

**An Interview with Henry Jenkins**  
**Conducted by email, October 2012**

**Julia Round**

*Henry Jenkins has published multiple books on the subject of fandom, interactivity, participatory narratives, transmediality, media convergence and fictional world making. He was kind enough to talk to Julia Round about academia, fan studies, formal comics analysis, digital cultures and the entertainment industries.*

*Academia and fandom*

*Can you say a bit about how you became an "aca-fan" and where you see your work fitting in terms of key ideas, theorists, disciplines and so forth?*

The term "aca-fan" seems to mystify some people. It simply means someone who is both an academic and a fan. It is not meant to prioritize either identity though Matt Hills immediately introduced the "fan-academic" as an alternative identity. We ran a pretty intense debate around the aca-fan concept via my blog last year with many different scholars (not only from fan studies, but also from a range of other branches of Cultural, Critical, and Media Studies) weighing in about their investments or lack there-of in this concept. It seems to be a framework that generates immediate recognition for some and distaste or distrust in others.

For me, the impulse to self-identify as a fan grew out of the role that autobiographical criticism has played across a range of fields in dislodging older, approaches for talking about experiences of subordination or marginalization -- for example, the autobiographical turn in feminist criticism, queer studies, critical race studies, but also in post-colonialist anthropology, standpoint epistemology. For me, a core problem in cultural studies, at least when I entered the field, was a tendency to abstract away from our personal experiences with media and popular culture, to deny our stakes in the objects of our studies, which allowed writers to cling to a series of unproductive clichés about media consumers and their place within mass media. Starting from our own experiences and working outward forced us to ask certain questions -- some about the ways that consuming popular culture is normative in our culture, some about the nature of fantasy and desire, some about the kinds of social affiliations or identities that can emerge through shared consumption of popular media, and so forth.

For me, being a fan was central to how I saw myself, how I read culture, how I see the world. And it seemed important to signal those affiliations through the way I describe my work, especially if it helps pave the way for other younger scholars to value their own experiences and perspectives, and to feel free to write about them openly through their work. That said, I do not think writing as a fan is the only or most virtuous way to write about culture. I learned a lot when Jason Mittell, for example, wrote a very frank and honest and self-reflexive essay about why he hates *Mad Men*, which offers another very productive route forward for cultural

criticism. I simply believe that being transparent about one's own stakes in their object of study and being open to discoveries that come from your gut as you write honestly about the place of popular culture in your life are worth striving for.

Where do I see myself fitting in? This is one of those questions I ask myself every morning when I get up, and some days, I like my answers better than others. My roots are in British cultural studies (on the one hand) and American cinema and media studies (on the other). Of course, these two schools are scarcely on speaking terms with each other. Then, you can add what I learned in my twenty years at MIT when I was very much part of the growth of game studies and digital studies as new fields of research, and then, add on top of that the many different interdisciplinary conversations I have engaged within since coming to USC, where I am positioned in three schools -- Communications and Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education -- and beyond that, the work I am doing as someone participating in the emerging and multidisciplinary realm of comic studies. And finally, add to that, the fact that as a very public intellectual, I am engaging in conversations with artists, media-makers, industry thought-leaders, activists, educators, fans, policy-makers, and journalists from around the world on a regular basis. Shake well, and see what comes out.

Everything I write is informed by cultural theory, but much of what I write is intended for audiences outside of the academic realm. I like to joke that I am "undisciplined" in the best sense of the word. I do not believe that the disciplines that grew up in response to the industrial era are necessarily the best way to organize knowledge in the information age, and I also do not believe that disciplines matter very much once you move beyond primarily academic conversations. There are real risks involved in moving into this space, though, since it means you are not necessarily spelling out all of your underlying theoretical commitments, using the specialized language of a given field, relying on all of the right citations to prove your membership in the club, and so, you are very much subject to friendly fire attacks from people who do not necessarily understand the stakes of your work. These days, I often feel like an aging gun-slinger who has to defend himself against all of the young guns who want to prove their courage to their colleagues, much the way fraternities at MIT used to initiate their members by sending them to ask a challenging question during a lecture by Noam Chomsky. :-  
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*What are your views on the ethics of mining data from fan sites etc, or the interactions between academia and fandom more generally?*

The term, "mining data," already suggests one answer here. If you look on what you are doing as "mining data," you are probably doing it in a way that is unethical and deeply disruptive to the communities you are studying. "Mining data" is a way to avoid forging any kind of meaningful, human relationship with the people you are studying; it is based on a notion of one-way surveillance rather than reciprocal exchange; it is based on being on the outside looking in rather than, as I suggested above, starting by examining one's own experiences and working outward to others. "Mining data" suggest someone who thinks they can observe

without touching or being touched, and nothing could be further from the truth.

Above all, it implies a lack of accountability to the people you are studying, an unwillingness to give anything back to their community, a disinterest in listening to and respecting their own social and ethical norms. And this is what can give academic research a bad name. For me, the ideal is a model of participatory research, one where you write about communities in which you already have some stakes, one where you are transparent and open about the research you are conducting, one where you consult with community leaders and thinkers at every stage in the process, one where you share your drafts and receive feedback from the people whose activities and beliefs you are describing.

All of this works to turn what you discover into something more than "data." Your research emerges not from individual bits of information ("data") but rather from a set of ongoing relationships which you are trying to honestly capture, seeking to share what you know from someone who has an inside perspective on this community in order to help communicate the shared values of the group to people who may not have that same level of access and understanding. I believe the best work in fan studies has always and will continue to respect this goal, even if individual researchers have been much more exploitative in the way they work with some fan groups.

*Do you think fan discussions and practices are a valid form of cultural criticism to compete with the kinds of discussions and analysis validated by the academy? Do they have particular strengths or weaknesses?*

Absolutely, the academic world does not have a monopoly on the production of theory and criticism. This has never been the case and it is even less the case now. At a moment of profound and prolonged media change, many different groups have a stake in trying to articulate their understanding of the current media environment from their own embedded perspectives, and all of them are producing insights which we need to hear and take seriously.

Fans have always shown a level of expertise that is rare among academics who do not come from a fan background. They care very much about the particulars of culture, and they also have fewer inhibitions, in many cases, about examining and sharing their own experiences; they write in ways that forge strong connections between the heart and the mind, and as such, they help us to understand the affective dimensions of cultural production and consumption.

Historically, if fan criticism had a limitation, it had to do with moving from particular observation to more meaningful generalization. Because fans were so invested in the particulars of their areas of interests, they tended to push back about anything more abstract or over-arching; they had some trouble seeing the forest for the trees. Academics, historically, suffered from the opposite problem: being adept at generalizations but less insistent on the particulars of specific works or specific activities.

Over the past few decades, the two groups have learned a lot from each other. More and more cultural scholars come from the ranks of fandom, and are bringing some of the virtues of fan criticism with them into their professional lives, and the same has been true, by the way, of many other professions -- from librarians and teachers to lawyers, business leaders, and ministers. At the same time, more and more fans are encountering academic writing about fandom and popular culture through their undergraduate classes, more and more of them are reading academic blogs, more and more of them are inspired to try to respond to academic conversations about issues that are central to their lives as fans.

Here, as in so many other instances, the web has broken down some of the walls which separated different conversations and created a context for rich, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary exchanges. For example, the distinction between "affirmation" and "transformative" fandom originated on a fan blog, but it has been central to the ways many fan scholars now frame their work.

*Speaking as a fan, what's your favourite comic (and why)? And then same question, speaking as an academic? Are they different? Do you have any reflections on this?*

That's an interesting question and one I have not considered -- in part because I often do not find it easily to fully separate these two aspects of my identity, these different ways of knowing have become intertwined through the years, so most of my work falls at the intersection between the two. But, let me try.

Walt Kelly's *Pogo* is a comic strip that is deeply meaningful to me at a personal level. It was my late father's favorite comic, especially when he was an undergraduate student at Georgia Tech in the late 1950s. When I was a child, I used to beg him to let me look through his crumbling original copies of the paperback editions of *Pogo*, which I learned to handle very carefully lest I not damage them. The strip was also meaningful to me because I grew up in Georgia and the stories were set in the Okefenokee Swamp, where I went canoeing, and involved local wildlife, which I had seen in the wild; it was written by a local author and the slang had the feel of southern speech. On my office wall, I have framed a drawing my mother made of the Pogo character, which, I discovered in an old photograph, used to hang in my father's studio when he was a young man.

So, there are so many personal reasons why I am drawn to this work, apart from any intellectual appreciation I may have of Kelly's enormous contribution to the development of the comic strip as a character-based mode of storytelling. I have never written a word about *Pogo* - before now -- though I have been reading and re-reading these comics for most of my life. So, this is as close as I come to something that falls purely on the fan side of the equation. I need to be clear, though, that this is a deeply personal interest to me, not something I share with other fans, so it lacks the social dimensions I would associate with involvement in a fandom.

On the other end of the spectrum might be some of the works I am going to be writing about in my new *Comics...and Stuff* book project, such as, say, Kim Deitch's Waldo the Cat stories. I was introduced to these stories by an academic colleague, Greg Smith, from Georgia State, who thought I would be interested in their representation of early media history, and while there is certainly an emotional resonance for me about this work, my relationship is so informed by my academic interests that these books fall much more fully on that side of the spectrum.

When I read them, I find myself flipping open my copy of Donald Crafton's *Before Mickey*, an account of the early history of comics; I find myself interested in the ways that *Alias the Cat*, say, models what an early 20th century version of transmedia storytelling might look like. I read them through the lens of what Jared Gardner has to say about the archival nature of contemporary comics in *Projections* or in terms of what Will Straw says in *Residual Media* about the ways that the web has fostered new kinds of intellectual and emotional investment in the past. These are comics I have written about in my scholarship and taught in my classes.

Both *Pogo* and *Waldo* would rank among my favorites -- hard to give a definitive answer to that question and my choice of these two reflects the fact that they fall loosely for me in the same genre of comics -- but in so far as this is true, they are also works which speak to me as both a fan and as an academic, on both an emotional and an intellectual level, and as part of my recreational and professional life.

### *Comics studies*

*What do you think are the important priorities for comics studies as a discipline moving forward?*

In my essay for *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, I raise some questions about what kind of field or discipline comics studies should become, describing a series of earlier moments when we might imagine an academic field emerging (around the "lively arts" criticism of Gilbert Seldes and later Robert Warshaw, around the social science methodologies and media effects arguments of Frederic Wertham, around the expert practice of Scott McCloud, and around the curatorial interventions of Art Spiegelman). So, what does it mean that comic studies is taking root now -- as an academic discipline, but one which necessarily has to sort through its relationship to creative artists on the one hand and fans and collectors on the other, both of whom have some legitimate claim to helping to guide the growth of this field. I've watched the growth of several other fields -- from television studies in the 1980s to game studies and digital studies over the past fifteen years or so.

There is enormous intellectual energy at the moment these fields are multidisciplinary, drawing insights from many different fields which have something to contribute to our understanding, but there's also a risk when each existing discipline tries to lay claim to the emerging field and make it look more like them. There's real strength to be gained when the field develops its own shared vocabulary and canon, but there's also a danger of insularity and repetition at such

moments.

So, for me, the goal is to protect as much as possible the "openness" which surrounds comic studies at the moment, even as we start to build institutional supports which will enable younger scholars to do their work without risk to their academic futures. My ideal model will be multidisciplinary at its core, will seek to be open to participation from everyone who cares about comics, and will understand comics against the background of a wide array of different media rather than seeking a medium-specific approach.

This last may be the most controversial of my claims here: there's clearly a need to take comics seriously on their own terms, to read and appreciate comics as comics, rather than, say, as simply a content factory for films, games, and television franchises. But, I also think we gain something by being attentive to the many different contexts within which comics are produced and consumed (from newspapers to electronic media), the many different aesthetic and thematic influences on comics from other media, the movement of comics creators and content into other platforms, and so forth.

Within that space, I have two lines of research I am eager to pursue. The first centers around what superheroes might teach us about the nature of genres. One of the biggest frustrations for those of us who take comics seriously is that for many people, comics get reduced to a single genre -- the superhero tradition -- rather than seeing comics as a medium which can support a range of different kinds of stories and practices. But, what if we made that problem into a virtue and really examined what it might mean for a genre to so totally dominate a medium -- in terms of both public perception and at least within mainstream comics publishers, commercial strategy? How did this situation come about? What forms of differentiation exist within the superhero genre? How might we see different superheroes, say, drawn towards different genres which have been absorbed into their orbit -- so the role of science fiction in Fantastic Four, of the detective genre in Batman, of the romantic comedy in Spider-Man, and so forth? How might we think about the kinds of multiplicity that occurs around the edges of the genre -- whether in Elseworlds or What If? stories by the major publishers, but also the kinds of genre experiments which occur as Superheroes get absorbed into the smaller publishers? And then what about the imprint of the superhero genre that is visible in those traditions which seek to break away from it -- underground comics, alternative press comics, graphic novels, all of which define themselves as "not superhero comics" and often make explicit use of superhero iconography to signal their difference?

The second is the one I am most focused on right now. I am calling it "Comics...and Stuff." It has to do with the relationship of comics to material culture -- to the "stuff" we accumulate, collect, curate, and discuss endlessly, and for the memories and other emotional baggage we attach to that "stuff" over time. I am using the "stuffness" of comics as a way into exploring notions of the archival, the ephemeral, and the residual as they get worked through a range of different contemporary comics and graphic novels, and how these relate to the self-conscious mobilization of different historiographical and autobiographical strategies within contemporary comics. My goal is to write essays about graphic novelists who represent a range of different

traditions -- from Seth in Canada to Dylan Horrocks in New Zealand or Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá, in Brazil, from C. Tyler's relationship to feminist comics to the ways that Jeremy Love repurposes racist iconography in *Bayou*. I just finished the first of the essays dealing with the meaning of early comics in Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

*You've described comics as 'a polyglot form -- an unstable mix of words and images'. Obviously there are a lot of different formal approaches to analysing the comics page -- which (if any) do you find especially useful?*

I plan to open "Comics and Stuff" with a comparison between Winsor McCay and Robert Outcault. McCay is much beloved among comics scholars as having helped to develop the modern language of American comics through his imaginative choices in framing and juxtaposition. In many ways, we read him through a cinema studies lens, both because of the importance of his parallel contributions to early animation, and because of the parallel development of comics and cinema as they both learn to organize and structure our vision around the same moment in time. But, in some ways, our focus on McCay and what he represents means that we have devalued Outcault, who has a totally different aesthetic.

Film scholars have moved backwards in time to deal with the first decade of film history not as "primitive cinema" or "proto-cinema," (i.e. reading early films in relation to what cinema would become) but rather as "cinema of attractions," that is, reading them as having their own aesthetic goals and accomplishments, which represent another understanding of film as a medium. What if we look at Outcault through this same lens?

I am especially interested in the notion of simultaneity in Outcault -- the dense mise-en-scene he constructs in each of his full page images, the ways he constructs narrative relationships across foreground and background of the image, the ways he shows multiple chains of action intertwined, the ways he brings together characters of multiple class and ethnic backgrounds. All of these formal practices help to capture something vital about life in American cities at the moment he was creating those images. (Of course, we can see some similar impulses in the architectural details in McCay's work-- McCay was not only interested in juxtaposition, but also highly attentive to issues of mise-en-scene.)

We can see some legacy of this tradition in "splash pages," especially in the highly detailed splash pages that artists from Jack Kirby to Paul Pope or Moebius have used to create a sense of belief around otherwise fantastical and futuristic worlds. Somewhere in between might fall the work of Will Eisner who has an especially interesting concept of "the shape of the page." Eisner believed that one of the defining traits of comics is that we absorb a gestalt across all of the panels each time we turn the page -- there is a kind of peripheral vision which prevents us from reading one panel at a time and results in over-all impressions spilling over. Eisner's best work uses the "shape of the page" to inform our emotional response to his stories, often producing a very different sense of time and space than can be found in other comics. So, I am interested right now in exploring what a more mise-en-scene or spatial

approach to comics might look like, as opposed to one which is primarily interested in issues of framing and juxtaposition.

But, on the other end of the scale, my *Comics and Stuff* project also hopes to deal with the densely layered collage-like images produced by artists like David Mack or by Bryan Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland*. If we were to draw an analogy with cinema to think about these works, the focus would not be on montage or decoupage, but on superimposition, a technique which was enormously important during the silent period especially but which has received far too little consideration within film studies. These are my particular fascinations and obsessions within the formal analysis of comics at the moment.

*Retconning, recycling, and (frequently) shared universes and understanding are all key to comics. Are the medium's "backwards-looking thoughts" and reliance on intertextuality an example of larger processes such as "retromania", or are there other reasons that comics rely so heavily on these sorts of creative and reading practices?*

The term, "retromania," comes from a recent book by the music critic Simon Reynolds who argues that a nostalgia for earlier music forms, especially fueled by the archiving practices of the web and by the ability to cheaply reissue and recirculate lots of old music, may be driving out the desire to experience "new sounds" and thus foreclosing the future of music. While Reynolds is clearly himself drawn to "retro" styles of music, he also worries about what the consequences of these practices may be for the capacity of popular music to continue to grow. It's worth noting that Reynolds also makes the point that the retro fascination in music often involves looking sideways as much as it involves looking backwards. That is, people are drawn to b-sides or neglected cuts from albums, even unreleased songs, that never received proper attention before. It is a process of reappraisal as much as it is rediscovery, and thus, in its own way, it may be generative rather than simply an endless cycling through of the same old stuff.

In my work, I've been mostly taking up Reynolds in relation to the graphic novelists I mentioned earlier, where in each case, what draws me to the work is that they are bringing a strong sense of historical consciousness to their borrowings from older forms of cultural expression. So, for example, I have written about the retrofuturism in Dean Motter's *Mister X* and *Terminal City* comics: Motter takes images from pulp science fiction magazines and especially from the 1939 New York World Fair's "World of Tomorrow" but uses them to question the core assumptions of the Technological Utopian movement which originally informed these images. If it is nostalgia, it is a very bleak form of nostalgia, and rather different in spirit from, say, much of Steampunk, which, until very recently, was deploying images from Victorian era science fiction without questioning the colonialist politics of that era.

As we turn to the various forms of "retro" practices in mainstream superhero comics, I think we have to adopt a position somewhere between Reynolds and what I observe about Motter. There are some powerful examples where "retconning" brings about historical consciousness. I have written for example about what James Sturm does with the Fantastic Four in *Unstable*

*Molecules*, using them to ask questions about the cultural and political realm of the early 1960s. Something like Darwyn Cooke's *The New Frontier* walks the line -- with moments of pure nostalgia where we wallow in Cooke's retro style and some moments -- the confrontation between Superman and Wonder Woman over the Vietnam War comes to mind -- where we do ask harder questions about the past. As a fanboy, I love it when we go back and reframe classic stories from comic book past, because this practice so often rewards my mastery over the arcane lore of the superhero tradition, but because there's a major gap in my comics-reading, between the years of my early adolescence and my adult rediscovery of the medium, I also know the frustration of trying to read a comic book which assumes a background that many readers do not possess. In this case, comics may be coming much closer to what Reynolds worries about -- their obsession with their past is foreclosing their future -- in this case, cutting out the next generation of readers, who suddenly have to do a whole lot of homework just to read a bloody X-man comic.

There are similar questions to be raised about the comics industry's reliance on intertextuality, which can simply be a marketing gimmick, where they force us to buy more books each month simply to follow the specific characters we care about as they enter other narratives. But, it also can be used in ways that are thoughtful and profound, as I think occurs in the best moments of Marvel's *Civil Wars* cross-over event a few years ago. We are dealing there with an honest debate which has ramifications in the Marvel universe (should Capes be required to reveal their secret identities) and has parallels in our own (how is America responding to 9/11); moving this across so many titles both gave the story the scope it needs (well, not really since they still, in my opinion, botched the ending) and also allowed us to see it through multiple points of identification and thus take seriously all of the various sides in the argument. I can't imagine any other medium achieving this effect because none other could achieve the timeliness, the seriality, and the intertextuality required to do so.

Finally, I would want to flag here the notion of multiplicity in comics as also part of this same phenomenon. I am talking here about what something like DC's Elseworlds achieves at its best -- the ability to go back and reread its core characters and their mythologies from a radically different perspective. For example, *Red Son*, my personal favorite, reimagines the history of the 20th century as it would have occurred if Superman had landed in the Soviet Union rather than the United States. Here, I would argue that we achieve something much closer to the historical consciousness I value in independent comics -- the comics fan is invited to ask some core questions about the ideological frame of the superhero mythology, about why it matters that Superman is so darned American, and at the same time, they are asked to think about the historical context from which comics emerged. Steven Seagle's *It's a Bird...* would be another example of a Superman story, in this case published by Vertigo, which invites some questioning of the basic premises by stepping outside of the dominant ways that narrative gets told.

I was very discouraged recently when I had Dan Didio speak to my USC class about "the New 52" and he said that DC saw no need to publish more "elseworlds" stories, since everything could be told within the DC universe and he saw no value in an "imaginary story" set in what

was already an "imaginary universe." Yet, for me, there's a real power in stepping outside of the universe as normally constructed and looking at it from a different frame -- whether thematic or stylistic -- which is what Elseworlds at their best achieve.

*The reconstruction of space/time, active reading and stylised, visual content are key elements of comics narratology to me. How would you characterise the medium's narrative workings?*

This question is so broad that it becomes almost impossible to make any kind of meaningful generalizations which would apply to the broad range of practices that constitute comics -- especially if we extend outward to include things like abstract comics, comics which experiment with radical fragmentation, wordless comics, and so forth. But, let me pull together some things we've already discussed in this interview that might point us towards a theory of comics narrative and narration.

Let's start on the level of the single page. For me, I am increasingly interested in the tension between juxtaposition and simultaneity. On the one hand, narrative gives us a template we use to put together the pieces of information contained at the level of the single frame and provides us with that hermeneutic hook which pushes us to keep moving our eyes across the panels. Scott McCloud makes the point that we can not help but form logical relationships between the individual panels, and he identifies a range of different kinds of juxtapositions we most often draw upon to sort through how they are connected. Most often, narrative is what motivates us to move from one image to the next as we actively construct meaning around the comics page.

At the same time, I am interested in the density of detail within the image, especially in artists who cram in background elements which we may only really recognize if we pause and scan the image, or if we go back through the book after the first reading and scrutinize certain key panels more closely. We can do this easily in comics in ways which we can not so easily do when we get obsessed in the mise-en-scene of a film or a television show. There are many more moments in comics where we are encouraged to scan the clutter than in these other media -- with this element of comics pushing much closer to certain kinds of visually dense paintings, say, which are intended to be images taken on their own terms. It's tempting to think of these moments of visual spectacle as anti-narrative in some senses, and they can be, but it also can be the case that studying this detail deepens our understanding of the narrative, rather than distracts from it, but it halts momentarily the forward flow of the story.

Also, I'd want to include Eisner's notion of "the shape of the page," which I referenced earlier: the idea that a one or two page spread forms a gestalt which has its own structure and which impacts our understanding of the story. The surprises come when we turn the pages, but as we catch a glimpse of something on the last panel, we then have a kind of anticipation as our reading catches up with our peripheral vision and we figure out what this means or how we got there. And this is a distinctive quality of comics as a narrative medium.

As we move beyond the single page, we would need to add a fourth concept -- that of seriality

(or as we discussed above, intertextuality) as we see the choices comics creators make at various moments in the history of the medium between completing a story in a single issue or constructing some kind of larger story arc.

Someone like Umberto Eco in his writing about Superman talks about comics characters as moving no closer to death, because they remember nothing of their previous adventures, because there's no real progression forward in time. But, there's also the case that readers do remember those earlier events, so even a comic story which is self-contained contributes to our serial understanding of the medium. There's something about these characters, whether Donald Duck or Spider-Man, which we have lived with across our entire lives, not as fixed texts, but as ever-expanding texts, which encourages a different kind of reading practice, even where each story seems totally self-contained. Of course, we are just scratching the surface here -- people can and have written whole books on the narrative principles behind comics, and this is an area where we are just beginning to ask even the most basic questions.

### *Digital cultures*

*How do you feel about emergent forms such as digital comics, web comics, motion comics?*

Each of these emergent forms represents a distinctive case. Let's start with web comics. There are really two core implications to discuss here. First, the web as a distribution channel, and second, the web as offering new expressive possibilities.

Scott McCloud suggested both of these directions in his book, *Reinventing Comics*, more than a decade ago, and as is often true for Scott, he was very prescient in terms of where the medium is going. Right now, web comics are thriving as an alternative distribution channel, one which has lowered the barriers for many young comics creators to get their work out to the world without having to go through commercial publishers. As McCloud predicted, this chance to publish without going through gatekeepers has resulted in much greater diversity in style, theme, and topic, than is found in print-based comics, with many comics creators targeting niche communities of interest in ways which extend the reach of comics. So, we could point to how central Penny Arcade has become as a means of getting player feedback into the games industry as the most obvious example here -- Penny Arcade is now so much more than a web comic.

And again as McCloud predicted, we are also seeing more diversity in terms of who reads web comics than who goes into the dark, dank basement comic shops. The female students in my comics class at USC are far more likely to read web comics than print comics. So, taken as a whole, the web comics field may be one of the most transformative movements in comics history since the underground comics of the 1960s or the alternative comics boom that surrounded *Raw* in the 1990s.

McCloud predicted something else, though, which was that the web would offer an "expanded

canvas" for creative expression -- that people would experiment with different structures and interfaces for comics online -- and McCloud through his own work modeled what this more experimental process looks like. Here, there has been very little real growth since McCloud and his followers tried to jump start this process more than a decade ago, much to my disappointment, since this did seem like a promising way to transform the language of comics. For the most part, web comics follow structures that are taken directly from print comics -- either the daily comic strip or the comic book page. They seem to all want to keep open the option of moving into print comics, someday, and as a result, they have been conservative about breaking with its strictures.

I am going to read Digital Comics here as referring to models for sharing comics content via digital devices, especially, at this point, various tablets, smart phones, and digital readers. Clearly, as some of your other questions suggest, this has been a high growth area for comics publishers. DC and Marvel are struggling with how to exploit their growing readership in digital formats without pulling the rug out from under their brick and mortar retailers, and this is a tension which will play out ever more fiercely in the years to come. I have enjoyed reading some comics in these formats, though I still tend to buy most of my comics on the printed page. I share McCloud's bias here that we maintain the notions of juxtaposition and the shape of the page, which I have already suggested are central to the aesthetics of comics. There's a real danger of reducing the comic to a series of panels which we click through one by one rather than seeing it as about the relationship between panels, which requires us to see the comic one page at a time. I would point readers towards Chris Ware's "Touch" which he developed for the iPad edition of *McSweeney's* and which is thoughtful about what these new kinds of tactile interfaces might mean for our experience of comics.

As for motion comics, this is a hybrid form which, to my mind, has yet to demonstrate its usefulness. Certainly, there can be rich and interesting hybrid media forms -- I am interested, for example, in transmedia narratives which can mix and match media to tap into their affordances. But, so far, motion comics are not adding anything significant and new to the comics medium: they are simply redundant; they rob us of the interpretive freedom to see the events through our own imaginations; they become very literal minded and plodding in the ways they play out the action and dialogue. They seem to be pretty much driven by the market without any legitimating aesthetic rationale behind them. I'd love to see interesting experiments here, but I haven't found them yet.

*Do you have any comments on ownership and digitisation? – the fine print seems to suggest that often downloaded titles are 'access-only' or 'rented' by the reader. What kind of consequences do you foresee for ownership, collecting and so forth?*

These trends worry me greatly. I am, in my heart of hearts, a collector. I like to own the comics I read. I still have a fairly large selection of print comics that I read as a child, some of them are in tatters, but I would not like to get rid of them. I have many bookshelves of comics and graphic novels that I have collected from all over the world, and I like to display them. I like to

archive them. I am not someone who is obsessed about putting everything in plastic bags backed by acid-resistant cardboard and sealed in steel boxes, but I do value knowing that I will have access to what I bought at my local comics shop today for many decades to come. I feel the same way about DVDs, especially about DVDs, having fantasized as a kid about being able to own and access the media that matters to me.

So, for me, the move towards putting everything in the cloud is very very worrisome. I do not want to go back to a world where my access to these materials are dependent on the whims of commercial interests. Keep in mind that Barnes and Noble has never gone to my house and started removing books I've paid for from the shelf, but Amazon has removed books consumers have purchased or otherwise accessed off their Kindles. We already have seen this happen, and there's every reason to think it can and will happen again and again, as soon as some company decides it is not economically viable to maintain access to certain backlist content. For some comics readers, access only might seem like a fine deal, especially if the costs are lowered, and especially if they tend to read comics once and never look at them again. But, I think it has the potential to be enormously destructive to comics culture over time.

*(How) do you feel that academia and pedagogy have been affected by the digital transformation of publishing practices?*

Digital publishing has the potential to totally transform the still emerging field of comics studies on many levels. I am conceiving of my current *Comics ...and Stuff* project, which is really just starting, as a "born digital" initiative. I want to use it to demonstrate the potentials of d-books for art criticism more generally. Let's start with the problem of color. It is prohibitively expensive for academic publishers to reproduce comics in color within books of comics criticism (and it is becoming more and more so in regard to the publishing of art books more generally, especially art books which are not catalogs of major exhibitions which are likely to be bought by tourists rather than other scholars), but in a digital format, it is no more expensive to reproduce a work in color as to reproduce it in black and white.

Second, we can see a variety of graphic techniques emerging in comics criticism to try to shift the reader's focus in regard to the panel -- to track movement across a span of panels, to show the relationship between foreground and background in comics -- and there is a much broader vocabulary for dealing with such issues in digital media where we can add animations or shift the resolution or enlarge details or.... than in a printed book. Here, we see print-based authors striving for something that is trivial to achieve in comics. In the case of my project, the scale and size of the various books I am discussing matters enormously and we can preserve these diverse aspect ratios in a digital book in ways that are much harder to do in a printed book, where everything conforms to the fixed shape of the object itself.

Many of the graphic novels I am writing about for this project are extraordinarily dense and expansive already -- they have pushed the comics page to its limits --- and if I want to comment on them, I need to add some new dimension to the experience. Putting my

commentary into a digital medium might allow me to preserve the integrity of their page (and not shrink the page to the point where it can no longer be read) even as I am adding new layers to the experience.

*Metamaus* -- the book which Hillary Chute and Art Spiegelman just produced -- demonstrates the value of supplementing the comics themselves with audio-visual materials -- in this case, some of the tapes of Spiegelman's interviews with his father, for example, that were the raw materials out of which the book's narrative emerged, or interviews with Spiegelman where he offers commentary about his own work. In the case of my project, many of the authors I am discussing are inspired by work in other media -- films and music, say -- and I want to be able to juxtapose these references side by side in explaining what they took and what they changed through these acts of appropriation. These are just some of the ways that digital publishing might offer new resources to comics scholarship.

Of course, the ability to work in these ways still requires working through issues of copyright and other intellectual property restrictions which make it difficult to provide the kinds of rich illustrations such works seem to demand.

### *Entertainment corporations*

*You've said that Comic-Con 'emphasizes fans as consumers rather than fans as cultural producers.' Do you think this is true of the entertainment industries more generally? How (should?) we try and address this?*

You are quoting here from an essay I recently published about San Diego Comic-Con for Boom magazine. My focus there was on trying to explain the growing importance of this fan gathering in relation to convergence culture (the meeting place between media industries from which many transmedia projects emerge) and as the place where Hollywood most directly interfaces with its consumers (as opposed to, say, Show West, which is where they interface with their exhibitors.) Seen from those vantage points, what happens at Comic-Con is nothing short of extraordinary, especially given the growing centrality of these fans to the social media campaigns around certain entertainment franchises. It is also significant that Comic-Con has become increasingly diverse -- much more racially diverse than most other U.S. based fan conventions, increasingly a site of visibility for female fans (after Hollywood and the news media showing a decade long preoccupation with fan boys as the center of their outreach to their audience), and I have reasons to hope that fans will learn to be more effective at using this access and influence towards their own ends. It is degrading to see so many fans groveling for freebies or spoilers, rather than using this environment to lobby for their own interests.

If we want to consider what an alternative model might look like, we could point to the very different role which Tokyo Comiket or the Comics Market plays in the context of the Japanese manga scene. (Full disclosure: I have not been there, so I am basing this primarily on other

people's accounts). Here, there is a strong focus on Otaku culture, especially on grassroots cultural production, especially the production and sale of dōjinshi. Dōjinshi are comics produced by amateurs, often through clubs, or at least by people who are currently operating outside the commercial industry in Japan. These kinds of grassroots productions represent the bulk of what's on display at Comiket, and the convention functions as a market place where fans can discover each other's work, and where the industry can recruit new talent. As far as I know, there is not an equivalent event for amateur comics artists in the United States, though there is certainly some space for small and mini-comics producers at some of the alternative comics events held around the country. There is a strong tradition of fan-run and fan-focused conventions in the world of fan fiction, however, or amateur video production, which give us some sense of what such an event would look like. For the most part, though, these events are not attended by people working in the commercial industry -- there's too much tension around copyright in the U.S. context (not to mention too much anxiety over sexually explicit materials) to allow for any great comfort in such an interface, but, again, as I understand it, these are not prohibitive problems for the interaction between fan and commercial manga producers at the Tokyo event.

*Finally, how do you feel about comics adaptations on screen, e.g. the latest Batman franchise. Is this a transmedial adaptation, reimagined for a new audience, or just yet another cynical attempt to make more money?*

More and more, adapting content from comics for the large and small screen is simply part of the logic of the ways contemporary media industries operate. DC and Marvel are both sustained at this point as essentially the research and development wings of Warners and Disney respectively. They are not that financially rewarding in terms of the production of comics, given the dwindling side of the readership of comics, but they are valuable as spaces that generate new intellectual properties which can be exploited across media. Arguably, mainstream comics publishers only stay in business because they can feed content into films and television (and if these publishers collapsed, they would bring down with them the specialty shops which also support the distribution of alternative comics.) So, if there's anyone cynical in this transaction, it may be comics publishers and readers, who accept this deal as a precondition for sustaining the medium we all value.

We need to accept that all art is produced in an economic context; there is no such thing as an art form driven by a purely aesthetic motive. We need to understand and be aware of the commercial imperatives that shape what kind of media are produced, but we should not be overwhelmed by them. An understanding of media industries should not totally swamp an interest in issues of comics authorship and readership or an awareness of the formal expression and experimentation that can take place even within a very mainstream work. (I am very interested, for example, in the many different ways that alternative comics artists have partnered with Marvel or DC to produce work which refreshes established franchises. I have

written for example about the work which David Mack has done in the Daredevil universe or about the collaborations which took place between alternative and mainstream comics publishers in the wake of 9/11.) I don't think it's helpful to think about comics-related films as "simply about making more money," even if we need to know that such decisions are at least partially motivated by market expectations.

Keep in mind that there are a broad range of different kinds of comics being adapted to the screen right now -- not simply the obvious examples of Superhero movies (*The Avengers*, *Dark Knight Rises*) but also works in other genres (*Walking Dead*, *A History of Violence*, *Cowboys and Aliens*) and independent films based on alternative comics (*Ghost World*, *American Splendor*). Some of these films have been made well, some badly, but I don't think we can offer a simple evaluation of the trend as a whole. I wrote an essay recently on the ways that *The Walking Dead* does and does not respect what drew comics fans to the original graphic novels, about the ways that they needed to be courted around the launch of the series but their influence has waned somewhat as the television series has developed its own following among non-comics readers.

The reality is that comic fans will always be swamped in a successful media franchise: Many more people go to see the opening weekend of one of the *Dark Knight* movies than have read a Batman comic in the past year. Where this is not true, for example, *Scott Pilgrim Vs. the World*, then we are looking at a film that fails to gain enough box office to justify future production. The challenge, then, is always to balance the expectations of hardcore fans with the need to broaden the audience to include many who are encountering these characters and their stories for the first time. Mainstream comics publishers work with deeply encrusted memories and elaborate continuities; they reward the mastery of hard core fans through all of the retro strategies we discussed earlier, yet these techniques can not work if you want to expand the audience for these stories and so comics-based films can seem superficial, simplified, dummed down, for those viewers who come to them with a deeper history in the franchise.

Yet, that does not mean that these films can not bring interesting layers of meaning to the universes they are exploring. I am very excited by what Joss Whedon, say, is bringing to the Marvel universe, not only through the feature films, but also through the planned television series focused on *SHIELD* currently being planned. As Will Brooker has explored through a recent book, Christopher Nolan has played with and expanded upon the contemporary meanings of the Bat-man across his *Dark Knight* films. And I liked the nervous romance elements which Mark Webb brought to the reboot of the Spider-man film series this past summer.

Each in its own way adds to the richness of the superhero genre, rather than simply reducing it to the lowest common denominator as it goes to the big screen. And all signs are that the new Superman movie is going to explore the alien-ness of the man from Krypton in ways that may refresh an often tired and uninteresting character. None of this is new: much of the Superman mythology came not from the comics, but from the Fleischer cartoons, the radio

series, the movie serials, and from several decades worth of films and television series. From the start, superheroes have taken shape across media, not simply through comics publishing, and so, at this point, it doesn't make sense to think about the films as a corruption of the process: this is how the superhero mythology grows.