Abstract
Materiality Comics is a digital comic produced with a combination of Bitstrips and Comic Life. It argues and visually demonstrates that materiality is an important topic for comics scholars to consider, and that through creating essays in comics form, comics scholars can develop insights about materiality that are unavailable when analyzing comics by others.
Creator's Statement

This was one of the hardest academic projects of my career. I am neither a trained artist nor a trained programmer, and by far the greatest obstacle I faced in starting this project was my own lack of confidence. Now I understand how my students feel when I ask them to write essays in comic or game form. Nonetheless, I feel not only amazed that I finished this project, but also proud of how it turned out.

Nonetheless, I was excited to do this project because it gave me an answer to the question of how digital humanities – or practice-based research, or critical making – could be made to work for me. As a British Fellow at Georgia Tech, I saw my colleagues doing complicated-sounding things like corpus analysis and visualization and distant reading, and as a scholar whose work focuses on comics rather than the sorts of texts usually analyzed with DH methods, I didn’t see how these methods were relevant to my work. One inspiration for this project, therefore, was to use comics to do practice-based digital research, and to implicitly argue that comics could be an effective means of conducting such research. Most of my theoretical arguments on this point did not survive into the final draft, yet “Materiality Comics” is still influenced by my conviction that making comics is an effective means of theorizing comics. It therefore connects with the recent exciting work done in this area by scholars like Nick Sousanis, Jason Helms and Jarod Roselio.

My specific goal in this project was to demonstrate that materiality is a useful rubric for theorizing comics, and that making comics can be an effective way of experimenting with and learning about materiality. This argument is explicitly stated in the captions and word balloons, but is also visually demonstrated by the wide range of visual materials included in the comic, ranging from hand drawings to photographs to public-domain images from the Internet. (An important parenthetical note here is that my goal throughout was to make this comic visually interesting as a comic. Previous drafts included a large number of panels that just depicted my Bitstrips avatar standing in front of a classroom and lecturing. In the final draft, I sought to reduce the number of such panels as much as possible, and to make each panel visually interesting.) I also sought to demonstrate that comics can explore questions of materiality through their verbal as well as their visual content. Inspired by my scholarly interests in typography and handwriting, I used as many different typographic styles as possible, and even included one page which consists only of text, yet nonetheless “counts” as a comic because its text blocks are juxtaposed to each other in a sequential fashion. I thus seek to demonstrate that text in comics matters not just because of what it says but also because of what it looks like, and that for this reason, comics can guide our interpretation of other text-based media. In this regard, "Materiality Comics" takes inspiration from other recent work on the visual and material properties of text, such as Lori Emerson’s Reading Writing Interfaces and Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman’s edited collection Comparative Textual Media.

The process by which this work was created is also proof of its argument that making comics is an effective way of learning about materiality. I chose to create this comic digitally both because of its DH focus and because given my lack of drawing ability or experience, completing a 20-page comic with pen and paper was out of the question. (For similar reasons, I typically offer my students the option to create longer comics projects with Bitstrips or Pixton instead of by hand.) I initially considered executing this project with Javascript or InDesign, but because of my lack of coding proficiency and my unfamiliarity with the latter program, I ultimately created my project using a combination of Bitstrips and Comic Life. The former is a free online comics creator tool and the latter is a proprietary application for designing comics pages. Neither program was sufficient on its own, because Bitstrips offers only rudimentary support for designing unique page layouts and has a limited repertoire of fonts, while Comic Life only allows preexisting images to be imported and does not contain its own facilities for creating images. Therefore, creating “Materiality Comics” was an exercise in bricolage, in which I designed panels in Bitstrips or took photos with my phone, then imported them into Comic Life. In the process I learned much about the constraints and affordances of both programs. For example, it was surprisingly difficult to get images in Comic Life to display at both the correct size and the correct aspect ratio, and determining the correct size for the panel gutters required painstaking trial and error. This is exactly the sort of insight that, as I argue in the essay (19.4), is only available when we make comics ourselves rather than analyzing comics created by others. By making our own comics, we as comics scholars can learn about the medium from a practical perspective, and these practical insights can inform our theorization of comics. This, indeed, is precisely why I ask my students to do projects in comics form, and I feel proud that I have finally succeeded in making my research match my thinking.

Works Cited


Hanks 9.3. Panel from Fletcher Hanks’s Fantomah story from Jungle Comics #15. Public domain.


Martin 20.1. Excerpt from Francisco Martin, Aayush Sharma and Beruke Zeleke’s final project for ENGL 1102 section B2 in spring 2013. Used with permission.


Raphael 6.4. Detail of Raphael’s The School of Athens. Public domain.
