Beyond Panels: the World of Webcomics will explore various ways in which illustrators have expressed themselves through comics made for visual consumption on the Internet.

Webcomics first appeared in newsgroups and on Internet service providers (such as Compuserve) around 1985. Within 10 years, the production of webcomics increased dramatically. Illustrators expanded the range of subject matter and experimented with style of comics, as changing software technologies became available. For some comics, this popularity meant more focus on story and character development while others had more elaborate image making.

Webcomics find themselves in a unique position from their printed counterparts. They don’t have to adhere to the same conventions as those that appear in syndication. With the Internet being a place of anonymity and relative freedom of speech, webcomics have little to no editorial oversight and can convey a message no matter how personal, scathing, or utterly ridiculous. The possibilities of how an image is produced (and how it can be redefined by using the web) also gives webcomics a freedom to break away from conventional panels and other size constraints.
Women in Webcomics

While early webcomics were a very male-dominated venture, within the past 10 years women authors have begun to gain traction for their comics that entertain topics such as sexuality, feminism, and even historical figures such as Jane Austen.
Jillian Tamaki, an already accomplished illustrator and comic artist, started SuperMutant Magic Academy after the release of her printed graphic novel, Skim. Tamaki only illustrated Skim (cousin Mariko Tamaki wrote the story), but with SuperMutant Magic Academy she takes the reigns of writing and illustrating.

The online comic follows the teenaged mutants of the The Academy as they deal with not only their super powers, but the ups and downs of adolescence. Focusing on teenage angst and moodiness, Tamaki also finds a way to weave in adult worries and skepticism into conversations of the characters. But, with this also comes superficiality, never forgetting that these characters are teens.
Erika Moen’s DAR is a highly-personal project that started in 2003. During its production, readers had the opportunity to grow with Moen as she navigated through her early to mid-twenties.

The online comic ended in 2009, with this issue a farewell to her readers. In addition she wrote a blog post which thanked her fans and the outlet that webcomics provided. An excerpt from this post:

It [DAR comic] started my sophomore year of college as a 20 year old student and has seen me through my first love, finding my queer identity, my first heartbreak, my first rebounds, traveling to another country, depression and medication, having stupid adventures, meeting the man I’d eventually marry, re-structuring “my identity”, graduation, working in the real world while struggling to keep making art which brings us to today where I’m a 26 year old self-employed happily married woman.¹

Danielle Corsetto

*Girls with Slingshots*

January 6, 2005

girlswithslingshots.com

900pixels x 253pixels

Danielle Corsetto started *Girls with Slingshots* in 2004. Following best friends Jaime and Hazel in their post-graduate years, Corsetto chronicles the women’s’ lives through make ups, break ups, boozing, and job hunting with a cast of supporting characters including a talking cacti named Mr. Pedro.

*Girls with Slingshots* has been praised by the LBGT community in its thoughtful portrayal of lesbian relationships and fluid sexuality.
Kate Beaton

*Hark! A Vagrant*

harkavagrant.com

800px x 402px

Kate Beaton earned her college degree in history which informs her webcomic, *Hark! A Vagrant!* In it, Beaton focuses on historical stories.

*Hark! A Vagrant!* Both informs and delights the reader, as often Beaton’s presentation of the comic is two-fold. It includes the comic which highlights a chosen subject. Below it, in a blog post, she expounds upon her content, providing additional details that are informative and entertaining.

Beaton has a very active Twitter and Tumbir presence. She remains close to her readers by peppering *Hark! A Vagrant!* with her own history, often drawing memories from her childhood.

In 2011, *Hark! A Vagrant!* was compiled into a book.
She violently destroyed every toy she had—even her inexplicably-patriotic-themed squeaky owl toy, which is her favorite.

Allie Brosh

*Hyperbole and a Half*

May 5, 2011

hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com

Allie Brosh of *Hyperbole and a Half* takes an unconventional approach to sequential art on the Internet. She combines panels of drawings with paragraphs of text. It reads as part comic and part blog, but individual panels can successfully be isolated from the text to create a story that stands on its own.

*Hyperbole and a Half* is a work of nonfiction, and its success comes from a juxtaposition of images from simple paint programs with self-deprecating humor.
An Escape from the Everyday: Webcomics as a Break in Monotony

Webcomics can be accessed from anywhere. They benefit both illustrators and readers – illustrators are able to create content in which they can express themselves and their opinions while readers can temporarily escape the monotony of their daily lives. Many comics have an absurd take on the issues we face everyday while others imagine a completely new and original world.
Nicholas Gurewitch

_Perry Bible Fellowship_

pbfcomics.com

900pixels x 300pixels

_Perry Bible Fellowship_ began in 2003 by Nicholas Gurewitch. The comic first appeared in Syracuse University's newspaper _The Daily Orange_ where Gurewitch was a student. After appearing in several alternative newspapers around the United States, the comic began to appear online where it gained much notoriety.

_Perry Bible Fellowship_ varies in its artistic styles and has a rotating cast of characters. Some strips, like this one featuring Sergeant Grumbles, are realistically rendered. Others strips may be highly stylized with flattened color. The dark humor and sense of irony is translated through Gurewitch's various ways of working, making the comic unpredictable and unconventional.
Subnormality by Winston Rowntree has the tag line, "Comix with too many words since 2007." It's true- Subnormality is unusually verbose, and the author/illustrator is well aware. In an interview with Hamish Gibson of curiousjoe.org, Rowntree states,

In terms of the amount of text in a given comic, I make absolutely no efforts whatsoever to limit that (as people may have noticed by now...). If what I want to say is 2000 words then that's how much text is gonna be in there. Comics are an unpopular little niche in the grand scheme of things, so anyone who says 'oh, you should have so many words in a panel for ideal flow etc etc' has to be working under the assumption that maintaining the status quo is somehow a good idea.'

Subnormality is filled with a rotating cast of characters that include sphinx, pink-haired girl, devil #76, and neo-Nazi time travelers.

Tristan A. Farnon

*Leisure Town*

1997

leisurertown.com

500pixels x 1128pixels

Illustrated by Tristan A. Farnon, *Leisure Town* was a webcomic that appeared on Farnon's site from 1997 to 2003. Known for its unusual style and provocative stories, *Leisure Town* featured photographed wireframe bendable toys in situations that offered a mixture of violence, profanity, and a disillusion of everyday life. In an interview with *The Comics Journal*, Farnon notes:

> My stuff is read by people stuck in their cubes all day. Or people awake at three in the morning, searching for something. The goal is to take them outdoors for awhile, show them something new and different. Or at least colorful. I figure if I throw enough colors and nice photographs at the reader, I've earned the right to make the world's most expensive and complicated dick jokes.¹

Swelling itself quickly to twenty times its natural size, once again the puffer donut escapes its natural predator.

David Farley
Dr. Fun
January 1, 1994
ibiblio.org
640 pixels x 480 pixels

*Dr. Fun* by David Farley was an early webcomic that lasted over 10 years. It is often compared to the printed comic *Far Side* by Gary Larsen, with a similar format and one-line zingers. Content was often satirical of “real life” or borderline absurd. Focus was more on the gag rather than character development.

*Dr. Fun* interestingly takes advantage of image creation for the web, using blurred photographs for many backgrounds to give the appearance of depth.
One of the earliest webcomics, *T.H.E. Fox* by Joe Ekaitis was created in 1986 and first distributed via online services CompuServe, Q-Link, and GEnie before later appearing on the web.

*T.H.E. Fox* represents an escape of everyday life through Ekaitis’s cast of characters which included Thaddeus Fox, his roommate Burnnington Ellsworth Rabbit, and other friends Grizz Lee, Wilt the Wolf. In an interview with Commodore Round Table, Ekaitis stated that he really preferred to write about everyday life. Animal species did not deliver as many gags.¹

Ekaitis was not a trained artist, remarking in the same interview that he would receive “F” grades in his art class. His profession (at the time of the interview, 1994) he repaired telephone poles.

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Technology and Internet Culture Cataloged Through Webcomics

The first people to make and read webcomics were those genuinely interested in the Internet and changing technologies. For anyone so closely associated with this culture, there were trends, inside jokes, and issues ripe for commentary and satire. In this way, webcomics offer a look into the changing attitudes of those using the Internet, and how much it has shaped the way in which we live our everyday lives.
NetBoy is a webcomic created by Stafford Huyler in 1994. With the tagline, "Comics for the hard core geek," Huyler delivered a series whose main character was an idiot savant when it came to the internet, but savvy enough to be able to satirize it.

Demonstrating its age and the rapidly changing nature of the web, the reader sees NetBoy's obsession with image graphics. He is on a quest for faster GIFs and laments about Pentium (which is now Intel) processors. While GIFs are now a ubiquitous and a popular file format, in 1994/1995 (during the birth of NetBoy), they were for high-level computer geeks.
Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik

Penny Arcade

January 13, 1999

penny-arcade.com

800pixels x 282pixels

Penny Arcade is a webcomic that has extended beyond just its comic form. Mike Krahulik illustrates and Jerry Holkins writes the comic, which is primarily focused on gaming and gaming culture.

The strip revolves around two characters, Johnathan “Gabe” Gabriel and Tycho Brahe. Priority is not given to issues of plot or continuity—characters might die and reappear in Penny Arcade and objects are often anthropomorphic. A blog post from the creators always accompanies the comic and clears up any questions readers may have.

The liberties taken with traditional story-telling methods has made it one of the longest running and most popular webcomics of all time, beginning in 1998 and continuing to the present day.
Joy of Tech was started in 2008 by Nitrozac and Snaggy and is still being made. The comic updates three days a week and concentrates on technology-related themes.

Joy of Tech oscillates between appealing to the religious tech news reader and the more casual technology lover. While there is the possibility that a reader might not understand all the tech jargon, Joy of Tech is written in such a way that it can inform someone, too.
Achewood by Chris Onstad features a cast of anthropomorphic stuffed animals, robots, and pets. They live in the house of their owner Chris at the fictional cul-de-sac, Achewood Court. Ray the cat is the main character and seen in this comic from 2006.

Ray loves eBay, and his obsession with finding the best items at the best price represents active Internet users who fill their days shopping online. The best deals, conceivably, are on the web, as there is the opportunity to price compare without ever having to leave your pajamas.
Matthew Thurber

Muk Luk

October 27, 2011

PictureBox, pictureboxinc.com

360pixels x 3240pixels

Muk Luk is a relatively new webcomic that started in 2011 and is drawn by Matthew Thurber. Taking a less realistic approach to the web and Internet culture, Muk Luk imagines a world where its characters are crippled by and totally dependant on the Internet, especially search engines. One panel of this comic even goes as far to say, "Mr. Radar, I don't quite remember how to use the door, let me Google it real quick."

While Muk Luk is pure fiction, Thurber interjects moments of reality, recalling behaviors that may be a habit for his readers. For some, the distressed man saying, "I've been checking my Facebook, my email accounts, and Twitter alternating for the last 72 hours. I need help" may hit a little close to home.
Webcomics and the Wild Wild West

Unlike their printed counterparts, webcomics lack editorial oversight and present a general “anything goes” attitude about them. While this is unpredictable, it also gives authors the chance to interface with readers that directly influence their work. And, because they are not limited to the physical constraints of a paper, the conventions of neat panels need not apply.
Scott McCloud

*The Right Number*

2003

[scottmcccloud.com](http://scottmcccloud.com)

551pixels x 360pixels

Scott McCloud is an author and illustrator most famous for his books about comics, which include *Understanding Comics* and *Reinventing Comics*. In *Reinventing Comics*, he writes about the potential of webcomics and postulates the idea of “infinite space.” This meant that webcomic artists could (and should) take advantage of changing image technology and create panels that move front to back rather than left to right.

In 2003, McCloud created *The Right Number*, where he utilized the idea of infinite space. It tells the story of a man and his fascination with the right number and coincidence. The entire comic is contained in one panel that when clicked advances and brings a new scene forward.
Ryan North is *Dinosaur Comics*. While the strip operates under a constrained form (each issue of the comic has the exact same panels), North’s colorful characters and his sense of humor keep this series successful and places the author in a small group of webcomic artists that make their living from it.

A strength of *Dinosaur Comics* is the connectedness with fans have with North. He is constantly tweeting and talking with readers. He uses online discussions to create comics based on his virtual life.

“Easter eggs,” or intentional hidden messages, are popular on *Dinosaur Comics*. Readers can see messages if they hover their mouse over the image, the subject line of the “Contact” email address, and in the title of the RSS feed of the comic. There, North invites even more interaction from his fans, with one title being, *Is it a good idea that players only love you when they’re playing? Let us know in the comments!*
Slow wave by Jesse Reklaw harnessed the power of his audience on the Internet to provide his webcomic with content and meaning. From 1995 to 2008, readers submitted their dreams to Reklaw who would illustrate them in comic form.

In reflecting upon Slow Wave turning ten in 2005, Reklaw writes that he felt immediate connections to drawing dreams, due to their interesting imagery and Dada-esque nature. Using the web, Reklaw could go beyond his circle of friends (who originally were providing him with content) and include readers and dreams around the world, which demonstrated a connectedness that we all feel to the nature of dreams themselves.¹

Josh Neufeld

A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge

November 14, 2007

Smithmag.net

699 pixels x 398 pixels

Josh Neufeld’s powerful comic, A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge, chronicled the lives of six people in New Orleans, Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Neufeld paints a picture of the unique struggles that came with the natural disaster as depicted through this non-fictional comic. It demonstrates how different New Orleans was depending on race, location, and social status.

Neufeld supplemented his webcomic in a way that a printed comic could not – relevant links were made available and corresponded to the panel just published. Readers could also comment on the strip, adding their opinions and stories about Hurricane Katrina, further connecting people whose experiences may be similar.
Beartato by Anthony Clark (AKA Nedroid) is a webcomic that caters to an enthusiastic readership. Through his comics, Clark entertains his audience with the stories of a bear and bird, as well as through the use of Easter Eggs in the alt text of the image.

Clark calls Bertato his “picture diary” which gives his website a more intimate feel. Before the comic was moved to Nedroid.com, it was hosted on the online journal site, LiveJournal.

Clark also shares bonus drawings and unused sketches, and he’s even featured readers to create their own issue of the comic.
Anthony Clark, Brandon B. (guest comic artist)

Beartato

2012

nedroid.com

800pixels x 1365pixels

Early in 2012, Brandon B. was the guest comic artist for Beartato, proving that the community on the web provides readers with the unique opportunity to talk to their favorite artists and connect with them in a more intimate and immediate way.

This is Brandon B.'s take on Beartato.
Andrew Hussie  
*Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff*  
mspaintedventures.com  
788 pixels x 3000 pixels

*Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff* represents a comic that was borne out of forums, or online message boards. The website *Know Your Meme* has researched the history of the comic, pointing it to another webcomic, *Penny Arcade*. According to *Know Your Meme*:

The origin of *Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff* comes from a thread in the *Penny Arcade* forum titled “Higher Technology” in which user the_Willard asked for some opinions on the art he was using for his own planned webcomic. Hussie created the first few comics in response to these images, as a light-hearted parody of the low quality art and writing of the originals.

The webcomic is intentionally bad, featuring two characters (*Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff*) and their nonsensical and surreal adventures. The comic is nearly unreadable, yet is aware of how horrible it is, making a nod to JPEG artifacts, cut and paste graphics, and punch lines that make no sense.
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(accessed May 1, 2012).

Beyond Panels: The World of Webcomics was curated by Sara Barnes. When she was younger she created her own webcomic on AOL. Many years later as a graduate student in the MFA Illustration Practice Program she enjoys studying and analyzing other illustrators’ comics.