

**Reorganizing Narratives:**  
Increasing Accessibility To Comic Book Literature

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Professor Marc Russo

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that, in my opinion, it is fully adequate  
in scope and quality as a dissertation for the degree of Masters of Design.

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“We can make this industry and this environment and comic book shops and comic book conventions and comic books themselves, we can make them a thing that is accessible to everybody so that nobody feels unwelcome, and nobody feels like this isn't their place.”

Noelle Stevenson

“I felt the comics grew because they became the common man's literature, the common man's art, the common man's publishing.”

Jack Kirby

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## **Abstract**

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Within the medium of sequential art there are numerous unique categories, genres, formats, and styles. One of the oldest formats within the medium is traditional serialized comic books. These periodical magazines have been in circulation since the late 1930's. My research outlines the artistic, literary, and historical value within the medium of comic books to highlight the significance of my thesis project. Over time the reading format for the medium of periodical comic books has evolved extensively and created a unique type of reader. Now, as the medium charges into a competitive and digitized future, evolving the reading format will become a necessity.

My thesis argument proposes ideas on how the reading format of comic books can or should evolve to better support readers and researchers. My thesis argument proposes that the current reading format of comic books lacks accessibility and legibility and a digital resource for better understanding the medium is needed. The conceptual design that I have created could work as a digital literary resource to support readers, researchers, and educators with engaging with the medium. I discuss ways to enhance the reading format by designing digital contextual reading guides. This project design is a proof of concept and is influenced by numerous precedents. This thesis involves the investigation and creation of a platform design intended to improve the overall accessibility of the comic book reading format.

## Introduction

For this thesis project, I will be creating a conceptual design model that incorporates various unutilized functions and applications within a digital comic reading platform. The reason for doing this is to demonstrate the potential that these applications have towards improving the sustainability and overall health of the graphic novels and comic book market. This project will seek to further the discussion of developing the comic book medium in both an economic and academic perspective. Many comic book scholars and academics have discussed the issues that I present in my thesis previously. However, I believe by creating this project, I will be able to illustrate possible solutions and unseen obstacles that other industry professionals can actively resolve in the future through expanding on my arguments. Reading Comic Books can oftentimes feel as if you are reading a novel with several pages torn out. Many serialized comic book properties have decades of long narrative chronology that connect to newer stories. There is a strong literary tradition within the medium of serial comic books that can leave many readers confused. Many stories are so interconnected and non-linear that it can be difficult for new readers to adequately engage with them. This reading format can become confusing to understand. As a result, I am creating a thesis project which is a concept for a comic book reading guide that could assist with increasing legibility and contextual understanding of comic book narratives. I hope to facilitate a project that provides a better understanding of the format of serialized comic narratives for readers and researchers alike.



## **Thesis Project Overview**

The creation of this thesis project is intended to investigate and research the existing ideas and methods for increasing accessibility to comics for readers. The project is intended to inspire or motivate other creators and designers to continue the conversation on how to further evolve the comic book medium by improving reader sustainability and engagement and overall community connections. The project analyzes the various ways that comics are maneuvered through reading ecosystems and seeks to explore opportunities for improving the legibility and format of the medium.

The target audience for this project are readers and researchers of comic books. The overall goal of the project is to create reader engagement by creating a platform that increases accessibility and legibility of the comic book reading format. I propose that using a digital interface can enhance that legibility of the media. A lack of accessibility and legibility appears to be a major problem within the medium. I argue that by using design principles such as simplicity, affordability, and the 80/20 rule the medium can improve the general readability of this medium. which would also increase reader satisfaction. A lack of strong design principles within a digital application can lead to reader disengagement. A lack of simplistic and easily accessible design results in user frustration. The lack of reader interactions and connections with other readers on many current digital applications can create an insular ecosystem that decreases reader engagement and community involvement. The solutions that I put forth are targeted towards the creators, publishers, readers, and designers of these current systems.

My project is intended to be a conceptual design. In order to prove the viability of my concept I have created an outline for a digital comic book reading guide interface that provides a resource for following comic book narratives. Within this outline I will provide individual

sample designs for sections of this conceptualized platform. Future endeavors after this project could include the creation of a digital comic archive or database with a curated library format that includes additional comic-related information. The current physical comic bookstore environment has been accused of being inaccessible, insular, and intimidating. By creating this application I seek to create an alternative avenue for new and potential readers to access. The project includes a chronological library of comic book narratives that allow for further research into their specific literary structures and background. This last particular method would support more literary and scholarly investment from academic professionals and allow for the expansion of instructional discussions on the comic medium as an art form.

I believe that my project represents a potential solution to the issues within the medium. Any succeeding projects by myself or other designers can expand on the various concepts that I discuss. There have been numerous previous comic reading applications created. I plan to conceptualize an application system that incorporates the more successful aspects of many of those proceeding models with new designs and additions that I formulate. My hope is that any research that follows after my project would be able to expand the work incorporated in my application for further experimentation. I believe that the results of the project can create numerous opportunities to solve various problems within the larger discipline of comics. The creation of a digital platform that provides additional legibility of the medium for new readers is pivotal to improving the sustainability of the industry as a whole. My argument hinges on the idea that a more engaging reading experience will create a more involved reading community and thus, a larger community overall. Also, the construction of this application has the potential to improve more intimate issues such as an insular comic book environment that is often considered hostile to new or diverse readers.

My project follows the techniques and skills used for contextual reading. Contextual reading is the act of investigating and analyzing specific aspects of a piece of literature. There are different forms of contextual reading. A reader can analyze a piece of literature from a historical context or a sociological context. My project involves using these various forms of contextual investigation to increase the legibility of the medium of comic books. This contextual reading application would provide a necessary avenue for readers, researchers, or collectors to engage with the medium more intimately. Any of the results that arise from the project will influence the way that I create, design, and publish my own work in the future. As an illustrator and sequential artist my goal is to create images that are interesting, clear, and accessible. This project should incorporate those principles in order to improve the legibility of the reading format of comic books as a whole. The implications of this project within the public sector include greater outreach and circulation of the medium of comics and graphic novels.

The implications within the academic setting include a digital database that allows for easier access to older material. The lack of access to historical comics media has often hindered many comics scholars from pursuing more detailed study. The results from the conclusion of my projects should allow other professionals within the industry the ability to view my conceptual hypothesis as a guide to creating more immersive, engaging, and accessible platforms for reading comics. My hope is that by following some of the theories I put forth in my project, other designers will be able to capitalize and create those spaces which will be used to improve the overall health and reader sustainability.

### **Significance of Comics as a Medium**

Comics are a relatively old entertainment medium that has various different sub categories and versions. The typical overall term for comics is sequential art. This term was first coined by the great cartoonist and writer Will Eisner. Eisner said, “I had finally settled on the term ‘graphic novel’ as an adequate euphemism [for comic book], but the class I teach is called ‘sequential art’ — and of course that’s what it is — a sequence of pictures arranged to tell a story.” (*Will Eisner and the Secret History of the Graphic Novel*, Sequential Art, Vulture Magazine) Comics are a unique literary art form due to the ability to combine writing and art in an exceptionally intimate format. The connection between writing and literature in comics is exceptionally cohesive and substantial.

Comics can be a significant literary and educational tool for students and teachers. Some classrooms will begrudgingly admit to the literary scholarship of certain graphic novels like *Maus* or *American Born Chinese*. However, many educational infrastructures are hesitant to use periodical comic books as literary tools, particularly of the superhero variant. This is needlessly inhibiting to the educational value of comic books. Despite this, serial comics like *Watchmen*, *Sandman*, or *X-men* can provide just as much literary value as prose novels such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, or *Dracula*.

Some introductory comics can help facilitate a better understanding of more complex readings by serving as preliminary options for younger readers. They are also good ways to practice reading comprehension by allowing students to extrapolate meaning from combining words and texts. Comics can also replace less accessible works from the historical literary canon while still conveying the same messages, themes, and motifs discussed in traditional literary and rhetorical spaces. Would a comic book story such as “*God Loves, Man Kills*” written by Chris

Claremont from X-men have the same educational potential for relaying complex themes of bigotry and xenophobia that a novel like *To Kill A Mockingbird* does? The Harvard graduate school of education discusses how “Motivating students with texts that resonate with their personal interests and identities will increase their investment, leading to greater exposure to words, greater vocabulary acquisition, and more frequent use of reading strategies — three cornerstones of comprehension,” (Sellars). Helping students understand and identify with the stories that they are immersing themselves in is critical to developing more thoughtful, reflective, and imaginative readers. There is also a measurable importance to recognizing the artistic value of comics. The term “sequential art” was popularized by the famous comic creator Will Eisner. Much has been discussed about how comics are a visual art form in recent years. Many skills used in comics extend from general fundamental art techniques such as drawing, painting, and inking. One of the biggest inhibitors of comics being acknowledged within the world of art criticism are the same obstacles facing most of commercial illustration. Comics are a commercial medium mostly used for entertainment. The fine art world has long held prejudicial opinions about art created within a highly capitalist system. However, the philosopher and educator John Dewey discusses how art must be able to transcend the art world and be accessible for general society at large. Comics as an art medium has the ability to connect to larger audiences.

Contextual Reading involves analyzing and researching information related to a particular piece of literature. Comic books offer a unique opportunity for researchers, students, and readers to investigate the background information within comic book narratives. The literature within comics holds extensive layers of subtext and context for researchers to investigate. Classrooms would be able to use my platform to engage with the media of comic books more extensively from an academic perspective. My platform would include contextual

information involving art history, literary history, literary traditions, and sociology within comics. A literary tradition is a type of evolution for writing. Comic books incorporate a unique form of literary tradition within its format. This format involves authors taking turns writing for a serial comic book periodical. Authors are expected to build upon previous storylines and plots. My project could help organize and reformat this unique method of storytelling for a digital space.

### **Historical Reference**

Sequential art is a communication medium has been around since pre-history. Using words and pictures together to tell a narrative is not a new phenomenon. The history of complex sequential art storytelling dates as far back as ancient Egypt with the use of Hieroglyphics. “Some researchers claim the Bayeux Tapestry traces an early form of comic strips.” (Muzumdar 3) “In the united states the history of contemporary comics began in the early twentieth century with the rise of pulp magazine comics for kids. Comic books were a combination of the old pulp novels of the previous century and the comic strips of the early twentieth century. “The release of Action Comics 1# in 1938 introduced a new hero named Superman into the medium.” (Muzumdar 3) Many early comics were inextricably connected to the United States war effort. Early comic book characters such as Wonder Woman, Captain America, and Superman were used to support war propaganda and advertisement. “Early depictions of these characters show them attacking Nazi enemies and performing numerous other amazing feats. During World War II, the United States military supplied the armed forces with comic books as entertainment and to increase patriotism among soldiers by showing “Captain America punching Hitler in the face.” (Muzumdar 3) As a result of this early connection between the two entities, comic books are still popular within the military and amongst veterans. The

medium of American comic books is intrinsically linked to its history of political messaging and social commentary. As the medium moves further and further away from its overtly political history and messaging, its technique for incorporating social commentary or political messaging have changed accordingly. Comic books have had an indelible connection with the greatest social and political movements of modern American history. Comic Books such as X-Men created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby incorporated allegories to civil rights ideals of the time. Jack Kirby's son Neal Kirby described the thought process behind his fathers comic book creation in an article with the Hollywood Reporter. "I recall during the winter or early spring he asked me what I would think of a black superhero in the comics...He very much believed in social justice and equality, so he honestly thought it was time." (Parker) Characters such as Black Panther were created with the intent of bringing diversity and representation into the medium. The medium of comic books has a long history of inserting sociopolitical content within its pages. My project concept involves creating a platform that would allow readers and researchers to investigate the art and literary history within the medium of North American periodical comic books.

Comic books were initially sold on newsstands next to newspapers and magazines until the mid-1970's. This format allowed for common access and visibility, but also reinforced a perception of disposability. Comic books were seen as discardable content for parents to buy their children. Comic books left the newsstand and moved to comic book stores in the late 1970's. This model is called the "direct market." The end of the comic newsstand model meant comic books lost much of their local visibility as a form of popular media. Periodical comics are generally only available in the direct market of comic book stores. A reader must now go to a specific comic book store to buy a comic book periodical. As a result, comic books of today

largely appeal to an older, pre-established demographic who already have access to these locations. Younger readers don't have as much disposable income or regular transportation and they often lack the ability to make weekly or even monthly trips to a comic book store. Asher Elbein at *The Atlantic* magazine discusses how "The disappearance of comics from the local newsstands removed an important gateway for new readers to discover the format of reading comic books." These historical events influence my investigation into alternative formats for consuming comic book periodicals. My research discusses the potential for creating a digital space to view and absorb comic book narratives in a clear, legible, and comprehensive format. My thesis project offers conceptual ideas for how to increase accessibility to comic books for readers.

Modern sequential art was first introduced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States. Those early 20<sup>th</sup> century comic strips were the initial form for comic strips before they later evolved into comic books in the late 1930s. Superhero comics were a huge success during World War II. In the 1950's the genre expanded further into humor, fantasy, science fiction, and crime noir comic books. The decline of the comic book medium began towards the end of the 1950's. Despite the early evolution within the medium, the industry nearly collapsed for the first time in the 1950's after the release of the popular book *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 by Fredric Wertham. "Wertham was a psychiatrist who believed that psychological disorders and criminal behavior were linked to deviant external environments and media, such as comics." (Muzumdar 4) After working with underaged youth with behavioral issues he came to the conclusion that comic books were a common part of their backgrounds and therefore partially responsible for their actions. The problem with his argument is that comic books were apart of most underaged readers' background at this time which he failed to differentiate in his research. Despite this, his



conclusion that comics were one cause of destructive and criminal behavior in children received support. His popular arguments that blamed comic books for juvenile degeneracy across the nation led to significant crackdowns on the medium. The comics code authority would be passed years later as a form of censorship and regulation of narratives. The comic code authority and censorship would become a constant routine within the medium throughout the following decades.

My research into other international comic industries has led me to discover how various forms of external systematic, governmental, and societal stimulus worked to affect comic industries across the world. Just as United States faced government crackdowns and censorship, South Korea, and China would also face similar suppression and control. In the 1980's and 1990's both the Chinese and South Korean comic book market would face heavy censorship. This meant that those countries went several decades without much new comic material being released due to the entire industry collapsing from the strain of external forces. "According to Korea Times, the Korean government also censored comics in the '90s for being deemed harmful influences." (Acuna, Kirsten) However, after years of the industry struggling and laying dormant, South Korean cartoonists and designers were able to innovate and create a completely new reading format for their comics that helped establish a new robust market. The creation of digital web comics known as "Webtoons" in South Korea completely revitalized the industry and has led to a global enterprise. It was not until the expansion of digital online spaces that webcomics resuscitated the South Korean comic industry. "Webtoons became manhwa's salvation. These digitalized, full-color comics were easier to read than traditional Japanese manga... The digitalized manhwa also skirted South Korean censorship standards, featuring more violent and pornographic content." (McKinney, DW) American comic books suffered

similar obstacles due to censorship and a declining industry in the 1950's and again in the 1970's but managed to survive by making smaller changes to its reading format. In the 1950's American comics virtually abandoned other genres of comics and focused universally on superhero narratives. In the 1970's the medium heavily invested in the creation of a direct market which created specialized comic book stores. Unlike eastern comics however, North American comic books were never pushed to the same levels of near extinction, and as a result did not completely alter their fundamental reading format. South Korean comics called "Manwha" are almost all read digitally and operate using a vertical style of sequential storytelling. Comic Panels such as one from the webtoon *Unholy Blood* published through Naver Webtoon are aligned vertically and bleed into each other on an "infinite canvas" format (Figure 1). North American comic books have instead stayed mostly identical as a format since the 1940's. My project discusses ways of revolutionizing the medium of North American comic book periodicals through the use of digital resources. I discuss ways that the modern comic periodical in North America can improve its reading system for the future.



**Figure 1.** *Unholy Blood* Comic Page. Webtoon published through Naver Webtoon created by Im Lina, Kim Jeonghyeon, [https://www.webtoons.com/en/supernatural/unholy-blood/episode-51/viewer?title\\_no=1262&episode\\_no=52](https://www.webtoons.com/en/supernatural/unholy-blood/episode-51/viewer?title_no=1262&episode_no=52)

The reading format of traditional comics books has gone through various stages in its evolution. The earliest form of contemporary comic books was the anthology model. “This format involved a publisher releasing a compilation magazine that held numerous stories at once” (Couch, Chris). This is where many of the earliest comic book characters stem from. The characters of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman all first appeared in magazine anthologies called *Action Comics*, *Detective Comics*, and *Sensation Comics* respectively. After the rise of the modern superhero, the anthology model was replaced by individual comic serials for a specific character. Superman #1 was released after “*Action Comics 1#*”. The anthology magazines were often renamed to coincide with the most popular character of their series. This is shown when the anthology known as “*Journey into Mystery*” was renamed to “*Thor*” in issue 126. This individualized serial model is still widely used today. However, in the early 1980’s the reading format of comics would split and form the creation of the graphic novel. “In the United States, the graphic novel is viewed as the descendant of the pamphlet-form comic book, published for sale on newsstands (Couch, Chris).” The legendary cartoonist and creator Will Eisner is credited with coining the term graphic novel. His book, *A Contract With God* is considered to be one of the first graphic novels released in North America. As graphic novels became more widely acknowledged, the periodical format of comic books also evolved separately. The 1980’s saw the creation of the “event” comic. The event comic is when a publisher has numerous characters from their publishing line appear in a single storyline for a book. This type of comic involved publishers combining their various individual titles into a single interconnected storyline. The first major comic book event was *Secret Wars*, published by Marvel Comics in 1984 (Figure 2). Previously, the serialized storytelling within comic book periodicals was mostly standalone with other characters occasionally crossing over into other book titles. Justice Society of America in

the 1950's was one of the first comic books to feature separate characters from different series appearing in the same book series. Decades later this smaller version of crossovers would be expanded into the “event” comic.



**Figure 2.** *Secret Wars* Comic Cover. Comic cover for event series *Secret Wars* published by Marvel Comics in 1984. Considered to be first event comic book. Michael Zeck, [https://www.marvel.com/comics/issue/10580/secret\\_wars\\_1984\\_1](https://www.marvel.com/comics/issue/10580/secret_wars_1984_1)

The historical evolution of the comic book medium in North America has created a distinctive reading format. Contemporary comic books are released as periodical magazines which often incorporate an interconnected storytelling style. The advent of “event” books and “crossover” stories created a unique non-linear reading process. This reading format causes

narratives in a periodical comic to be organized non-linearly. This means stories are not always contained within a single comic series. A story that is told in a standalone series might crossover into a completely different series at various times. Comic books also incorporate a specific authorial format where new writers take over for a specific series in succeeding order. Each time a new writer or artist takes over for a series it is labeled a new “run” for that serial. As a result, the reading format of modern comic books can become labyrinthine. Many characters and series have numerous runs, series, and volumes, with non-linear ongoing narratives that weave through lengthy serialized publishing histories. The comic series *Batman* has been in publication for over 80 years, with dozens of authors and hundreds of narratives in an ongoing story.

This unique form of storytelling generally does not exist in other forms of literature. By comparison, most fiction novels and many graphic novels only rely on a single linear narrative structure. A novel series such as *Harry Potter* has a consistent reading format where a reader begins the series on book one and ends at book seven. It was creators like Stan Lee and Jack Kirby who helped popularize this interconnected form of storytelling in the early 1960’s. Their innovative storytelling style involved connecting characters from standalone series into shared linear stories. The book *Avengers*, first published in 1961 was a compilation of various individual characters from other series. This interconnected storytelling format has since been adapted by other entertainment mediums to explosive success. The 2012 *Avengers* film was an adaptation of this original interconnected storytelling concept. Despite this success in other mediums, the current comic book industry has faced significant strain and stagnation in its growth and development in recent years. The interconnected and non-linear reading format can become difficult for new readers to understand or engage with.

The economics in comic books has also seen significant development over time. Comic book prices have risen steadily in recent years. The cost of the average comic book has roughly doubled in price since 1997 (Comichron). The first comic book stores were not established until the late 1980's in North America. Before these specialty shops became popular, the standard location to buy comic books were the grocery or convenience stores and other localized venues. The newsstand stores would purchase comics in very large quantities because of their cheap and disposable nature. "Up until 1961, comic books were mostly priced at 10 cents in the United States. Comics were seen by retailers as loss leaders, things to offer to kids while their parents spent money on more expensive things" (Miller, *Vital Statistics*). From 1961 to 1981 the average price of all comic books increased from ten cents to fifty cents. By the year 1995 the median price for a comic book had increased to \$2.50. Unit sales for comics has recently fallen from 100 million units in 1997 to roughly 76 million in 2019 (Miller, *Comic Book Sales by Year*). Comic books have gotten more expensive, and less people appear to be buying them. Comic Books are a luxury item historically targeted towards children and teenagers. Children and many teenagers generally do not have large amounts of disposable income. This means that kids must make a choice in how they spend their limited funds. Since comic books are short periodical magazines, it can be argued that a kid is unwilling to spend five dollars on an item that only provides a few minutes of content compared to more sustainable forms of entertainment media.

Outside of the issues with format and affordability, the medium has experienced issues surrounding community and inclusivity. Many of the environments where comic books are sold have been accused of being hostile or uninviting to new readers and consumers. The comic industry has received accusations of being averse to engaging with new or diverse readers (Berlatsky). The medium has struggled to expand its audience in recent years, which includes

providing community for new or diverse readership demographics. Some publishers have sought to rectify this by pursuing underrepresented demographics to varying levels of success. “The relative lack of diverse creators—and characters—has been a bone of contention for years at both DC and Marvel” (Elbein). The ideal of the specialty comic book shop was meant to be a haven for readers. The comic shop itself formed a community in which like-minded people had a place to come together. The removal of comic books from local locations might have caused it to lose its visibility and accessibility for larger audiences. The overall audience of comic book readers appears to have stagnated within the past few decades. Less children are reading them than before, and less Americans overall. The majority of comic book readers in the first half of the twentieth century were underaged. “A survey commissioned in 1943 showed that 95 percent of children ages eight to eleven were regular comic book readers and 84 percent of those from twelve to seventeen.” (Pustz) There is no significant and reliable current data on the percentage of young comic readers today, however that number has unquestioningly diminished from its prevalence back in the 1940’s. The medium that appears to connect with youth today in a similar numbers would be video games, which boast similar percentages of use as comic books in the 1940’s.

The comic book industry has always been seen as a lesser art form than its counterparts. “Comic books have been often treated derisively as a hybrid of art and literature, but ultimately a product of low culture.” (Collins, Yalcinkaya) Comic books have never had the full respect and appreciation of other formats such as prose literature. In the late 1940s, “Dr Frederic Wertham warned that ‘Comics [is] death on reading.’ (qtd. in Dorrell, Curtis, and Rampal)” (Collins, Yalcinkaya). Comic books also lack the larger general popularity of video games, film, or animation. Even at the height of popularity in the 1940s and later in the 1990s, comics were still



viewed with a certain level of derision by many in the public and considered disposable. The advent of the graphic novel helped cultivate a space where sequential art stories could gain more esteem. However, the periodical comic book is still viewed as an aspect of lower culture by many. Graphic novels themselves still often suffer under prejudicial assumptions about their format as well. Graphic Novels are typically long form individual books similar to prose novels. They are released less frequently than comic book periodicals. Comic books are periodical magazines sold as a serialized narrative. As the medium continues to evolve the line between the two categories continues to blur. Many comic books are collected in trade paperback volumes that mimic the appearance of a typical long-form graphic novel. Alternatively, many longer graphic novels are collected into chronological books similar to a novel series.

Comics books have gone through a severe economic deflation, price increases, and a continuously changing reading format. They have always been able to overcome obstacles and advance through innovation and ingenuity. The 1950's and 1980's saw systematic changes to the format of the medium. Now the industry is at another evolutionary crossroads. Hollywood and other popular industries are looking to comics for adaptable story material. The "idea" of comics has never been more popular. Several of the bestselling films in history have been adapted from a comic books. The comic industry has an opportunity to pull in more new readers and researchers than ever before due to the heightened awareness of the medium by the general public. Lack of access due to cost, space, and an illegible reading format are all obstacles that hinder the viability of the medium. Modern comic books are not curated in a legible format for newer readers. An article in *The Atlantic* magazine discusses how "Such a publishing scheme is convoluted even for a committed fan; for a new reader, it's nearly impenetrable" (Elbein). I believe that increasing the accessibility to comic book content is a way to increase reader

engagement with the medium. One of the questions my project is investigating is what factors are limiting comic books from evolving further into a more robust and viable literary and art medium. In my research I discuss the significance of comic books as a uniquely American literary and visual art form that can also be a great tool for educators and researchers. Comics have been around since ancient history. Nearly all comics owe much of their history to the formation of the traditional comic book in the early twentieth century by innovative artists and writers. North America was a pioneer in the modern 20<sup>th</sup> century for comics as a visual art form. Many other countries adopted and adapted the initial American comic book method to use in their own innovative ways. Countries such as Japan still use the anthology model for their comic serials. The North American market appears to have relinquished its leadership position as an innovator within the medium. I have investigated the historical, political, and cultural factors that influenced the art form of comics in North America and other cultures around the world. My thesis project proposes arguments and concepts for how North American comic books can evolve and improve the accessibility of the reading format.

### **Thesis Argument And Hypothesis**

The main question guiding my research is how can the reading format within the medium of traditional North American comic book periodicals be enhanced through the use of a digital apparatus? The reading format of comic book periodicals currently involves a focus on direct market sales, crossovers, relaunches, reboots, inconsistent creative teams and other related factors. My thesis project is a proof of concept for a digital contextual reading application that could assist readers in better engaging with the literary medium of serialized comic books. The medium of comic books has had difficulty with engaging and interacting with newer readers. Traditional comic books have experienced significant levels of stagnation and a lack of growth

over recent years. There are several systems that impact and influence the format of the comic book medium. Other new formats for comics have seen considerable success and growth in the medium. Kids graphic novels and Japanese manga has seen extensive levels of readership development in North America and on a global scale. The industry has been shaped and altered by the disciplines of creative writing, publishing, and design.

The reading format of traditional comic books is often intrinsically non-linear. Many American comic books typically involve numerous publishing strategies that affect the way their narratives are organized. Comic book companies incorporate various publishing schemes for their books. Major comic publishing strategies include relaunched, reboots, crossovers, events, and renumbering amongst others. Each one of these systems influences the way that a comic story is told. The majority of comic books are also told using the authorial system known as a “run.” A run of a comic involves the entire length of time that a specific creator or group of creators work on a comic book title. This method of storytelling means that numerous different artist, writers, and editors will work on a book over time. This method creates a specific story chronology that is unique to the medium of comic books. “Such a publishing scheme is convoluted even for a committed fan; for a new reader, it’s nearly impenetrable” (Elbein). This authorial tradition in comic books coupled with the overall publishing formula of relaunched, reboots, and renumbering can create a complex reading format.

Comparing the comic book reading format to other serial storytelling mediums highlights the unique challenges of legibility within it. Serialized prose fiction does not typically operate the same way that comic books do as a storytelling medium. Book series such as *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, or *Lord Of The Rings* have a reading format where the story is told in a linear format in chronological order. Book one is followed by book two and so forth until the

conclusion of the series. This is not the same publishing format present within the majority of traditional American comic books. Many corporate-owned serial comic books properties contain multiple different authors who take turns writing a series for a specified amount of time. Each new writer can build or add onto the stories from a previous writer. A comic book such as “*Batman*” has hosted hundreds of writers who have worked on that particular comic series in succeeding order since it was established in 1940. Fiction book series typically do not incorporate this form of storytelling.

Another significant counterpart to traditional American comic books that exists within sequential art would be eastern comics. One format of eastern comics are Japanese comics known as “manga.” The reading format of Japanese comics has more similarities to the storytelling format of a fiction series than traditional American comic books. The majority of Japanese manga series operate as individual sequential volumes that tell a singular story in chronological order. The majority of Japanese comics only have one author, or a single creative team. This allows a series to maintain a consistent identity and a more homogenous visual style. The design format of Japanese comics is also considerably more uniform and accessible. Japanese manga are collected in volumes known as Tankobon (Couch). Japanese Tankobon are collected editions of a Japanese comic series. These collected editions are typically digest-size and paperback books that collect 5 – 8 issues of a Japanese comic series. Tankobon books are organized chronologically using a chronological numbering system. Japanese comics are able to maintain a uniform and standard book design that provides legibility for the reading format. These formatting regulations enhance the general accessibility of the medium of Japanese comics. I argue that these design and formatting choices contribute to the success of Japanese manga. Alternatively, the collected editions for comic books within North America are far more

diverse in style, design, and format. The most common collected edition format for comic books is the trade paperback format. This edition usually collects a few issues in a paperback format. The height and width is typically identical to the standard comic book periodical magazine. A digest comic is a collected edition that is smaller in both height and width to the standard comic periodical. A hardcover collected edition also known as an “oversized hardcover” is similar to a trade paperback but the cover has a thicker stock like a hardcover novel and typically taller and wider than the standardized sizes. An Omnibus is a very large hardcover collected edition of a comic that can collect dozens of singles issues at once. An omnibus typically collects the entirety of a comic book “run” or a complete storyline (Sondheimer, S.W.). Other variations in the format for comic collected editions includes the comic book spine design. Collected editions typically do not maintain the same spine design for the duration of a comic serialization. Manga typically maintains a uniform digest size for all of their comics which incorporate a clear chronological number order on the spine of the book. The linear reading order of the series is outlined by the book spine format which uses simple, affordance design to maximize legibility. Alternatively, North American comic books have a myriad of book size formats and no universal chronology to view and follow. Comic books often have a non-uniform format and their book spine design varies considerably. My project seeks to create a clear, legible, and accessible digital platform that will add a greater level of overall uniformity and standardization into the reading format of North American comic books.

North American comic books are organized by consecutive “runs.” Each new creative team follows up the previous for a particular comic serial. An article in *The Atlantic* discusses how disruptive a reading format like this can become when creators are consistently changed on a series title. “Another source of instability lies in the way corporate superhero comics have

largely moved away from long tenures by creative teams. Artists are now regularly swapped around on titles to meet increased production demands, which devalues their work in the eyes of fans and rarely lets a title build a consistent identity. (Elbein) This combined with the lack of uniformity in the book design of North American comic books both contribute to the overall lack of accessibility, legibility, and readability of the medium by readers.

My thesis argument claims that comic books often lack accessibility due to a lack of legibility, cost and insular community spaces. These factors affect the medium's ability to penetrate a larger readership audience. These factors form a niche environment that stifles diverse perspectives and the expansion of the medium. Asher Elbein at *The Atlantic* discusses how “publishers like Marvel’s instinct with readers has been to squeeze them for all they are worth. Marvel comics tend to be priced at around \$3.99 to \$4.99 for 22 pages, and many series ship new issues twice a month. Digital editions are usually priced about the same.” Current prices for many periodical comic books have continued to rise despite a stagnating readership population. John Jackson Miller, founder of Comichron.com, discusses the history of American comic book prices. “Up until 1961, comic books were mostly priced at 10 cents in the United States. In 1975 the median comic book cover price was 75 cents.” (Miller, *Median Comic Book Cover Prices by Year*) According to statistics gathered from the comic book sales and analysis website *Comichron.com*, sales of comic books increased exponentially from 1985 to 1995. Comic book prices have continued to rise dramatically over the past few years as the population of readers stagnates.

Comic book communities have been accused of facilitating insular environments that discourage or inhibit new and diverse readers. There is little research available to accurately portray the gender makeup of comic book readers. “Heidi MacDonald at the comic book news

site *The Beat* pointed to a recent demographic survey suggesting comic readers were roughly 90 percent male,” (Berlatsky). Alternatively, other comic mediums such as manga display a significantly higher proportion of female readers. The comic book film *The Avengers* had an audience that was made up of 40 percent women, (Berlatsky). The medium itself of sequential art is not somehow unappealing to women, but the community surrounding it might be. The medium does not necessarily have to incorporate overt forms of insulation. The reading format and the general lack of accessibility could be a contributing factor to why young readers in general are often unable to engage with the medium of comic books.

My thesis argument outlines potential solutions to alleviate the problems of accessibility with the medium of comic books. By solving these issues, the medium could increase overall reader engagement. The most significant solution to the problem of legibility for comic books in North America would be organizing the reading format to better fit new readers of the medium. Comic books can learn from other forms of serialized print storytelling. Japanese comics organize their series using clearly visible, chronological volume and issue numbers that move in a linear path for the duration of the series. They also maintain consistent creative teams which forms a unique identity for readers to connect with. Comic books could adapt aspects of this format by maintaining a consistent creative team for each new run, and organizing their various runs in consecutive uniform order. One contributing inhibitor to the legibility of comic books is the varying design styles of each new series. One series or run of *Batman* is often designed differently than the succeeding runs or series. Would readers be able to enter a series like *Batman* more successfully if the most significant stories were organized in a uniform chronological order? The various runs could be fitted into consecutive volumes which would allow a reader the ability to transition from the beginning of the characters publishing history up

to their most recent stories. Perhaps each volume could be labeled as “seasons” or another name grouping.

My project adapts many of these potential solutions and organizes them for a digital interface. My conceptual platform is a digital reading database that organizes the various comic book properties into a linear, chronological format with contextual information layered within. Each title, run, and series are organized by publication date and storyline to facilitate a standardized reading order for stories within the medium. The platform is intended to be a resource and not a full substitute for any copyrighted products. My project offers two sections for a user. A user can view the complete chronology of published books for any comic property within the Volumes section of my database. The second section labeled Runs includes only the most significant runs from a comic book in sequential order. My thesis project acts as a visual proof of concept for the creation of a comic book contextual reading database.

Along with the lack of accessibility, and legibility, the medium of comic books appears to also have lost much of its visibility as a form of media. Originally, the newsstand was an inexpensive opportunity for publishers to achieve an increase in visibility for their product by readers. The newsstand was eventually replaced by the modern comic book stores in the early 1980’s. However, the comic book store has unintentionally created a certain level of insulation against new readership audiences for comics. Comic book stores are considered specialty shops dedicated to pre-existing customers. This format can potentially disincentivize new readers from engaging with the medium. Physical comic book stores themselves and the reading format of comic books can create a barrier to entry for engaging with the medium. Many communities also do not have comic book stores nearby. According to Publishers Weekly there are only about 2,000 comic book stores in the U.S. (O’Leary) After the 2021 Covid-19 Pandemic the number of



operational comic book stores has only decreased further. In an informal survey conducted by Publishers Weekly, a comic book store owner discusses how “In the early 1980s...the advent of the direct market saved the comics industry as we knew it. It was perhaps the single most important change in how the business... since the introduction of the Comics Code Authority in the late 1950s. I really think that right now the industry is in the middle of a similar, seismic change,” (O’Leary). A possible replacement for the newsstand model would be a public digital comic database that is placed within online communities. Print publishing has seen significant stagnation in recent years with diminishing returns, (Grieco). Placing comics in popular digital spaces online might serve as a suitable replacement to the original local newsstand model. Web comic publishers such as Naver Webtoon and Lezhin comics have experimented with this method. North American comic books have the opportunity to connect with more people by investing in digital formats.

Comic books can also develop and engage more potential readers by developing material that appeals to popular online communities such as video game users. Comics are an efficient, affordable, and visually rich medium that can get more content to larger gaming audiences. Both industries could share a successful symbiosis. Madefire has seen significant success by investing in digital comics that are geared towards video game users. According the *Publishers Weekly*, “Madefire, which distributes comics online, has had success with its original motion books based on popular video games. The Overwatch series of motion comic books, licensed from Blizzard, is the most popular title on its platform. The Overwatch series alone has received millions of downloads since the series launched in 2016” (Salkowitz, “Ready Player One”). Due to the complex storytelling structure of modern mainstream comics, new readers have been hesitant to begin reading these stories. Video game users are already invested in the games that they play.

Video game users are more likely to invest in media content that they already understand. When companies are able to create inexpensive ancillary comic content for those users it can entice them to consume that form of media. I argue that pursuing alternative methods of adapting comic media and linking it to mediums with larger audiences like video games can produce more readers of the comic book material overall.

The comic reading application Madefire, was able to pursue alternative types of comic readers. There are different types of comic readers that exist within the market. Some consumers are only interested in reading comics digitally while others are uninterested in paying to read comics at all. It is up to comic book industry professionals to find ways to serve and entice these consumers. Madefire gave the industry several foundational opportunities to bring in new readers that must be expanded upon. I am influenced by Madefire's ability to bring in alternative comic readers through creating sensory experiences in their motion books. I am also influenced by international comic providers like Lezhin comics for creating alternate spaces and payment models for people to read comics. I believe that several of the current digital comic reading platforms should merge or fuse their various functions and properties in order to create a more cohesive interface for comic book readers. None of the current applications have all of the correct answers.

My thesis argument outlines the biggest issues that contribute to the stagnation in reader engagement within the medium of comic books and how to solve this problem. My argument also discusses the need for a digital space that provides opportunities for research into the medium of comics. My research asserts that lack of accessibility, legibility of the reading format, cost, and general visibility of the medium all contribute to the stagnation in reader engagement for comic books. The proof of concept for my product does not yet offer up a clear solution to

issues of visibility with the medium of comic books. However, when I discuss my next steps following the completion of my proof of concept, I discuss the opportunity to make my project an open source application that is publicly supported. I also discuss the possibility of connecting my platform with public libraries to provide a pathway for readers and researchers to engage with physical comic book media. I argue that providing universal and free engagement with my application would help increase the visibility of the comic book medium in general.

### **Influences And Precedents**

There are numerous influences and precedents that direct my project creation and conceptual design. These influences are both artistic, academic, and design oriented. As a designer my project is influenced by the work done on various digital comic reading applications. I believe digital comic reading platforms are an extremely valuable section of the comic book industry. The digital and motion comic application known as Madefire is one significant influence for my Thesis projects direction. Madefire is no longer in use as a comic reading platform, however I believe that its functions, goals, and designs can still inform my projects creation. Other comic reading platforms that influence my project include ComiXology, Marvel Unlimited, Kuaikan Manhua, Tapas media, Netease comics, and Naver Webtoons. Each one of these applications has contributed unique techniques and functions that help develop or improve the user experience and interface for digital comics. Artistically my project is influenced by prolific creators such as Jim Lee, Greg Capullo, Yusuke Murata, Esad Ribic, Zao Dao, and Chris Bachalo. Illustration is intrinsic to the medium of sequential art. The medium has value as a visual art form that is worthy of research and study. These illustrators and others influence the way I approach my project from an artistic and creative perspective. My platform would allow researchers and readers the opportunity to investigate these various comic book illustrators and

creators further. The final viewpoint that influences my project application would be as a digital literary study guides. Applications such as Litcharts, Sparknotes, Enotes, CliffNotes, and GradeSaver, and numerous others are excellent resources for analyzing literature. However, there is no platform that is solely dedicated to investigating the literary intricacies of comic books and graphic novels. My project seeks to uncover the most successful aspects within popular literary study guides and adapt them for my digital platform which focuses on comics. for reading comics that helps expand the readership and increase the accessibility of the medium. My project draws from the knowledge of both domestic and international influences in order to create a project that pushes the medium into expanding and evolving successfully.

### **Precedents: Comic Reading Platforms**

The digital and motion comic application known as Madefire was influential for my projects direction. Their ideals and philosophy around motion comics has influenced the way I think about altering the reading format of comic books. I argue that Madefire's choice to focus on creating animated functions and transitions for comic books was flawed and it ultimately proved to be unsuccessful. My project instead focuses on altering the way that narratives are presented to readers. My platform focuses on the logistics of comic book reading and organizes it on a digital interface to improve accessibility and legibility. This strategy does not alter the inherent format of sequential art but provides a channel to better experience it. Other precedents such as Kuaikan Manhua, Netease comics, and Naver Webtoons have also adapted a new format for reading comic books. South Korean Webtoons created the vertical scrolling format for reading comics. This new format has proven to be quite successful. Both applications have developed new concepts for experiencing comics.

South Korean digital webcomics have been able to adapt and evolve the comic reading format and experience. “Webtoons represents the most successful publisher of web comics in South Korea, which is owned by the internet search engine Naver. The vertical reading and scrolling method of reading digital webtoons has garnered significant popularity and engagement. This method of reading comics was created in South Korea. The reinvigoration of digital comics was seen most notably in China and South Korea after their print comic book market crashed. Numerous designers helped develop innovative ideas to the reading format of comics in these countries. Naver Webtoon was founded by JunKoo Kim in 2004. After the print market collapsed due to censorship he and other designers were forced to come up with alternative ways of creating comics and connecting with readers. He is responsible for creating the vertical scrolling view format for South Korean webtoons. He described his process in a 2016 interview with Business Insider. “It wasn’t necessarily that I wanted to do the scroll, but people that create content and deliver content should always think in terms of how the creators or how users will consume the content,” (Acuna)” His platform readapted the reading format successfully. Another innovator would be South Korean web comic provider Lezhin Comics, founded by both Hee Sung Han and Chris Kwon in 2013. It has become one of the largest digital comic publishers in the world alongside Naver Webtoon. This south Korean application has made strides in numerous international markets outside of just South Korea. Anni Chen is another designer from China and is the founder of the largest digital comic reading application in that country, Kuaikan Manhua. She created an online application in China that has garnered over millions of regular users. Her innovation has helped ignite a reinvestment into the Chinese comic book market that had been nearly insolvent for years. What makes all of these innovations so spectacular is the historical background that instigated it. Both China and South Korea saw

considerable levels of censorship and suppression against print comics at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their governments nearly obliterated their print comic book markets due to censorship bans and prohibitions of physical comic media. “In 1967, manhwa [Korean comics] were even declared one of the “six evils of society.” Obscenity laws have continued to be enforced into the 21st century,” (Ro). As a result, South Korea spent many years where there was virtually no sustainable print comic market. It was not until designers created online comic book portals to connect with readers that comic industries in South Korea and China saw renewed expansion and growth. The United States saw similar levels of censorship in the 1950’s but managed to survive them by acquiescing to the comic code authority and only moderately reorganizing the reading format of the medium. China and South Korea spent decades without comics being published which forced them to make large scale changes to their mediums in order to adapt and evolve. I believe American publishers can learn a great deal from their international rivals and use some of those techniques to benefit the North American comic book market. My project involves researching alternative comic publishing methods and discussing how the North American market can adopt or adapt them. I believe the North American market can learn a great deal from their international rivals about adapting the reading format of comics and using new techniques for engaging with comics. The south Korean comic publishers were able to reformat comics into an infinite canvas and vertical reading orientation for mobile devices. My project involves organizing the narratives of traditional comic books to create a reading guide that provides a clear path for readers to reference. My platform utilizes a digital interface that can store extensive comic book narratives easily and accurately.

Madefire developed an innovative and original approach to reading and viewing comics on its digital interface. CEO and Co-founder Ben Wolstenholme developed intricate additions to

this platform's database. These additions include animation, sound, narration, and guided reading among other utilities. I believe that Madefire presented the industry with interesting tools to move the medium forward. The app's approach to reading comics offers a way to reach alternative and underrepresented readers. Ben Wolstenholme is a passionate storyteller and illustrator as well as a designer and entrepreneur. He co-founded Madefire with artist Liam Sharp and Eugene Walden in 2011. The company delivered high quality motion books to consumers through their digital application. The application also allowed for creators to make their own motion books within the application. The company created new additional channels and functions for reading comics for diverse audiences. Madefire published independent comics, video game comics, and other derivative comic book media, as well as mainstream comics. Madefire had an experiential reading interface which incorporated moving images and sounds into reading comics. The addition of various functions like animation and sound effects were intended to help create a heightened experience for the consumer.

Despite these new techniques the company closed down in 2021. I argue that Madefire did not have the adequate library of comic book content or a strong reading format available to truly offer a seamless experience of reading comics for consumers. Madefire partnered with the virtual reality provider Oculus to add an even greater sensory experience for comic readers. Wolstenholme explains how "Comics are such a powerful storytelling format. Comics are words-and-pictures, perfect for storytelling in virtual reality." The platform contained titles such as Planet of the Apes and Star Wars. Despite the opportunities presented by digital comics and digital reading applications, there are still obstacles that hinder the viability of this reading format. I argue that motion comics do not offer a viable or successful reading format for consumers. Animated comics do not adequately reinvent the format for reading sequential art.

Comparing motion comics to vertical webtoons, it would appear that South Korean web comics have the more successful format. The application Madefire shutdown due to its inability to remain a viable comic reading platform. I argue that the application relied heavily on the idea of animated motion comics and therefore was unable to adequately grow. Madefire's dissolution reinforces my project's thesis argument. One aspect of my argument discusses how one of the biggest issues affecting the reading format of comic books is the lack of accessibility and legibility. The media of comic books can be difficult for users to engage with and there is often a lack of clarity for the reading format for comic narratives. Madefire's inability to address these problems likely contributed to its closure. However, some of the aspects of Madefire can be reintroduced and improved upon for new comic reading applications. Madefire did a good job of connecting with alternative mediums of entertainment such as video games and animation. Their library contained content from other mediums that brought in more diverse readerships. Madefire sought to reinvigorate the medium of comics by trying to overhaul the entire reading experience using animation techniques. Their solution seems to have been to format comic books into animated illustrations, which ultimately proved unsuccessful. Their platform used animations, sound effects, motion graphics, and other functions to alter the reading experience of comic books. I do not believe the traditional reading experience of sequential art storytelling is the most significant problem for the medium. I argue that the lack of accessibility and legibility for the reading format is what contributes to the decline of reader engagement. My project seeks to maximize the legibility of that reading format.

### ***Influences: Literary Study Guides***

One of the foremost influences on the identity and format of my project would be online book study guides. The rise of digital study guides for books has been a controversial but popular



discussion amongst the education community for the past decade. Websites such as *Sparknotes*, *Cliff Notes*, and *Litcharts* have amassed a huge following of dedicated researchers who analyze and provide informative commentary about popular literature. The creator of Cliff Notes, Clifton Keith Hillegass founded Cliff Notes in August 1958 in Lincoln, Nebraska. He was interested in providing a supportive study guide resource for students in the United States. Sparknotes was founded by academics Sam Yagan, Max Krohn, Chris Coyne, and Eli Bolotin in 1999. It initially provided study guides for literature, poetry, history, and philosophy before being acquired by Barnes and Noble in 2001. This platform is the single largest free study guide website for students.

SparkNotes is a resource you can turn to when you need assistance understanding books, writing papers, or studying for exams. SparkNotes provides guides which contain thorough summaries and analyses on various texts. In the face of controversy over students cheating on academic assignments using their platform, Sparknotes has heavily invested in an anti-plagiarism stance. They offer clear instructions and examples on how to correctly cite work from their platform or others, and push for students to read the literature and create their own academic arguments. The last literary study guide that was a huge influence on my project would be LitCharts. This website is dedicated to creating a more robust, accessible, and design-friendly approach for literature study guides. Litcharts was founded by Ben and Justin, two of the original editors of Sparknotes. LitCharts creates a bullet list summary format for every individual plot point within a book. These bullet lists are incorporated side-by-side with analysis and color-coded themes for each point. Every LitChart includes a color-coded key for book themes, which assigns a specific color to each theme. Readers can then trace the various themes across the book. LitCharts compares itself to other platforms on its website page, “Analysis in other

literature guides is often disconnected from the summary and underlying text, our side-by-side summary and analysis are always examples of close reading. All of the quotes we include in our Quotes section can be sorted by location, character, and theme,” (Ben, Justin, *About LitCharts, or Why LitCharts Are the Best Literature Guides on Earth.*) The method of organizing literary information within LitCharts is a major influence on how my platform. LitCharts has also invested in using more data visualization approaches for its website. LitCharts uses what they have labeled as “theme wheels” that indicate the embedded plots and themes as data points within a book to create a visual overview for an entire book on a single page. A user can interact and immerse themselves in this digital data chart on their website. Lastly, the website provides charts as PDFs which present the same content from their website as an accessible and design friendly chart that's easy to print. These charts can benefit teachers as classroom aides or references.

### ***Influences: Creators***

As an artist my work is influenced by the numerous illustrators and writers. Some prominent creators who have inspired my work include Greg Capullo, Yusuke Murata, Esad Ribic, Zao Dao, Tatsuyuki Tanaka, and numerous others. However, for this project the biggest creative influence would stem from the work done by Todd Mcfarlane. While I am not heavily influenced by his artwork, I have been inspired by the specific techniques he has employed as a creator and entrepreneur in comics. He has helped form a space for comic book creators to grow their own brand and offered alternatives to antiquated and exploitative comic book industry practices. He is one of the co-founders of the comic publisher Image Comics which supports intellectual property rights for creators. His work as an artist, writer, and

entrepreneur is a large influence on how I plan to format my digital comics platform for my thesis.

Todd McFarlane was born in Calgary, Alberta, Canada on March 16, 196. McFarlane cites artists such as John Byrne, Arthur Adams, George Perez, and Walter Simonson amongst his main influences. Todd submitted his art to numerous comic book editors across the United States. He sent over 300 separate art submissions and received roughly 700 rejection letters before breaking into the industry. McFarlane began his career as a penciler artist for Marvel Comics. He would later illustrate some of Marvel's biggest book titles including Spider-Man, Hulk, and Venom. Todd eventually became a premiere level Marvel artist. He became the main artist on Marvel's Amazing Spider-Man series. Due to the massive popularity of his work he was given the role of sole artist and writer of Spider-Man. Spider-Man issue #1 was released in September of 1990. The first issue became the best-selling Spider-Man comic book of all time, selling over 2.5 million copies. Despite this, many comic creators had still been minimized and undervalued across the industry. Due to corporate greed and the disrespect that was being directed towards creators, McFarlane decided to depart from Marvel and corporate comics as a whole. He helped found Image Comics which has published best-selling titles such as *Spawn*, *The Walking Dead*, *Saga*, and more. The first issue of his independent comic book *Spawn* sold almost two million copies. It is currently the best-selling independent comic book in North America, (Image Comics.com).

Todd McFarlane is one of the 7 co-founders of Image Comics, the third largest comic book publisher in the United States. The 7 artists who formed Image Comics include Lee, Rob Liefeld, Jim Valentino, Erik Larsen, Marc Silvestri, Whilce Portacio, and Todd McFarlane. Each artist has gone on to create a significant and successful space for themselves through comics.

Mcfarlane and other Image comic creators proved that they could create a successful space for themselves and others without relying on established company brands like Marvel or DC.

Mcfarlane has since served as Image Comics president for nearly two decades. He has supported and published numerous successful creator-owned comics within the company. Image Comics operates much differently than a company like Marvel, Disney, DC, and others. Comic book creators retain the intellectual property of their creation when they publish through Image. This format gives creators the freedom to tell their story under their own terms and retain the financial, and critical rewards without being exploited by corporations. Other independent comic book publishers like Boom Studios and Oni Press owe their existence to Image Comics. Image Comics allows for creators to own the intellectual property of their stories. Comic books like *Walking Dead*, *Saga*, and *Monstress* have all gained massive success and acclaim. The recent growth and expansion of independent comic book titles is a direct result of the contributions made by Image Comics and its president Todd Mcfarlane. The ideology of creators owning their own intellectual and creative property has been a long standing fight. I plan to use my platform to create additional resources and contextual information that highlights the contributions of comic book creators. Mcfarlane's determination and affinity for creating and publishing comic books has been a huge influence for this thesis project.

### ***Influences: Comic Researchers***

As a designer I am interested in the aesthetic, artistic, and design qualities that exist within comics. I am also interested in investigating the historical and economic aspects of comics and graphic novels as a medium. In my project I research the past trends and data in order to come to a conclusion that would solve major problems within the industry. There have been different researchers and reporters who have offered insight and evidence for studying comics.

John Jackson Miller is one of the most well known and experienced comic book researchers and archaeologists within the industry today. His website, Comichron.com is an excellent resource for understanding the general economics and statistics of comic book publishing within North America. While other comic book researchers such as Scott McCloud focus on the narrative and aesthetic qualities of comic books, Miller focuses mostly on the economic trends and market factors. His work has helped me formulate ideas and hypothesis for my thesis project. Through reading his information and the data he has collected I have been able to define my own goals for my project and how it can support the economic vitality of the comic book industry.

John Jackson Miller has worked in journalism, market analytics, and as a comic book creator. His work has entered the New York Times bestselling list multiple times. He has worked on titles such as Star Wars and others. Miller labels himself a pop culture archaeologist who specializes in comic books. He helped create the comic book sales data resource website known as Comichron.com. He has completed extensive research into the historical trends of comic book sales data. Due to the lack of public data released by any of the major comic book publishers, his website offers a necessary and important representation of the financial climate of the comic book market. In 1993, the comic book industry hit a peak in sales. This was partially due to the increase in speculators and collectors entering the market and buying more books. This time was the height of the speculation boom. Investors and collectors entered the market and inflated the numbers. Miller began his journalism career as an editor of the magazine Comics Retailer in 1993. After the successful introduction of Magic: The Gathering, he added games to the magazines news coverage. Miller was later appointed managing editor of the Comics Buyer's Guide. This background experience has helped him further investigate and record the financial aspects of comics and graphic novels. Miller describes himself as a “pop-culture archaeologist,”

who focuses on comic book circulation history. His website Comichron.com is his main source for publishing data.

Comichron.com has roughly 200,000 sales figures for comic books and graphic novels from decades of publishing data listed online. The sales charts on the website are based on distributor sales to comics stores in North America. He has completed a report every month since 1996, and has been slowly working backwards to add more information from earlier charts. Miller has archived distributor sales charts that date back to the 1980s. Miller describes rescuing one major defunct distributor's records from the incinerator. He is constantly adding past and present data to ComiChron.com archives. He includes the sales and economic statistics of modern books and historical trends. His research informs the way I approach my own research into the economics of comic book publishing.

I use ComicChron.com and any available public data from publishers to inform my project research. Major comic book publishers do not release most of their financial numbers publicly. This creates difficulty for individuals to investigate the accurate information. However, the major distributors of comic books do release their numbers. This allows researchers to discover how many comic books are being shipped to stores regularly. The issue with this method of research is that this information only details how many comics the direct market stores are buying. There is limited evidence as to how much the publishers make or any research into how many books that consumers actually buy. Comichron.com also uses postal sales statistics for research. Publishers initially reported annual average sales of their comics in the 1960s and 1970s. Comic book sales previously were documented by audit bureaus who tracked the sales of their comic books in order to make sure their books were reaching the promised audiences. Miller collects this data to compile the historical numbers for sales. Miller also uses

Comichron.com to report on the state of the industry as a whole. He releases an annual joint report with ICV2 of comic sales and information.

Miller believes that having the data of comic book circulation available to everyone is a collective good for the industry. I believe it also helps to provide a larger perspective about the comic book market. The comics industry came close to collapse in the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s due to various reasons. 2020 has been a significant challenge for comics as well. By researching the historical context and data trends, publishers and creators can avoid falling into similar problems. Comics is an especially resilient medium, similar to the famous marvel character, Wolverine, it takes a lot of hits, but is very difficult to kill. Miller's website Comichron, is a necessary, important, and reputable resource for comic book economic information. All of these precedents and influences help me define and direct my thesis project.

### **Related Disciplines**

There are several disciplines that support, engage, impact and influence the comic book and graphic novel industry. The industry has been shaped and altered by the disciplines of creative writing, publishing, and design. More specifically, children's literature, digital publishing, and user experience design have greatly affected the medium of comics and various others. These disciplines and fields of study and research will continue to affect the way that the medium of comics evolves and transitions into the future. Digital publishing was initially met with trepidation by the industry. The idea of labeling comics as children's literature has been met with ire by many creators and consumers alike. The need to improve user experience for consuming digital comics has been left largely uninvestigated. I attempt to research each discipline and detail their qualities and the potential that they have for impacting comics and other mediums. I have an undergraduate minor in creative writing. I have always enjoyed writing

and reading fiction literature. My background in creative writing allows for me to speak about the nature of storytelling and writing. Journalism, marketing, advertising, public relations, and more jobs employ some form of creative writing. In the field of comics and graphic novels creative writing is exceptionally important and the field of children's literature is intrinsically connected with the history and format of the medium. Creative writing involves various forms of writing and literature that involves imagination or inventive elements. This form of writing typically relies on using abstract thoughts. Within creative writing there are various specific disciplines. Children's literature is one of those disciplines within creative writing that involves creating narratives that can be consumed by younger readers.

### ***Children's Literature***

The goals of children's literature include improving literacy, comprehension skills, and entertainment. Some of the oldest forms of children's literature include fairy tales and folk tales. The discipline can be used in books, magazines, poems, comics, or picture books. The medium has historically been accompanied by illustrations. The form of using art and writing together to tell a story is a long tradition within mediums that were intended for children. Many historic children's stories actually pull their archetypes and ideas from classic literature. Many of the stories were originally written to be much more adult oriented but were altered to fit younger readers. Grimm fairy tales are one such example of this phenomenon.

Children's literature does not need to be immature. This is a popular misconception for the medium. Media targeted towards children does not make it less intelligent or frivolous. It also does not need to be simple or superficial. Children's literature merely defines itself as a form of writing that is intended to connect with younger readers. There are various ways to achieve this. Popular techniques for achieving these goals is through condensing complex or



even controversial topics into cohesive or fundamental concepts. Often the stories in children's literature deal with basic emotions and ideals about morality and ethics.

Children's literature has the ability to foster empathy, therapy, and improve communication for younger readers," (Stephenson). Through children's books and stories, readers are able to be exposed to complex topics without having to understand all of the contextual intricacies. Basic principles and functions of life are expressed and formulated for young readers to consume. As children's literature continues to develop and grow as a medium, the need to expand access also increases. More people are consuming children's literature and publishers must find ways of reaching those consumers. One way is through increasing digital publishing of printed material.

Children's literature is a form of literature that focuses on connecting children with literature and language. It attempts to entertain, inform, and educate children using useful archetypes and literary conventions. Publishing focuses on being able to spread a specific type of media to the public. Digital publishing refers to using the tools within the internet and computer technology to spread that media further out into previously unreachable locations. Another discipline that is.

### ***Digital Publishing***

The goal of publishing is to connect content or products to the general public. The intended target can be any type of group, individual, organization, or area. However, in order to connect the published material at a specific location the media must be made accessible for that location. Accessibility is an important factor in publishing. Digital publishing has proven to increase access to more material for more people who previously could not attain the content. Publishing is defined as the activity of making information, literature, music, software, and other

content available for use. Publishing can be for free or for sale depending on the group.

Traditionally, publishing refers to the distribution of printed material, such as books and magazines. However, with the creation of digital media, publishing has been able to expand its definition to include all forms of media that is disseminated into the public for use. With the advent of digital information systems, the scope has expanded to include electronic publishing.

Publishing has a long history and was heavily connected with the invention of printing.

However, with the creation of digital media, the need to print material to disperse it to various locations has become much more unnecessary.

Other forms of publishing include academic, educational, retail, and corporate. Academic publishing is the form of publishing that involves governments, civil society and private companies for research, advocacy, or public interest. Trade or retail publishing is the form of publishing that focuses on selling printed material for profit. The commercial publishing industry ranges from large multinational conglomerates to thousands of smaller independents. This is typically labeled as retail publishing. In order to make publishing successful companies must invest in accessible formats of publishing. Digital publishing is heavily connected to increasing access of material.

Digital publishing is a discipline that focuses on transferring physical printing and documents to digital interfaces. Digital publishing is one form of increasing access. The goal of accessible publishing is to create simplified channels to increase the ability to access content. The internet is a universal interface that allows users to interact with content from across the world. In order to have access a person must have the necessary tools to interact and connect with material. Digital publishing is often labeled as Electronic publishing. Many publishers have worked towards increasing access to their content using various methods of electronic or digital

publishing. Streaming, Subscriptions, online databases, online retail and other forms of user interaction have been implemented to allow for organizations to publish their work for consumers.

The word digital implies an inherent connection to technology. “Digital publishing officially began in 1971 when Project Gutenberg was formed with the digitalization of the US Declaration of Independence. Since that time, the sub-genre of digital publishing has expanded into a force that has taken on conventional publishing, encompassing comics, music, news, video games, mobile apps, art, books and more,” (Carlos). Digital media is the content that is circulated around the internet and on computer technology. Publishing involves the process of making material available to the public. With the expansion and development of the internet that availability has been increased substantially through digital publishing methods. As more tablets and smart phones become available to more people, the necessity for having a space to spread information becomes more prevalent. The rise of technology and the internet has contributed to the rise of e-publications. E-publications consist of printed material that has been transferred or inserted through a digital interface for consumption. Many newspapers and other previously print based companies have completely transferred their business models to a digital and online format.

Users and consumers are able to interact with e-publications in ways equal or better than that of traditional printed products. With the increase in e-publications there has also been an increase in electronic books. This increase is intrinsically connected with the prevalence of digital tablets. Sales of e-books have risen significantly. Several industries and companies have completely transitioned over to digital. Established digital reading services and devices have continued to take hold within the industry of publishing. Amazon now owns two major digital

publishing companies, Amazon Kindle, and Comixology. Many literature mediums have invested in the ideas of digital publishing. Comic book prices have risen significantly in recent years. As a result of this many potential readers, particularly young readers are unable or unwilling to buy the content. The public library can help serve as an alternative option for many of these readers. My application could possibly assist libraries in their effort to organize their comic book collection. Public libraries could use my digital comic reading guides to assist readers and researchers with following the complex chronology and contextual information layered within comic book narratives.

Comics have slowly begun to transfer their publishing methods and functions to more digital frontiers. Digital comics were first universally published in North America in 2011. This created a stir in the entire industry. Retail comic shops were completely against the entire format because of the competition that it represented. Many other comic publishing industries have abandoned their print market in favor of digital publishing. The Korean comic book publishing industry is almost universally digital. Chinese comic publishers are also mostly digital Japanese comic book publishers recently announced that digital comic sales have surpassed the sales of their physical print books. Many mediums must adapt and evolve in order to maintain a presence within the constantly expanding sphere of publishing. The field is so vast that every industry that attempts to connect their product or media to a larger audience must find inventive ways to separate themselves from their competitors. Comics are heavily impacted by the evolution of children's literature, digital publishing and also user experience design. User experience design is a form of design that investigates and creates viable systems for user interaction and satisfaction.

***User Experience And Interface Design***

User experience design is an area of technology design that is intended to support user behavior through increasing accessibility, usability, and interaction. User Interface Design is a discipline that involves simplifying the process of interacting with technology and improving efficiency. Experience design attempts to develop the experience of a media along various dimensions such as duration, interaction, significance, breadth, and intensity. Duration involves the initiation and immersion of content for a user. Significance involves the emotional and metaphysical functions and meaning of a specific form of content. Intensity is based on the way a user engages with the product, and interaction involves how a user connects with a product or system. Duration (initiation, immersion, conclusion, and continuation)

User interface design is often labeled as UI. It is a form of technology design that focuses on the interaction of machines and software. The goals of this area of study involve maximizing usability, experience, interaction, and efficiency. This area of design can be used for various forms of technology such as digital programs, appliances, computers, and mobile devices. However, the overall goal of this form of design is to maximize efficiency and achieve user goals. Graphic design and typography are important disciplines that support the success of user experience design models. Aesthetic qualities of a application can affect the overall user experience. The designer must balance the technical functionality with the aesthetic elements of a system. A device must be operational and appealing in order to maximize user satisfaction. Designers are categorized in certain areas based off of what type of design they specialize in. Software designers all follow the core tenets of design study and relate them to their specific field. User experience designers are concerned with creating systems that adapt and relate to user satisfaction and comfort.

Improving the User Interface allows designers to create more robust interactions for consumers. The way a user interacts with an application contributes to the overall enjoyment and experience. However, interaction is focused on changing the physical connection of the user. User experience focuses on improving the user emotional and psychological experience with the digital content. User interface design is a sub category of User Experience. The ideas of interface design revolve around improving the interaction and connection of a user to the content.

User interface is especially important for my project because of the need for improving human connection with specific digital programs. The idea of digitalizing comics and graphic novel content has become increasingly more popular and necessary. However, various publishers and industries have created different ways to consume that product. As comics continue to be transferred and published online and on digital platforms, the need to improve user interaction and experience becomes more imperative. The interaction of a user and a product typically involves elements such as the aesthetic style, physicality, sound, space, and more. All of these elements can be supported in various ways and methods. There are several basic dimensions of interactive design. Those include time, words, physical space, visuals, and behavior. When these dimensions are formulated correctly for a product they give us a rough outline for how a product will function.

Research is extremely important for the industry of UX and UI design. Both disciplines require professionals to constantly investigate and research information that would assist and improve their designs. Some of the basic research topics include user wants, expectations, functionality, aesthetic designs, accessibility, and other related factors. These areas are then tested and applied in order to gain further feedback and discussion. One of the most important

steps implemented by UX designers involves creating prototypes. The process of investigating design functions and ideas involves creating low and high fidelity prototypes, wireframe renderings, and user maps. Each one allows for designers to revise, edit, and alter their product before moving further in the design process.

For my project's proof of concept I have designed a prototype for a digital interactive reading guide which is a visual map of contextual reading information for a comic book property. I am using the aspects of user experience and interface to organize my conceptual platform. The reading guide details specific literary, artistic, and cultural elements that have influenced the narrative media. My case study is of the storyline of The Mighty Thor series by Jason Aaron which features a female version of the famous Marvel character Thor. This character was created to showcase and highlight a more diverse and inclusive representation of the comic book medium for readers. My reading guide details how this character profile reached a much larger audience than the general comic book reading demographic. It was discussed by the View on national television and created an opening for new female readers to get invested in a character and story that they might be able to better relate to. The storyline also featured topics such as cancer treatment.

These three disciplines inform, affect, and influence my project goals and objectives. These disciplines often directly affect the medium of comic books. Digital publishing is growing and developing to entice new readers. User experience and interface is slowly being taken more seriously within the industry. Comic reading platforms have been forced to invest in the digital reading format and improve it for consumers. Children's literature is continuing to be accepted as more robust and respectable media. Not all comic fall easily within the breadth of these disciplines. Not all of these disciplines support the comic book industry equally. As comic

continue to move forward into the future these disciplines will be implanted into the threads of this industry.

### **Theories And Philosophy**

There are numerous philosophies that have had an influence on comics and sequential art. Comics have a relatively longer existence compared to many other forms of modern entertainment. Traditional comic book periodicals debuted in the 1930's and they have had numerous scholars discuss and research about them. Some prominent researchers include Will Eisner who coined the term graphic novel, which helped increase in visibility of comics by scholars. Scott McCloud 's research into comics led into a reevaluation of comics as a viable art form. The first theory I present comes from the educator and philosopher John Dewey. John Dewey's *Art As Experience* describes the way that art is consumed by its audience and who that audience is. The second theory is the idea of the an art medium impacting a user through its varying levels of sensory perception. McLuhan coined the term "medium is the message" and "hot and cold media" which describe the ways that media interacts with a user. His ideas of participatory media and how the different levels of user participation affect the way an audience member responds to that medium is very significant for my research. The final theory is the pragmatic theory of art which is similar to the idea of epistemology in that it discusses how art is able to provide a specific function or role, (Worth, Sarah E. "Art and Epistemology"). The philosophy of pragmatism is that something works or is true if it is successful or achieves a specific goal. The pragmatic theory of art is that art has a specific reason or goal to achieve. One of those goals is to achieve knowledge or truth. This is especially popular with literature. Literature can be used to explain core functions or ideals that state a universal ideal or truth of



life. This philosophy was endorsed by Aristotle who viewed art as being able to capture the essence of a particular truth in life through recreation.

### *Pragmatic Theory of Art*

The pragmatic theory of art describes the way that art is able to affect its audience or achieve a goal or even a shared experience. Pragmatic theory of art is a form of assessing the way that art contributes to providing specific goals or tools to society. One of the most significant aspects of the pragmatic theory of art is the idea of using art as a means to an end. That end could be cognitive, moral, social, religious, or other components. However, the idea of pragmatism in art is opposed to the ideas of aesthetics where the art in and of itself is important and produces a specific worth or outcome to be appreciated, (Worth, Sarah E. “Art and Epistemology”).

One form that the pragmatic theory of art adopts is the idea of art being used to find “truth or knowledge.” This is a way to find the cognitive function through creating art. This is where literature specifically is typically has the best case to be made for this theory. That theory is that using literature, which is defined as an art form, a user can discover specific truths about life or society. These truths do not necessarily need to be specific or concrete. The idea of literature as an art form providing knowledge is that writers are able to present specific ideas or the truth of human nature as they see them for an audience member to appreciate and become aware of. This idea has been around for a long time. Aristotle and Plato had conflicting opinions on this. Plato believed art was merely a weak imitation of the truth of reality. Plato believed the knowledge we gained from literature could cause negative outcomes, while Aristotle believed it could cause positive outcomes, (Worth, Sarah E. “Art and Epistemology”).

I argue that literature is able to achieve the effect of informing or providing knowledge of a specific human truth about life. I believe this affect is achieved when a writer is able to make the stories and characters feel real to the audience. This is a much more subjective perspective. This aspect of the pragmatic theory of art as knowledge is the idea that art can be used to achieve a truth in human nature or a universal truth about life. In literature this is accomplished by characterization. Are the characters in the story believable? Would real people ever act like the people depicted in the novel? This is the idea of literature as art being used to depict reality from a generalized perspective. Literature is not the only medium that can achieve a “truth in human nature.” Motion pictures, plays, operas, and other storytelling art forms appear to have the advantage in capturing a specific truth or reality about life and human experiences. This is because all of those mediums have literature at their foundation. If the viewer of the story is able to believe that the characterization and personalities within a story are believable or realistic then they are able to acknowledge the inherent truth or aspects about human nature. If a sad character cries, or an angry character becomes physical, these traits provide a form of knowledge or acknowledgment of human existence. I believe comics or sequential art has the ability to achieve a “truth in human nature” as well. Comics are a form of literature which allows them to tell stories using characters and characterization that helps a reader believe the material. Britannica describes how “Painting and sculpture cannot depict action, and action is all-important in the representation of human character...The late self-portraits of the 17th-century Dutch artist Rembrandt do seem to reveal an agonized yet sometimes serene inner spirit, suggesting that there are flashes of human insight to be found in depictions of human beings in visual art.” (Hospers, John) Now, since sequential art is the combination of both literature and art, I argue that it is able to achieve the pragmatic function of providing knowledge of the truth in human nature to a

greater degree than some others. When a consumer reads the graphic novel *Watchman*, they are able to appreciate the characterization and acknowledge their realism, but the artwork provides additional sensory interpretation for readers to latch onto and recognize as realistic. The art and literature working together increases the success of the pragmatic goal of acquiring knowledge of human nature.

### ***Marshall McLuhan: Medium Is The Message***

Marshall McLuhan describes several aspects of media in his book, *Understanding Media*. His main theory is that media itself is a specific form of information that participants respond to differently depending on the nature of that medium. As he states, “the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of our-selves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.” (McLuhan 1) He also discusses how the medium itself defines the message that is being transmitted to the audience member. The medium is what dictates the type of message and the nature of the message that is being perceived by the audience. When McLuhan talks about the medium being the message he is saying the way that we communicate a medium to an audience is more important than the actual medium itself. This means that the communication of ideas or information. I do not completely agree with that assessment. I think they are both important, and that if you slightly alter the properties of the medium you are able to automatically change the message.

McLuhan argued that modern electronic communication would have significant sociological and aesthetic consequences. He believed it would alter the ways in which we experience the world. He was accurate in this assumption. McLuhan’s predictions about the world becoming a more communicative, connected, and interactive global space meant that the

messages of mediums have become easier to disseminate. The mediums themselves are also easier to spread. The internet allows people to communicate their art and ideas far easier than before. Digital media has become exceptionally popular in the entertainment sector. I argue that the more digitized that the world becomes the more connected we become, which increases our capacity to communicate and understand those messages. However, his ideas about the medium and the way that an audience responds to that medium depending on how it functions are pivotal to better understanding how comic books as a medium can, or should evolve. He describes how “technique of the suspended judgment” goes further. It anticipates the effect of, say, an unhappy childhood on an adult, and offsets the effect before it happens.” (McLuhan 11) He seems to be discussing the ability to believe the reality presented by the medium. An audience member is participating in the act of pretending something is real. Comics are a cool medium. They require a great deal more participation than other mediums such as video games or film. However, McLuhan’s argument about the specific nature of the medium being more important than the medium itself are very interesting and important to the ideas that I present in my project. Part of my thesis argument is that comic books being a cool medium can be detrimental for audience members. The more participatory work that a viewer has to complete can cause that viewer to feel dissatisfaction with the experience as a whole. If I have to exert more work to understand or translate a piece of art such as a comic book, then why would I not just choose something less tiresome to experience.

McLuhan discusses participation in the way that an audience member needs to formulate a more accurate representation of reality. He describes television as being a cool medium because the image quality is low, and film as hot media because the image quality is much higher. The image quality is closer to reality in a film which meant that the user had to exert less sensory

participation to interpret it as reality. Film is closer to real human imagery and radio is closer to actual human voice sonic vibrations. This made them hotter mediums in McLuhans view. This description of participation as the idea of a medium making the audience perform more or less sensory work to receive an accurate message of the content is different from what I really want to discuss in my thesis. I would like to use the basic definition of participation when discussing his theory. I would add or expand to his theory of participation to include the physical exertion or interaction with a medium. This means discussing how a consumer physically experiences a medium and how that can change or alter the message. The reason that comics are cold is not only because an audience member has to extrapolate reality from the image and adapt it to reality, but they must also exert more participation in literally using and following the story on a physical piece of paper or surface. They participate more with the medium in a physical sense than a person who is within a virtual 3-D environment would need to do. My argument posits that the user who does not have to do as much work to achieve a specific goal is more likely to appreciate that medium, or at least understand it better. How would a reader respond differently to comics if you did not have to physically pick up the book and flip the pages? If a reader did not need to research the correct reading order of a comic series, travel to the store location, or readjust their sensory participation of the different art styles within the books would that change the message of the medium.

I use that idea and the basic ideas of McLuhan to argue that the less physical participation or exertion that a user needs to produce, the “warmer” the medium could become and as a result the easier it is to enjoy that medium. Comic books are mediums that require the reader to not only physically read them and view the images together but also often read between the lines of the panel gutters to understand those interspatial moments in time. In order to understand a

storyline a reader must often read several interconnected comic book series. What if this version of participation was changed or altered in some way. My project argues that the medium becomes more inaccessible and by extension this makes comic books more extraneous and difficult to attain, engage with, or pursue. My project adapts these theories in order to create the digital, interactive space. My conceptual platform handles all of the logistical requirements to reading a comic book narrative. The application organizes the narrative and publishing chronology, explains terminology, and provides additional contextual reading information. By creating a digital space my platform is inherently more accessible to more users.

I also add some of Scott McCloud's theories about complexity of design versus readability into my argument. McCloud describes how iconography is an excellent method of creating representational imagery, (McCloud 27). Icons allow a user to immediately recognize a complex idea. I implement iconography across my digital platform in order to help a reader understand and engage with the complex contextual information that is layered within comic book literature and history. McCloud discusses how the human brain adapts images to translate them into recognizable images. McCloud states that "In Pictures, meaning is fluid and variable according to appearance," (McCloud 28). McCloud discusses how using simplistic imagery can sometimes engage an audience member more thoroughly than implementing very complex imagery and design. My project incorporates this method by using affordance design and simplistic and concise formatting for my reading maps. My contextual reading maps within my conceptual project design are organized to maximize legibility above aesthetic quality. My goal is for my project to be clearly readable and easily understood by a user. It is not until the user delves deeper into my reading guide platform does the reading map get more detailed and extensive.

***John Dewey: Art As Experience Theory***

John Dewey uses art as experience as a way to depict the nature of the art world and how art is interpreted and received. He discusses in his book how art can produce a particular emotional response or experience when you see it. This ties with some of the theories of art being a form of aesthetic pleasure or enjoyment from experiencing it. The art itself allows us to appreciate it for existing. Dewey believes that the art and artist are working together to experience the art. Art is more than just the intrinsic value of the work itself. Art, according to Dewey, deserves consideration of its production. Dewey also highlights how emotion from the creator and viewer is needed for creating art. Dewey discusses how art is the product of specific cultural and environmental factors that affect it as well. (Dewey 4) He explains how art is able to produce a stimulus or an experience that transcends a specific piece itself. His ideas are very much based in the ideals of pragmatism. Art is a means to accomplish a specific goal. In Dewey's view art is a way to accomplish Dewey is not saying that the art is not significant or important. Dewey adds to the aesthetic art theory in his arguments on the "live creature." (Dewey 10) He describes how the experience of art is a product of a biological response from interacting with the outside world, or specifically an art object.

Dewey explains three major concepts in art as experience. Art represents the culture that it is created within. Viewers can engage with an artist about the work, either physically or emotionally, and that the ideas of capitalism affect the ideas of art being able to experienced. His ideas are very much rooted in the ideals of aesthetics as an art philosophy. (Leddy, Tom) However, he departs from many others art philosophers by stating a work of art should be enjoyed by the audience instead of seeing the art in of itself as enough to cause enjoyment or pleasure for the viewer. He used a pragmatic perspective when describing the aesthetic nature of

art as experience. Dewey in many ways is combining the two theories of aesthetics and pragmatism of art. The art itself is able to produce an enjoyable or pleasurable response, and the pragmatic view explains the reasons for how art is able to create that response. Art allows us to appreciate the aesthetic quality through gives us an emotional experience that we latch onto. In my thesis paper I discuss the different philosophies of art and the theories that are used to better understand art as a whole. In my project I am attempting to create a platform that provides many of the functions that these theories describe. I want to help readers have an experience.

A key concept within Dewey's argument that is useful for my thesis project is the rejection of the fine art dynamic. (Dewey 4) Dewey discusses the way that art can be expressed through normal actions. Dewey argues that modern society has limited itself from truly recognizing the potential for creating aesthetic experiences due to the insular nature of art communities. Dewey does not recognize a difference between high and low art and thus expresses a need to make art more approachable and relatable as a medium to more people. Dewey describes how the austere nature of the museum walls creates a segregated community. Throughout the history of comic books as an art medium there has been a level of social segregation between graphic novels and comic books as important literary media. Also, the contemporary comic book store that operates within the direct market has unintentionally created an insular community space due to a lack of accessibility and legibility with the medium. These factors mimic some of the challenges within fine art museums and communities that Dewey describes. My project seeks to adapt and redevelop Dewey's solutions for comic books reading communities.



## Project Application and Concept

The publishing and literary history of the medium of comics has had numerous sociocultural influences. Graphic Novels, web comics, comic periodicals, bande dessinée, and Japanese manga are just some of the variants that exist within the global medium of sequential art. Traditional North American comic books are just one subcategory within this expansive medium. My project focuses only on organizing the reading format of traditional North American comic books. Traditional comic book periodicals have their own unique reading format due to its creative, social, and historical evolution in North America. The interconnectivity and collaborative nature of storytelling within this section of the medium was birthed out of the periodical comic magazines of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dynamic of ownership between creators and publishers meant that many characters and properties were solely owned by corporations which created a revolving door of authorship over the decades in North America. *Batman* was owned by the publisher and not the creator which led to the literary tradition of new writers and artists taking turns telling sequential stories for that title. However, this format has arguably created a certain level of illegibility for readers and consumers. The medium must work to continuously evolve and advance in order to remain viable. My thesis project offers the first steps in revolutionizing the reading format of this medium as well as providing a gateway for scholars and researchers to investigate it.

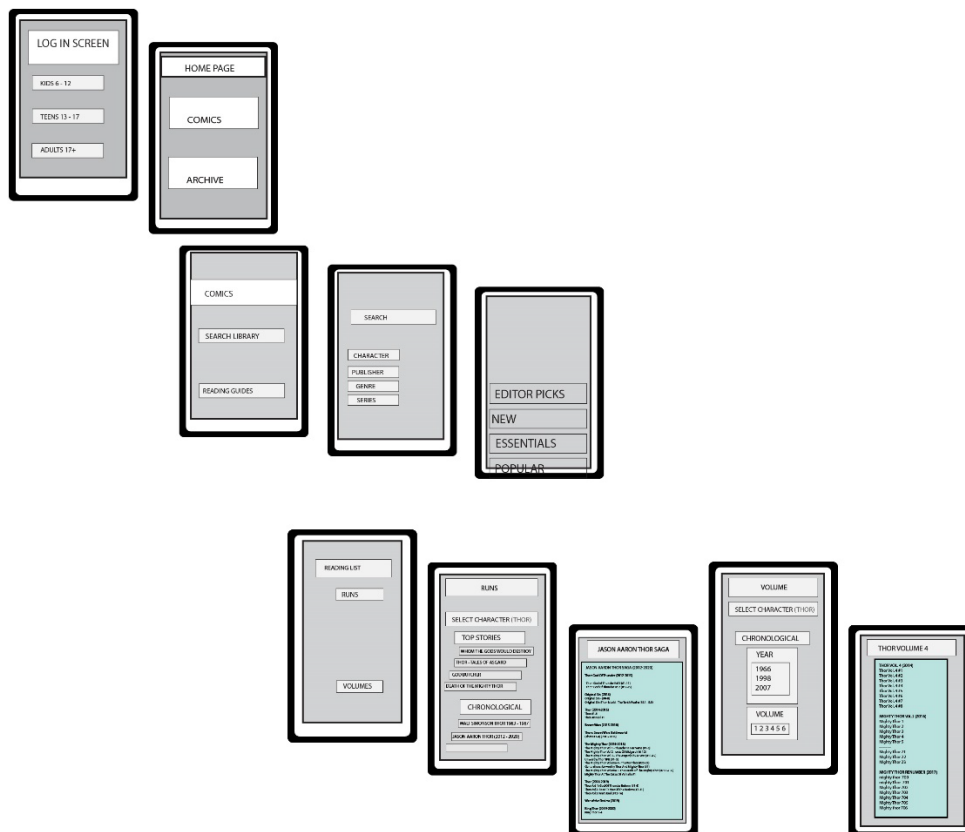
My project is a digital interface that provides contextual reading information for comic book narratives through curated reading guides. Many traditional comic books have an extensive, complex publishing history that is ripe for investigation and analysis. In order to support this investigation the narratives must be made accessible. Comic books are diverse and dense as both a reading format and as a literary medium. My platform is a hypothetical proof of concept that

displays the potential for a fully functional comic contextual reading catalogue. This digital catalogue would be organized chronologically in order to allow a user to view the full publishing and narrative history of various comic book properties and titles. The difficulties with accessibility to comic books is one of the aspects that I have sought to investigate in my project. A specific aspect of accessibility that I address in my project is the lack of legibility for the unique format of storytelling within North American comic book periodicals. This platform organizes various comic narratives, runs, crossovers, relaunches, and events into a seamless consecutive sequence. This platform seeks to improve the legibility of the reading format in order to enhance reader engagement and encourage scholarly research.

My platform has two separate ways of cataloging the publishing and narrative history of comic book serials. The first way of organizing these narratives is within the Volume section of the database. This section of the database outlines the complete publishing history for any particular comic book property. For example, the volume section of my database would organize a comic book serials entire volume history in chronological order. For a character like Wonder Woman, the platform would display the very first issue of the first volume for this character's book title which was published in 1942 and organizing it chronologically so that it leads all the way up to Volume 5 published in 2016. The decision for how to organize these narratives are based off of relevant information taken from comic book publishers and the editorial team which organizes the narratives within the website platform.

My platform would be released as a website. The platform would be most acclimated for a tablet or desktop user. The full database of my platform would include a home page. I have only created an outline for the full database, (Figure 3). On the home page there would be a option to transition to the next section within the website. The next space within the website would be the

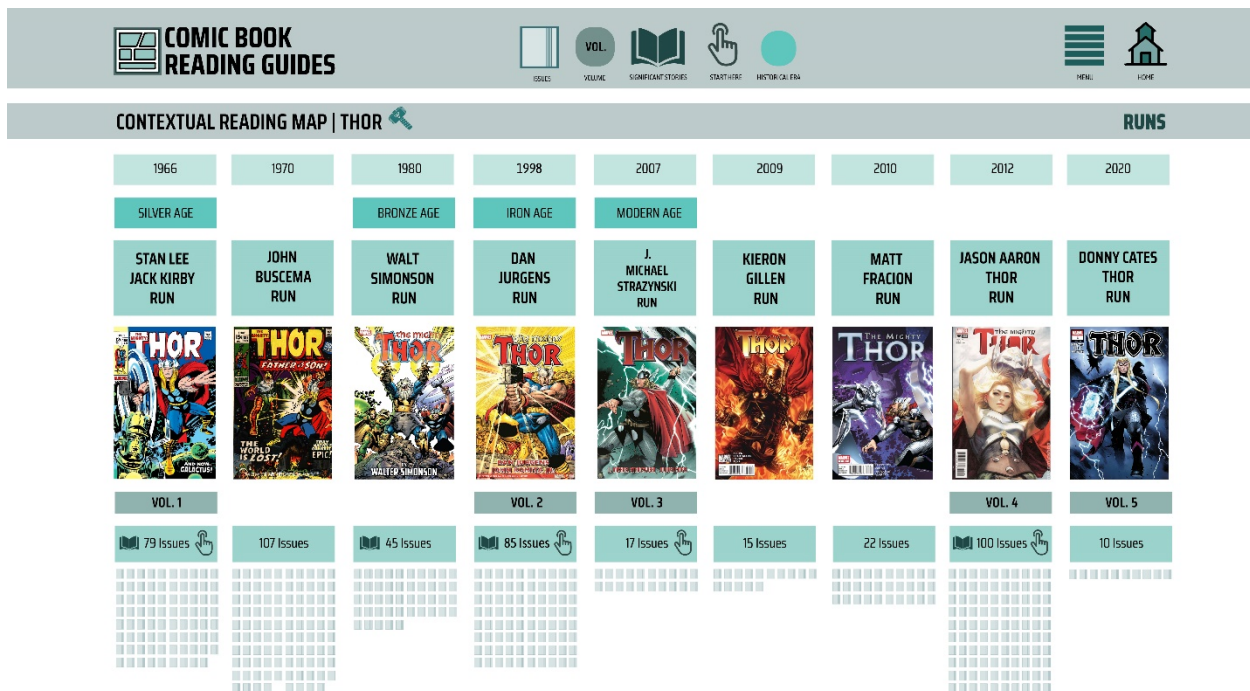
contextual reading maps section. This page of the website is divided into two separate sections for a user to choose. Those sections include the contextual reading maps for Volumes, and the contextual reading maps for Runs. The volumes section organizes the complete publishing history of a particular comic title in chronological order. The Runs section organizes only the most relevant narratives of a comic book title in chronological order. The runs section for the database is significantly more streamlined than the volumes section. This section outlines only the most significant comic runs of a characters narrative history in sequential order.



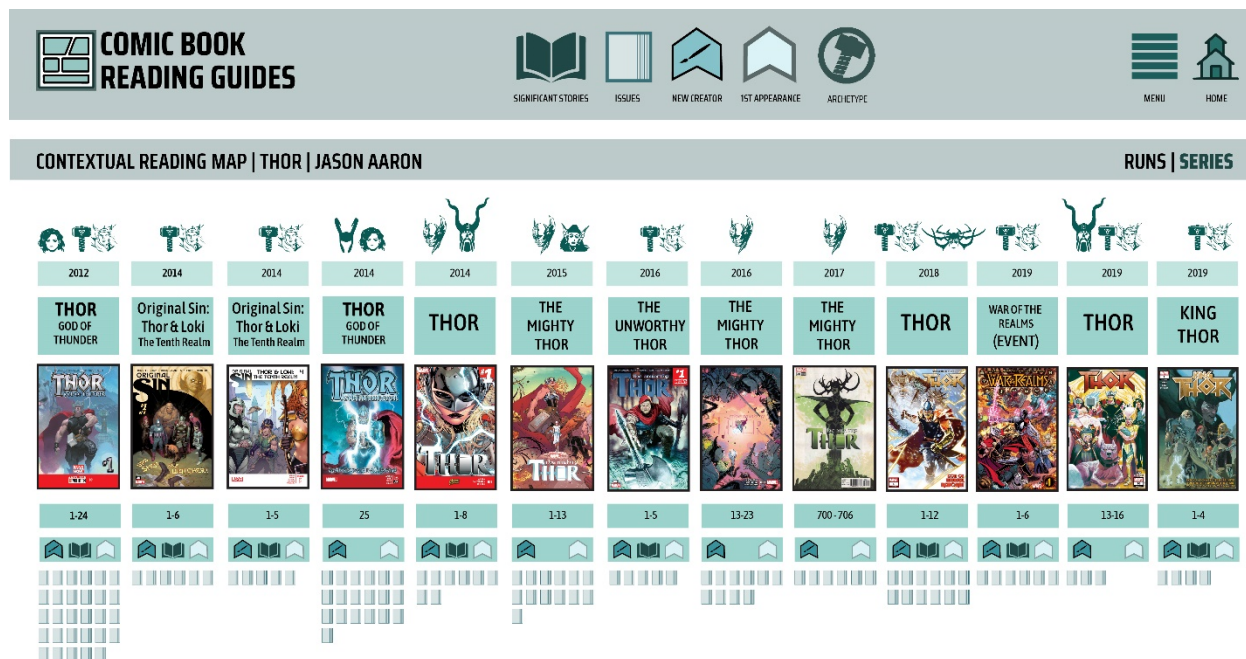
**Figure 3.** *Project Wireframe for Comic Book Contextual Reading Guide.* Wireframe organized to indicate the concept for a complete comic reading guide database and format

My proof of concept showcases only a portion of the Runs Section within the database. The conceptual models for my project display only one narrative within one comic book run from

one series title. After a user chooses the volumes or runs section of the contextual reading maps page they will be transitioned to that section. A user will be transitioned to a new page that lists the entire available contextual reading maps for Runs. A search function will be included on this page to allow a user to choose any character or title that they wish to investigate. Once a user chooses a character they will be transitioned to the first level of the contextual reading map for that property. My thesis project involves the creation of conceptual models for a potential version of this contextual reading map to serve as a proof of concept.



**Figure 4.** Contextual Reading Map Level 4: Runs organized with contextual information overlaid onto page.



**Figure 5.** Contextual Reading Map level 3: Series organized with contextual information overlaid onto page.

The contextual reading map that I have created organizes the most significant Runs of the comic property of Thor. There are four levels to this contextual reading map that build on each other chronologically. Title *Thor* runs from Marvel Comics are organized in chronological order with contextual information overlaid onto the reading map (Figure 4). A user is able to click on individual icons on the page to reveal additional contextual information about the comic book title. Information such as authorial background, character background, and first appearances of a character are revealed at this level. Each section has a unique contextual reading map that provides context and information about the contents of that level of the narrative. Each new level gets more detailed and specific with the contextual information provided. Each space has a different subheading within the reading map. This subheading indicates where a user is located on the overall contextual reading map within the application. The first section is the Runs section that organizes each run in chronological order, (Figure 4). The second level is the Series section

which organizes all of the series, crossovers, events, and relaunches in chronological order, (Figure 5). The third section situates a specific series in order, (Figure 6). The last level (Figure 7) organizes specific key pages from a comic issue in chronological order with relevant contextual information layered on top of each one. This level details the specific creators working on each issue of a series.

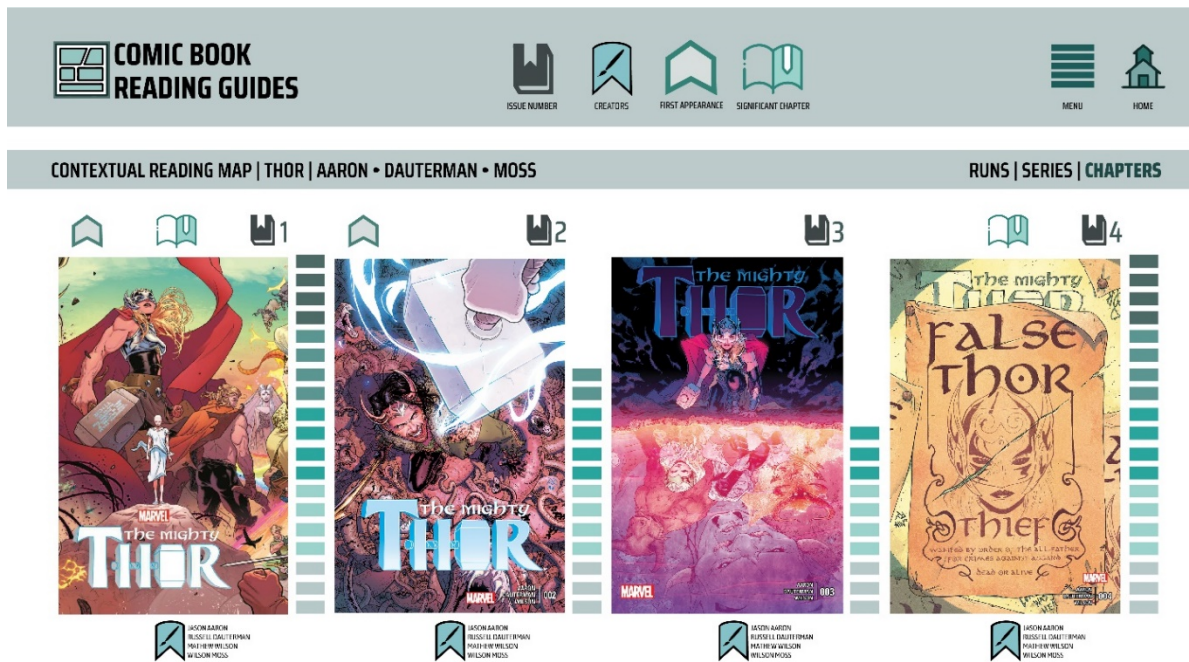


Figure 6. Contextual Reading Map level 2: Chapters organized with contextual information overlaid onto page.



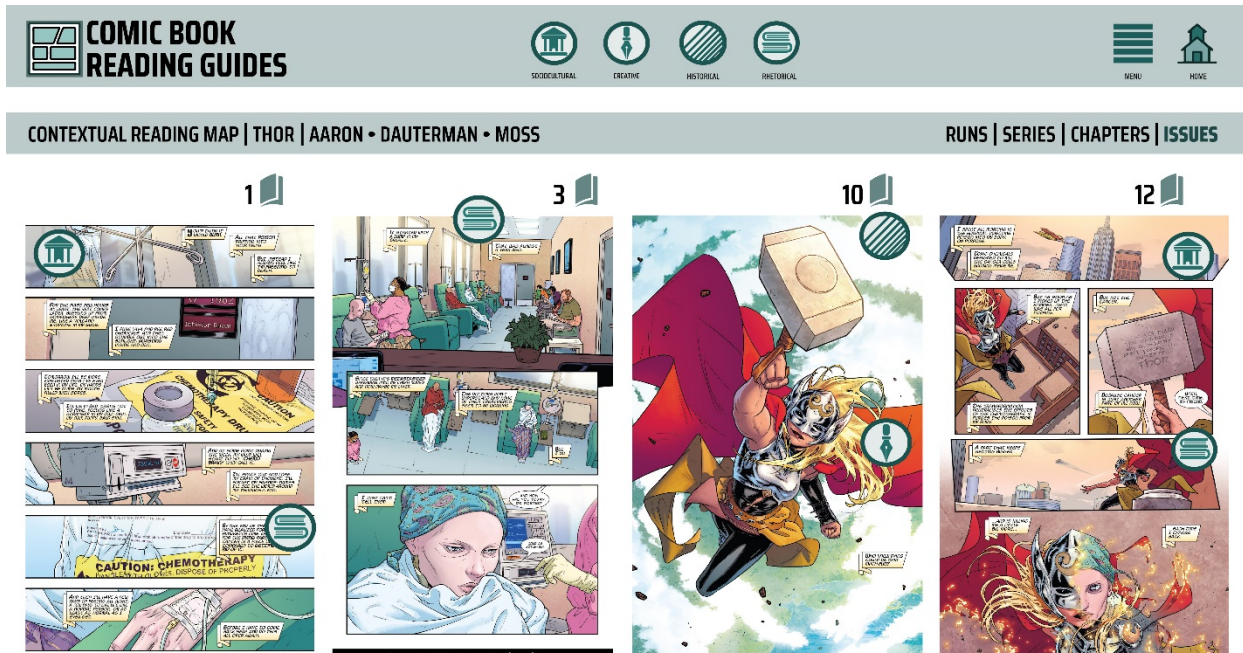


Figure 7. Contextual Reading Map level 1: Issues organized with contextual information overlaid onto page.

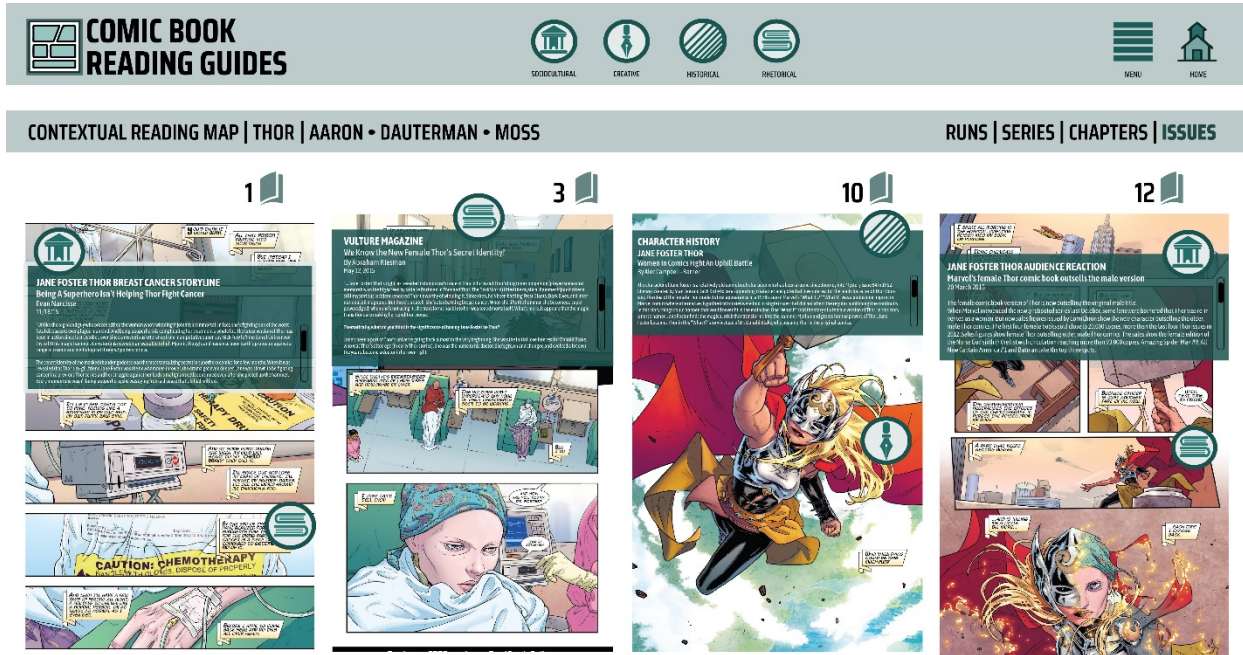


Figure 8. Contextual Information Overlaid Onto Reading Map: Contextual Information is hidden within individual icons spread across a comic page.

The final level of the contextual reading map is the section that organizes specific pages of a comic book. This section provides key contextual information about a specific comic page using selected icons on the page, (Figure 8). A user can click on any of the icons on a page to reveal the information related to it. This section has four specific icons that the context can be organized by. Those icons are sociocultural context, historical context, creative context, and rhetorical context. Each form of context represents relevant, important information that would provide a thorough review of aspects within the individual pages of a comic book. My proof of concept reviews a specific comic book run on “Thor” published by Marvel comics. This particular Thor run focuses on a character named Jane Foster who becomes the new “Thor” and temporarily replaces the previous iteration of the character who has become unworthy. This storyline implements themes of existentialism, spirituality, feminism, war, and death. A researcher or reader would be able to seamlessly access and review the narrative of this run. My database would provide contextual information overlaid onto the reading map to allow various types of users to interact with the medium. The database could benefit regular readers as well as academics and researchers.

I have researched possible target users who might benefit from using my platform. James is 13 years old and needs a resource to help him learn how to read comic book stories successfully. He is a middle school student who wants to learn how to read comic books correctly and immerse himself within this new medium. Adrian is 30 and is a serious comic book collector who needs a space to review the extensive chronology of different comic series before he buys them for his physical collection. He would be able to use my platform to review the narrative and publishing history of specific comic series. Donald is a 45 year old English professor. He wants to teach his students about the how stories and narratives influence and reflect upon each other



over time. He needs a resource that can provide him with examples about historical, literary, and cultural influences on narratives. My final target user is Lynette. She is a 35 year old art teacher. She would be able to use my platform as a tool to review the art history within the medium of comic books. Comic books contain a large array of different artistic styles and methods. My resource would allow a user to review the different artists who have influenced the artistic methods of the medium over time. Each one of these target persona's help me organize and formulate my projects creation.

My platform represents an opportunity to create a resource to provide legibility and accessibility to the medium of comic books. My platform is organized using affordance based design principles that provide clarity to the reading format of the medium of comic books. The Runs section of my proof of concept is organized in a linear fashion that creates a bread crumb trail that helps a user visualize the sequence of a comic serial

My platform divides the contextual information into multiple categories. Those categories include creative, historical, cultural, and rhetorical. Rhetorical context refers to the circumstances from which a piece of literature were written. This form of context is concerned with who the writer is or its intended audience. This form of context is the most closely involved with outlining the structure and nature of comic books as a medium. Historical context discusses the relationship between past and present moments in a piece of literature. Cultural context is concerned with how outside forces affect the literature. My platform would organize each of these forms of context into color coded groupings. The platform uses specific iconography to detail certain aspects of the narrative that you are viewing on the reading guide. Small rectangular boxes are used to indicate the number of chapters within a specific series on the chart. Silhouettes of characters are used to indicate the major characters within that series. A

symbol for first is used to indicate the first appearance of a new character within a series or volume. The final level of my contextual reading map organizes individual issues of a comic in chronological order with contextual information overlaid onto the pages. A user can click on specific icons layered onto the page to reveal related context. The contextual information consists of news articles, interviews, editorials, blogs, and research studies.

### **Platform Expansion And Future Work**

My project has various opportunities to continue the development process. My final proof of concept showcases a specific walkthrough of a section of a comic book run. The final evolution of my platform would include numerous comic book properties. This final version would include a chronological catalogue of the publishing history of various comic book titles. My platform would initially hold only the data for comic book periodicals. However, my database could potentially branch out into organizing graphic novels and other sequential art media. The final version of the application would operate as a fully functioning reading guide that holds the publishing and narrative history of various comic books titles.

My next steps after the completion of my proof of concept project should be to continue working on completing the publishing history data for my single character and connecting with other comic researchers and readers. The final form of this application could be a wiki page that is open to the public. This wiki format would allow like minded individuals to do their own research and import it into the platform. As a wiki page, I would hopefully be able to avoid issues of copyright infringement. My platform is designed as a reading resource, not a fully capable reading interface. There are numerous places where I could open my platform to be viewed by the public. Comic book conventions seem to offer the most accessible form of public display and interaction. I will work to complete the remainder of the entire database

walkthrough. I will also work towards finding audience to pitch this project to. My goals are to display this project within comic reading communities. There are various community spaces that would provide an audience for my project. My first choices are to display this digital apparatus in spaces such as the local comic book conventions.

One of my biggest final steps involves connecting with other designers, programmers, and creators to assist me with organizing this platform. I will also allow my platform to be supported by research submitted from online users. My platform's final state would be to operate as a public wiki where online supporters can add or edit information through a submission process. I believe adapting the public wiki format for my platform would help maintain, organize, and research relevant information and data for the website. Public wikis are open source spaces for people to join in. This technique allows me to take in large amounts of research which I can filter and refine using a smaller team of editors. The platform will be a non-profit platform. I believe the non-profit format would benefit my application. This format would help reinforce the platform's fair-use claims for adapting existing comic material within the database. There are additional functions that I plan to incorporate into the final version of my database. I also plan to pursue opportunities for connecting my platform with the public library. My platform serves as a digital resource for understanding comic books as a literary medium. I assert that the public library could use my database to assist readers with engaging with the reading format of comic books. My catalogue could help public libraries organize their comic book collections to improve the legibility of the reading format.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that comic books are a uniquely diverse artform with a myriad of different unique qualities and functions. The medium has experienced significant alterations and evolution over the course of its history. I have argued that the reading format and design structure of contemporary comic book periodicals must be reorganized and improved. My thesis project suggests design ideas that could be used to improve the reading format of the medium. By improving the reading format the medium could potentially entice more readers and researchers into engaging with this literary artform. Comics are an excellent tool for education, storytelling, illustration, and design. The medium has a versatile and flexible composition that allows for continuous innovation and reinvention. The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic has brought many of the most significant obstacles facing comic books to light during the pandemic. Sections of the medium of comics within North America saw both success and failure. Comic books periodicals saw significant hardship during the 2020 pandemic. Despite these challenges, the comic book industry survived the pandemic and is forcing itself to make significant changes to its structure and format. New designers, innovators, and creators continue to contribute to the ongoing sustainability of the medium. My conceptual designs offer opportunities to investigate, analyze, and remodel the comic book medium specifically. My project represents one perspective for revolutionizing and reforming the framework of the artform. My thesis project details potential ways for the medium to advance and adapt as it enters a new stage in its evolution as an artistic form.

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