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Mark Szymanski
Pacific University

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Comic Life for a Teacher

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By Mark Szymanski <marks@pacificu.edu>

We in the educational technology field like to use research findings to inform our understanding of how to design effective learning environments. These learning environments can be student centered or teacher led. This in turn leads us to look for tools that will help us and our students learn. Starting to plan instruction with a tool first is not seen as best way to plan instruction. There are a few exceptions to this rule one of them is a piece of software called Comic Life [1] which uses the familiar metaphor of a comic as the organizing feature of the software.

When educational software was in its infancy, its shape and form came right from the business production model. Word processing and database programs dominated the market. The extension of this model was the electronic facilitation of writing and arithmetic. Thus, the kind of learning that happened was the same; the tools just changed. The learner or teacher were still authors of the same final product, a typed paper or spreadsheet. The irony was that often people composed with pen and paper, typed the paper into a computer, and printed the paper using a printer equipped with a typewriter ribbon and type ball. This seemed logical since these were printers were electronically driven versions of typewriters.

In retrospect, we might see this advance as unworthy to note. But, at the time it did create a fundamental change. It placed creative power in the hands of the user. Before that, all type formatting was left to the print shop and the typesetter. This led to a now classic book, Your Mac is not a Typewriter [2]. The back cover proudly proclaims:

This book explains all the inside techniques and rules governing traditional type—techniques and rules that should be applied to all the type coming from personal computers, whether the computer is a Macintosh or any other model. Following this book guarantees you type will be more impressive and of better quality.

All this at the time didn’t do much to change the papers people wrote. It did certainly change the writing process for many students and teachers. And in many ways it set the stage for the entrance of more sophisticated educational software.
Since Apple unveiled the Macintosh in 1982 “An entire generation of Americans has grown up knowing only computers that use pictures or icons to launch programs on color monitors. And when someone says “mouse,” they’re referring to the device that controls their desktop [3] “

At this point, the possibilities changed. The types of things people could do changed. James Gleick describes that quick pace of change adeptly in his book *What Just Happened* “Millions of ordinary, sensible people came into possession of computers. These machines had wondrous powers, yet made unexpected demands on their owners…instant communication became a birthright. A new world, located no one knew exactly where, came into being, called "virtual" or “online," named “cyberspace” or the Internet” or just “the network.” Manners and markets took on new shapes and guises. [4] “

What we do as humans may not have changed too much, but how we do these things has indeed changed. As scholars follow these changes and write about them, our increased distance from these events is the one thing that will help us understand these changes and their effects more deeply.

But, our human needs will always influence how we use these tools. Therefore, some of our familiar techniques and metaphors will continue to drive the creation and use of software. An example of this is the comic. The comic can be characterized as blocks of art set in a sequence to form a narrative. Types of comics are culturally dependent. Thus, we have one of the earliest forms of a visual narrative similar to what we can all do with our computers: Arrange pictures and words on in a way that tells a story.

A recently created piece of software, Comic Life [1] helps us do just that. It’s an example of using this familiar metaphor and structure. It might seem like a simple idea, but it is a powerful with regard to learning. The most widely adopted software is software that allows people to continue doing familiar things. It’s often the entry point for new users of software. Experienced teachers understand the power of metaphor in learning.

Technically, Comic life provides the user with comic book templates, speech balloons, and access to any image on your computer. The user can drag any element from these three work spaces in to the work area. The interface is drag and drop, carrying on the legacy of the Macintosh interface. At this point the power of the tool lies in the hands of the user. The images, and the speech balloons will drive the way the teacher or the student uses the tool.

Maybe getting into prophecy in the digital arena is a dangerous venture. But, one thing might be a constant, reaching for old structures and metaphors that we are familiar with can be the avenue we might travel on most comfortably. For learning, this will change with generations, but the comic’s essential pieces: art and narrative, are two things humans have been using to communicate their understanding for generations.

References:


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