunities for new forms of control and exploitation.

Amazon's decision to remove in-app purchases from the comiXology app demonstrates the influence new companies have on the industry. Amazon's decision led to much debate in the industry with some creators, like Chris Roberson, writer and co-publisher of MonkeyBrain Comics, stating, "Now, readers will be spending the same amount on their @Comixology purchases, but the creators will be getting a bigger cut across the board" (Bond, 2014). Meanwhile, other creators, such as artist Kevin Colden, highlighted the loss of impulse purchases and increased concerns over discoverability: "Due to the removal of in-app purchases, the big losers will be the independent creators with books on ComiXology, as their visibility and discoverability just dropped to zero, possibly lower" (Perazza, 2014a).

One reason comiXology gave for removing in-app purchases, Apple's censorship of content deemed too sexual, violent and, in some cases, political, points to another example of the power and control new digital distributors have in the comic book industry. Chip Mosher, ComiXology's vice-president of communications and marketing, highlighted the content restrictions of the platforms' mobile partners as a previous impediment to the mobile app, which has been removed now that the comics are only sold through ComiXology's website (Parkin, 2014). Mosher is referring to Apple's content restrictions, where the interpretation of these restrictions has led to self-censorship (see Hudson, 2013) or the removal of content (see Alverson, 2013). It has also led to confusion and a sense of double standards. Content that had been banned in apps like ComiXology was then available in Apple's iBook store, a separate marketplace accessible through iOS devices,

which appears to operate on a different, more lenient content policy. This has led to content, such as Matt Fraction and Chip Zdarsky's comic *Sex Criminals*[26], being banned from sale through Comixology on the iPad but not Apple's iBook store (McMillan, 2013). Censorship is not a new issue in the comic book industry; it has always been a contentious topic owing to the influence of Frederic Wertham's 1950s anti-comics campaign, the Comics Code and the subsequent self-censorship of the industry. ComiXology is also not the first distributor to refuse or pull content with Diamond refusing to distribute Eclipse Comics *Miracleman* #9 based on the company's desire to protect the industry and maintain it's community image (Geppi in Duin and Richardson, 1998). The difference is now external policies, like Apple's ethics policy, drive digital censorship.

Distributors, such as Apple and comiXology, wield considerable power in the comic book industry because they control the means of distribution, the means of online storage and the means of connectivity, namely the infrastructures and networks that allow users to socialise, communicate and consume (Wittel, 2012, 318). ComiXology's rise was built on distribution, but also the development of a certain way of consuming comic book content. When Amazon purchased comiXology they highlighted that, "We've long admired the passion comiXology brings to changing the way we buy and read comics and graphic novels" (comiXology Unbound, 2014). Apple's influence through the development of the iPad also moves beyond the distribution of content to owning the infrastructure and network that much of the digital comic book industry has been built on. DC co-publisher Jim Lee described the impact of the iPad as, "its commercial success, and probably more importantly, its perception of commercial success, was important to creating the positive reception we needed to create a digital comics channel" (Rogers, 2010b). Many creators and industry members point

[26] *Sex Criminals* focuses on content of a sexual nature. The protagonists are able to stop time when they have sex and they use this ability to rob a bank. The series was nominated for two Eisners in 2014 and won Best New Series.

to the iPad's design, which influenced subsequent tablet design, as important for growing the idea of digital comics. Again Jim Lee (quoted in Rogers, 2010b) commented that:

> It's portable, the screen is very bright and glowing, the colors are very vibrant. I think it's an ideal tool and mechanism for reading digital comics. And the fact that you can have Wi-Fi or 3G digital service and download them instantaneously, or near instantaneously, will be a boom for the comic book business in general.

The emergence of these new distributors is important, because distribution continues to be an important concern in relation to the political economy of digital contexts. As Dahlberg (2005) and Jones and Salter (2012) argue, the promise of reduced costs and scarcity online mean publishing digitally is easier, but there has been a corporate colonisation of attention. Distribution is now about controlling and directing attention, which traditional media corporations dominate through deals with providers. For instance, the comiXology homepage features specific navigation tabs for Marvel and DC but not other publishers, making their work more visible (see Figure 4). A search for 'comics' on the iPad app store returns the DC and Marvel apps, built by comiXology, as the top results (see Figure 5). Digital may reduce some costs, but independent app-based development can still be expensive. Independent creator Daniel Lieske spent 8000€ in 2011 to develop the Wormworld Saga App. Over three years the app earned Liekse 7000€, but the app continued to generate new costs (ie bandwidth, bug fixes, updates, chapter fixes) for which the app developer Robot Media needed to pay (Lieske, 2014). Given the increasing costs, particularly after the release of iOS7, Lieske and Robot Media pulled the app from the app store and chose to continue distribution through the Wormworld Saga website. Wormworld shows how proprietary standards can

continue to create choke points in the media industries and provide advantages to larger corporations (Mansell, 2012). Creators and new media companies must weigh up the risks of independent app-based development and create business models that provide multiple sources of distribution and revenue.

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Figure 4 comiXology homepage with Marvel and DC tabs
Source: https://www.comixology.com/ (accessed 7 May 2015)

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This figure/table/image has been removed
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Figure 5 Top search results for 'comics' in iPad app store 7 May 2015

5.5.3 Resurgent Print Market?

The growth of the digital market has caused concerns among stakeholders, mainly retailers and collectors, about the impact this would have on print sales. For the time being the print market has

actually grown, but it is unclear whether this will prove a long-term trend. For instance comics, at the time digitisation first started to impact the industry, were a niche market compared to other media content. Global sales in the music industry reached a high of US$38 billion in 1999 (Pfanner, 2013), prior to the launch of services such as Napster and the iTunes store. The value of the global music industry has since dropped to US$16.5 billion in 2012, although this figure did represent a 0.3 percent increase on 2012 revenue (Pfaffner, 2013). The role of physical sales has declined, with physical formats now representing 51.4% of global revenues in 2013 (Smirke, 2014). Major retailers have closed, with record stores in the US numbering 5515 in 2003 and dropping to 2805 in 2008, and others reduced the shelf space provided to music (Knopper, 2009). The music industry size meant it had further to fall as it sought to adjust to a new digital industry. Comics, through their niche status, had more room to grow in the short-term.

Modern comic book sales peaked in 1993 at US$850 million or US$1.35 billion when adjusted for inflation (Miller, 2013). Sales declined thereafter as the speculation bubble burst and collectors who had inflated the market left. Miller's most recent reporting on the size of the comics industry in America put combined direct market and bookstore sales at US$785 million (Miller, 2014a). While the overall number is down from 1993, it is the specific numbers for the direct market that are revealing. When the iPad was released in 2010 the direct market in print, unadjusted for inflation, was worth between US$410 million and US$420 million (Miller, 2011). By 2014 the direct market was worth more than US$540 million (Miller, 2014a) and even when accounting for inflation[27] the market had grown by 18.4%. Meanwhile the digital comics market grew from US$1 million in 2009 to US$90 million in 2013 (Miller, 2014a).

[27] In 2014 inflation valued the 2010 figure at US$455.9 million

The continuance of comic book collecting and the return of several practices from the industry's pre-collector's bubble practices, can help to explain the continued growth of the print market. *The Walking Dead* reached its 100th issue, an important publication milestone, which resulted in increased interest and increased focus on collecting. *The Walking Dead* #100 sold 383,612 copies, but it also featured 13 variant covers (Comic Book Resources, 2012b). In comparison issue 99 sold 55,710 copies (Miller, 2012). Similarly, Marvel relaunched the *Amazing Spider-Man*[28]*;* with issue one selling an estimated 532,600 copies (Miller, 2014b). The comic also benefited from variant covers, with certain retailers even having their own special covers (Johnston, 2014). One of the interview participants made the comparison between the current print revival and the collector's bubble of the 90s:

> I mean you have a book that's got 15 covers it's like I wonder why it sold that many. You know what I mean, it's how many are the true readers versus collectors. I mean there's points where it feels, not quite like that 90s boom/burst thing where everyone just started doing variants and just trying to oversaturate the market but, ya know, kinda… kinda points there sometimes (laughs) and kinda start to feel like 'oh god I hope we learned our lessons from the past'. (Madefire Editor 1)

New print subscription services have also aided the print industry's growth. 2014 saw the introduction of the Loot Crate effect. Loot Crate is a subscription service for pop-culture merchandise[29]. Marvel's *Rocket Raccoon* #1 was selected for inclusion in Loot Crate's service, contributing 100,000 orders to the comics' total figure of 300,000 copies (Ching, 2014). A second Loot Crate order included *The Walking Dead*

[28] *Amazing Spider-Man* was continuously published for 50 years, finishing in December 2012, and reaching 700 issues.

[29] Customers pay a monthly subscription and receive a package including print comics, novels, figurines, t-shirts and other pop culture merchandise.

#132, which sold 326,334 copies, in contrast to the two non-Loot Crate issues #131 (69,819) and #133 (69,561) (Miller, 2014c). These practices are keeping the print industry healthy for now, but the creator's individual perception of the profession sees a fundamental shift in the future of the comic book industry:

> I would guess that digital sales will continue to grow. I am not certain we will ever move to a model with NO print books, nor do I think we would really want to...but I think it's obvious that much of America is interested and comfortable getting entertainment on handheld devices and tablets, so I think there is a large market to be tapped of lapsed or new readers. (Marvel Editor 1.1)

> I can expect print to become increasingly high end, with digital distribution of product eventually replacing the monthly titles, I think we'll always have 'flat' comics as we have had in paper form for years, but they will be delivered digitally, on some form of device. (Madefire Artist 1.1)

The views of the creators demonstrate the growing acceptance and comfort with the digital future of comics, but the question has now moved from *whether* comics will embrace digital to *how*, specifically their format and business model.

5.6 Existing Publishers' Digital Strategies

Incumbent media companies must manage the risks and potential opportunities for growth presented by the transition to a digital business model within a framework that is influenced by piracy fears, their existing creative contracts, and their relationship with the lucrative and still valuable print business model. It is within this framework that

Marvel's and DC's new digital projects have been situated. The publishers have developed discourses that frame digital change as beneficial to their publishing operation, their creators, fans, and the industry as a whole. These discourses reveal the way the publishers have chosen to interact with the structures digital technology presents and in turn have shaped the direction of its development.

I have identified three dominant discourses, based on the language utilised by DC when they announced their DC Squared and DC Squared Multiverse digital comics in June 2013 (Siegel, 2013), that frame DC's and Marvel's digital strategies. These discourses included: releasing first-class content, achieving broad distribution, and storytelling innovation. This framework has structured both publishers approach to digital comics as they seek to protect and grow their dominant position in the comic book industry. The publishers have been analysed together due to their oligopolistic relationship, where the decisions made by one publisher are often reflected in the decisions made by the other.

The first discourse, first-class content, can be analysed through Robert McChesney's (2002) research into the political economy of communication where corporate dominance and inequality is not alleviated by digitisation but potentially strengthened. Existing media corporations maintain certain advantages when transitioning to digital production and distribution, which can allow their dominance to continue. Marvel's and DC's digital content relies on their existing intellectual property with DC's co-publisher Jim Lee explaining, digital storytelling provides, "new and interactive ways of storytelling that really open up many possibilities for DC super-heroes" (Cheredar, 2013). Marvel's Infinite Comics similarly rely on the publisher's existing characters with titles linking into the existing print continuity and acting as promotional tie-ins for the movies based on Marvel properties.

McChesney (2002) found that cross media promotion gives corporations an advantage, because the new digital portals benefit from links to other established mediums. DC's *Batman 66* digital comic is an example of this. The comic is based on a popular cult TV show involving one of the publisher's most popular characters and was initially published to coincide with the long-awaited release of the show on DVD. Similarly, Marvel has used the Infinite Comic format to produce comics that tie-in with their popular feature films, existing comic book continuity and events, and animated TV shows. This cross promotion links the digital comics to popular and desirable work, while their connections to the established continuity are geared at the dedicated fans who consume all content related to a particular character, series or event. The cross-promotional features give the digital comic projects of DC and Marvel an advantage over the work of the new publishers Madefire and Thrillbent.

The idea of extra promotional awareness also ties into another of McChesney's findings, that the digital projects of the media corporations have more of a built-in audience than new start-ups. This increases their ability to attract advertisers and generate revenue. Marvel and DC, as established comic book publishers who oversee thousands of characters, are able to quickly generate awareness for their digital projects. Madefire and Thrillbent must rely on the symbolic capital of their founders and creators to attract audiences and interest whereas the characters of Marvel and DC have their own symbolic capital, which can create interest in their projects. While these features may provide benefits to the established publishers, Chapter Six explores some of the difficulties associated with digitisation in the comic book industry. Here, Marvel and DC's position within the existing comic book hierarchy may prove detrimental, because their ties to a specific audience make it difficult to enact change.

By focusing on their existing intellectual property the publishers also maintain the contractual structure of the print industry. Marvel and DC continue to utilise work-for-hire contracts on the digital projects, which determine how the creators are compensated and the level of control creators have over the project. Work-for-hire contracts allow the publishers to maintain control of their intellectual property and structure digital production around their profit-generating motive.

Work-for-hire contracts deny creators ownership of the content they produce, but the publishers who rely on these creators to provide new content have had to adjust their contracts to allow creators to benefit from new revenue streams. These changes are necessary so the publisher can continue to attract and retain quality talent. Print work-for-hire contracts now include royalty payments based on print and digital sales. Marvel cited this new royalty agreement as a way to keep their talent happy and to deny their competition a recruiting incentive (Quesada, 2010).

Revising the structures of work-for-hire contracts requires recognition of not only new forms of distribution, but new content formats. For instance DC's digital-first content was not initially included in the new work-for-hire contracts. This was highlighted as a problem that needed to be addressed:

> I suspect with the level of additional work the DC squared format requires it will be a bigger discussion down the line and will require some reworking of compensation and deadlines for the comic industry. (DC Artist 2)

In June 2014 DC announced digital-first contracts would include flat rate payments and royalties, allowing creators to “feel that they’re truly participating and receiving the benefit of the success of the property” (Dan DiDio in ICv2, 2014b). Jones and Salter (2012) argued that good journalism costs money and, similarly, good comics cost money. Publishers need to invest in their creative workers who, according to my interviewees, want to produce good work, but must also make artistic and career-based decisions in relation to their need to achieve financial security. Digital is constantly changing and publishers must continually address their relationships with creators to avoid losing the talent capable of producing the ‘first-class content’ the publisher’s need and their fans demand.

The second discourse, broad distribution, reveals the tension between the structures of the print industry, mainly the print distribution network, and the new digital structures. During this period of digitisation the comic book industry has been characterised as a fragile ecosystem (Wolk, 2011). Many publishers and publishing divisions operate on small margins. Completely embracing a digital model, where there was no guaranteed market or revenue stream, presented a risk publishers did not want to take. In particular, the publishers needed to manage their existing relationship with the print network. The retailers were concerned comics’ physical distribution network would collapse like Blockbuster and Borders. This created a discourse of fear towards digitisation, which questioned whether digital would kill the comic book store (see Rogers, 2011).

This desire to protect the comic book store demonstrates the place stores have in the culture of the comic book industry. For many fans they are not only a site of commerce, but culture, helping the fandom of the comic book industry to grow through routines like creator signings, standardised distribution cycles, and back catalogue sales. Over time

the comic book industry has increasingly targeted and relied on the revenue generated by comic book stores. Marvel and DC need to be seen as acknowledging and respecting the culture of the audience, but it is the underlying capitalist political economy of the comic book industry that necessitates this respect for culture. The publishing divisions of Marvel and DC need to justify their continued existence by generating a consistent profit. Given the uncertainty of the digital model's success, wholesale disruption could impact their ability to make the same profit as they did before. The industry needs the continued support of the print model during digital's experimental stage. The publishers see print providing secure profits until digital can develop a viable business model which will eventually match and overtake the revenues generated by print. The business model of the future relies on multiplying the ways consumers can access and pay for content and includes both analogue and digital options.

The relationship with the print distribution network has led to an additive discourse, based on the 'content everywhere' nature of digital consumers (Aris, 2011). Digital grows the market as a whole, providing new ways to access content, instead of cannibalising or supplanting print sales. When DC launched their first digital comics through ComiXology, John Rood, DC's executive vice president of sales, marketing and business development, stressed the fact that digital would add a new audience:

> Anything we do regarding publishing is seen as additive, that we are taking new consumers and closing the loop and incentivizing them to return to brick and mortar, and that we are doing all we can to make this feel additive. (Rogers, 2010)

Marvel similarly argued their app attracted new readers, but also directed readers to comic shops. When Marvel launched their

standalone app they highlighted the inclusion of a comic shop locator as part of their commitment to the print industry (Nouveau, 2010). This forms part of the socialisation process of digital consumption and the analysis of this process forms the basis for Chapters Six and Seven.

The additive discourse was backed by actions, including the initial focus on back catalogue content, windowing[30], and pricing digital and print comics the same. Publishers took these actions in response to the very real threat of losing the support of their retail partners, threatening the fragile ecosystem of the comics industry. Independent publisher Dark Horse were threatened with a retailer boycott when it was falsely reported that the publisher's move to release digital comics on the same day as the print edition would result in cheaper prices for their digital comics (Johnston, 2011). DC Comics also faced backlash from book chains Barnes & Noble and Books-A-Million when it announced an exclusive digital distribution deal on Amazon's Kindle Fire tablet for one hundred of their digital graphic novels (Streitfeld, 2011). These retailers, who had their own proprietary readers and digital storefronts, removed the print books from their stores in protest at the deal.

The strength of the additive discourse has allowed the publishers to gradually increase their digital operations to achieve the broad distribution desired. In 2011 DC altered its focus from back catalogue and windowing to day-and-date digital and print releases[31] with the relaunch of the publisher's whole comic line under the New 52 banner. DC cited the additive discourse to justify the decision, with DC's Senior Vice President of Digital Hank Kanalz explaining:

[30] Windowing refers to the practice of providing one platform, in this case print distribution, with an exclusive timed window to sell content providing an advantage to that platform. The film industry has perfected windowing with films released in cinemas then to DVD and finally to streaming services. The practice also develops release windows based on geography. Windowing has been cited as contributing to piracy (Peoples, 2013; Strangelove, 2015).

[31] The day-and-date release strategy sees digital content, which was previously delayed, released on the same day as the print version.

> We've been testing digital comics for a year now, and have seen extremely positive responses in both markets (digital and the direct market). All evidence pointed to digital being additive to the overall business. (Esposito, 2011)

In November 2011 Marvel announced a similar day-and-date digital strategy. Marvel's Peter Phillips, senior vice president and general manager of Marvel's Digital Media Group, again highlighted digital as "a way to continue to grow the business" (Moore, 2011). Through the additive discourse the comic book industry is now characterised as one where consumers are given a choice. As the publishers explain, digital comics are released the same day as print for the same price to, "provide readers with a choice over how they want to consume their comics" (Esposito, 2011 and Moore, 2011). Content creators now need to make their content available across multiple devices, formats, and operating systems, but while publishers promote the release of digital and print content on the same day at the same price as a choice, this choice has been filtered through the publishers' attempts to find new ways to control the consumption of content in the digital age (Mansell, 1999; Mansell, 2004).

Piracy also influences the publishers' desire to implement mechanisms of control. As stated previously, comiXology developed effective digital rights management software that would protect the content of their publishing partners. In 2010 comiXology's David Steinberger explained the decision as reflecting the demands of the audience:

> The question really is "What do our consumers want?" [...] Do we feel like, or do we know, that there's a consumer demand for downloadable units on an application? So far, the answer is no, we don't have that indication. (Brothers, 2010)

comiXology has since responded to consumer demand and altered its stance on digital rights management protection (Alverson, 2014). Instead of every comiXology comic being sold with digital rights management protection the publisher or creator can choose whether to implement it. Publishers like Image have adopted DRM-free, but Marvel and DC have not. This reveals that comiXology's initial decision actually reflected the demands of the powerful publishers. To gain their support comiXology needed to create a platform that would allow the two largest publishers to protect and control their digital content.

During digitisation existing print structures, such as controlling access to content and the contractual relationships of comic book work, remain and are joined by new mechanisms of control. Contractual relationships have previously focused on the ownership of content. With the development of digital storytelling in the comic book industry, the third discourse of 'storytelling innovation', ownership has extended from content to the way content is presented. Digital comic distributor comiXology developed specific reading technology for its digital comic marketplace. This technology, dubbed Guided View, "transforms the comic book medium into an immersive and cinematic experience" (comiXology About, 2014). Specifically, it developed technology to allow for panel-to-panel viewing, as well as full screen reading on digital devices. In offering access to DRM-free comics, comiXology removed the Guided View Native features from the files (Alverson, 2014). Removing Guided View Native from the DRM-free comics allows comiXology to protect it's own intellectual property, which is protected by patent law.

Marvel Comics also filed a similar patent in 2006 for a digital program that displays images in a particular sequence with visual enhancements, one year before comiXology was formed, which was

granted in 2012. The patent filed by Marvel employee Peter Olson, who is the VP of Web and Application Development has many similarities to comiXology's Guided View. Given Marvel's earlier filing they could have filed for patent infringement against comiXology and, if it resulted in victory, could force comiXology to remove the feature from its app (Greenberg, 2013). While not made public, Greenberg (2013) reported that Marvel and comiXology negotiated a settlement out-of-court to allow comiXology to continue to use the patent. Many other digital comic readers have been developed, each offering variations on presentation and storytelling, with varying levels of legal protection.

The combination of comic books with technology opens comic book creators up to new structures that can influence their experience of work, as companies file patents that can potentially restrict the creative options and opportunities open to them. Creators may also benefit from industry standardisation, achieved through the proliferation of Guided View, or from software developed and released as open source, such as the Yanapax Viewer. Developed for Comic Book Think Tank, a digital comic site, the creators of the Yanapax Viewer specifically chose to release the software as shareware to enable other creators to use and modify the code (Perazza in Priego, 2012).

Proprietary file formats are highlighted as not only potentially impacting creators, but also audiences. These formats fragment and slow the growth of the market because audiences become locked into one marketplace (Madefire Founder 2). Developing a new digital format that echoes CBR[32], which can be opened by a number of different comic book readers, would allow readers to consume the digital content in the platform of their choice (Madefire Founder 2), but this would go against the restrictive DRM favoured by the major publishers.

[32] CBR is a specific comic book reading file format

5.7 New Publishers' Digital Strategies

The process of digitisation in the media industries can provide new ways for large media producers to exert control and influence over the industry, but as Mansell highlighted there are also opportunities for resistance through alternative models (2004). The new publishers Thrillbent and Madefire offer such alternatives, which could eventually shape the direction of the comic book industry.

Firstly, Thrillbent and Madefire offer an alternative structure from the print industry by allowing creators to operate under a creator-owned identity. Thrillbent co-founder Mark Waid explained the company's model as:

> I view *Thrillbent* more as a distributor. We're not asking for rights. We don't want to own properties, we want to create an umbrella/distribution hub. In the second stage, we plan to create revenue streams, and will ask that if the creators make money, then they kick back a small percentage to us (Kalder, 2012).

Madefire has developed a distributor model similar to Thrillbent. The venture launched with what they called 'Studio Content', featuring characters created by the founders Liam Sharp and Ben Wolstenholme, as well as advisor Dave Gibbons. Madefire's founders referenced the creator-owned identity, introduced in Chapter Three, when the company launched:

> Most of what we're doing is joint-owned by the creators and Madefire, so both we and our creators have an investment in the IP and the stories – we mutually care about them. (Liam Sharp in Gillette, 2012)

By owning part of the IP the creator is also invested in the digital format. Their affective attachment to the IP, they *care*, creates an environment where the creator wants to take risks because they want the platform and their property to succeed. “I’ve been way more experimental on [Madefire project] than anything else… you could take the risk with your own stuff much more because you’re in control of the whole process” (Madefire Founder 1). Providing new opportunities to own their work and have creative control justifies the creator’s investment of capital.

The contractual, creator-owned structure from print is not just replicated in digital. Waid’s Thrillbent in particular has utilised the “pioneer identity” to demonstrate how digital provides creators with new opportunities to experiment with how their content looks and how it makes money. The pioneer identity is not exclusive to creator-owned projects. Marvel has supported the pioneer identity of early digital creators by providing them with a degree of freedom and autonomy to develop and shape the look of their digital comic format. While the creators have been given freedom in relation to content decisions this freedom does not extend to the way Marvel releases their digital comics and ultimately makes money from them. Marvel has experimented with new models, such as weekly content or a Netflix style all-at-once release, but the publisher has ultimately made these decisions. Waid described the Thrillbent model as:

> I don’t see a point at which there is one revenue stream for Thrillbent. If John Rogers wants to do his series as a PDF download for a certain amount of money, or Gail Simone wants to do something where every month it’s free, but for a $1.99 subscription you can get the next month in advance — there are different models to play with. (Alverson, 2012)

This ethos, which focuses on the creators influencing how Thrillbent properties make money, has influenced and shaped the development of the company. The creators' experiences feed back into the overarching structure of how Thrillbent operates. For instance, content was initially released for free on the Thrillbent website on a weekly basis, echoing the method used by webcomic creators. Even though this content was free it was pirated 24 hours after it was uploaded. Instead of seeking to punish piracy Waid and Thrillbent embraced it, releasing PDF and CBR files for people to download. Thrillbent adopted the alternative discourse that piracy in fact helps to grow and promote content, forming a vital part of the group's marketing (Waid, 2012). By preparing and releasing the files themselves, Thrillbent allows creators to at least partially control the way their content is pirated, with the creators' control of production allowing them to add in materials aimed at directing readers back to the source of the content.

When Thrillbent began implementing a paid model through a partnership with comiXology and a shop feature on the site, it gave creators a choice over how they approached paid distribution. Waid trialled a pay-what-you want model for his series *Insufferable* (Waid, 2013). James Tynion IV, creator of Thrillbent series *The Eighth Seal*, opted to release the paid version two weeks before the free version, stating, "There is a bit of an incentive to buy. If you want it a little faster, you can buy it and if you want to wait and get it free, by all means" (Sutcliff, 2013).

While the pioneer, experimental identity characterised the early days of Thrillbent, the platform is not immune to standardisation or the core political economy that underpins the creative industries. As Rogers (2012) highlights, the underlying assumption is that media are driven by a profit-motive because it is not sustainable or advisable to continue producing content that does not make money. Artist Jeremy Rock

highlighted financing as one of the current minuses to Thrillbent (Making Comics, 2014). In 2014 Waid announced a new standalone digital comic app and transfer to a subscription model for Thrillbent, conceding that:

> To make sure our artists, colorists and letterers are compensated fairly, and to continue to build a base for other creators to redefine this medium in new and exciting ways, we can't afford to give it all away for free the same way we've been doing. (Waid, 2014)

Thrillbent's model demonstrates the difficulties associated with launching a new digital business model. It also displays Thorburn and Jenkins' (2003) understanding of media change, which they applied to the content of new media, but which can also be applied to the business model. The Thrillbent model allowed pioneering creators freedom to discover how they wanted to release their content yet the need to earn money eventually led to a form of standardisation and structure that had been associated with the webcomics model and outlined by Anderson (2009).

Madefire, through its similar publisher-distributor hybrid model, is also challenging the existing structure of the creator-owned contract. Whereas Thrillbent provided creators greater control over how their content made money, Madefire is challenging ideas about who can make comic book content through the popular digital media themes of user-generated-content and 'produsage' (Bruns, 2008). Madefire, through its proprietary Motion Book Tool, allows creators to make motion books. These are comics and other visual narratives that allow for touch, sound, movement, and links between panels. At certain intervals, such as covers, it is capable of using a 3D parallax technique, while also providing the reader the opportunity to explore a panoramic,

360-degree image. Madefire initially partnered with comic book creators to release Madefire studio content, for free, through the Madefire app. The purpose of this stage was to introduce the Madefire experience to readers and allow the audience to grow quickly. With the launch of the Madefire iPad application on June 21st 2012 comic book creator and Madefire advisor Dave Gibbons labelled the application as "democratizing the ability to publish comic books" (Madefire Press Release, 2012). Gibbons' statement is based on Madefire offering the motion book-authoring tool to creators who would like to produce content for the Madefire platform for free. Madefire have also orientated their company on a 'creator-first' philosophy:

> We believe that creative teams should lead innovation, both in thinking and practical terms. So we developed our Motion Book Tool to deliver a wholly reimagined collaboration experience for the storytellers, stylists, innovators and writers behind the stories. Our goal is to give creators the freedom to escape from the traditional confines of 22 static pages, and create a new world of words, pictures, motion and sound. (Madefire About, 2014)

Initially Madefire partnered with existing comic book creators for the development of select Madefire studio titles, a move described as relying on the symbolic capital of those creators to provide validity and credibility to the format. Through their collaborations with these creators Madefire was trying to demonstrate how their technology enables them to 'stand out' in the comic book industry and present new ways of producing content while also 'fitting in' with institutional norms surrounding what a comic is (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009). This is discussed further in Chapter Seven.

The company has also emerged as a distributor for other comic book publishers, releasing repurposed print titles and partnering with other

publishers to launch apps powered by Madefire technology. Madefire initially focused its strategy on digital-first content only, with editor Ben Abernathy explaining they are, “unique as a publisher in that we’re creating all-new, original content strictly *for* digital release, not a print/digital hybrid” (Arrant, 2012). While the company did not want to repurpose existing print material I would argue that the decision to release motion book versions of existing print content was a necessary step to allow the company to show greater revenue potential. The company partnered with existing comic book publishers, like IDW in 2013, and focused on content from established franchises, such as Transformers, Star Trek and My Little Pony, to increase its appeal to a wider, established audience. This was an important step, because Madefire has been funded via venture capital. While it has been given the freedom to explore new formats and distribution models it is still governed by the same need to generate and return a profit to those parties who have invested in the company.

Madefire signed deals with incumbent publishers DC, to produce the DC Multiverse title *Batman: Arkham Origins*, and IDW and Archie Comics, to power their new storefront apps. These deals highlight the process of mainstreaming and legitimisation within a field. Madefire took a risk to stand out, positioning themselves as path breakers and pioneers who challenged the dominant logic of what is a comic and how they generate revenue. If they did not succeed, like motion comics, the existing structure of the field and how things should be done would be reinforced. Instead, the company has found success, such as being recognised as one of the Best Apps of 2012 by Apple (Madefire, 2012), which is prompting shifts in the field. The shifts in the field are further strengthened by Madefire’s partnership with the incumbent producers DC, IDW and Archie. Their partnership signifies an acceptance of the new technology, admitting that the new practices can be beneficial to the field (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009), and legitimise the company’s efforts to stand out. While the incumbents have accepted the changes

the new structures are still being established and whether this acceptance leads to long-term change is unclear. For instance, Madefire and DC have only produced one Multiverse comic together, so whilst the incumbents of the field can accept a change it may not lead to a lasting shift in the status quo if it does not lead to ongoing projects using the technology and format.

As the Internet and digital technology removes traditional barriers to distribution, it also challenges the concept of who a comic book creator is. Madefire's model demonstrates this through its partnership with the online art community deviantArt, securing web distribution of its content to a network of over 32 million users (About, 2014). The deal also provided deviantArt users access to the Madefire Motion Book Tool, in line with the publisher's goal of democratising the ability to publish comics and blurring the line between creator-owned and user-generated-content. For instance, two long-time deviantArt users, Kate Redesiuk and Anna Podedworna from Poland, released their original comic *Milk for the Ugly* on deviantArt using the Madefire motion book tool. The comic has garnered over 565,000 views since being launched in July 2014 (deviantArt, 2014). In comparison horror writer and film director Clive Barker's Madefire comic *Clive Barker's Next Testament* has only received over 1,600 views. These two comics are comparable as they are both offered for free in their entirety, as opposed to offering a sample before requiring payment to view the rest. The views also total more than the first issues of the Madefire version of DC's *Injustice: Gods Among Us* (105,000 views), and IDW's *My Little Pony Friendship is Magic* (298,000 views). It also represents more views than any of the Madefire studio content produced by known industry veterans, such as Liam Sharp and Dave Gibbons, reiterating the point that digital not only challenges our idea of who a comic book creator is, but also what content is successful in the digital market.

Madefire and Thrillbent's pursuit of app-based, web-based, and recently print-based audiences is part of the 'content everywhere' nature of the digital consumer where it is necessary for content to be available in multiple formats and across multiple channels to meet the consumers' demands (Aris, 2011). Pursuing the 'content everywhere' model also has real implications for creative practice. Thrillbent publish their comics in landscape format because, according to Mark Waid, "it's easier to read on your laptop as well as on a tablet as well as on most digital devices" (ICv2, 2013b). Chapter Seven deals more specifically with the changes in practice, where creators must adapt to the change in orientation and produce work that is compatible with the publishers' adaptive, content everywhere business model. In this model tablet distribution and consumption is not the *only* future of the comic book industry. Instead this thesis has focused on tablet distribution and consumption as an important component in fulfilling the content everywhere nature of the new media industry.

Digital technology blurs the "real or perceived boundaries between makers and users in an increasingly participatory media culture" (Deuze, 2009, 145), which challenges our understanding of what it means to work in the creative industries. Madefire's platform provides a place where the professional identity of comic book creators converges and interacts with the "cult of the amateur" (Keen, 2007) and professionals from other media forms. It reveals that the print industry included structures that determined who could be deemed a comic book creator or professional. Those who could not access the large distribution networks operated by Diamond would struggle to sell their work and earn a liveable income. Publishers had access to this network and the means to provide a revenue source to creators, allowing publishers the ability to determine who is a 'creator' in the comic book industry.

Content from deviantArt can be sold using the site's digital coins system and select titles have been moved to the Madefire app, offering further revenue opportunities. Madefire's Ben Wolstenholme stated that providing this framework for users to sell their content is, "what we've been working toward since day one" (Cheredar, 2014). This shift to user-generated content, where publishers shift work to unpaid consumers in the pursuit of further revenue, is one reason why Vincent Mosco (2009) urges a more labour focused political economy approach to communication. The impact these new creators will have on the industry is outside the scope of this thesis, but it is an issue that requires further research. As one Madefire worker explained:

> Maybe a lot of them realised that getting into the print market is very hard. Having the tools and the delivery system to create their own content is, is really what the future is and that's what we do. We have the marketplace, we have the tools we'll be releasing to the public to create your own motion books and then ya know we have the infrastructure to make it all happen and I think that's ya know for creators or creative people or anyone that just has an idea is very different than trying to, ya know, get into the print world. (Madefire Editor 1)

In this user-generated future providing access to the tools and marketplace as well as nurturing that ecosystem becomes very important. This shift from not only producing content but controlling its distribution echoes Bilton's claim that "attention has shifted from the *what* of content to the *how* of delivery, branding, and customer relationships" (2011) and Levine's argument that the new gatekeepers of the media industry have risen to their dominant position not by producing content but by providing access to it (2011).

The move to provide access to content does not mean digital publishers, like Madefire, can ignore the need for talent management. In particular, they need to work out how best to manage a diverse user base that is made up of identified professionals and new users/amateurs who are motivated by different goals and values. The platform needs to ensure they are providing access to the content that people want and value. This content will come from both the professionals and the amateurs, and the digital companies will need to build new relationships and contracts to ensure their platform has access to this content. For instance, after YouTube began sharing advertising revenue with content producers in 2012 the company launched a number of initiatives to help their largely amateur partners produce better quality content. The company has built five state-of-the-art production spaces that are open to YouTube contributors; offers free consultation services to help grow the content creators business; and provides grants to top producers (Kaufman, 2014). YouTube also began advertising some of its most popular content producers to raise their profile, and negotiated new compensation deals for top content to strengthen the relationship between the platform and the creator (Tate, 2014). The platform has also begun signing new exclusive deals with content producers to guarantee their content will air exclusively on YouTube for a set period of time, because new content services, such as subscription video service Vessel, have entered the space to compete for professional and amateur talent (Winkler, 2014). YouTube's ad-supported business model differs to Madefire, but the need for talent retention and management remains.

5.8 Conclusion

The strategies of the four publishers focused on in this chapter display many of the dominant views towards digitisation in the comic book industry. The decisions they make and who gets to make them help to formulate the structures that will influence creators' future experience of work in the comic book industry. Existing structures, such as the profit

motivation of publishers remain, forcing the existing media corporations to opt for a defensive approach to digitisation. Their actions are also dominated by their desire to protect their intellectual property. Adhering to these structures has influenced the shape of the digital industry, as Marvel and DC partnered with ComiXology due to the company's ability to offer a suitable business model. In this model the audience and their expectations have become influencing factors, because both old and new publishers seek to maintain a positive relationship with the audience to ensure their continued consumption. This relationship with the audience is a continuing feature throughout the rest of the thesis.

This chapter has also shown the opportunities for resistance that digitisation presents by exploring Thrillbent and Madefire. They have new attitudes to piracy and revenue, which provides an alternative for comic book creators. Over time this experimentation leads to standardisation because the projects need to make money. Madefire also expands the idea of who is a comic book creator creating new challenges for talent management where publishers must negotiate the demands of recognised professionals and new amateurs who have different values and goals.

How professional creators' values and goals are changing during the adaptation to digitisation is the focus of the remaining two chapters. These demonstrate how the actions of these publishers are internalised, enacted and contested by comic book creators. These structures are not just introduced or carried over without influence or interaction from the actual workers of the industry. The creators undergo a process of socialisation that helps change the dominant discourses and stereotypes surrounding comic book work. This process of socialisation is targeted at consumers and other creators, the external sources who can validate the identity of creators and their contribution to the field. If the structures of the publishers are to become

the new standards of the industry then they need the acceptance and assistance of comic book creators.

Chapter 6 Socialising Creators to Digital Comics through the Reactive and Relational Discourse

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Five demonstrated how the new digital content formats are influenced by the publishers' interaction with new and existing structures. These structures influence the creator's experience of work on the digital projects, but their experience is also impacted by the internal creator perception and external public perception of digital comics. This internal-external perception causes tension in the creator's identity because the field[33] has been socialised to negative stereotypes of digital comics. Digital comics are perceived through the 'rear view mirror' (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967) of print comics and motion comics, influencing the way the content and those who work on them are judged and valued. This adds to the uncertainty and risk of the projects where creators have already invested their time, labour, social capital, human capital, symbolic capital and their identity "in exchange for uncertain future payoffs" (Neff, 2012, NP).

This chapter argues comic book creators utilise discourse to socialise the field to the new digital platforms and manage the risk of their decision. It focuses on the importance of 'good work' to the creator's identity and how negative evaluations of digital comics, developed through the 'rear view mirror' process, influence the recognition of digital comics as 'good'. This chapter focuses on the creator's use of discursive practices, such as 'reactive' and 'relational' positioning, to manage their identity in relation to the field of comics production. The reactive discourse (Ortner, 2013) is a defensive discourse utilised to establish what digital comics are not while the relational discourse is a

[33] This use of the term field is derived from the systems model. Creators take their work to the field to have it judged by other agents who have the required domain knowledge to determine what should be added to the existing set of knowledge. It represents the social aspect of creative work where the creator internalises the standards and values of the field. In some instances new fields are created when the current field is not open to the creator's ideas for change.

more positive discourse focused on relating the new digital comic format to certain core comic book ideals. The reactive and relational discourses allow us to examine how creators develop a framework to manage and influence the process of digitisation and distance their work from historical exemplars of what is now perceived to be 'poor work', and by extension poor work by the creator.

6.2 'Poor Work'

The impact of prior digital comic formats is important because creators want their work and identity to be recognised by external sources because the way others perceive their identity influences their own views (Brooks et al., 2011). Motion comics, which are not to be confused with Madefire's motion books, are the digital comic format most readily associated with 'poor work'. These views stem from motion comics' combination of comics artwork with animation. An individual panel becomes a full shot, breaking away from the page, and the action is not only animated but also augmented by the inclusion of sound effects and voice-overs. The changes alter comic's fundamental storytelling from a reading experience, where space shows the progression of time, to a viewing experience, where time progresses according to a predetermined schedule. The reader becomes a passive viewer as the motion comic unfolds according to a prescribed screening time where the experience is managed for the viewer, much like film and animation (Pratt, 2012).

The changes to comic book storytelling as well as the overall quality and implementation of the animation and sound elements influenced the negative reception from comic book creators and critics. In a post on Warren Ellis's website, illustrator and trained animator Paul Duffield critiqued the motion comic format: "I've never found the result as engaging as either the original comic, or a purpose-built animation" (2011). Reviews from the fan press expressed similar dissatisfaction,

with one review stating, “if this first episode is an indication of the general quality of the Marvel Motion Comics, then this is a new age doomed to failure. Or at least ridicule” (Callahan, 2009). Other reviews felt the technology added little to the experience, preferring the option to just the read the narrative as a standard comic (see McMillan, 2009b; Meylikhov, 2009; Sims, 2010; Wrede, 2010). This failure of the motion comic format reinforces the existing structures of the field with the reviewers comments that they would rather read the stories as a standard comic validating the current order of the industry (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009).

By relying on a medium specific analysis of the motion comic and print comic formats the creator’s and critic’s venture into McLuhan’s (1964) essentialist hot and cold media dichotomy, where the cool, high participation medium of comics was changed to resemble the hot, low participation medium of film. McLuhan’s hot and cold dichotomy has been criticised for its focus on the way technology influences quality as opposed to the actual content conveyed by the medium (Fourie, 2008), but relying on these oppositional distinctions between comics and motion comics allows the creators and critics to explore the relationships between the formats and the audience’s relationship to the content (Berger, 1995).

Webcomics, which maintained a closer connection to print comics through the remediation of the comic book and comic strip format (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), were more positively highlighted as the future of comics (McCloud, 2000; Fenty et al., 2004; Hicks, 2009). Comic creator and theorist Scott McCloud (2000) drew attention to the potential of digital comics in his book *Reinventing Comics.* McCloud proposed creators should adopt new digital forms of storytelling based on his ‘infinite canvas’ concept. Instead of remediating the form and structure of comic strips and print comics the infinite canvas replaces

the concept of the page with the screen and the story is told on a single continuous plane. McCloud (2009) sought to develop a form of digital storytelling that “felt more like comics and less like any other medium” and remained reader-centred. Already McCloud was referencing the multimedia narrative tools, such as animation, sound, and interactive elements, which would form the basis of the motion comic format. When discussing the implementation of sound, motion and other digital effects in comics McCloud (2000, 210) asks the reader:

> Think of it: if you were a Spider-Man fan. Would you want to see him in partial motion or full motion? Would you like to see him in 2-D or 3-D? In little boxes or on a full screen?

McCloud (2000) argued multimedia features would only be additive and not transformative for the comic book medium. Other researchers supported McCloud’s view, showing concern that digital comics, which included animation and sound, would remove the control of the narrative from the reader. Sabin stated that the addition of interactivity, animation, sound or other similar digital techniques changes the work from a comic to a piece of “multi-media art” (Sabin, 2000, 49). Pratt reflects (2009, 2012) McCloud’s views of multimedia, seeing the inclusion of sound and motion as stretching the category of comics to its limits.

Motion comics, which take control of the narrative progression away from the reader, and digital comics as a whole, which threaten the cultural practices of print comic collecting and communal store experiences have developed a stigma among members of the field that has influenced views of the new formats. Reviews for DC’s DC Squared comics have begun with statements such as, “I’m not a fan of digital comics” (Trigonis, 2013; Wilding, 2013). Fans highlight the physicality and attraction to books as objects as a factor contributing to their

resistance to digital formats (Scheidt, 2011). Other readers highlight the business model of digital comics as the reason they do not like the format (Kleefeld, 2014). Creators have recognised and encountered this resistance to digital comics:

> I think the move to digital is still difficult. There is resistance to the digital model, although that is changing. I know Liam has struggled trying to sell the concept to fans who prefer the idea of print. (Madefire Artist 2)

This stigma, associated with digital comics, threatens the creator's identity, because it has socialised consumers to a particular view of digital comics that influences their judgment of the content before they read it. Fletcher (1999, 42) argued, "creative people are judged and prefer to be judged by their output rather than by their personality" yet the stigma surrounding digital comics makes creators feel individuals are judging their identity before they read their output. As digital creator Reilly Brown explained, "the ONLY negative things I've seen about this comic come from people who haven't even read it— usually because they're upset that it's not a traditional print comic" (Brown, 2014). Creators also highlighted the presence of this stigma amongst other creators. It is necessary to quote at length to demonstrate the frustration the stigma of digital comics creates:

> It frustrates me so much when I see people from my industry go, 'ah there has to be 22 pages on paper and digital's horrible, who wants to read that shit.' It's just, ya know, what's a matter with you? You're cutting your nose off just to spite your face. Here's another medium that you can work in. That you are eminently built for and prepared for. That you have spent a career honing your skills around, telling stories with pictures and words. All of those people, almost to a man or a woman, would happily have

> their properties taken to film. So why not to a digital space? It's another form of storytelling and again a great story can be told in any medium and that's my view on it…to, to get hung up on the paper aspect that is crazy. (Madefire Founder 1)

Pioneer creators are engaged in a socialisation process that challenges the negative view of digital comics. They engage in identity work through the reactive and relational discourses to manage their own identity, as well as the reception of that identity by others. The remainder of this chapter focuses on these discourses as the first step in the socialisation process, removing the stigmatised image of technology. Chapter Seven then addresses they way creators are socialising the field to the specific changes in routines, practices, norms and values associated with digital comics.

6.3 Discursive Framework

The reactive and relational discourses form part of the discursive framework, introduced in Chapter Two that provided an analytical framework for how comic book creators experience digital change based on discourse, venture labour and the systems model. Together these theories establish the link between identities, content, and the existing stereotypes members of the comic book industry have been socialised to.

As stated in Chapter Two, the reactive discourse contrasts stereotyped views of one form of work (digital comics) with another (motion comics) to justify the creator's decisions (Ortner, 2013). The comparison process allows creators to show how their work and, therefore, their identity are different from motion comics in both its "ethos and practice" (Ortner, 2013, NP). The relational discourse acts as a companion discourse seeking to connect two forms of work. The discourse

highlights the connections to print, which the field views as what 'good' comic book creators do, to justify the creator's decision to work on the digital projects. Together, the discourses work to show that the new digital comics can be successful projects that warrant a positive shift in the existing structures of the field.

The discourses are important because, following Neff's (2012) venture labour thesis, the creators have invested their social, symbolic and human capital in the digital projects. The creators assume a high level of risk by investing these capitals in the projects. The creators use their social capital to promote the format and its socialisation, with their talk acting as a powerful socialisation tool (Stahl, 2013). Their symbolic capital, accumulated through the accolades and prestige they have garnered, is also invested and transferred to the platform as a form of validation. As Bourdieu (1993) claims, symbolic capital is a transferrable capital that the owner can risk and bestow on an individual or project in the hopes that the field will view the work as worthy. These forms of capital take time and money to develop and their accumulation and deployment represents a risk to the creator. The reactive and relational discourses are a way to try and protect that investment by shaping the discourse and understanding surrounding the new digital comics. Through discourse the creators establish new appropriate identities that are part of their wider adaptive identity and protect their investment of capital, which can help to legitimise the format. By doing so they promote certain attachments (print comics) and deny others (motion comics) to aid in the positive evaluation of their identity by external sources. By using the disciplinary power of discourse the creators seek to define the new acceptable behaviours and attitudes for comic book workers, but these behaviours and attitudes must also be accepted by external sources.

While the creators have invested in developing new domain knowledge, the field, which judges the works produced by the creators (McIntyre, 2011), evaluates the work utilising the “rear view mirror” (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967) of print comics and motion comics. The agents of the field understand the new format by attaching it to something they know and understand (Levinson, 2003). Creators are aware of this process because they “internalise an anticipated reception of their work as a part of the process of production” (Robbins, 2007: 84), but I would argue they have also internalised an expected form of consumption.

The reactive and relational discourses focus on active, passive and interactive audiences, yet not in the way the media effects model has applied these terms (see Neuman and Guggenheim, 2011). Instead the framework recognises the creators’ talk as part of a medium-specificity view (Pratt, 2012) where different media have been identified and categorised based on the way audiences consume media and the control creative workers have over the text. As stated, the negative stereotype of motion comics is connected to the relationship with the audience and the creators utilise a medium-specific framework when discussing how the new digital platforms differ. This is part of the creators wider attempt to change the view of digital comics and have the field recognise that the norms and values of the digital platforms can produce good work (Cohen, 1981).

6.4 Reactive Discourse

Given the pre-existing negative stereotypes and resistance towards digitisation in the comic book industry creators utilise the reactive discourse as a defensive, protective action. The creators use the discourse to position their current work as opposed to or different from a stereotyped, less desirable image of work. This view is supported by Ortner’s (2013) work on the division between Hollywood and Independent film. Here the less desirable work is commonly motion

comics, with digital writer Mark Waid highlighting the view towards motion comics:

> In order to better explain what I said, let's look at motion comics. Just speaking for myself and not for Marvel, I've never been terribly fond of motion comics as the previous experiment for how we do digital comics because adding voices or movement or cheap animation or whatever only ever seemed to me to be a weird hybrid of bad animation. (Phegley, 2012b)

The creators seek to distance themselves from that format given the negative connotations associated with motion comics. The way the formats have developed makes this process necessary. Creators characterise digital comics as using techniques that print cannot replicate, offering new storytelling opportunities. They focus on techniques that mimic the use of limited animation, building the comic in layers. Each element, such as the background, characters, and text, constitutes a separate layer that creators can manipulate to create new effects. The implementation of these techniques exists on a continuum: companies like Madefire use more animation as well as sound effects and musical scores, while DC use very few digital effects because their titles are also printed. The publishers and creators are able to interpret the digital devices, which are a hybrid of existing and new technologies, differently based on their own specific social context, leading to variations in the ‘coolness’ of the digital projects between publishers and even between projects produced by the same publisher.

Regardless of the creator’s interpretation, the use of any animation or technique that mimics animation initially draws comparisons to motion comics, which the creators wished to avoid. “The interesting thing about tools is that tools have a point of view and the tool will point you in a particular direction” (Madefire Founder 2). The development of

Madefire's proprietary Motion Book Tool was influenced by the reactive discourse with the tool designed so creators were not pushed immediately towards animation. By providing primacy to animation in the tool creators would associate motion books with animation, going against the founders' philosophy for digital comics (Madefire Founder 2). Here we can see the ways the individual's particular desires and motivations impact and shape the process of digitisation. The technology developed by Madefire can still be used to develop animation, but through the reactive discourse it's use and intention is socialised away from animation as the primary method of storytelling. This begs the question of why Madefire, who argue tools have a point of view, would name their digital production tool Motion Book given the negative connotations associated with motion comics. Names, like tools, also have the ability to influence the reception and interpretation of the platform.

The negative connotations of motion comics and animation not only influence the development of the necessary production tools, but the actual creation and design process. As Madefire's editor-in-chief Ben Abernathy explained:

> It's a fine line to walk. Every single build of every book we release, we look at very carefully. We don't want any page to have too much motion or have anything that takes you out of the reading experience. If it does, we rein it back in. Every frame of every book is very carefully thought out. (Cecchini, 2012)

The reactive discourse was also about more than just stating what their respective digital comics were not. Ortner's (2013) research on the reactive discourse found that people could utilise and subscribe to the discourse in different ways, reflecting their different experiences as well as goals. While still utilising the reactive discourse, Madefire consultant

Dave Gibbons emphasised the way he had learnt from his prior experience with motion comics to create a better format:

> I think it's still a reading experience and it's most important to me that it is that. I was involved with the *Watchmen Motion Comics*, which were more like limited animation than a true reading experience, but we learned some interesting lessons from that. I think it is keeping the control with the reader, but it is also allowing the reader to control the speed of transition--to look around the real estate of the page. (Griepp, 2012)

Madefire's Liam Sharp similarly interacts with the social history of digital comics by claiming:

> It's interesting; motion comics within the comics industry have developed kind of a bad reputation. But they were game changers in a way. They had to be there, they had to be the first steps taken and people that did them were pioneers, so we kind of have to take our hats off to them even if we don't particularly like them or see them as second-rate animation or whatever. (Sacks, 2012)

Regardless of how much the creators felt they learnt from motion comics, and recognised their influence on the current projects, it was still necessary to distance their projects from the negativity associated with them. As writer Matt Kindt demonstrates, the anticipatory socialisation of motion comics had shaped the creator's views of digital comics:

> Honestly I was completely skeptical at first. I wasn't really even sure what Marvel was going to do with this format. I don't want

> animated comics with sound effects, etc. And then when they released the first couple I realized what they were doing was still comics -- still sequential art -- but it just took advantage of page-turns in a way that regular comics can't really do. (Matt Kindt in Zalben, 2012)

Utilising and developing the content in conjunction with the reactive discourse allowed the creators to begin the process of socialising the field to accept the new digital formats. They needed to socialise the field to what their digital comics were not before they could begin to socialise them to what they are and how they can produce good work.

6.5 Relational Discourse

I propose that the creators implement the relational discourse to aid the socialisation process. Utilising the rear view mirror concept the relational discourse associates the new content with the long-standing history of traditional printed comic books. Becker (1982) argued that innovations become more acceptable through familiarity and association. The relational discourse highlights the similarities to print to mitigate the sensation of disrupting or ignoring the previous comic book structures. By focusing on the similarities and continuances the relational discourse highlights my respondent’s statement in section 6.3 that the skills and understanding creators have honed in print are still relevant and vital to these new formats. It also allows the creators to frame the role of the audience and highlight their importance to the creator's identity.

Creators maintain the connection between print and digital by framing their approach as “staying true to comics’ core”. The creators specifically highlight the structural properties of print comics that the new digital comics remediate. As Marvel editor-in-chief Axel Alonso

explained, “Infinite Comics utilize the tools of the digital world while preserving all the features that make a comic book reading experience unique" (Phegley, 2012b). Alonso highlights structural features of the format, such as word balloons, to show the continuity between the new format and the old. For Alonso it is important to achieve a balance between the new and the old, something that has proved difficult for the creators. Mark Waid claimed that, “The most challenging part has been how to use new tools and tricks without having it look gimmicky or straying away from what the core of comics is" (Phegley, 2012a). These quotes highlight the importance of maintaining their identity as comic book creators and recognition of their work as comics through continuing to utilise certain structural and storytelling conventions. Figure 6 shows how completed sequences from digital comics, by adhering to the relational discourse, can echo the printed page. This is despite the digital comic using new techniques, such as building the sequence one panel at a time and adding and subtracting dialogue boxes, to get to this stage.

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Figure 6 Completed sequence from *Deadpool: The Gauntlet* #3. Story by Gerry Duggan and Brian Posehn. Art by Reilly Brown. Colours by Jim Charalampidis. Letters by Joe Sabino. Published by Marvel Comics.

In looking at the challenge of combining comics with digital technology, the relational discourse has framed digital as an evolution, building on the core principles of comics. Madefire co-founder Liam Sharp described the company's approach:

> Essentially, we just looked at the iPad when it came out and said, "this is better than a piece of paper. How would we evolve storytelling on this platform, using the language that I know, comics, which is essentially pictures and words, into the best reading experience that we can?" (Terror, 2012).

Creators also framed the relational discourse through a medium-specific view of how the audience interacts with comic book content.

Consuming comic book content is classified as a reading experience where audiences are readers. This follows Pratt's (2012) medium specificity analysis, which separates comics from the viewing experience of film. Maintaining this distinction is important for digital projects. As Thrillbent artist Jeremy Rock explained:

> Comics have always allowed people to read at their own pace. I feel that's a very important element to keep with a digital comic. Motion comics force you to sit through their usually low-end animation and sound effects. They completely miss the point of what comic storytelling is all about. (Thomas, 2013a)

Creators further critique and distance their work from motion comics by highlighting the importance of reading to the idea of what a comic is. Motion comics, according to the creators, forgot this core understanding of comics and they cite this as the reason for their failure. The creators, in highlighting the role of the reader, utilise the terms active and passive, associated with audience studies in media research, yet their use does not follow the literature. They are not talking about the agency of the reader in understanding the message of the content or their ability to create their own meanings and remix content, but their agency to consume and experience the comic at their own pace.

While creators have sought to maintain the role of the audience as readers they have also explored the way digital tools provide creators with more control over the reading experience. The relationship between the creator and the reader becomes one of negotiated control. The reader maintains control over the pace of consumption yet the creator can influence where the focus of the reader's attention is by the way the panels and screen unfolds, highlighting certain content and restricting the readers' ability to look ahead. Chapter Seven discusses these new storytelling features further, but it is worth addressing the

way creators have used a similar discourse to the relational discourse to frame these changes.

In discussing the changes to the comic book format creators utilise the "love of comics" discourse outlined in Chapter Four. Instead of being their motivation for entering the field, the creator's love of comics provides the motivation for wanting to explore the possibility of improving the format and protects them as they critique long-standing comic book traditions. Their critique is grounded in their love and appreciation of the medium:

> Well, my first and greatest love is print comics. But as anyone that's worked on them knows, some of the limitations that add an awful lot to our medium are also at times almost needlessly difficult to overcome. For instance, you're really required to account for the fact that your reader can see the future. So there's very much a contract with the format. It asks you not to cheat and look ahead, to ignore a lot of what's in front of you. One of the biggest possible gains in an Infinite Comic is that the stories unfold in pure sequence, one image at a time. It seems to put the element of surprise and the illusion of time into play a bit more. That allows us to do some unique things that make the environment and pace. It goes a long way in making things feel fresh. (Jason Latour in Richards, 2013)

> Don't get me wrong – I bloody LOVE print! But, y' know, life's for the living after all. And here's this new medium that is all about the things I love most – words and pictures – but it can also be so much more. Sound, motion… live links! You can start to build story clouds that can grow, and interlock in amazing ways. It's very exciting stuff! (Sharp, 2013)

Using the love of comics discourse allows the creators to address some of the fear and resistance towards digital comics. The success of the new digital formats relies on the creators being able to highlight more than just how the formats replicate what print comics already do. In Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation a new medium must "justify itself by improving on a predecessor" (1999, 59). The relational discourse relies on the rear view mirror of print comics to give the digital comics credibility, but this limits the format's potential. Creators utilise the love of comics discourse to begin the process of socialising the field to the differences and new opportunities these formats offer, which the creators find exciting and capable of providing fresh ideas and experiences within the medium. Sequence and swipe based storytelling provide the creator with new tools to build narrative suspense by constraining the reader's ability to look ahead, but the creators must manage the implementation of the new techniques with the tension the field's resistance creates. Framing the changes through their love of comics is an attempt to minimise the risk associated with highlighting challenges or issues in the print format. This represents a balancing act for the creators who, as the early pioneering creators, were attracted to these new, exciting possibilities offered by digital. It led them to invest their human, social, and symbolic capital in the projects. They need to find ways to socialise the field to these new comics so that the field in turn can begin to view their work as good, thus validating their identity.

6.6 Good Work

The framing of the new digital comic projects by the reactive and relational discourses is important because creators value doing good work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). The content they produce is representative of who they are as creators (Elsbach, 2009 and Wei, 2012). The negative socialisation of motion comics influences the ability of the creators work to be viewed as 'good' by external stakeholders.

Good work is a multi-faceted concept. Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) analysis defined good work as being both practice and product based. Workers can enjoy good experiences of work when they are provided with autonomy, security, work-life balance, self-esteem and self-realisation while good products are those created to the highest standards and that "promote aspects of the common good" (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011, 36). The practice and product aspects of good work are linked with financial security and autonomy often providing the conditions to produce work to the highest standards. The pride and satisfaction associated with good work can be replaced by frustration and disappointment when bad work is produced. While the evaluation of good practices is a more internal process the evaluation of good products is social.

Creators release content to be judged by members of the field, which has been 'named' or credited to allow the public to recognise that work as the product of a particular individual or group (Ryan, 1992). The reception of that work is guided by the 'nobody knows' concept (Caves, 2000) and the existing standards and values of members of the field. The creator's own internal standards of good work may be at odds with those of the field. This relates back to the art-commerce dichotomy of creative work where creative workers must balance the need to produce creatively satisfying work with the political economy of the creative industries:

> You also kind of forget that everyone's trying to make money. People do want great comics, but they want great comics that are going to sell, and when they try something new, even if it's great, it doesn't always work. (Thrillbent Writer 2)

The new digital comic formats represent an attempt at something new, which presents more uncertainty and risk based on the negative view of

digital comics in the industry. The freelance nature of the work can lead to compromise between the creator's values and their need to earn an income (Wei, 2012). The project, overall, needs to make money but more importantly the creators recognised the necessity to earn a consistent living to survive in the industry. The new digital formats, with their learning curve and new practices, represent a different monetary proposition for the creator. They must adapt their practices and their values of good work while managing their work on more lucrative projects, such as print work-for-hire. This is the practical reality of comic book work:

> I'm also practical. I don't have nearly as much time to do Thrillbent projects, and its time:income isn't as good, as my Marvel titles so I tend to work much, much faster. So the color isn't as polished but I still feel it looks good enough to take credit for and if you can say that then it's good enough. The idea is to do the best you can with what you have and I think I do that. I'd still like to get faster though. (Thrillbent Colourist 1.2)

The creator adjusts their internal values, producing work without as much polish, to align with the underlying political economy of their freelance career, projects that pay better demand more attention. The new digital projects cannot avoid the economic realities of creative production, nor can they avoid the role the field plays in determining whether the project is 'good':

> Of course doing good work is important. I did the best I could do with each chapter, and I think each chapter is reflective of where I was when I drew them, so yes, I'd say it's good work. I've experimented with storytelling in ways I haven't done before, so whether those are successful or not, it's not for me to say, that's up to the readers. (Thrillbent Artist 1)

The reactive and relational discourses become a vital tool in changing the field's socially constructed perception of whether digital comics can be good during a time when the necessary evaluative criteria are still being developed. This is necessary to alter the public perception of digital comics and their work so their identity and their work can be positively valued (Brooks et al., 2011; Brunton & Jeffrey, 2013). Even with the reactive and relational discourses creators experienced difficulty when trying to change the opinion of the field, particularly audience members who were fans of print comics. The creators want to be supported and appreciated by this audience (Becker, 1982), but artist Reilly Brown described his interactions with audience members, and it is necessary to quote at length:

> The only bad thing I hear about it, is from people who haven't even read it. Like they just don't wanna do the digital thing and they're so resistant ya know, a comic book fan who is afraid of something new, who would have thought? And so it wasn't unexpected, but it is something I've been hearing ever since working on Power Play, just talking to people at conventions. I'm just sitting there at my table in artist's alley fans come up to me, some of them like angry not like yelling but really distressed but they walk up and they say, 'man I really love your stuff on Spider-Man, your stuff on Hercules I don't know about this digital thing man I've read digital comics, I don't like digital comics. I want something I can hold in my hand, I want something I can smell, I want the whole thing.' And I'm like, 'yeah I know, but have you tried our comic yet have you tried Power Play yet?' And they go, 'no man I've read it, I've read things on Comixology and it doesn't work for me.' But have you tried our comic yet and then they're like 'no I haven't tried it' and then ya know I've got my iPad there and I just flip it around and show it to them and, 'well just take a look' and I can see them, their whole posture

> changes. They flip through and they're like that's pretty cool and I know the part to show em. I just show em that little section that I know, this'll convert you…so I'm just talking to these guys who just don't want to have anything to do with it and they're um, the lines disappear from their forehead and they kind of like, 'oh this is pretty cool' and then they see, and there's like this one thing I really like to do, character intros, because it's something that is a super comic book thing to do but you can't do it on a printed page and its where it's like a main character will show up and it's like a whole screen will turn blue or grey or something like that and a name plate will show up and this is their name, this is their powers and so it's in the beginning…you see it in movies all the time and then they see it and they're like, 'oh' and they go through that first scene and they're like, 'okay now I get it'. They turn around 180, like now they're onboard. (Siuntres, 2014)

The fan views the new digital comics through the rear view mirror of print comics and other digital formats, influencing their evaluation of the creator's work and their identity. Brown highlights the difficulty and frustration in getting print fans to read and accept digital comics let alone view them as good. The creator has pride and satisfaction in their work, but must utilise the reactive discourse to distance their work from the fans stereotypes of digital. The discourse surrounding digital comics must move beyond the rear view mirror of motion comics to succeed.

The creators' use of discourse is directed not only at consumers of print comics, but other creators. The creators value the recognition from their peers because they have a deeper understanding of the work (Kirschbaum, 2007; Williams, 2010). The creators' peers also provide opportunities for work; so producing good work helps to build their reputation in a freelance industry (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Neff, 2012). Successful projects bring visibility and increased

reputation, while unsuccessful projects can damage reputations. The new digital projects also require creators to invest more than their reputation in the project and section 6.7 further explores the risk creators take when investing in uncertain new media projects. The digital projects presented an opportunity to pursue new, challenging and interesting forms of work and the riskiness of their success and judgment by peers and the wider audience was the price to pay for that opportunity (Neff, 2012).

It should also be noted that not every creator who worked on the digital projects viewed the format positively and currently capable of producing good work. The creators focused specifically on what the new digital techniques added to the experience:

> The exercise didn't yield much in terms of narrative but more in terms of, what I dub, poor man's animation. It felt more like we were adding bells and whistles rather than excavating narrative gold. (DC Artist 3)

> But at the same time it doesn't cease to be a poor substitute for cartoons in my opinion. It hasn't made me want to switch to this format myself and I still prefer reading comics in paper format. (Marvel Inker 2)

The creators' critique is grounded in their reflections on practice, criticising how the digital projects utilised the digital storytelling tools. For these creators the current understanding and implementation of the technology does not aid the production of good work and the new formats are yet to justify their existence by improving on their print predecessor. They relate the digital storytelling to gimmicks and poor-man's animation, the very characterisations the reactive discourse

seeks to move digital comics away from.

For the first creator (DC Artist 3) the projects did not produce good content, but instead offered an opportunity to engage in good practice, which aligned with other aspects of their identity. The opportunity for creative collaboration and to receive payment for the work made the role attractive despite the creator's view of the format. For the other artist it was the creators and character involved:

> Spiderman is one of my favourite characters I was really interested in working for them. It was also another opportunity to work with a friend, Ramón F Bachs, which I was really excited about. (Marvel Inker 2)

The creator's connection to particular characters and properties forms part of their love of comics and motivation for working in the industry. For these creators good work includes those projects that allow them to fulfil that part of their identity, to add their own mark on a character that means so much to them. The creator is prepared to risk their reputation and invest their skills in an uncertain project for that opportunity. The following section further explores the risk creators take in pursuing good work in digital formats.

6.7 Digital Comics as Venture Labour

The negative stereotypes associated with digital comics places a different emphasis on the creator's investment of capital, in Neff's (2012) venture labour theory. The creators need to invest their time, labour, and human capital to acquire the necessary skills to produce good work in the new format. They then invest their social capital and symbolic capital to change the perception of digital comics, allowing their work and identity to be valued as good by their peers and fans.

Chapter Four has already introduced the idea of risk associated with comic book creators investing in the acquisition of new skills to boost their human capital. Learning these new skills takes time and money and is a responsibility the creator must manage on their own while still finding enough work to survive in the industry. Creators have already invested in numerous new skills, which have benefited the companies that they work for. Gaining computer skills for production and communication has allowed publishers to reduce costs through creating new efficiencies in these areas. These computer skills have extended to social media, where creators have learnt skills to manage their reputation online, while publishers benefit from the added marketing and promotion the creators' network provides.

In relation to digital comics, creators have also had to invest in new skills related to storytelling at their own risk. Chapter Seven further explores the acquisition of skills by creators, but creators justify the investment of skills through the pioneer identity. The opportunity to explore new creative challenges and to work with fewer constraints allows the creative to demonstrate, and have recognised, their own unique creative voice and vision. Neff (2012) called this the creative strategy for risk. These workers value creative challenges that provide opportunities to explore their creative potential. Being a pioneer provides this opportunity and a chance to differentiate their skills from the rest of the creative workforce. As one respondent demonstrated, by gaining digital skills on their creator-owned digital comic while still doing print work-for-hire projects at Marvel their name was bound to come up when the publisher began hiring for Infinite comic projects (Marvel Artist 1.1). The difficulty for creators is acquiring the skills to work on the right project, something that cannot be known until the project is released to the field. This is why the creators optimistically state Infinite Comics or Motion Books are the right project. Because they have already made the investment of skills, they need it to be.

The creators' investment of human capital drives their investment of social capital. The creator invests their social capital into the project, promoting the specific content, but also the digital format. This promotion to their personal and professional networks is aimed at building support and acceptance for the new digital project. The pioneers need both fans and other creators to accept their project or risk rejection from lack of interest. We can also build on Neff's conception of social capital to incorporate their social media presence, where creators spend increasing amounts of time cultivating professional networks made up of other creators, journalists and fans.

While the creators have closer relationships with other creators and media figures, there is also a parasocial[34] interaction between the creator and their fans. The fans develop a sense of closeness to the creator despite it being a largely asymmetrical relationship (Rubin & McHugh 1987; Rubin et al. 1985; Rubin & Perse 1987). The creator's actions online become the resources for the fan to develop a parasocial relationship with the creator and feel like they know them, despite the possibility that they have had little actual direct interaction with the creator (Ding et al., 2012). In the same way the fan can claim the creator as part of their social capital by following their online actions, the creators are also able to claim their followers, collectively, as part of their social capital. This becomes a valuable resource for the creator, based on the fact that their fans want to interact with the creator and feel a sense of closeness to their life and career. Writer Mark Waid claimed that when he launched Thrillbent he sought to utilise his 20,000 loyal fans as advocates for the platform (Kalder, 2012).

Investing these resources can aid in the acceptance of the digital

[34] Parasocial relationship refers to Horton and Wohl's (1956) explanation of the way audiences developed one-sided relationships with the media being consumed and, in this case, the people who create the content.

format, helping to change the perception of digital comics but by relying on their social capital the creator also places it at risk. The creator has developed a trusting relationship with fans and other creators (Valenzuela et al., 2009; Gil de Zúñiga et l., 2012) based on their status as a print comic book creator. Discovering the creator is now pursuing digital comics could lead to mistrust and discontent from fans and other creators. Already Waid has experienced a disconnection amongst his social capital when some comic book retailers boycotted his print comics in response to the creator's launch of the Thrillbent platform (Truitt, 2012a).

I would also suggest creators invest a third form of capital in the companies and projects they work on: symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is the amount of prestige, honour or recognition the creator has gained from agents of the field. Most important to the idea of investing symbolic capital is the ability individuals have to consecrate other works or artists. Bourdieu (1993) used the example of art dealers, who invest their symbolic capital in the artist and transfer economic and artistic value to the work. The dealer risks their symbolic capital in the hope that other members of the field, such as critics, will similarly value the work. During periods of media change the creators similarly invest their symbolic capital in the new projects to consecrate and provide artistic value to the digital format.

The publishers realise the creator's investment of symbolic capital in the promotional and marketing materials of the project where the creator, and their achievements are named. For instance, new publisher Madefire has relied heavily on the symbolic capital of artist Dave Gibbons and his work on *Watchmen* because symbolic capital can engender belief and trust in the quality of the project (Pret et al, 2015). The original press release stated, "The team is also joined by creative superpower Dave Gibbons, co-creator of Watchmen, the best-selling

graphic novel of all-time" (Madefire, 2012). Madefire utilises Gibbons status as a creator and a creator of a specific project. *Watchmen* has developed it's own symbolic capital through garnering awards and a status as the 'best-selling graphic novel of all time'. Gibbons status as the co-creator of *Watchmen* is important here because it highlights how certain roles accrue more symbolic capital and star status than others. Movements like Colourist Appreciation Day were started to bring more attention to the craft roles of comic book production where writers and artists are awarded more attention and recognition. This means creators who have accrued symbolic capital through those roles, like Gibbons, have more power to influence the discourse and reception of digital comics.

Madefire's Liam Sharp further highlighted the importance of this symbolic capital to Madefire when discussing the hiring of Ben Abernathy as their editor-in-chief: "You know I think, once again you get the extra level of credibility when you have a senior editor from DC coming to join you because he gets what you're doing and is just very excited by it" (Sacks, 2012). This process benefits the new publishers Thrillbent and Madefire more than Marvel and DC because the existing publishers already hold a certain amount of status and recognition within the comic book industry. For writer Matt Kindt, who had experimented with digital storytelling and innovative techniques on creator-owned titles, the opportunity to work on Marvel's Infinite Comics "seemed more official because it was Marvel and Spider-Man" (Phegley, 2012c).

The importance of the creator's investment of symbolic capital was evident in the recruitment of creators to the digital projects at Thrillbent and Madefire. Creators chose to work on the projects based on the investment of social and symbolic capital by certain figureheads:

> My next job after [Licensed project] was [Thrillbent Writer 1's]…at BOOM! Studios. I did almost 30 issues between the two and I guess [Thrillbent Writer 1] was happy with my work. When he started up [Creator-Owned Project] at Thrillbent he mined prior collaborators to work with him again. That's also how Pete Krause got involved. Didn't take much convincing with those two onboard. Great artists. Great people. (Thrillbent Colourist 1.1)

> Well, thing is, Liam asked me, and that is enough to be honest. No one has more drive, determination and natural storytelling ability than that man, even on a bold and ground breaking venture like this, there are some people who, when they sound the bell, you come running, Liam is one of those people, and his team of collaborators and contributors is truly world class, I'm honoured and humbled to be counted amongst them. It was a no brainer. (Jimmy Broxton quoted in Madefire, 2013)

For these creators the opportunity to work on the project was presented through the founders' investment of social capital. The creators' decision to work on the project was then influenced by the founders' consecration of the format by their symbolic capital. They valued the founders' reputation so they valued the digital project.

Utilising their symbolic capital the creators are challenging the established understandings of comics, bringing in new ways of creating comics and how comics should or could be defined (Stevens, 1998; Shefrin, 2004; Kirschbaum, 2007). In an expansion of De Clercq and Voronov's (2009) work on the symbolic capital of entrepreneurs, the creators are not newcomers but established veterans who have built up considerable symbolic capital in the field yet the desire to 'stand out' remains.

They invest their symbolic capital, attributing a degree of value to the project, but they also rely on other agents (reviewers, fans, and other professionals) recognising the work as good. If these agents do not value the new digital work then the creator's reputation and symbolic capital can be damaged, potentially impacting their ability to find further work because a negative reputation based on past performance can 'stick' (Pret et al, 2015).

The reactive and relational discourses become an important tool for the creators who are looking to alter the industry status quo "without disturbing the principles upon which the field is based" (Bourdieu, 1993b, 83). It is this threat to the principles of the comic book that has caused resistance to digital comics. Creators utilised the reactive and relational discourses to reassure the field that the digital comics do not alter the principles of comics too much and therefore should be consecrated as good by agents of the field. This consecration justifies the creator's investment of capital and, importantly, provides value to the creator's identity.

6.8 Audience Construction

A crucial role of the reactive and relational discourses is to manage and shape the field's expectations for digital comics. The field evaluates the creator's work and identity and the creators do not want to invest their capital and identity into projects that "suck" (Neff, 2012). Given the pre-existing negative stereotypes surrounding digital comics, the creators' must convince the field that the changes related to digital comics can produce good work. The discourses are targeted at the existing print audience, but the industry is also focused on new readers:

> I think we're introducing a lot of um new readers to the market, not lapsed readers, which is a term that has popped up in the

> last few years…They're new readers. People that are engaged by what we do. (Madefire Editor 1)

Unlike music or newspaper journalism, which served a mass audience at their time of digitisation, the comic book audience was a niche one. Within this niche market Marvel and DC's dominance influenced the profile of the audience, leading to characterisations of the audience as white, adult, male collectors[35] and fans who visit comic book shops to purchase superhero and pulp comics (Lopes, 2009). Jean-Paul Gabilliet (2010) argued that the superhero, adventure and pulp genres, through their portrayal of violence, action, and a masculine vision of the body allows readers to participate in imaginary masculine games that appeal more to men than women. Industry research[36] adds to the male stereotype of the comic book audience with a 1995 reader survey revealing that 90% of DC readers were male with 80% of them aged 18-39 (Carlson, 2007). A 2012 reader survey revealed DC's New 52 line of comics was 93% male, only 2% were aged under 18 years and 70% identified as avid fans who visited comic book stores every week, purchasing up to 20 of DC's 52 new titles (DC, 2012 and Hudson, 2012). The industry has highlighted greater diversity, in content and readership, as one of digitisation's proposed benefits. While this new audience is crucial to growing the industry it can cause tension as publishers and creators manage the expectations of their existing print audience.

Research has focused on the way creators internalise an anticipated reaction from audiences when producing content (Robbins, 2007). The literature reveals creative workers internalise multiple, different intended audiences. Jazz musicians felt disdain for their audiences' needs and

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[35] Collectors include those individuals buying multiple copies of a single title for the purpose of resale or those readers who collect every title by a particular publisher, creator or that includes a specific character.

[36] The research was commissioned by DC Comics and only reflects the publisher's audience who filled out the survey after purchasing a comic.

instead played for themselves (Macdonald and Wilson, 2005). News editors were found to choose news stories based on their appeal to other journalists and editors (Sumpter, 2000). More recent research has found online journalists now use feedback from their readers to construct a better image of who their audience is and what sort of content they want (Agarwal and Barthel, 2013 and Kantola, 2013). Taylor (2012) found creative workers were conflicted over the audience for their work. For instance, external validation from a populist, general audience raised concerns over selling out. Instead, it was creating work that validated their personal feelings that was important. Finally, toy car designers working in a corporate setting developed signature styles to appeal to both other creators and dedicated fans (Elsbach, 2009). The designers developed their work to appeal to this audience because it provided an opportunity for validation of the creator's identity when their contribution may have otherwise gone unnoticed through the absence of crediting practices. Who the intended audience is influences the way the creator produces their content.

The creators' discourse has constructed an intended audience for the new digital comic that includes new readers and existing print readers. This mixed audience serves different purposes. The existing print audience is valuable because the readers are accustomed to paying for comic book content. Madefire's Dave Gibbons highlighted that many of their early adopters would be comic book readers (Truitt, 2012b). Meanwhile, Mark Waid also conceded that he relied on the 20,000 serious readers of his print titles to act as advocates for Thrillbent, helping to promote the project (Kalder, 2012). Mark Waid invested his social capital, through his 20,000 devoted fans, because they have been socialised to the idea of paying for his print content and are advocates for his work. Creating content that appeals to that audience will provide the short-term success necessary for Thrillbent to grow and expand. Marvel and DC similarly structure their digital publishing around

their popular intellectual property and in-continuity stories to connect the content to their existing print audience.

Nevertheless, attracting new readers is key to the long-term success of the projects, particularly those backed by corporate interests. As Mark Waid stated:

> This is what we've done with comics in the past 75 years - we've taken what used to be a successful mass medium and turned it into a niche market, so viva comics. Digital has always been our chance to create a new newsstand, if you will, to get the word out there that we are still a vital medium. (Armitage, 2014)

Figures from DC show that the new reader discourse is backed up by statistics. DC's Jim Lee reported that 30-40% of readers on the company's digital first titles are either new first-time digital purchasers or first-time comic book purchasers while the DC Squared and DC Multiverse titles specifically target the videogame audience (ICv2, 2013c). Research by comiXology also found female readership increasing, now representing 20% of the app's audience, with many of those female readers new to comics (McGarry, 2013). Madefire's publishing of repurposed print content, based on existing popular IP like Transformers and Star Trek, is also part of their strategy to reach a wider global audience by engaging the audiences for film, TV, and game content (Wolstenholme in Armitage, 2013). Where the creators and publishers utilise the new reader discourse also reveals the change in focus. The projects have been discussed on technology sites such as The Verge, TechCrunch, and Fast Company, while Marvel announced their Infinite Comic project at the technology-focused show SXSW Interactive. As industry analyst Rob Salkowitz (2012) claimed, making these announcements outside of the usual comic book industry channels signals an attempt to capture "a larger chunk of cultural real

estate than the niche market accorded to superhero comics in recent times".

The reactive and relational discourses account for this mixed audience focus of digital comics by managing audience expectations. The pioneer creators want to create content that pushes the previously established boundaries of the comic book medium by developing new storytelling techniques and conventions. The existing print audience can act as a constraint because they hold certain pre-existing expectations for comic book content (Fulton and McIntyre, 2013). Digital offers new ways to play with the audience's expectations, through the creator's implementation of new domain knowledge, challenging their expectations of comic book conventions (Fulton and McIntyre, 2013). The difficulty for the creators lies in managing their quest for novelty and innovation with the familiarity of expected conventions (Becker, 1982; Berger, 1994). As Berger (1994, 46-7) argues, when audiences "encounter something totally unlike anything they have encountered before, they are confused and mystified. If they encounter something totally familiar, they can be bored very easily". The creators utilise the reactive and relational discourses to direct the audiences' judgment of the digital content. Motion comics introduced conventions that confused the comic book audience they were marketed at and the reactive discourse distances the work from those negative expectations. The relational discourse demonstrates how more recent digital comics projects seek to appease the audiences' expectations by more cautiously innovating and maintaining established conventions, avoiding complete alienation of the print audience.

Managing audience expectations is also important when looking at the new audience. New readers approach digital comics with their own expectations, based on prevailing stereotypes of comic book content or expectations established through the consumption of other media. For

instance, DC's targeting of the video game audience with the branching, interactive storytelling of Multiverse comics signals a recognition of that audiences' expectations. Digital also provides creators with tools to break down comic book storytelling and focus the reader's attention on specific moments of the narratives. These decisions are targeted at making comics more accessible to new readers:

> You still get, even at New York Comic-Con someone asked "oh my girlfriend says she doesn't know how to read comic books"… And like, it's like it's weird to run into that but it still happens where people don't, they never read comics as kids and then they see a 6 panel page or a 10 panel page and they don't know what order to read it in or maybe they have even some manga background where they read right to left. (Madefire Editor 1)

Writer Jason Latour highlighted the tap-based[37] reading of Infinite Comics as making digital comics more accessible to new readers (Richards, 2013). Marvel writer Joshua Hale Fialkov described digital as allowing him to, "sit down with my daughter and read this form of comics, and it's less overwhelming for her in that guided view" (Montgomery, 2014). The exploration of new conventions, such as landscape, tap-based reading, is not only driven by the pioneer's creative desires, but a recognition that digital business models require new audiences who previously did not understand the intricacies of comic book storytelling due to a lack of exposure to the medium. In some cases they hold expectations of comic books being difficult to read so the pioneers must manage their desire to push the boundaries of the medium with the need to educate the next generation of readers. "I wanted a landscape read, sort of like just swipe panels, something easy kids could read… they could just hold it, tap and then read forward

[37] The reader's tapping of the screen triggers changes in a scene, such as new word balloons or changes in action. This moment based storytelling directs the reader's attention at the new element of the scene.

and it was simple ya know it wasn't confusing with panels" (Madefire Editor 1). The creators construct an audience that is multiple and shifting, representing the growth of the comic book market and the influx of new and existing expectations that structure their work and the way the creator's identity is valued and judged.

6.9 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that comic book creators engage in identity work through the reactive and relational discourses to manage this period of digitisation and socialise creators and the field to the idea of digital comics. This socialisation and management is necessary due to the creators' investment of capital in the projects they work on and their desire to produce work that is judged by the field as good. For the field to recognise their work as good, validating their investment of capital, the creators need to address the negative stereotype of digital comics using the reactive and relational discourses. The discourses distance the digital projects from the undesirable motion comic format and build stronger ties between the new digital comics and print comics. This allows creators to enact change and influence in the industry, while also managing the expectations of the audience.

The creators' use of discourse also reveals important core identity features of the creator, such as the relationship with the audience, which the projects must maintain to gain the creator's investment of capital. The discourses act as the first step in the socialisation process, removing the stigmatised image of technology before socialising the field to the specific changes in routines, practices, norms and values associated with digital comics. These changes are the focus of the next chapter, which builds on the socialisation of the discourses of digital comics to analyse the changes to the experience of work in the comic book industry.

Chapter 7 Socialisation of Tensions in Digital Production by Creators

7.1 Introduction

> I think we've got to unlearn a lot of stuff. The reason why Kinman Chan's done it so well, on Treatment Tokyo for instance, he wasn't, he hadn't over learnt comics. He hadn't learnt all the do's and don'ts. (Madefire Founder 1)

This description of artist Kinman Chan highlights the difficulty creators experience during periods of change. Creators recognise the early period of media change as the most artistically rich because pioneering creators are able to work without the constraints of standardised production, but they have also been socialised to a particular community of practice. Unlike Kinman Chan, who approached digital without a background in comics, comic book creators meet resistance and experience tension between the established forms of work and the new. In effect, the digital projects cause tension in the creator's identity because their existing understanding of work is challenged.

This chapter explores how comic book creators engage in the informal education process of digital comics within the context of the political economy of freelancing. As pioneers these early digital workers are responsible for establishing and defining the new conventions and structures that will govern the work for future creators. They establish the new domain knowledge, directing the creators' investment of human capital, and further socialise the field to this new form of work. Building on the findings of Chapter Six, which focused on the broader process of socialisation, I look at how creators are socialising the changes in process and routines. This chapter analyses the ways that creators frame digital work to overcome this tension, relying on the maintenance

of core identity features to orient their understanding of who they are and what they do.

7.2 Pioneer Creators

Those creators who identified as or can be classed as ‘pioneers’ drive the early socialisation process of digital comics. Introduced in Chapter Four the pioneer identity is motivated by the sense of freedom and exploration periods of media change can grant creators. Following Thorburn and Jenkins (2003), the creators are less constrained by routine, standardised production leading to more experimental and artistically rich production. The creators discussed the feeling of creative freedom and autonomy as they explored the new formats and developed new conventions for digital storytelling. Artist Reilly Brown characterised his work on the Marvel Infinite Comic *Deadpool: The Gauntlet* as:

> Pushing the boundaries and finding new ways of telling stories that haven’t been done before is one of the biggest appeals of doing a comic this way! It’s rare that you find an artistic opportunity to truly do something new, and explore new ground that hasn’t already been well-trodden by other artists, so that’s one of the most fun parts of the series for me. (Thomas, 2014)

The pioneers engage in a performance based on a discourse of value. It is important for creators to continually standout and differentiate themselves from other workers by displaying their unique voice or talent and ability to develop successful projects (Deuze, 2007; Neff, 2012). Digital comics are presented as having value because they can produce good work and offer the opportunity to pursue good work practices that are important to the creator’s identity. The freedom and sense of agency on the projects gives them value. This value also extends to

their ability to build the creator's reputation. The pioneers seek to claim a reputation as an innovator and someone with unique talents who is capable of learning new skills and understandings. Following on from Chapter Four, the creators career orientation shifts during this new career cycle, representing a desire to build their reputation as an innovative, pioneering creator, which can help to build their symbolic capital. They want to be recognised in the field, but the uncertainty and negativity discussed in Chapter Six threatens this recognition and causes tension that the creators must manage through discourse. The pioneers rely on the relational discourse to show the value of their digital work, relating the advances in digital storytelling to other important changes to the comic book format:

> Look for us to continue to pioneer how comics are being read, indeed how comic book stories are being told. Initially there was the comic panel, the little cartoon, and then it expanded to the comic strip, which was three to four images going in a horizontal line. That was the next stage of comic storytelling. Then someone conceived of the comic book page, and you had movement that went horizontal and vertical. Artists and writers considered the entire page, and people like Jim Steranko and Neal Adams pioneered how you look at the page. Then Chris Ware came along. But the last few decades we've existed in those parameters, in that frame, and that's changing now. We're not limited by it, and there are new ways of experiencing reading comics. I think that's something that's going to change: With the expansion of digital comics in terms of sales and popularity, I think it could be a game changer because of the way distribution will change content. (Axel Alonso quoted in Sava, 2013)

Digital comics, like Infinite Comics, are presented as the next major innovation in the comic book format and the pioneer creators the next

visionaries who will shape comic book content. By linking digital storytelling to this past the creator seeks to 'fit in' and attribute value to the digital work in the eyes of the field. The creator's recognition by the field relies on their ability to socialise other creators to the digital format. This socialisation process is complex and contested as the creators' discourse of value, through freedom and agency, clashes with the need to develop conventions, knowledge, and norms related to digital comics. The pioneer creators' work develops the necessary conventions, routines, and evaluative norms that allow others to participate in the format. These conventions can be constraining, but they create familiarity for audiences and creators (Becker, 1982). They make the work more approachable because each creator does not need to develop their own standards, rules, techniques, and tools for every project (Becker, 1982). As Chapter Six described, a sense of familiarity is also important for audiences, who may be confused and alienated by an absence of recognisable forms or confused by innovation. Digital comics would hold a certain degree of expected familiarity through their association and relation to print comics. The pioneers place structures and restraints on their own freedom and agency by looking through the rear view mirror (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967) at print comics and negotiating the need for familiarity.

The socialisation process is also complex and contested because it involves moving from anticipatory socialisation, the process outlined in Chapter Six to alter the existing stereotypes surrounding digital work, to self-reinvention. Digital work requires adaptation to new understandings and ways of working and this self-reinvention can challenge the creator's core values and career needs (Bridgstock, 2013; Lingo and Tepper, 2013). The socialisation process, where the pioneers occupy the role of the emerging intuitive experts responsible for developing the tacit expert knowledge and socialising the newcomers to the necessary norms and knowledge (Gravengaard and Rimestad, 2011), then needs to become a process of reinforcing and sustaining the creator's core

identity. Creators who stretch the horizons and creative possibilities can experience isolation when working across boundaries and may not feel like they belong to any one group (Shorthose and Strange, 2004). Maintaining their core identity, even as they reinvent to pursue new opportunities, allows them to maintain a sense of belonging during this transitionary stage. This chapter explores how the pioneer creators utilise core identity features to manage the complexity of the socialisation process and aid in the recognition of their identity by the field.

7.3 The Political Economy of Socialisation

The political economy of creative work, which structures the creator's experience, also influences the pioneer creators' socialisation of digital comics. Chapter Three established that comic book work is predominantly freelance-based involving a networked, international division of labour (Deuze, 2007) working on a project-to-project basis (Bridgstock, 2013). Creators appreciate the freedom to work from home and set their own schedules, but it is also isolating and at odds with the traditional socialisation process that has relied on discourse and interaction in the workplace (Gravengaard and Rimestad, 2014). This close workplace interaction allows the experts to instil the industry norms, communicate their knowledge, and provides an opportunity for newcomers to observe and internalise the experts' behaviour. The process allows the newcomers to develop the knowledge, values, and norms necessary to participate effectively in the chosen community of practice (Gravengaard and Rimestad, 2014). Rendace (2001) highlighted the dispersed, networked geography of comic book work, and my data revealed there is a disconnection between the creators' anticipatory socialisation and the reality of modern comic book work. According to DC editor Brian Cunningham, creators need to learn to work in isolation:

> You need to be able to work alone…in a room…with no one… Some guys don't talk to people during the day. They're typing, they're working, they're drawing, they're inking, they're coloring. They're just isolated in their own little world. They don't act in a studio or anything like that, they're just in their own homes. Ah, so you need to be able to work alone and have the discipline to be able to do that. (DC Comics Breaking Into Comics, 2013)

Creators also still utilised a discourse of place, describing their existing view of comic book work as:

> [A] very romantic idea of working in comics, formed by reading too many accounts of Gold and Silver age creators, and their early days, the shared studios, the all night sessions, turning up at the NY offices in collar and tie, something like Mad Men only not as well paid. The reality of course is quite different, basically it's 12 hour days, 7 days a week, working alone fighting deadlines, despairing that you never get time to produce your best work. (Madefire Artist 1.1)

Creators have been drawn in by the discourse of place. Marvel Infinite writer/artist Jason Latour moved to New York as a newcomer: "I moved and lived in New York City for the experience of it but also because I knew people who make comics live in New York" (Breaking Into Comics "The Marvel Way", 2014). The perseverance of the discourse of place is linked to the organisation workers' discourse of comics as a small family or community centred on the bullpens of Marvel and DC. In this discourse the creators work closely together for long hours in the office and also socialise outside of work. This discourse socialises creators to the wrong image of freelancing in the comic book industry. The reality experienced by many freelance creators is that of isolation:

> All the work is delivered by e-mail and FTP servers, so I never get to meet or talk to anyone aside from Facebook and Twitter… The solitude can be a little bit of a strain. My wife is home with me now, but when she worked outside the house, it was a little stressful being home alone all the time working. I used to be starved for conversation, and when she'd get home, I just wanted to hear about her day (which wasn't very interesting, but very different from my day of sitting in front of the computer). I got used to it after a while, but it's much better since she quit her job and works out of the house. Even still it's very isolating. You very rarely meet or speak to the people you work with. (Marvel Colourist 1)

This isolation and solitude can be a strain on creators because of the importance placed on collaboration. Creators want to interact and experience that community aspect, but the freelance working arrangements can limit the contact between the creators on a particular project (Clarke, 2012). Clarke (2012) argues this can lead to conservative rather than innovative production in contrast to Bain's (2004, 2005) research on artists' construction of space. Bain (2005) found that while artists congregated in certain areas, occupying warehouse space or studios in a building, they chose to isolate themselves within those spaces. The artists' own private, isolated space was seen as necessary to sustain creative work (Bain, 2004). Comic book creators want to interact with other creators, but their contracts structure their experience of work and their exposure to the socialisation process. For instance, when Madefire co-founder Liam Sharp spoke about his freelance career he characterised it as follows: "I spent the first 25 years of my creative experience in a shed at the bottom of my garden on my own" (Kessler, 2014). In comparison, the office environment of Madefire was described as somewhere where, "It's nice to be able to come to work and be able to talk to people every day who actually know what I'm doing, who understand the industry" (Madefire

Founder 1).

Exposure to this organisational environment remains limited on the digital projects. Instead the pioneers utilise interviews, panels, blog posts, and social media interaction to socialise other creators to the new formats through the discourses of digital comics. New digital communities have also formed, like the Digital Comics Coalition, which includes creators from Madefire and Thrillbent as well as other new digital projects. Thrillbent's Mark Waid stated the Coalition's goal as follows:

> Let's be transparent. Let's share what we've learned with each other and with the audience…the more we can work together and cross-promote each others material, each others platforms…that helps get the word out that this is a legitimate media. This is a new emerging media that we're all excited about. (Digital Comics Coalition, 2015)

The Coalition aims to create a place where creators and publishers can share ideas and engage in discussions about the future of digital publishing. The development of the Coalition should be followed to see how it aids in the socialisation process for digital comic creators.

The need for creators to get paid on a consistent basis also influences the pioneers' socialisation of digital work. As Thrillbent Colourist 1.1 stated previously, the time to money ratio on Thrillbent projects was not as good as Marvel projects. Until recently the DC digital titles, including DC Squared and DC Multiverse, only paid a flat per-page rate instead of the combination of page rate and royalties paid to print creators. Thrillbent's Mark Waid highlighted the problem for digital creators: "the other barrier is that you need to eat and pay rent…to be perfectly

honest with you it [digital] ain't a money tree yet" (Digital Comics Coalition, 2015). Waid's comments are targeted more at those creators looking to produce creator-owned content. The creators valued creating work they owned, which could provide financial security, and Thrillbent and Madefire need to convince creators their platform can help creators achieve this goal. Waid stressed the difficulty new publishers and creators find trying to cut through the plethora of digital content to find a sustainable audience that provides a liveable wage. During this stage the socialisation process focuses on the technical aspects of digital comics as well as the economic aspects. Working in print does not guarantee the creator a liveable wage, but it does offer a more visible and tested business model. The pioneers stress the freedom and agency of the digital comic projects to shift the focus from the uncertainty of the digital business model to the compatibility with the creator's identity as a communicator/storyteller. The creators have stories to tell and feel the comic book medium is best suited to expressing those stories. For example Thrillbent offered, "a whole new dimension in comic book storytelling for horror fiction" (Thrillbent Writer 2), which created new narrative possibilities that were not achievable in print. This made the platform desirable for the creator's first horror comic. Digital needs to be presented as offering opportunities to tell stories that can only be told digitally.

7.4 Digital Production Tools

The work practices of the pioneer creators were also representative of a wider change in the way work is conducted in the comic book industry. As Chapter Five highlighted, specific production tools power the new digital comics. These tools, such as the Madefire Motion Book Tool, guide the creator in a particular direction because tools have a point of view (Madefire Founder 2). This point of view is constructed by the developer's specific vision for digital comics. Madefire designed their tool to deemphasise animation and direct creators to create a reading experience (Madefire Founder 2). The tool structures the pioneers'

experience and they are socialised to the values and understandings of a particular publisher and their choice of tool:

> Initially I wanted to try and create a very cinematic approach, very limited animation, mainly pans and zooms etc, Madefire want(ed) something more end user defined and less passive, with way more animation and special effects than I ever had in mind. (Madefire Artist 1.2)

The artist was socialised to the Madefire way of digital comics, which emphasised user activity over a cinematic approach. Madefire's philosophy structures the experience, but following the structuration approach (Giddens, 1979; Fulton and McIntyre, 2013) it is in the creator's understanding of these structures that they have agency and choice to determine how they utilise the options provided by the tool. This is where the creators experience freedom and agency, exploring how the tools can be used.

This agency, within the structure of the tool, extends to the adaptability of the Motion Book Tool to the way the creator wished to work: "the way all of our artists work is they continue to use all of the tools that they love for the things they are great at" (Madefire Founder 2). Here the respondent emphasises a discourse of choice in production, which is related to the growth of new digital production hardware (Wacom drawing tablets and Microsoft Surface tablets) and software (Photoshop suite and Manga Studio Pro). For artists this choice is also between traditional and digital methods of production:

> I prefer to draw traditionally with pencil on paper, but the strict deadlines of producing art lead me to pursuing a completely digital production process. Now I use my Cintiq for 90% of every

> job and I could not be happier about the time it saves me. (DC Artist 2)

The structures of the industry, which demand speed, influence the decision but creators are also adopting a more digital workflow to meet the demands of the digital format. *Batman 66* artist Colleen Coover adopted an all digital workflow because of the layered storytelling:

> One of the advantages I had was all the art in that issue was completely digital. I didn't touch a piece of paper the entire time. None of that is ink on paper, it is entirely electrons and as a result like all the layers of art, like each figure is on a different layer so I can move it around electronically. So it's sort of like the, sort of like what they do in digital animation. You have everything on different layers and you can move it wherever you want and as a result I was able to really easily say change the colour of a layer or insert a layer between or whatever. (Thompson, 2013)

Mark Waid similarly highlighted that Thrillbent artists are adopting more of an all-digital workflow because it reduces the steps and transitions required of the artist (Future of Digital Comics Platforms, 2015). Still, many artists continue to utilise a mixed methods approach. They are able to choose the combination that works best for them as long as they can produce the required work on time. Other roles, particularly the technical production positions, have had a different relationship with technology.

Technology has had a more direct impact on the technical production roles, threatening their future and leading to reskilling and up-skilling by the creators (Green, 2006; Wallace, 2013). The time-intensive manual

methods have been replaced by digital production, making the creator more efficient:

> A letterer might have needed a few days to letter a comic, but now he needs just a few hours. (Marvel Letterer 3)

Inkers, colourists, and letterers appear most vulnerable to the type of job disappearance that Sperlich (2011) found in the movie industry, where roles for assistant editors and camera operators declined. It is not that their roles will be removed from comics, but that digital technology will make it easier for one individual to perform multiple roles. As Deuze (2009) found, staff journalists were concerned that new technology would lead to the decline of specialist journalists in favour of more generalist reporters. Singer (2011) also found that the multi-skilled journalist, who understands a much wider range of media "languages" such as text, images, and sound, has become more desirable. Challenging the view that their role may become obsolete, technical workers in comics relied on a discourse of creativity to generate an optimistic outlook for their future:

> I don't worry about lettering becoming obsolete because the craft is much more than placing text on a page. There's a certain degree of storytelling to it that requires a human element, especially in the way I approach my lettering work. I do see it becoming easier for people to do with new technology, but the best lettering will always have that something special that only the man using the machine can provide. (Marvel Letterer 3)

Here, creativity is seen as an essential part of their identity, as the creator focuses on their active contribution to storytelling in the comic. This is despite the historical status of many craft roles as purely

production roles and not creative. The idea that their role could become obsolete, as technology continues to change and improve, was refuted on the basis of their identity as *creative* workers. As the extract highlights, creativity is seen as something inherent to people and technology is a tool to help facilitate that creativity, not replace it.

While this frames the role as protected from pure automation, it does not account for the sort of job erosion due to multiskilling that has been seen in other industries. Inking appears particularly vulnerable to multiskilling because “many Pencillers do the job of the Inkers as well, therefore completing the whole process, so this means less work for specialised Inkers like myself” (Marvel Inker 2). To address this threat, creators focused not only on their creativity, but also a discourse of specialisation. Specialists hold theoretical and technical knowledge that makes it difficult for other artists to produce the same quality of work:

> As for the role of a colourist being obsolete, I've worked with enough pencilers and inkers to know that not all of them have an understanding of light let alone colour. (Marvel Colourist 2.1)

> It’s not to say that my role will never be obsolete, but people who appreciate art can understand that inking is still an art that can be best achieved with a skilled hand. (Marvel Inker 1)

For the respondents, their identity is built on their specialist knowledge and understanding of their role. Colouring has benefited the most from advances in digital technology. As one colourist described the change:

> Technology created my job. Prior to technology, color wasn't really considered as art (and in some places it's still not, sadly). Once Photoshop came around and opened up potential for color

> and the internet made it possible to download and upload files instead of FedExing CDs or DVDs, it again changed the life of color artists. Now, I wasn't coloring prior to Photoshop or the internet so I wouldn't say my personal experience has changed but I'm more than aware how much it changed the industry so people like me could be color artists. (Thrillbent Colourist 1.1)

Improved production and reproduction technology has allowed colour artists to continually up-skill to provide more advanced services, increasing the importance of their role to the production process. Letterers have also reskilled, expanding their services from lettering the books to creating their own fonts and logos as well as becoming more involved in the overall design and composition of the comic.

Creators experience benefits from digital technology, but they also face similar tensions in their identity that Klein-Avraham and Reich (2014) found in photojournalists. Their creativity is devalued and there is a view that their subtle skills of expertise have been replaced by crude skills that anyone can do and are therefore not as valuable (Klein-Avraham and Reich 2014). Production workers have experienced this devaluing, with reduced time and money allocated to their role:

> Technology has made the work easier and less time-consuming, but unfortunately it also really compressed the deadlines and lowered rates for a lot of freelance artists. (Marvel Letterer 3)

> The misconception that coloring takes no time at all can be taxing. (I'm sure letterers have the same issue.) Yeah, we can color a page faster than it takes to pencil or ink one but it's still not instantaneous. The misconception that Photoshop does all the work compounds the problem, too. Because of this notion our

> time and art form can be devalued which makes doing our best not always possible in order to meet the ship date, the monster of all deadlines. Granted, a good editor will pad deadlines to help avoid that scenario but sometimes it's just not in the cards. (Nolan Woodard quoted in O'Shea, 2012)

Organisations seize the opportunity to support new technologies when they lead to increased efficiency and opportunities to cut costs (Jones and Salter, 2012). These efficiencies do not result in more time to do the work, but redundancies, re-skilling or a redistribution of time to an increased amount of tasks (Jones and Salter, 2012). This causes tension in the creator's identity, where the artistic identity wishes to spend more time to produce good work, while the commercial identity recognises the importance of meeting deadlines to appease clients and ensure the creator continues to receive work.

Understanding these roles is important because many of the digital comics have added new technical roles to the production process. Marvel utilise layout artists as an intermediary step between the writer and the penciller and Madefire similarly uses builders, individuals who compile the motion book and are responsible for the animations and transitions. The individuals in these roles had animation degrees and experience working on early experimental digital comics, which provided them with specialist knowledge, such as animation techniques, crucial to the digital formats. I had limited access to these new technical creators, but there did appear to be tension between how they wanted their role to be perceived and socialised and how the publishers were socialising their role. Creators in these new roles hoped they "may be recognized and hired for our work as Builders like Comic artists and writers are today" (Madefire Builder 1). The builders are responsible for deconstructing the artists work to allow for animation and their experience as artists is necessary to allow the builder to mimic the

artists style when an animated scene requires extra background detail or a figure requires additional art (Buckley in Madefire, 2013c). The builder's contribution can be scene in Figure 7:

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Figure 7 Comparison between Character art and final Madefire build. On the left the original character art by Gary Erskine. On the right the expanded character with the fill-in art drawn by builder Kevin Buckley.

Source: http://www.madefire.com/blog/2013/02/21/the-making-of-houses-of-the-holy-ep-2-once-upon-a-time/ (accessed 6 May 2015)

The creator views the role as a vital, specialist part of the production process, yet the publisher has characterised the role as a stopgap to cover a lack of skills and knowledge held by writers and artists. Madefire's editor Ben Abernathy explained the company's long-term goal, in regards to building, is "to allow the creators to do all of this stuff themselves, at some point" (Cecchini, 2012). Whether this future eventuates is unclear. Madefire have taken on increasing amounts of remediation work, digitising previously printed material as motion books, which would require builders. Either way the comments made by the publisher can impact the ability of the builders to develop their identity

as comic book workers by devaluing their role and socialising the industry to view their contribution as temporary.

The growth in professional digital production technology, increased pool of talent for digital projects, and new business models of digital comic book publishers were viewed with some resistance from creators. The global pool of new talent competes with the existing creators for the limited number of paid positions. There is also a blurring of the line between professional and amateur because of the business models of digital publishers like Madefire, with Chapter Five showing the importance of user-generated content to their future operations. These amateurs have access to the professional tools, yet according to the creators do not have the skills and knowledge to use them, leading to an increase in poorer quality work when judged against the professionals' norms of good work. In reaction to these developments the existing creators negatively socialise the impact of digital technology, which impacts on their *professional* comics identity:

> The market right now seems to be full of colourists, due to availability of Photoshop. It has allowed anybody regardless of skill to get work. Companies can pay them less (and do). In a battle of quality over bottom line, bottom line always wins. So you'll see companies keep a hand full of 'top colourists' to put on their top profile books. Then the rest goes to the cheapest rates. (Marvel Colourist, 2.1)

> Unfortunately in many respects the digital revolution has resulted in a nosedive in quality across the board, as now everyone with access to Photoshop thinks they are a creative professional. I have an oven, I'm quite a good cook, but I don't delude myself into thinking I'm a chef. Great work is still great work, but advances in digital production and distribution have given rise to

> a depressingly large amount of amateurish material. (Madefire Artist 1.1)

These ‘amateurish’ creators cause tension because the creator’s identity is realised not only through their own work, but the work of others who all contribute to the image of the profession. While the Internet has made it easier for anyone to produce content, and this is a great benefit, the increase in competition causes tension with established creators’ personal values and artistic tastes. This is not to say that existing professionals should be protected, but that they may have real concerns relating to the status of their job and profession in the face of more user-generated content. One of the contributing factors to the crash of the North American video game industry in 1983 was the loosening of restrictions on third party game development and a loss of publishing control, which led to the market being flooded with second rate material. Opening up markets to new creators is a positive, but if the content does not meet the professional standards of the industry or offer new, innovative ideas then it can damage consumer confidence and impact the overall health of the industry. Further exploring the role of user-generated content and the professional-amateur identification is out of the scope of this thesis but warrants more research in the future. Survival is already a difficult proposition in the comic book industry with creators experiencing freelancer fear and it would be valuable to explore how professional comic book creators differentiate their work from amateurs or users and what role new digital formats have in aiding professionals to standout.

7.5 New Digital Production

This section focuses on how the creators understand the changes in norms and routines and present their talk as a form of socialisation and identity management. The way the pioneers socialise the new production routines and norms associated with the digital formats

influences the way the digital comic format develops. They are filtering the changes through their own experiences and socialising the changes to other creators based on their own understanding of how they align with their core identity. The pioneers direct the investment of human capital and direct the development of the domain of knowledge necessary for other creators to function in the emerging digital community of practice.

7.5.1 A Reconceptualisation of Time

Chapters Three and Four showed how time is an important consideration for comic book workers. Time separates the freelance creators from the salaried organisation workers, with the freelancers relying on their speed as a core survival skill in the comic book industry. Deadlines also constrain the creators and restrict the amount of time they have to complete their work. Their experiences in print have socialised the creators to the professional norms, which oblige creators to work long hours. The pioneers' socialisation process for digital comics maintains the focus on time, but also acknowledges the impact the format's changes have on work processes. Creators need to be prepared to spend more time on the digital projects to learn the new language of digital comics while still meeting the publisher's deadlines.

The pioneer creators experienced a disconnection between their anticipation of socialisation and their actual experience on the digital projects because their expectations were based on their work in print. They expected the digital projects to require a similar amount of time as their print work, but this was not the case:

> It takes longer than a regular book. Going in, I didn't realize how much more time it would take from start to finish. (Marvel Writer 2)

This increased time is influenced by the back-and-forth collaboration of the art team. One participant explained that the process involves the comic moving from the writer to the layout artist, back to the writer and then to the penciller, inker, colourist, letterer and digital production team (Marvel Writer 1). Experimentation with distribution, such as weekly releases, has also led to more work. The publishers then implement art teams to meet the deadlines following Marvel's CB Cebulski's claim that modern artists struggle to meet the existing monthly print production schedule. Marvel and DC interchange the art teams on their longer series, with *Iron Man: Fatal Frontier* utilising as many as 17 different people across the role of penciller, inker, layout artist, and colourist.

This increased workload has forced the pioneer creators, particularly the writers, to readjust their norms for what the art team can achieve by the given deadline. Artists are encouraged to draw in layers, allowing the technical workers to manipulate the different elements to give the image a sense of motion. Figure 8 displays the various layers necessary to animate the opening of a mouth in Madefire series *Houses of the Holy*.

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Figure 8 Separated art layers from *Houses of the Holy: Episode 2* in Photoshop before being imported into the Madefire tool. Art by Dave Kendall. Published by Madefire.

Source: http://www.madefire.com/blog/2013/02/21/the-making-of-houses-of-the-holy-ep-2-once-upon-a-time/ (accessed 6 May 2015)

Detailed scenes not only require the drawing of many layers, but the artist must also draw all the backgrounds behind a particular character as well. One artist equated it to about 30 more drawings requiring many 14-hour days to meet the production schedule (DC Artist 4). The extra work required by the artists meant the writers had to adjust their expectations to form a successful collaboration:

> The best way to think about it for me is to figure out that print page and then reverse it out in certain parts. Because you don't want to make a ton of work for your artist. They only have so much time and can't spend it all drawing multiple versions of one scene. (Jeff Parker in Phegley, 2013)

> The downside I found is that even a seemingly minor change to a single panel results in disproportionately more work for the artistic team. That's a big part of why we took the hiatus—penciler/inker Cecilia Latella and colorist Jenn Manley Lee were perfectly diligent on their end, but I underestimated the workload implications of the swipes and so the prodigious number of swipes per issue simply meant we had more screens than they could execute in a given week. (Jonathan Larsen in Means-Shannon, 2014)

The pioneer creators' freedom on the digital projects, like their work on print comics, is a negotiated autonomy because they work as part of a team. To successfully produce good work the creators must renegotiate their understanding of the collaborative process and their roles and expectations within the process.

The increased work has also led to a change in the creator's professional norms:

> Overall I definitely think it's more time consuming as far as the entirety of the production process for me, but we decided that pushing the capabilities of how the comic was read and experimenting was really important, so we've played around with it in every chapter. (Thrillbent Artist 1)

This renegotiation of professional norms in light of changes to the production routine has been found in the change to digital journalism (Agarwal, 2013; Cassidy, 2005; Steensen, 2009). Creators adopt new ways of evaluating their work, and their identity, in light of the changing work conditions and values. The digital creators justify the extra time required because they value using the capabilities of the format and experimenting with the new storytelling techniques. This becomes part of their desire to do good work, because digital comics not only need a good story, characters and art, but a good understanding of the digital platform and its storytelling techniques.

7.5.2 A Stable Core

Highlighting the continued importance of norms relating to good work, such as a good story and characters, demonstrates how digital work can remain a familiar experience for creators. This familiarity was based on the creators' reliance on a stable set of core identity characteristics, an idea introduced in Chapter Four, which are still relevant to the digital comics identity. The creators alter their norms and values to take advantage of the new opportunities, such as dedicating more time to learning and utilising the digital storytelling techniques. Following Bridgstock's (2013) notion of adaptive identity, they also rely on a stable core to help them manage this period of transition; to essentially help them maintain their sense of self. The extracts below highlight the continuance of these core identity features:

> On the whole, it doesn't really differ--stories are stories. (Thrillbent Writer 1)

> I'd say good storytelling comes first. Readers shouldn't notice the fancy transitions. (Geoffo quoted in Thomas, 2014b)

> Really at the bottom line It's all about story for me regardless of platform – if you can keep the reader invested and enjoying the experience then that's the game and I'm enjoying the different tools that digital comics allow you to do that with. (Fin Cramb quoted in Thomas, 2014c)

These core identity features relate to the creators identity as communicators and storytellers. For these creators, storytelling becomes part of their core values and their sense of self, guiding their work regardless of whether they are working on print comics or digital comics. For this reason working digitally can feel the same. A digital comic requires a good story, compelling characters, and engaging dialogue just as much as a print comic does.

While the adaptive identity revealed the continuance of certain norms, related to doing good work, the creators' talk also contained a warning. They talked about the temptation to stray from the core of their identity and become too involved in the new, peripheral elements. This talk was targeted at both the audience and other creators, who, following the relational discourse from the previous chapter, need to be socialised to the idea that digital offers opportunities to explore new tools and techniques, but that exploration should not come at the expense of a good story:

> It is about story, make no mistake, some people will only see the crash, bang and wallop, it's natural, some will like and some most definitely will not, but the key thing is to set aside your preconceptions about tablet/device driven comics/visual storytelling and concentrate on STORY…..I honestly believe, that in an increasingly complex and confusing market, with so many digital formats vying for attention that the real job is often overshadowed. Our job is to tell stories, the best stories we can,

> in as interesting and imaginative a way as possible. (Broxton in Madefire, 2013)

The extract shows that while the creators may invest human capital, to learn the new skills needed for the digital formats, and the pioneers may talk of freedom and exploration, certain traditional norms remain intact that must be respected to produce good work. The maintenance of these traditional norms also makes the transition easier, because it socialises creators to view digital comics as an extension of the creator's existing identity and not something that is completely new or requiring a disregard for their prior experiences and understandings.

7.5.3 A Continuing Business Model

The maintenance of existing business models also created a feeling of familiarity in the experience and routines of certain creators. As Chapter Five discussed, publishers are approaching digital distribution and business models in a number of ways to address digital's uncertainty and risk. One model, where content is published digitally and in print, places constraining structures on the creator. DC Comics utilises this model with their DC Squared line and these continuing ties to print have placed restrictions on the creators' creative freedom and made the experience feel similar to print:

> [Work-for-hire project] is not DC squared exclusive so I have to layout the comic for print in mind first. This is pretty much like doing layouts for any other print comic with the exception of having to divide every page in half to accommodate for the eventual DC squared layout. Every digital page is exactly half of the print page, which means I can never use a middle tier for panels. This makes page composition rather limited and I've been pushing myself to use more creative layouts to break up the monotony. (DC Artist 2)

> The trick is to think of the endpoint in whatever extra beats you put in so it still works for the print page. The best way to think about it for me is to figure out that print page and then reverse it out in certain parts. (Jeff Parker quoted in Phegley, 2013)

The publisher's decision allowed them to maintain control of the way creators worked on the digital projects. Creators could not fully explore the capabilities of the digital format because they needed to ensure the content would easily transition to print. It was this consideration for the comic's eventual printing that led artist Colleen Coover to avoid the temptation of overindulging in digital techniques:

> I kept it pretty simple. I mean a lot, a lot of the interactivity if you mess with it too much it would be really irritating…because when we're drawing it, Jonathan has figured this out as well, when we're drawing it we also have to think about it has to work as a printed page too. (Thompson, 2013)

For Coover, the urge to fully explore the new possibilities offered by digital was tempered by the publisher's demand that the comic also work as a printed book. While DC dictated the creators' experience from the start they were not the only ones to maintain the connection between the new digital formats and the print business model. Working on a creator-owned project, an artist explained that the production process:

> Doesn't differ that much. As the option to go to print is still very strong I design the panels etc with a view to print. (Madefire Artist 2)

The continuing pursuit of a viable digital business model has also seen digital-first publisher Thrillbent announce deals to print their content after the digital projects had been finished. When Thrillbent creators Mark Waid and Christina Blanch announced the print collections of their comics they described the move as being driven by their 'love of print' (IDW, 2014; Wickline, 2014). The decision was also more practically driven by a desire to reduce the risk associated with the new digital business model. As Waid stated, "I don't see a point at which there is one revenue stream for Thrillbent" (Alverson, 2012). Being a good comic book publisher or creator in the new digital economy means having your content available in a number of formats, on a number of platforms and at varying price points to spread the risk across.

This shift in the policy of the publishers can create difficulties for creators who approached the new digital formats with a digital-first philosophy. As Mark Waid explained, there were specific reasons they initially opted to remove the focus on print and digital compatibility in the production process:

> When I started out with this idea over a year ago, I still had in the back of my head that we would be doing print comics out of digital comics fairly easily. I wanted to do comics in a 4/3 ratio so we could stack one on another and make a comics page. Trying not to do in digital what I can't do in print was such a bad mistake. If you're going to do it, do it right, go all in, is what I learned. That was a hard leap to make, but once I made it, it was very liberating. It made me a lot less cautious, and it narrowed my focus so I no longer had to feel that I was serving both masters, print and digital. Then being able to use different techniques like rack focus, repeating panels, pop-up dialogue, that you can't do in print becomes a reality, and it made us all the more adventuresome—I don't mean just me, I mean my

> collaborators. I made the mandate fairly early on: Don't worry about print; we'll figure it out later. (Alverson, 2012)

For Waid, the dual focus on print and digital created tension in the production and restraint on the team's creativity. Moving away from print allows the creators to experiment with new production norms and practices, which help to generate new storytelling and creative possibilities. Freeing themselves from the need to print the comic also allowed the creators' to distance their projects from the other digital comic work, which they viewed as simply remediated print work. Artist Reilly Brown characterised the view as:

> You have to show people what makes this something special that they can't get anywhere else. If we did this in a way that was easily translated into print, people would be asking why we didn't just do it in print? So to me, one of the specific goals of this project was to show people things that can't be shown in print. To really be true to the medium that we're exploring, and make as much use of what works well digitally as we can. (Thomas, 2014a)

However, this decision to pursue purely digital production made the process of transferring the comic to print a difficult one. The unique features that digital production allows the creator to use do not transfer to print and the process has been challenging with the creators going back over the comic to provide the same story in a different reading experience. The move to print not only forms part of the attempt to protect the investments of capital made in digital by providing another avenue to generate revenue, but it also forms part of the discourse process introduced in Chapter Five. As the individualisation of risk makes the creator responsible for their own career and success in the industry it is important during this early stage that the digital industry

does not cannibalise print and reduce the overall revenue of the industry. By embracing print and the existing industry structure the creators maintain their important relationships with their retail partners and print fans, contributing to their ongoing management of the risk of a creative career.

7.5.4 A Development of New Conventions

It is the development of new digital conventions that makes the transition back to print difficult. These conventions relate to the production of the content, where standards are created in relation to size, vocabulary, collaboration, etc., and the storytelling, where new understandings of rhythm, scene composition, and visual storytelling are developed. The pioneer creators benefit from the absence of convention yet also take on the role of establishing the conventions others will be socialised to.

Chapter Six discussed the importance of conventions for managing the expectations of the audience. Creators also rely on conventions because they provide a guide for production, ensuring each new production does not need to create new tools and understandings every time (Becker, 1982). This structuring aspect of conventions has been viewed negatively by creators, with Fulton and McIntyre finding that print journalism is often viewed as less ‘artistic’ than other media professions due to the view that it is “overwhelmingly constrained by rules and conventions, or structures, giving little license for a journalist to exercise agency” (2013, 18). Under this perspective the structures of the industry restrict the ability of journalists to make creative choices. Fulton and McIntyre argue this is a rather Romantic view of creativity and media production, which has been countered by the more rationalist view that creativity is always embedded in structures. Creators have spoken of the freedom from restraint in relation to digital comics, casting them as:

> You want to know why I love digital comics, or our own special brand of Motion books? Because there are no rules; Because this is a new country; Because it's exciting, and terrifying, and we don't have all the solutions or answers. We don't know what the optimal experience is. We're inventing it as we go. How can that NOT be inspiring? (Sharp, 2013)

By highlighting the benefits of artistic freedom the creators justify the existence of the new formats, highlighting the way they can improve on print comics. In exploring this freedom and inventing as they go the creators in turn develop the conventions specific to this format for both the storytelling and the production.

While the pioneer creators drive the development of the new conventions they are also guided by the structures of the emerging digital industry. One major aspect of the digital first philosophy is the emphasis on the landscape format instead of print's portrait orientation. Creator's found it took time to adapt to the new format:

> It changes the pacing. A standard page on a Thrillbent comic is only one to three panels where I'm used to having five or even in some cases six or seven. That was a bit of a learning curve that my artist thankfully helped with. I was writing it with so many panels on each screen and Jeremy reconfigured it and made it much better. Now I'm realizing what it looks like when he formats it so I can write towards it. (James Tynion IV in Johnston, 2013)

> From my point of view, yes – visualizing a page in a landscape format is different from imagining it in a portrait one, especially when you have to fit three panels in it, as it's usual for *The*

> *Endling*. You can play only that much with verticality and top-to-bottom tricks. Instead, you have to learn to think in a more tracking shot way. (Cecilia Latella in Thomas, 2013b)

The creator must shift their mindset, from print to digital, to adapt to the new convention of the landscape screen. The digital publishers place structures on the pioneers, but they have the agency to experiment and explore how landscape digital storytelling works.

By exploring and developing the new digital conventions the work of the pioneers is beneficial to other creators, because it helps to socialise them to the new way of working and acts as a guide for their investment of human capital. It shows them what skills and techniques are necessary for these new formats. For instance, Thrillbent artist Jeremy Rock developed a detailed breakdown of the swipe and layering method of Thrillbent storytelling, which has been distributed to other creators and posted on the Thrillbent website. Rock explained the reasons why he developed the article:

> We didn't really have a clear example of where to go with it. Because all of the stuff Balak did that inspired like the primary core of, of sort of my beliefs I guess with this stuff, was really loose framework and ideas and there wasn't really a clear template, like that was reproducible that anybody can pick up and run with. And in my mind I wanted to sort of develop that to make it easier to be explored further and after playing around with that article and seeing like, oh there are, there's like a clear cut approach here I'm surprised. I was surprised there was that much there but I felt it was important to share because and you never know, the Internet anybody anywhere can read basically anything. I always had it like in the back of my head, if I ever got the opportunity to help anybody else out with anything,

> opportunity wise, I would cause I know the struggle of trying to get somewhere, anywhere. Just a scrap. Um my hope is people ya know look at some of that stuff, maybe they don't like all of it but there's bits and pieces they can take. Expand and build their own thing from. I mean that would, that's the best I think ah that could come of that or I'd feel almost satisfied cause of that. (Making Comics, 2014)

Here the extract shows that the development of the conventions benefits other creators and Rock himself. Developing the framework for his process acted as a form of reflection. As Mead (1934) argued, identity is a continuous process constructed through interactions and reflections, while McNay (1999) argues that identity is influenced by reflections on the past and anticipations of the future. In reflecting on the process Rock provided clarity to his identity, seeing the existence of a more distinct digital comics identity by recognising a clear approach to digital comic storytelling. Further, the process of reflection also revealed that the establishment of conventions does not constrain the creator. Instead, these emerging conventions or structures are intended to provide creators with the basis to explore the medium's creative potential. As Giddens' (1979) structuration thesis argues, structures, such as traditions, institutions, and other established ways of doing things, can place constraints on action, but those structures can also enable action through the provision of a common framework for meaning. Within those structures the individual can have agency and in turn alter the overriding structures of the industry. The routines and conventions of Rock's production model provide a common framework so others do not need to reinvent the process, but instead work to change or improve it.

The other key theme of the above extract is the positive feeling the creator had through developing the conventions for other creators to

use. Helping other creators to succeed in the industry was a common theme amongst the creators at the industry panels on breaking in. The creators wanted to see 'good' and creative people in the industry and actively helped other creators to succeed. This same idea is found in the above extract. As the creator stated, he would be pleased if someone used his guide to expand on and build their own comics. He recognises his role as a pioneer creator and the opportunity he has to shape the future development of the industry through developing the initial structures that orient the new formats. For the pioneer creator, the establishment of the conventions and the opportunity to help others becomes a professional norm the creator values.

The establishment of conventions involves not only the development of storytelling techniques, but also a shared vocabulary. Vocabularies become a resource for communities of practice, part of the shared understanding of how to do things (Smith, 2003). The new digital comics require a new vocabulary as part of the developing shared repertoire, which conveys the accumulated knowledge or developing tacit knowledge (Gravengaard, 2012) of the digital comic community. This vocabulary is developed in practice, reflecting the creators' growing understanding of the digital comic format. The creators talk of swipes, transitions, screens, and scenes while more animation heavy digital comics are referred to as episodes. We can see the way this vocabulary is developed in practice in the following extract:

> I started calling, well…I started calling them swipe effects…everybody kept saying swipes over and over, 'oh we'll swipe here on the screen and this will pop-in' and I just, to keep my own head organised because I have to constantly think about where everything needs to go I didn't really know what to do besides start labelling stuff with some, whatever word was close by. I mean it'll probably, the language will I think change over the

> years and evolve and somebody will probably nail down some cool sounding words but for right now I mean that's pretty much what I go with, some sort of swiping technique or something. (Making Comics, 2014)

By developing a new vocabulary, to explain the conventions, the creators are able to engage with the dichotomy of the rear view mirror of print comics. While stressing the similarities to print comics was important for gaining acceptance, the new digital comics also have to justify their existence as a new form of storytelling. By removing the language of comics production (pages and panels) and embracing the digital vocabulary (sequences, screens, layers, and transitions) the creators are encouraged to think in fresh ways. Section 7.5.5 further explores the process of adaptation for comic book creators where, according to Madefire founder Liam Sharp (Gillete, 2012), there is tension between the maintenance of the creator's core identity as a comic book creator and the need to shed certain understandings of storytelling when working on digital comics.

Developing a vocabulary also allows the creator to organise their understanding of the format and their approach. Artist Jeremy Rock further broke down the swipe vocabulary to include seven specific types of swipe[38], which infer a particular type of action in the comic. The organisational role of a shared vocabulary benefits not only the individual, but reflects the team-based, complex production of comic book work. A shared vocabulary provides structure to the production experience for those creators working across multiple projects. Writer Jonathan Larsen discussed the process:

[38] The seven swipes include: action swipes, traditional swipes, full screen swipes, alternating swipes, isolation swipes, inset swipes, letter swipes.

> We did go through a bit of evolution with Mark and Thrillbent in which I had to reformat the scripts multiple times as the creative team and the Thrillbent folks all gelled around one style of script – if only so that the folks working on multiple series (like Lori Matsumoto and Troy Peteri) wouldn't have to deal with a different format for every series they did. This was a pain in the butt for sure, but one of those where the merits of going through it were obvious and inescapable. (Thomas, 2013b)

The digital vocabulary provides structure for the creative workers and the other members of the emerging field. Importantly, the emerging vocabulary also forms part of the discourses of digital comics by highlighting the tension between familiarity and novelty in digital storytelling. Here adhering too closely to the rear view mirror of print and its conventions can be a constraint. The development of a digital vocabulary demonstrates how the new formats move away from those perceived constraints, as discussed in the extracts below from writers Jason Latour and Mark Waid:

> So far writing an Infinite Comic has been a much less rigid of a process. It's still very beautifully tied to pictures and words, but it's less concerned with several images working in harmony. It doesn't eliminate page composition, as you can still have as many images as a frame can hold, but it allows you to break out of it. That gives us the ability to create the illusion of time or motion, and allows us to make the environment a very active part of the story. (Ching, 2013)

> When I'm writing a comic the only place I can surprise you, as a reader, is right here in the upper left-hand corner when you turn the page because if you're, even if you've got tunnel vision, even if you're turning the page and just looking to, you're still seeing

> what's happening here. The corner of your eye is still seeing what's happening over here. So, this is the only place I get to surprise you like, once every ya know turn of the page but with a digital comic with each screen swipe, with each new screen I can throw something new at you, I can have some new surprising element happen and that affects the flow of the story. (GeekExchange, 2012)

In removing ties to print, these creators are able to explore new narrative and storytelling possibilities for the comic book format. While these creators embrace the new vocabulary, as they fully embrace the format's narrative potential, the tension exists on those projects that are also intended for print. Creators continue to talk of the page, panels, page layout, panel composition, and the page turns in regard to digital comics. The shared print vocabulary aids those creators who are working on digital-print projects, but its maintenance reveals the conflicts in production where the creator must marry the digital format to the existing print structure. One artist highlighted the tensions between the two formats because the tablet screen is smaller than a printed page and cannot display two-pages at once in the same way a printed comic can (DC Artist 2). Adhering to the shared vocabulary can magnify the differences between the formats and the restrictions close ties to print place on creators.

Overcoming and exploring restrictions is part of the routine of comic book workers and their identity. These restrictions are related to industrial factors, including the number of pages, page size, editorial influence, sales statistics, and strict production deadlines, which can lead to comprise by the creative team to make a more profitable comic (Bongco, 2000; Duncan and Smith, 2009). The formal properties of the medium, such as the relationship with the reader, the focus on selected moments in representation, the conflict between words and images,

displaying action and motion in a static medium, and the use of the page as a storytelling tool also place constraints on creativity (Bonco, 2000; Duncan and Smith, 2009; Potsch and Williams, 2012). Digital presents its own limitations, like the removal of two-page splash pages[39], the size of the reading device, and the landscape format limits the ability of creators to expand the page vertically. Adapting to limitations is engrained in the creators' identity and the vocabulary utilised by the creators on the digital projects highlights the way the creators address and manage these limitations. In exploring the limitations of the digital format the pioneers also developed an appreciation for certain aspects of the print format:

> There are still plenty of things you can do IN print that you can't do in digital--bigger pictures, bigger visual impact. (Waid quoted in Zalben, 2012b)

> When I started working on Saint George, after spending so much time in the digital realm, a funny thing happened– I started to appreciate the printed page more than I had in the past, and had a great desire to make use of the things that I could do in print that I can't do as well digitally. Things like interesting page designs, or double page spreads. (Reilly Brown quoted in Federali, 2014)

The pioneers focus on digital first comics, building stories that are designed for the digital formats, also applies to print. Through the additive discourse the creators not only want digital and print to co-exist for business and consumption reasons, but also because it allows the creators to choose the right format for the story they want to tell.

[39] Splash pages are generally a single image or scene that take up an entire page or two-page spread to capture the reader's attention.

7.5.5 A Revitalisation of Older Practices

Periods of media change introduce new norms and practices (see Agarwal and Barthel, 2013 and Parmelee, 2013), but digital comic production has also focused on the remediation of an older set of norms and practices. Plot-first or Marvel Method production, popularised by Marvel creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, has regained popularity on the digital projects. The writer develops a plot outline instead of detailed scripts allowing the artist freedom to determine how the comic realises the plot, including greater control over the visual storytelling of the comic. The writer then adds the dialogue after the art has been finished. The presence of the Marvel Method in digital production not only demonstrates how new formats remediate old practices, but it also highlights how certain established norms and understandings of comic book production, including power, control, and collaboration, are challenged by digitisation.

Marvel and Thrillbent writer Mark Waid provided an example (see Figure 9) of the differences in the full-script method used on print and the Marvel Method inspired model used on the new digital projects.

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Figure 9 Marvel Infinite and Print Comic Script Comparison. The top half is a script for the print comic *Daredevil* #10, which provides clearer instructions. The bottom script is from the digital comics *Avengers vs. X-Men* #1 and has a more conversational tone that invites the artist to determine the scenes.

Source: http://markwaid.com/digital/writing-for-digital-part-one/ (accessed 6 May 2015)

Full-script production places more control with the writer who fully develops the story, outlines the composition of the page to control the narrative pacing, and develops detailed panel descriptions for the artist. Marvel Method production sees the writer relinquish some of this power and control to the artist to determine the pacing and flow of the narrative. As writer Peter David explained, “with the Marvel style, the artist has greater freedom to bring elements in terms of visualisation that might not have occurred to me” (Duncan and Smith, 2009, 114). The artist gains more freedom and agency within the structure of the writer’s plot although this demands an artist competent in storytelling and narrative pacing and risks a disconnect between the art and the writer’s dialogue.

Full-script and Marvel Method production reveal the importance of control and power within collaboration, with certain methods of production favouring the artist or writer. As William Messner-Loebs, who worked as both an artist and a writer, explained, “When I’m the artist, I like Marvel style. When I’m the writer, I like full-scripts. Control, that’s my bag!” (Duncan and Smith, 2009, 114). The different production routines favour one creator over the other and the pioneers are using the socialisation process to establish that different formats favour one production routine over another.

To establish the necessity of the shift in production during this period of change creators rely on the discourse of collaborative digital production. Writer Mark Waid explained digital work is:

> A much more collaborative process, and it involves the artist taking much more control over the pacing of the story than he does in normal print comics. But I'm fine with that. I think as we're all learning how to do this and use the tools, it needs to be more collaborative. (Phegley, 2012a)

Emphasising the collaboration is important because digital forces writers who have only ever worked in full-script to work Marvel style. This clashes with their norms and their existing identity as a comic book writer, which has been influenced by writers such as Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman whose use of detailed full-scripts "contributed to reemphasizing narrative elements in contemporary comics" (Round, 2010, 21). Writers Rob Williams and Joshua Hale Fialkov explained the experience of working on a Marvel Infinite project:

> I wasn't sure though. I've written full script for about 10 years and I didn't like the idea of suddenly losing the ability to detail the individual visuals. (Williams in Richards, 2014)

> The format was a big challenge for me, because I think of so much of what our job is as comic writers is pacing. And, we're ceding pacing to our collaborators and to our readers in a very... unique way. (Fialkov in Arrant, 2014)

The writers relinquish a degree of control to the artist by allowing them a more central role in developing the visual storytelling of the comic. The writer also moves from controlling the production timeline, with less deadline pressure, to relying on the art team to allow them enough time to write the dialogue before the deadline (Gillen, 2013). This forces the writer to place a higher degree of trust in their collaborators and alters the power relationship in the production network. Mark Waid described the process on the first Infinite Comic *Nova* as:

> I didn't want Stuart (Immomen) to feel like his hands were tied. I wanted him to really be able to experiment with the flow of it and

> the staging and really take control of the story on a visual level. (Phegley, 2012a)

This change in control and collaboration requires the writer to rethink the way they approach comic book storytelling. Rob Williams again explains:

> It makes you concentrate more on the major character beats and character arcs. You have to leave the visual storytelling to the artists. (Richards, 2014)

By altering the writer's practices digital comics place value in different aspects of the work. Socialising creators to the new production process and the benefits of this model is important given the discourse of experience utilised by the creators. The discourse of experience was utilised by those comic book writers who define themselves as relatively new to the comic book industry. It can be seen in the following extracts:

> I'm actually pretty new to writing comics - I co-wrote an obscure book called Rant with my old buddy JG Jones, and then recently did two Batman stories for DC's Legends of the Dark Knight series - so the transition hasn't been as jarring as it might've been if I were more experienced. (Jonathan Larsen quoted in Means Shannon, 2014)

> In some ways I suppose I had an advantage as I wasn't always bedded to the traditional comics 'style'. (Madefire Writer 1)

> The benefit is that I'm so new to writing comics that I'm just figuring out how to write print comics so it's not like I'm stuck in one mode. (Thrillbent Writer 2)

The creators' lack of experience in print comics meant they had not fully developed their identity as comic book workers or been completely socialised to a particular way of comic book production. As a result, they find the changes in the production practices more manageable. In particular, they have not been as socialised to the power and control in the collaborative relationship of comic book production as more experienced writers have.

Artists can gain more control on digital comics, but those projects involving the new technical roles can limit the artist's freedom. Artist Reilly Brown discussed how the experience of control or creative autonomy could differ on the digital projects:

> With the *AvX* story I did with Mark Waid a year and a half ago, the script was tight, and the story was actually already storyboarded by Yves Bigerel, so I just stuck to the decisions that were already made… Deadpool is somewhere in the middle. Gerry and Brian give me pretty loose plots to start from, which leave me plenty of room to do my thing, and then they go in afterwards and bring it all together with the final script. There's plenty of phone and e-mail conversation in between all this as well, but for the most they just trust me to kick ass on my end, and I trust them to kick ass on theirs. (Thomas, 2014a)

The layout artists and builders have power in the production network because their understanding of the digital medium gives them control over the implementation of the digital storytelling, such as when to pan

or zoom. The artist must learn to collaborate with the new technical roles, providing guidance as shown in Figure 9, but according to builder Kevin Buckley it is also important that you “follow your own vision” (Madefire, 2013c).

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Figure 10 Artist direction to Madefire Builders. Direction provided to builders by artist Gary Erskine in episode 4 of *The Irons*. Written by Haden Blackman. Published by Madefire

Source: http://www.madefire.com/blog/2013/05/17/the-making-of-the-irons-episode-4/ (accessed 6 May 2015)

The new members of the production process can place restrictions on the artist even when working in the Marvel Method. The artist loses control over an important aspect of the visual storytelling, the exact way the digital comic implements many of the new, innovative digital techniques. This demonstrates how digital comics adopt existing practices and change them due to the new industry structures, in this case a lack of required skills in the current workforce, to create new experiences. As stated earlier, it would be beneficial to further investigate the new production roles and their relationship with the existing creators to more accurately reveal their impact on comic book production.

The experience discourse was utilised more generally to explain changes in digital comic work practices. Artist Jeremy Rock discussed his own experience:

> The first thing I did for probably a month prior to even digging into *The Eighth Seal* was try to unlearn a lot of stuff because I spent, ya know, years and years and years trying to get good at print storytelling and try to find my own way in that. Ah with digital, with this kind of stuff I started to notice there's a lot of stuff I kinda need to unlearn because I need to make way for this other way of thinking. (Making Comics, 2014)

Rock's experience echoes the chapter's opening quote. Many of these creators are veterans of the comic book field who have developed tacit knowledge and command of the print comic domain of knowledge. The creators' stable core of print knowledge is beneficial, but there is the risk that it could become a constraint on their creativity. Madefire's Liam Sharp described this as the rule breaking nature of the pioneer creators:

> I think sometimes you have to break the rules sometimes to figure out why they're there in the first place. Particularly with what we're doing because if we didn't have the rule breaking then we'd end up with something way too static I think. Something that was a little bit insipid and not very inspired. (Wilk, 2014)

Sharp went on to describe how digital storytelling could reverse the flow of storytelling, introducing a narrative flow that progressed from bottom-right to top-left, yet that creative jump came from outside the domain of comic book knowledge. What this reveals is the potential for domain or media overreliance during periods of transition. Whereas Wimmer and Sitnikova (2012) found media worker's consumption of content was important to their identity, allowing them to acquire domain knowledge as well as understand tastes and trends, creative workers can also become constrained or overly reliant on that knowledge during periods of change. As layout artists JL Mast and Geoffo claim, the worst digital comics are those that "don't use the format enough. Don't play it safe! Don't think "print", think "screens"" (Perazza, 2014b).

7.5.6 A Contract With The Audience

Finally, it is necessary to revisit the role of the audience when looking at the socialisation of new conventions in digital comics. Chapter Six established the importance of the relationship with the audience to the creator's identity and how this relationship has structured the development of the new digital projects. The creator's understanding of who they are and what they do relies on the identification of the audience as readers, but digital provides new tools to control that relationship and explore the creative potential of digital comics by going beyond the remediation of print conventions.

Print comic books present content two-pages at a time yet comic book storytelling focuses on the individual panels, as well as the relationship between panels and the page. The readers' gaze is free to wander across those two-pages or back-and-forth between past and future pages because they are in control of the pace of consumption. The creator must try to control that freedom, guiding the reader within the narrative conventions of the printed comic. Creators design panels to guide the reader through the page in the order they intended and build narrative tension to the bottom right-hand panel before revealing the resolution on the next page. The creator must adapt to the constraints of the format, but digital provides new creative opportunities.

The discourse of digital comics in the previous chapter highlighted the way digital comics maintain the reader's control over the narrative progression. While this is the case the creator also gains greater control over the narrative leading to a sense of negotiated control between the reader and the creator. This negotiated control can lead to new storytelling conventions as discussed by artist Jeremy Rock and builder Cody Garcia:

> I mean the creators also have a chance to control things differently by, you can hold back more from the reader. The reader can sit and still control the image and sit and like look, they can take as long as they want on any of the screens or images they are looking at but now I think the, any of the creators or writers or artists or whatever they are, they have an opportunity to not let anybody know anything about what's happening next in any way, shape or form. (Making Comics, 2014)

> With the Madefire tool, we now have more control over the tone and development of a story through our desired timing of each

> panel entry and 'next panel' tap points. With traditional format comics and graphic novels, all the art is displayed at once. As you're frantically reading through to see the outcome, you can't help but notice, a page over, the final scene, where everyone dies! (Madefire, 2013b)

It is the exploration of these new possibilities, to control and direct the reader's attention more precisely with less concern about unwanted plot reveals that attracts the pioneer creators. Importantly this aids the socialisation process by providing an example of how the digital format aids storytelling without damaging the creator's core identity as comic book workers:

> Whether it's on the digital screen or the printed page it's comics if you decide the pace at which the story is told. If you're the one turning the page. If you're the one reading the words. The moment that you introduce sound effects or recorded dialogue or limited animation into that medium it transforms it. It's not fully comics anymore. (Mark Waid in Digital Comics Coalition, 2015)

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the pioneer creators' development of the new conventions, norms, and routines of digital comics. It has shown that the pioneer creators soon introduce the very structures and conventions, whose absence initially appealed to the pioneers. The pioneers' digital discourses and practice guide the socialisation process for other creators. Developing these conventions was seen not as constraining to the pioneers, but in fact a positive aspect of their work. They enjoyed helping others to succeed and, more importantly, it allowed them to better understand the format and their own work.

The socialisation process of the pioneer creators also revealed the importance of the creator's core identity features, such as their relationship with their audience and identity as storytellers, to address potential tensions caused by the new routines and practices of digital comics. Digital comic production is not an entirely new process, but instead a careful balance between traditional and new practices. It is not a revolution but an evolution, which builds on the understandings and traditions of print while exploring new narrative and storytelling opportunities. Creators rely on their core identity as comic book workers to maintain a sense of belonging and identification even as they create autonomous spaces to explore and challenge the boundaries of the comic book medium.

Chapter 8 Conclusion: Technological Change and the Management of Risk by Comics Creatives

Media production (and by extension media work) is and always has been risky. This thesis, through examining a period of technological change in the comic book industry, has been able to explore how the nature of risk in the media industries is constantly changing. New technologies add to the uncertainty of media work and the reception of content – the 'nobody knows' principle – by providing tools that challenge the established status quo, which has structured the creator's experience of work. Specifically, analysing the transition from the analogue, print-based comic book industry to the app-based, digital industry emphasised the way risk has been privatised and individualised (Gill, 2011; Neff, 2012).

Focusing on the privatisation and individualisation of risk recognises the need to place periods of technological change within the context of a human story. New technologies have been a causal factor in broader changes throughout the media industries, but this thesis is not just about technology. Instead, it focused on how the structures of work are changing from the creator's perspective, how they develop alternative discourses related to work, and how the creator's existing identity adapts to manage the tensions and risks during a period of digital change.

By engaging with comic book professionals I have presented an analytical framework that tries to understand in a clear and coherent manner the way the creator's self-understanding helps to understand the changes to technologies, business models, and content. The framework focuses on how creators actually act as mediators when it comes to the influence of technological change and how creators, in turn, deal with the tensions and risks emphasised during periods of

change. Specifically, the framework focused on the discursive resources used by comic book workers to manage the adaptation experience. The findings of the framework emphasised the historical and contextual nature of technological change and the influence of social actors on the adoption of new technologies and practices noting that:

1) Digital comics are perceived as beneficial to the future of the comic book industry, but only when they are framed through discourse as additive to the comic book industry and not a threat to print comics;
2) Prior digital comic formats, such as webcomics and motion comics, provide vital historical exemplars regarding business models and formats and influence the perception of digital comics and require management through discourse;
3) The digital creators are also shown to rely on a core identity developed during the breaking in process, which provides stability and a sense of belonging as they push the limits of the comic book format;
4) Digital creators position themselves as pioneers with an attachment to the digital platforms through the opportunity to grow their reputation in the industry and the creative freedom on offer.

Many of the creators involved with the new digital projects identified as pioneers in this framework, attracted to the opportunity to develop the new norms, conventions, values, and practices that will guide digital production. The pioneer identity goes across the contractually bound identities, discussed in Chapter Four, and presents new opportunities for creators to claim negotiated autonomy on their project. The creators invest their capital in the projects, hoping they will succeed, but they make use of certain strategies to try and protect and aid their investment. Specifically, a vital part of the creators' identity management involved changing the socially constructed views of digital comics. The framework demonstrated how creators use discourse and

the socilialisation process to reframe technology and the new digital comic formats as compatible with the core values of their identity. As Madefire's Liam Sharp claimed, "We want to create the first digital classics" (Roush, 2012, 3). But first the field must also accept that digital comics and creators are capable of producing 'classics'.

By engaging with comic book workers from two existing publishers (Marvel and DC) and two new publishers (Thrillbent and Madefire) I have demonstrated the importance of discourse at the publisher level when managing digitisation. Chapter Five showed that despite the promise of digitisation to grow and expand the comic book industry, comics were framed as a fragile ecosystem (Wolk, 2011). If the emerging digital market followed other media industries and cannibalised the print market it could undermine the entire industry. Madefire co-founder Liam Sharp stated: "We realized that when we started doing this that it was a difficult time and there was a lot of worry, particularly in the print world, about how it was going to impact on regular comics and the stores and all of that" (Sacks and Sonne, 2015). To counteract the worries of consumers and retailers, and protect against resistance, the creators and publishers used an additive discourse:

> They [digital and print] work in tandem. There's so much overlap between the two. I don't see the print business going away, I see it changing. It's an evolution. The digital business can't live without the print. There's an enormously passionate group of people who love to hold a print book. There's a very important place for the print product. (Marvel Digital General Manager Peter Phillips in Karpel, 2013)

The additive discourse became a structure, which influenced particular actions examined in the thesis and helped to reduce the risk associated

with the projects at the new and existing publishers by positioning digital as compatible with the values of the existing, valuable print audience.

The analysis of the digital business models in Chapter Five and the socialisation of new practices in Chapter Seven highlighted how the additive discourse could structure the creator's experience. DC's decision to print all of their digital first DC Squared titles is grounded in the additive discourse, which protects retailers but limits the creative freedom on the project. While the additive discourse focused on the business models surrounding digital comics the second finding of the thesis emphasised the importance of discourse in managing the reception of the content and the creator's identity. Prior digital comics, specifically motion comics, were seen as a failure and viewed negatively by creators, fans, and critics because they distorted the core values of comic book storytelling. As a result, new digital comic formats that similarly tried to explore comic book storytelling through technology were subject to the negative stereotypes held by the field. This influenced the way the new content and the creator's identity were judged.

Creators want to feel like they are similar to the prototypical comic book worker and they want the public to hold a positive view of comic book workers. In the content producing creative industries both forms of validation are closely related to the content produced by the creator. This content acts as evidence that they are who they say they are and that they have the necessary skills, work ethic, goals, and values of the profession (Brooks et al., 2011; Wei, 2012). When the digital creators chose to explore the new digital formats they challenged the existing stereotypes of comic book work and what constitutes 'good work' held by the field introduced in Chapters Three and Four. This revealed the tensions between the creator's identity and the field's preconceived notions of digital comics. By challenging the views of the field,

particularly those of the other creators who had been socialised to a particular work identity, the emerging digital platforms added to the riskiness of the shift to digital production where there is already uncertainty regarding the business models and revenue sources for digital content.

Chapter Six explored how the digital comic book creators used a discourse framework to manage this risk to their identity. Building on Sherry Ortner's (2013) research of the film industry, this research shows creators adopted discursive practices, such as reactive and relational positioning. These discursive resources were used to specifically target the field's negative digital stereotypes that impact the external validation of the creator's identity. The reactive discourse was used to disassociate the new digital comic formats from the stigmatised motion comic format. The existing views of motion comics were influencing the field's evaluation of the new digital comics *before* they even read the content. On the other hand, the relational discourse was used to build stronger ties between the new digital comics formats and print comics. The connections between print comics and the new digital comics are embraced, through McLuhan's (1967) rear view mirror understanding, to help other creators and fans accept digital comics as comics. Together the reactive and relational discourses were grounded in the 'love of comics' repertoire introduced in Chapter Four, which allowed the creators an opportunity to socialise the audience and other creators to the possibility that digital comics can, in fact, be good without fully detracting from why they fell in love with comics in the first place.

The third finding, which Chapters Six and Seven demonstrate, highlights the importance of having their work valued as good by agents of the field because doing good work is part of their core identity. Regardless of the format, creators want to produce work that others

value, particularly their peers. This establishes a sense of continuity in their identity from print work to digital, which is part of their wider adaptive identity. The uncertain, constantly shifting career of creative workers requires a strong sense of self based on certain unchanging core values and needs, an understanding of what they are good at and what is important to them as a creator (Bridgstock, 2013; Lingo and Tepper, 2013). Instead of feeling that they do not belong or are trapped between two categories because of their digital exploration (Shorthose and Strange, 2004), the creators reposition their core identity as compatible with the changes in content and the industry. These core values were established during the breaking in process explored in Chapter Four. During this time the creators' motivations for entering the industry and their socialisation to the realities of comic book work developed the core aspects of their comic book identity. They loved comics, identified as storytellers, and were attracted to comics as a job. Further, they were oriented by their values of what makes a good story, the need for interesting characters, and captivating dialogue: "the overall craft is knowing what makes a good story and how to tell it, everything else is really a subset of that" (DC Writer 1.2).

Finally, the fourth finding recognises that while it was important to maintain these core aspects of their identity, periods of change such as digitisation emphasise the need for creative workers to remain flexible and open to new career opportunities, such as working on the new digital comic formats. Recognising these new opportunities is key to the creator's survival in the industry because they are constantly beset by the freelancer fear. They need to keep up with the changes in the industry so they have the right skills to remain employable, yet the acquisition of these skills remains a risk. Further, identity is now considered contextual and ever shifting with individuals continually in a state of becoming as opposed to fixed, static, and unchanging (Reed, 2013). The sense of flux in identities extends to professions, where conventions, rules, and definitions continually transform (Reed, 2013).

Digital has altered the definition of ‘published creator’ in the comic book industry because it removes many of the barriers to entry.

Publishers have previously been able to restrict who can identify as a ‘professional creator’ by controlling commissioning, publishing, and access to distribution (Davies and Sigthorsson, 2013). The new business models from digital publishers, explored in Chapter Five, seek to exploit this changing definition by focusing on the development of tools and marketplaces that promote the distribution of user-generated content. This challenges the existing creators’ claim to a professional identity and creates an environment where more creators compete for attention and the few paying roles. Aspiring creators are already being socialised to focus less on breaking in and more on survival. It is no longer a guarantee that a creator’s first project will lead to more work. Shifting the focus from breaking in to survival recognises the precarious, uncertain nature of creative work. Many of the risks associated with creative work have been transferred to the individual, meaning survival is not just the creator’s responsibility to continually find new work, but their need to continually develop the necessary skills/human capital and contacts/social capital to sustain a career. Creators must also cultivate a reputation for producing good work and for being good (Deuze, 2007; Neff, 2012). In this context the new digital comics, in a freelance industry like comics, are framed as providing creators an opportunity to differentiate themselves from their peers and build upon their reputation, justifying their investment of capital.

Chapters Four and Seven explore one particular reputation and identity the digital creators looked to cultivate: the pioneer. The pioneer identity was a supplementary aspect of their adaptive identity, representing the creator’s flexible and opportunity taking nature. The pioneer creators seized the opportunity to work on the digital projects based on the discourses of creative freedom and autonomy attributed to the digital

projects. By investing their human, social, and symbolic capital in the digital projects the pioneers were able to claim a degree of power within the emerging digital structures to influence the industry's adaptation to digitisation. Here the risks associated with the uncertain digital projects were exchanged for the opportunity to establish and subsequently socialise other creators to the new routines, norms, and values of digital comic production. This socialisation does not occur through schooling but in practice, via the discourses and talk used by the creators to discuss their work. As Thrillbent's John Rogers explained to the website Fast Company, "We're creating a new visual vocabulary. Much like in the early days of film where you had to create a new way to talk about certain shots, or having to create a new way to talk about certain transitions" (Rivera, 2014). Being able to develop a new, shared vocabulary provides the members of the digital comics community of practice with an important resource that helps to shape their understanding of how to do digital work.

The research findings build on Gina Neff's (2012) venture labour theory, where publishers have been able to privatise risk. Creators spend time promoting the projects through their social networks and developing the necessary practical skills. Periods of digitisation also reveal how publishers benefit from the symbolic capital of key comic book creators. Their reputation, cultivated through doing good work and being recognised as good, becomes another resource for media companies to provide credibility and prestige to their work. Investing this capital represents a risk to the creator due to the uncertain nature of the projects' success and the freelance contracts associated with the projects, which are more precarious than those of the organisational new media workers studied by Neff. By changing the audience's perception of digital comics, to view them as capable of producing good work and not detrimental to the creators' reputation, the creators are working to protect and justify their investment of capital in the digital projects. The freelancers need the project to succeed to ensure they

continue to get work making the investment of their human, social, and symbolic capital, while a risk, one worth taking if it means the opportunity turns into ongoing reputation boosting work-for-hire work or a successful creator-owned project.

The framework provides a deeper understanding of what people and institutions do with technology, how they frame and shape it to direct the process of digitisation. It also provides an in-depth understanding of comic book work, which may help creators to better understand the structures that influence their work and also identify the opportunities within those structures that provide conditional agency to pursue the core values of their identity. It is also hoped that the findings will form the basis for future research into creative work and identity during periods of change. Professions, including those in the creative industries, are continually in a state of becoming, where definitions, conventions, and understandings of work are constantly changing (Reed, 2013). In this environment research into how creators adapt to shifting conditions and understandings of their work will remain relevant to practitioners and academics.

Through my engagement with comic book creators during this period of digital change I have demonstrated the need for creators to manage negative perceptions of their work, which can be harmful to their identity and their career. Periods of change amplify these negative perceptions because they allow for new forms of content and ways of working to challenge established structures. The findings of this thesis can be applied outside of comics to other industries undergoing periods of change and flux, such as the video game industry. Mobile gaming and new business models, such as free-to-play, are challenging the previous dominance of console and PC gaming. Patrick Hudson, CEO of gaming company Robot Entertainment, who are releasing their first free-to-play game, told gaming site GameIndustry.biz that free-to-play

games have a stigma in the industry. This stigma stems from their poor past development and perception as exploitative, leading to Hudson claiming, "I know excellent, experienced developers that will not play nor make a free-to-play game" (Sinclair, 2015). Hudson engages in a similar process of identity management, through discourse, to protect the studio from negative perceptions. The studio only pursued free-to-play because it was the right fit for the game, the developer does not class themselves as a free-to-play developer highlighting their openness to the traditional content models, and finally they only pursued free-to-play after learning from the "really great games that we enjoy playing that are free-to-play and treat their customers fairly" (Hudson in Sinclair, 2015). Hudson uses a variation of the reactive and relational discourses to justify the decision to make a game using a stigmatised model, focusing on changing the field's perception to recognise free-to-play as capable of producing good work. Expanding this work to other media industries would provide larger bodies of evidence to develop our understanding of how creative workers use discourse to manage risk and identity during periods of digitisation and change.

This study has implications for the comic book industry and the wider media industry. The study revealed the way comic book workers maintain many of their core values during periods of change, namely their desire to do good work that is valued by the field. Comic book publishers and digital content providers need to frame their projects as being compatible with the creators' core identity. This is essential to gain the support of the creators, but also the audience. As the digital technology becomes more accepted by the industry the need for identity management strategies, such as the reactive and relational discourse, will decrease. Continued, future research of the platforms analysed would provide an opportunity to show how the discourse and socialisation of the platforms change as they ideally become more

accepted or show how creators frame unsuccessful projects to justify their investment of capital.

The development of technology is also ongoing, meaning new technologies and digital storytelling capabilities that challenge the new status quo of the comic book industry will require a return to the framework outlined in this thesis to manage the identities of the creative who will be tasked with producing the new content. This would allow the framework to be tested and strengthened with further evidence.

Due to the limitations on time and resources the findings of this thesis are presented within certain parameters. One important parameter to this study was the analysis of the comic book creators as a single group. While some distinction was made based on the position the creator occupied it would have been possible to develop analysis comparing the experience of male and female comic book creators; industry veterans and relative newcomers; the experiences of America-based and international creators; or, professionals and amateurs/fans. This thesis recognizes that these are fruitful areas for research and analysis, but there were limits to the scope of this project, which prevented it from exploring them in any depth. Therefore, there exists scope for further research to explore how identity tensions and the experiences of comic book creators in the comic book industry are felt by these categories of creators. The broad scope of this thesis was adopted to address and begin to fill the gap in comic book research, targeted at work, as well as further our understanding of how media workers adapt and survive during times of change.

The thesis also relied on a purposive sampling method, approaching those creators identified by their involvement in the digital comic project. The intention was to interview existing comic book professionals and the creative workers, from a variety of industries with a variety of new skills, who were entering the industry to fill the new positions required to

produce the digital comics. While I was able to interview the existing comic book professionals the creative workers adopting the new production roles were more difficult to contact. As a result their experience and impact is underrepresented in the study. Using a purposive method, based on identified workers, also meant that the contributions of those workers who were not credited were not analysed. Deuze et al (2007) argued that a lack of crediting marginalises the contributions of those workers. Unfortunately, this project was unable to shed light on the uncredited creative, technical, and managerial production roles that worked on the digital projects. Further research on the digital comic projects should seek to address these limitations through more ethnographic research methods that embed the researcher in the day-to-day operations of a particular publisher or digital media company. This embedded research would allow the researcher to identify and address those uncredited members involved in the digital production.

While I limited my focus to those digital comics that creators distanced from motion comics, expanding the focus to include motion comic projects would provide more evidence to test the arguments put forward about how negative perceptions influence creative practice. Similarly, I limited my project to a specific geographical framework, the North American comic book industry, where work is produced within a particular historical and cultural context, but future research should consider the applicability of the framework to other regions. Digital technologies and marketplaces allow producers from around the world to easily develop stories, distribute content, and connect with audiences and while that audience may be global the projects, such as Netwars (Germany) and the Webtoon format (South Korea), and their creators are linked to a specific regional comics tradition that influences their production and reception (Meskin, 2012). These projects offer different experiences and suggest that while the creators established structures and conventions on the projects studied in this thesis the digital market

might not be characterised by the same uniformity in format that print comics were. Multiple formats, each presenting a different version of digital comics, may persist instead of one format emerging as a 'winner'. Furthermore, work with an audience studies focus could be conducted to analyse how successful the creator's use of discourse is in shaping the intended audiences' perception of digital comics. Finally, future research could revisit the new creative workers with a range of new skills who are entering the industry and examine how they manage the risk of adapting to a new industry and how they frame their identity to be compatible with the digital comic projects.

The new digital comic formats are a rich and exciting development for creators, publishers, academics, and audiences. Whether or not Infinite Comics or Motion Books become the industry standard, we are presented with an opportunity to capture a snapshot of the comic book profession in flux and the way media workers frame risk during digital change in relation to their existing, ever changing identity. At the very least we can understand that creating the first digital classic is a risky, contested and negotiated process where, in the words of Mark Deuze (2007), it is "not only about being good at something – it is also about carefully cultivating the image of being good".

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Appendices

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Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

Hello my name is Troy Mayes,

I am a PhD Candidate at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. I am studying the impact of the introduction of tablet devices on the comic book industry. Specifically, the study is looking at the impact of tablet devices on the production of content by comic book creators and in establishing the professional and organizational identification of creators during this time. You have been invited to participate in an interview as you have been identified as a comic book creator who is creating comic books for tablet devices.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. The interview will focus on your experience of work in the comic book industry, how your role has changed or developed, and the relationship between creators and publishers. If you do choose to participate you have the option of completing the interview **via e-mail**, I will forward a list of interview questions for you to complete, or **via Skype**, where the interview will be recorded for transcription later. Depending on the depth of detail provided the interview should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. I am aware that time is a precious commodity and this is why I have given you an option for how you wish to participate in this study.

Participation in the study can be confidential and anonymous although participants have been identified through conducting a case study analysis of digital comics. Therefore complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only and may be shared with University of Adelaide representatives.

If you wish to participate in the interview then please either print out the attached consent form and fill it in, indicating how you wish to conduct the interview, email or Skype, and the level of anonymity you desire. Then scan the consent form and email it back to the researcher. Or highlight the level of anonymity you desire and copy in a digital signature to the attached consent form and email it back to the researcher.

In the event that an interview participant wishes to a) change a response given to the researcher or b) wishes to withdraw their participation from the project the following processes will be undertaken.

First the participant must lodge the request with the project leader, Dr Michael Wilmore. Upon lodging the request the researcher will identify the material in question and ensure it is not placed in the published material. A signed agreement, by the researcher, project leader and witness is to be created and given to the participant lodging the request.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Dr Michael Wilmore:

Discipline of Media

School of Humanities

905 Napier Building

University of Adelaide

South Australia 5005

Tel: +61 (08) 83034289

Email: michael.wilmore@adelaide.edu.au

Or myself:

Troy Mayes

Discipline of Media

School of Humanities

905 Napier Building

University of Adelaide

South Australia 5005

Email: troy.mayes@adelaide.edu.au

This research has been reviewed according to the University of Adelaide's HREC procedures for research involving people. If the participant wishes to speak with someone independent of the project they can speak to the Universities Human Research Ethics Committee about the project by quoting its ethics approval number: **HP-2012-057**. The committee can be reached via phone during business hours on (08) 8313 6028 or via email at hrec@adelaide.edu.au.

Appendix B: Interview Consent Form

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Note: Please Print and Fill Out This Form Then Email It Back To The Researcher

1. I have read the attached Information Sheet and agree to take part in the following research project:

Title:	Identity Work in the American Comic Book Industry- The Establishment and Changes to Professional and Organisational Identities During Digital Comics 2.0
Ethics Approval Number:	**HP-2012-057**

2. I have had the project, so far as it affects me, fully explained to my satisfaction by the research worker. My consent is given freely.

3. I have been given the opportunity to have a member of my family or a friend present while the project was explained to me.

4. Although I understand the purpose of the research project it has also been explained that involvement may not be of any benefit to me.

5. I have been informed that, while information gained during the study may be published, I have the choice of how I wish to be addressed in the study. I wish to be addressed anonymously/via pseudonym/by company name/by my name/other (please circle one)

6. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time.

7. I wish to participate in the interview via **e-mail** or **Skype** (please circle one).

8. (If choosing Skype) I agree to the interview being audio recorded:
   Yes ☐
   No ☐

   Video recorded:
   Yes ☐
   No ☐

9. I am aware that I should keep a copy of this Consent Form, when completed, and the attached Information Sheet.

10. I have been informed of the process for lodging a complaint or query with the project and have been provided with the appropriate information.

Participant to complete:

Name: _____ Signature:_____

Date: _____

Researcher/Witness to complete:

I have described the nature of the research to _____
(print name of participant)

and in my opinion she/he understood the explanation.

Signature: _____ Position: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Complete List of Participants

Name	Email or In-person	Follow-up	Wordcount
DC Writer 1.1/1.2	Email	Yes	2134
DC Artist 1.1/1.2	Email	Yes	1657
DC Artist 2	Email	No	1866
DC Artist 3	Email	No	2229
DC Artist 4	Email	No	2548
DC Colourist 1	Email	No	751
Marvel Writer 1	Email	No	1705
Marvel Writer 2	Email	No	2229
Marvel Editor 1.1/1.2	Email	Yes	2824
Marvel Colourist 1	Email	No	2716
Marvel Colourist 2.1/2.2	Email	Yes	1430
Marvel Colourist	Email	No	819
Marvel Letterer 1	Email	No	1709
Marvel Letterer 2	Email	No	1465
Marvel Letterer 3	Email	No	2104
Marvel Inker 1	Email	No	1907
Marvel Inker 2	Email	No	1707
Marvel Artist 1.1/1.2	In-person	Yes	4879
Marvel Production Manager 1	In-person	No	3561
Madefire Writer 1	Email	No	1664
Madefire Artist 1.1/1.2	Email	Yes	2479
Madefire Artist 2	Email	No	1665
Madefire Artist 3	Email	No	654
Madefire Founder 1	In-person	No	6130
Madefire Founder 2	In-person	No	4135
Madefire Editor 1	In-person	No	7325
Madefire Builder 1	Email	No	1434
Thrillbent Writer 1	Email	No	1047
Thrillbent Writer	Email	No	2296

2			
Thrillbent Colourist 1.1/1.2	Email	Yes	1821
Thrillbent Colourist 2	Email	No	1558
Thrillbent Artist 1	Email	No	5090
Thrillbent Artist 2	Email	No	2656

Appendix D: Conference Data List

Name of Conference	Name of Panel	Year	Participants/Roles
San Diego Comic-Con	Breaking Into Comics	2010	Andy Schmidt (editor/writer), Reilly Brown Mike Costa (writer)
Florida Supercon	Breaking Into Comics The Marvel Way	2010	Jim McCann (writer/PR), Fred Van Lente (Steve Kurth (artist), Khoi Pham (artist), Bra (artist)
New York Comic-Con	Breaking Into Comics The Marvel Way	2011	C.B. Cebulski, Mark Brooks (artist), Leinil ((Writer), Axel Alonso (Editor-In-Chief)
Toronto Fan Expo	Breaking Into Comics The Marvel Way	2011	CB Cebulski (Talent Scout/Manager), Aruh (Director of Communications), Axel Alonso Chief), Matt Fraction (Writer), Mark Brooks
Dublin International Comic Expo (DICE)	Breaking In, Staying In	2012	Kieron Gillen (Writer), Lauren Sankovitch (Editor), Declan Shalvey (Artist), Jeanine S (Marvel editor), Mark Doyle (Editor DC/Ver and C.B. Cebulski (Marvel Talent Scout/Ta Management)
DICE	Breaking Into Comics	2013	Declan Shalvey (artist), CB Cebulski (Marv scout), Nick Roche (artist), Ruth Redmond and Michael Molcher (2000AD PR)
Canadian FanExpo	DC Comics Breaking Into Comics Panel	2013	John Cunningham (DC Entertainment), Bri Cunningham (editor), Ray Fawkes (Writer/ Jason Fabok (artist), Lee Bermejo (artist), Berganza (editor), Francis Manapul (artist)
New York Comic-Con (in-person)	You've Broken Into Comics, Now What? Becoming a Comics Pro and Managing Your Expectations	2013	Charlie Chu (Oni Press editor), Cullen Bun Joshua Williamson (Writer), Jim Zub (write Brisson (letterer/writer)
New York Comic-Con (in-person)	Breaking Into Comics The Marvel Way	2013	CB Cebulski (Marvel talent scout), Gerry D (Writer), Charles Soule (Writer), Shawn Cr (Aritst), Mahmud Asrar (Artist), and Declan (Artist)
New York Comic-Con (in-person)	Breaking Into Comics Right Now	2013	BOOM! Studios Managing Editor Bryce Ca Dark Horse Editor-in-Chief Scott Allie, Ava Vice President of Publishing and Managing Jim Kuhoric, and Oni Press Editor-in-Chief Lucas Jones
New York Comic-Con (in-person)	Editors on Editing Panel	2013	Scott Allie- Dark Horse, editor-in-chief, Chr editor-in-chief IDW, and Warren Simons- e editor, Valiant
Planet Comicon	Breaking Into Comics	2013	C.B. Cebulski, C.W. Cooke (writer), Freddi Williams II (artist), Scott Snyer (writer) and Tieri (writer)
Emerald City	Breaking Into	2013	C.B. Cebulski, Marvel's Talent Scout, Culle

Comicon	Comics The Marvel Way		(Writer), Shawn Crystal (Artist), Christos G (Writer), Joe Keatinge (Writer), Sam Hump (writer) and Matteo Scalera (Artist)
Wizard World Austin	Breaking Into and Staying In Comics	2013	Jai Nitz, David Marquez and Kody Chambe
Emeral City Comicon	Breaking Into Comics the Marvel Way	2014	Marvel's Talent Scout C.B. Cebulski and p Jason Aaron (Writer), Jordie Bellaire (Colo Jason Latour (Writer/Artist), Declan Shalve and Charles Soule (Writer)
San Diego Comic-Con	Breaking Into Comics The Marvel Way	2014	Axel Alonso (Editor), CB Cebulski, Jim Zub (writer), Sam Humphries (writer), Declan S (artist), Jordan D White (editor), Kris Anka
Digital Comics Coalition	Future of Digital Comics Platforms	2015	Mark Waid, Peter Krause, Felix Kiner, Min Douglas Lefler

Appendix E.1: Original Interview Questions (Experienced creators)

1.Why a career in comics?

2. What role has education played in your career in comics?

3. What image did you have of working in the comic book industry before you started? Has your experience matched that image?

4. How did you ‘break in’ to the industry? What was the industry like during that time?

5. Can you describe your role in comics at this very time for me? How has it changed?

6. How have you managed to survive in the industry from when you broke in?

7. What is the ultimate career goal you hope to achieve in the comic book industry?

8. What is the reaction from people when they here you work in comics?

9. What are the most difficult aspects of working in the comic book industry?

10. What are the most rewarding aspects of working in the comic book industry?

11. How has technology impacted your experience in the comic book industry?

12. How would you describe the [digital] format?

13. How did you get involved with [the digital project]? What convinced you to take part in it?

14. Can you describe your work process on [the digital format]? How does this differ from your print work?

15. What is the relationship between the publisher and creator like? What changes have there been?

16. Where do you see the industry heading in the future? What role do you think you will play in it?

Appendix E.2: Original Interview Questions (New creators)

1. How did you become interested in comic books?

2. Was a career in comics ever your goal? What convinced you to take this opportunity?

3. What role has education played in your career?

4. Can you describe the role you have adopted in comics for me? Was this the role you always intended on occupying?

5. What image did you have of working in the comic book industry before you started? Has your experience matched that image?

6. What is the ultimate career goal you hope to achieve? Is this in comics?

7. What is the reaction from people when they here you have worked in comics?

8. What did you find were the most difficult aspects of working in the comic book industry?

9. What did you find were the most rewarding aspects of working in the comic book industry?

10. What role does technology play in your working life?

11. How would you describe the motion comic format you worked on?

12. How did you get involved with Madefire's Motion Books? What convinced you to take part in it?

13. Was this your first job in comics? If not how did you first break into the comic book industry?

14. Can you describe your work process on Madefire's Motion Books? How did this differ from your previous understanding of comics and your role?

15. How do you feel your prior experience prepared you for working in the comic book industry?

16. What is the relationship between the publisher and creator like? How does this influence the creative process?

17. Where do you see yourself in the future? What role do you think comics will play in your future?

Appendix F: Sample of Additional and Follow-up Questions

Have there been any difficulties working with the [digital] format?

What direction or help was available when working on [the digital format]?

How important is doing good work to you as a creator? Would you evaluate your work on [digital project] with [digital publisher] as good work?

Overall what is the current industry view towards digital comics and formats? How has this changed?

What skills are now necessary to be a successful comic book worker?

What is the relationship with the audience like?

What are the reasons for wanting to do more creator-owned work?

Appendix G: Example of Coding Process

Individual Codes and Notes	Categories	Core/Foundational Identity
- Love of the medium, love of creators, characters, artwork - Attracted to comics as a job, work in recognised field, meet idols, suited to freelance lifestyle - Need to create, creatively satisfying, storytelling opportunities - Guided by desire to produce 'good work' - Learn through doing: 'Make Comics' - 'Make Comics' valuable throughout career, idea of learning through doing. Always learning, evolving - Comics not respected through education - Less direct benefits, instill wider values of story etc - Print still important - Develop a voice, part of good work - Must constantly grow, adapt **Counter** - not attracted to comics, tried to get in other way - lack of education or overreliance on comics inhibiting - Comics specific education not necessary or unavailable but educated sample - - Comics specific education can socialise creators to industry	- Motivations - Education - Good Work	Underlying aspects/norms that have oriented the creator's career in the industry. Form part of the unchanging basis of their identity even during periods of digitisation. Help them to understand who they are and what they do. What their role is. Developed during their period of breaking into the industry, formed part of their anticipatory socialisation. Crosses over with Socialisation of Comic Work as speed, collaboration, survival skills have been adapted as part of their core identity.

expectations		
Individual Codes and Notes	**Categories**	**Pioneer Identity**
- Period of change - Exciting - Countributions recognised in field - Break the rules - Autonomy - Cutting Edge - Experimental - Contracts/structures don't necessarily match up. Change needed - Opportunity to get paid - Want to expand medium – narrative and technical	- Creative Freedom - No Rules - Industry/Peer Recognition	Describes those first creators exploring digital comics. Part of their adaptive identity. See digital as an opportunity for new creative expression, increased autonomy, creative freedom and opportunity for recognition. There are also practical aspects such as the opportunity to get paid on the new project or create their own work, that they own, which makes the projects attractive.
Individual Codes and Notes	**Categories**	**Socialisation of Digital Production**
- Comparison with print comics - Comparison with print production - Different type of collaboration - New techniques need new vocabulary - Developing new conventions - More creator control over narrative - New contract with reader - Some changes in roles – more/less work - Some accommodation of print still - Digital also has its limitations - Maintain reader control - Digital learning cure - Not motion comics - Different audience - Be more open to collaboration and role changes **Counter** - still gimmicky - not the end version of digital, needs work	- Reactive Discourse - Relational Discourse - New Production Practices - New Production Norms/Values - New Vocabulary	Pioneer creators are working to socialise the field to the new digital comics. Must change the existing negative connotations about digital work and show that the digital comics can be 'good' and are compatible with the creator's identity and the audience's expectations. This is the wider level socialisation and identity management. Must then socialise other creators to the specifics of the new format and its production. Pioneer creators are also the experts in charge of socialising others and establishing the new conventions, norms, vocabulary for others. Utilise discursive positioning to manage their identity. Crosses over with the 'love of work' in the creator's Core or Foundational Identity as well as their Audience Relationship and the need for external validation of their identity.