

Is this Article a Comic?

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Abstract

The article begins by asking why comics scholars should create comics as scholarship and traces possible answers through a variety of related fields: English, Rhetoric and Composition, Art, and Games. It then investigates the question of whether this article is itself a comic, by reviewing the history of the conversation about defining comics as an imitation of the Bayeux Tapestry. This tapestry section outlines the major camps, positions, and moves that comics scholars have made. The two major threads are the essentialist camp (with Kunzle, Eisner, McCloud, Harvey, Carrier, and Hayman and Pratt) and the constructivist camp (Meskin and Beaty). The section ends with Bart Beaty's recent (2012) conceptualization of a comics world that does not need to define individual artifacts as being or not being comics. The article ends with a discussion of the importance of distinguishing definition from conceptualization. Building on Beaty's conceptualization and Gilles Deleuze's theory of the concept and critique of representation, it offers applications to the comics world. Finally, it returns to the question of whether or not this article is a comic. The answer (yes, and becoming something else), calls for further interventions throughout the comics world that don't ask what comics are but what comics might become.

[Introduction](#)

[Is This a Comic? 1](#)

[The Geology of Comics](#)

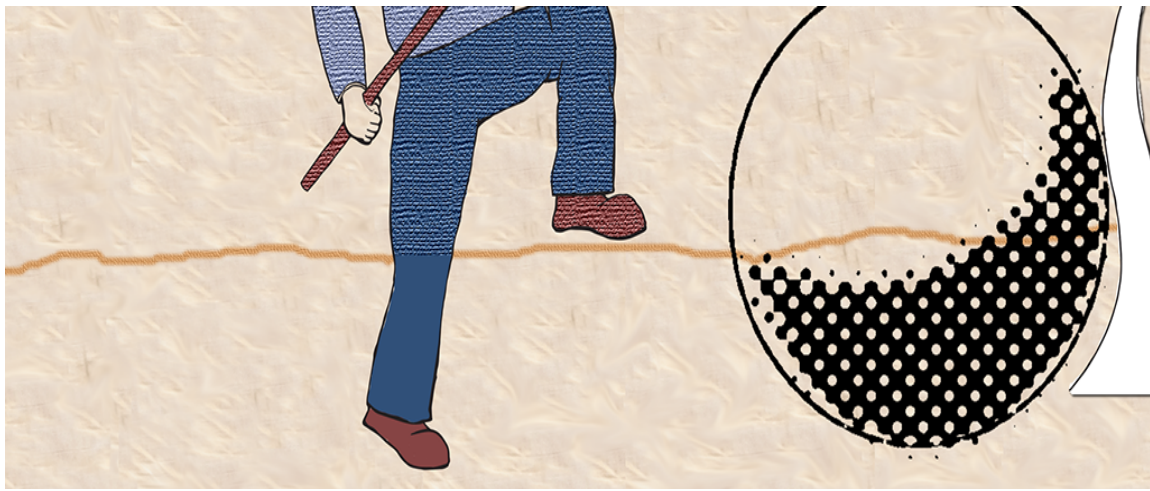
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[Deleuzian Comics](#)

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Preparatory Note

View embedded content above in its own browser window at: <http://digitalhumanities.org/dhq-annex/000300/index.html>.

Creating this article was one of the most challenging and exhilarating academic projects I've ever taken part in. I had to learn how to do new things every day (when I began, I'd never used Adobe Muse before). It also gave me the techniques and knowledge to create a book-length digital monograph, *Rhizcomics* (forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press). In many ways, this article was a test-run to teach me how to write the book.

I began with a script and a few sketches and ideas for interactive elements. I knew I wanted to push the boundaries of what could be considered a comic (similar to Chris Ware's *Building Stories* or Richard McGuire's *Here*, neither of which had been published when I wrote the script). I also knew I wanted to engage various strands of DH thought. Typically, when I think of DH I think of data and numbers. If I think of visuals at all, it's of graphs and other "dry" visualizations. However, I've also pushed students to create compelling visualizations of information and arguments in my classes, and I began to realize that drawing is another form of visualization.

The script led to a storyboard and then a few proof-of-concept web pages designed in Adobe Edge Animate. My first experiment was with one of the panels of the Tapestry section. It was the first time I had drawn using a stylus, so I wanted to get a feel for the look of the finished product. Originally, I planned on including all sorts of marginalia throughout the Tapestry section. That plan got scrapped pretty quickly when I realized just how long it was going to take to draw with a stylus.

After getting feedback on the storyboard, script, and single page, I created the article over a three-week period during the summer. It was fantastic to be able to give the project such sustained focus. Each morning I drew new images (almost all of them with pencil and ink on paper) and each afternoon I did the computer work: scanning, fine-tuning and coloring in Photoshop and Illustrator, adding interactivity in Edge Animate, and doing layout in Muse. Finally, I shared the article with a few colleagues to get initial feedback, and I judiciously made just about every change they recommended.

I ended up doing a lot less coding than I had foreseen. Edge Animate allows users some space to compose and edit javascript, but Muse generally pushes its users away from code entirely. I found this a strange way to work, as I was more comfortable with Dreamweaver and with being able to edit the code I create. I have mixed feelings about Muse: it's simple, but it takes a great deal of control away from designers.

I was very excited to play with paraphrase and block quotations in particular. When reading scholarship, I often find block quotes to be jarring, pulling me away from the author's thread. On the other hand, I'm often frustrated by paraphrase, wondering what the cited author *really* said. The digital comics platform gave me a way to have my cake and eat it too, providing paraphrases in the speech balloons and offering the full quotation to those who click on the balloons. It also helped me avoid the awkwardness of academic prose appearing in speech balloons. Speech balloons are meant to represent dialogue, and academic prose is rarely that conversational.

I was surprised to discover the ways my arguments changed as the project coalesced. The Deleuzian Comics section in particular was difficult to visualize initially, but came together gradually and from many directions at once. The final product falls short of what comics might be, but that was also always the plan. I'm hoping it pushes someone to make something better (see the other articles in this issue for more answers to the question "What might comics become?").

I would like to thank the editors and reviewers at DHQ for their help in making this article work. The reviewers offered insightful feedback throughout the process. I am amazed that Anastasia Salter and Roger Whitson were able to propose this collection and see it through to publication. It was a monster and couldn't have been completed without their careful guidance. Julia Flanders and John Walsh were incredibly helpful and forgiving of the technological complexities of this article. It certainly provided to be more work for them than most articles would be and I sincerely appreciate their efforts. Amanda Booher, Joshua Hilst, and Ben and Meaghan Helms read early versions of this article and their feedback proved invaluable.

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