Creating an Authentic Experience:
A Study in Comic Books, Accessibility, and the Visually Impaired Reader

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Abstract

While working as production assistants for the National Network of Equitable Library Service (NNELS), an organization that creates and shares accessible versions of books to people with print disabilities, we were tasked with a challenging request from a user: Could we make an accessible version of the comic book *The Walking Dead*?

Audio description services are available to the visually impaired in a few different venues such as television, movies, and live theatre. Guidelines for the creation of these descriptive texts are available to potential creators, but in our case, we could find nothing that would help guide us to create a described comic book.

While some people and organizations have created prose novelizations of comic books, these simply tell the story, and do not include the unique visual aspects of reading a comic book. We have found that it is possible to create a balanced description that combines the visual grammar of a comic with the narrative story.

In addition to creating a described comic book, we are developing guiding documentation that will be a necessary tool to ensure that visually impaired readers have a comic book experience (CBE) that (a) closely matches the CBE of a sighted reader, and (b) is standardized across producers, so that the onus of understanding the approach to comic book description (CBD) is not put on the visually impaired reader. At this point in our work, we need more feedback from users with print disabilities to ensure we are meeting the highest standards.

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Introduction

Comic books, graphic novels, and other traditionally print-based visual mediums have been almost entirely inaccessible to people with print disabilities. Through our work for the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS), we have been given the opportunity to begin developing a solution to this challenging issue. In 2017, we were hired as production assistants by NNELS, a Canadian non-profit organization that works to create and share an online repository of accessible format materials for people with print disabilities. Under the Canadian Copyright Act, NNELS is permitted to create accessible format materials when one

is not commercially available (Copyright Act, 1985, s. 32). As production assistants, we are tasked with physically formatting texts so that they can be made compatible with our users' assistive devices.

Most of our work involved formatting traditional books (i.e., novels, biographies, etc.), until we received an unusual request from a user to create an accessible version of the comic book *The Walking Dead*. NNELS had never received a request for a comic book before, and there was no established path to follow in order to fulfil this request. Usually, our work consists of applying Microsoft Word styles to text documents, and occasionally adding alt-text descriptions for e-readers when required, but this would not be sufficient for a comic book since it is an almost entirely image-based medium. In order to create an accessible version of a comic book, we would need to develop a new approach from scratch; one that would encompass the creation of clear image descriptions, the translation of the visual grammar of comic books, and worked to ensure that the narrative of the story was not harmed by the addition of detailed description.

We are creating two major documents: first, an accessible version of *The Walking Dead*, and second, accompanying documentation on how to create a described comic book. This documentation will be used by NNELS, as they intend to expand their work with creating accessible comic books. We also hope that it can be used and further developed by other people in the industry to create their own described comic books. A working version can currently be found online on the NNELS training website[1] as we continue to fine-tune and develop our approach.

Background

Some readers may be familiar with what is known as either "Audio Description" (AD) or "Described Video" (DV). This type of description is intended to describe and explain visual media to people with visual impairments, and is most commonly used for television and movies. It was first developed in the 1970s (Packer, Vizenor, & Miele, 2015, p. 84) and there are many sets of guidelines and best practice guides in existence to aid describers in their work (see Appendix for a list). In addition to those for television and movies, there are also guides for the description of live theatre, artworks, and even dance, but no equivalent document exists for comic books. While we found that these guides were helpful at the beginning of our research, it became clear that comic books had their own set of issues that would need to be taken into consideration. For example, DV and AD for television, movies, and live theatre are constrained by dialogue and music cues—these are a part of the narrative and help to keep the story moving along. AD for museum artworks does not have to play to time constraints like that, but it also does not have to focus on keeping a narrative moving. What we have termed "comic book description", or CBD, is unique, as it is free from audio constraints, but we must be highly mindful of over-description, as this can be distracting to the reader and take away from the narrative.

In 2011, Marvel Comics released an audio version of *Daredevil* #1, an apt choice for an audio edition since the title character of the comic is blind himself. This audio comic bears mentioning here, however, it was not useful for the development of our writing since "the narration is taken directly from [the author]'s script for the comic" (Christopher, 2018). While comic book scripts are useful as reference material for areas such as terminology and character names, they are not ideal as the basis for narration. The script is what the artist works with, and creates their drawings from, so a well-described comic book must work from the finished product that combines both the work of the author and the artist.

Alt-text and Audio Description

While we do not have experience writing DV, or describing comic books, we do have experience in writing what is known as *alt-text*. Alt-text is a textual description of an image or graphic that is embedded in the code, and therefore able to be read by screen-readers and assistive devices. It is added to an image when there is not enough context in the text, or in an associated caption, to make the details of the image accessible to a person with a visual impairment. Alt-text is also used to describe items such as maps, graphs, and charts; anything that conveys information on a purely visual level. There are a few resources included in NNELS' internal documentation that offer advice on writing alt-text, and while many of the ideas and guidelines are generally useful, like focusing on objectivity, brevity, and context, it was clear that we would need to do more research in order to develop guidelines for CBD.

A key reference and inspiration for our documentation was found in best practice guides for AD and DV. Multiple guides exist to help train people on this kind of work, as the development of described programming is mandated by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission in Canada (n.d.), the Federal Communications Commission in the U.S., and other federal governments around the world (Descriptive Video Works, 2012). Streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video also offer DV for some of their programs, and other streaming services are working to offer more (American Council for the Blind, n.d.). As previously mentioned, there is a lack of description documentation for comic books and graphic novels, and a primary aim of our work is to help change this so that one day mandatory description will extend to include these visual printed mediums.

A full listing of all of the best practice guides that we consulted appears in the Appendix, but we found that they offer much of the same advice. Objectivity is strongly emphasized throughout all of the guides, as it is not the job of the describer to give their interpretation of the situation; just as it is with sighted viewers, the meaning of a scene or image is for the audience to decide. Another factor that is particularly important is not to censor anything; this was something that we had to contend with while working on *The Walking Dead*, which is a very graphic and gruesome zombie story. It was sometimes off-putting to describe violent and grotesque scenes, but it was absolutely necessary, as that is what is on the page.

The AD and DV guides are used to train people on how best to describe visual media; they also act as a quasi-standard, and this is something that we have tried to incorporate into our work. While CBD is an incredibly recent form of media, it is nevertheless important to begin to produce guidelines that will help create a standardization for the medium. When approaching a description, there are many different ways to describe scene composition, characters, and even the layout of pages and panels. If more and more described comic books become available without standardization, then the onus of deciphering the describer's approach will be left up to the user. This could quickly become confusing and discouraging, and should be avoided if at all possible.

How to Write Comics

In creating and reading comics "the regimens of art (e.g., perspective, symmetry, line) and the regimens of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other" (Eisner, 2008, p. 2). Comics are a medium where the visual storytelling is just as imperative as the written. In order to understand how to better describe this medium we needed to learn how

to create one, and a good place to start is from a creator's point of view. Will Eisner, a cartoonist and writer, wrote *Comics and Sequential Art* (2008) and *Expressive Anatomy for Comics and Narratives* (Eisner & Poplaski, 2008), amongst several other books that many consider as foundational texts for creating comics. These books explore the rules of how to create a comic. Eisner points out that "comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols . . . the 'grammar' of sequential art" (p. 2). Everything on the page of a comic book is part of the "grammar" that creates the story; from the layout of the panels, to the positions of the speech bubbles, to the fonts that are used; each and every element is carefully considered by the writers and artists. It is essential to understand this grammar in order to properly translate it for the described comic book. Scott McCloud (1994) explains in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art:* "The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and unseen. The visible and the invisible. This dance is unique to comics. No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well . . . . What happens between these panels is a kind of magic only comics can create" (p. 92). When reading a comic, the reader has to exercise both their visual and verbal interpretive skills, but for our purposes we had to find a way to translate the visual part of interpretation into a verbal description without losing essential pieces to the story. These lessons on how to write comics complemented our research with AD and DV, as well as alt-text, and helped us get closer to our goal.

How to Translate Comics for the Visually Impaired

Early on in our research we discovered Comics Empower, an online comic book store for the blind, which was created and maintained by Guy Hassan. The company's mandate was to create and sell comics to people with visual impairments through transcription and original writing. Unfortunately, this company no longer exists, but we were inspired by their work and used it as a key resource when designing the navigation and descriptions for our reader. In addition to running the store, Hassan also produced a podcast called *Blind Panels* (n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). Three episodes (26, 28, and 32) explore the structure of comics and how to efficiently describe them to a visually impaired reader. In these episodes a reader with a visual impairment was paired up with a sighted reader, and they read and reviewed the same comic from the Comics Empower Archive. They then discussed their experiences focusing on what worked, what didn't work, and what could be improved. Their conversations highlighted some key points for CBD, such as:

- be specific about description,

- be direct and concise with actions,

- include references to space and time,

- give the key details that help build the narration and the world of the story, and

- if it is important to the story, describe it for the reader.

One important takeaway is that a visually impaired reader wants to have a similar experience to that of a reader without impairment. This was the first type of user feedback we discovered, and though it was limited to only three discussions, it helped us develop our foundational decisions and work from what we already knew from researching AD, DV, and alt-text. It also gave us our first glimpse into what audience there could potentially be out there for this type of work.

From January to March of 2018, we became part of a grant-funded project for NNELS where we were given the opportunity to work alongside a handful of editors with visual impairments. It was through part of this project that we were able to seek out formal feedback from our new colleagues on our CBD work, which is explored later on in this paper. In addition to this opportunity, one colleague shared a recording of a video conference presentation by Cordelia McGee-Tubb, which was part of the conference Inclusive Design 24 that was held in June 2017 (Paciello Group, 2017). In her talk, *Accessible Comics*, she discusses her experience as an accessibility specialist and long-time amateur cartoonist who recently earned her master's degree in comics. Her talk explores the question: What can we do to make comics inclusive to all readers? When it comes to guidelines for creating transcripts, she states that there is nothing out there that is currently defined, though she does highlight a few recommendations to get started including finding the tone of the comic in your writing, understanding the technical terms, and applying them to your descriptions.

She also stresses that there needs to be some level of repetition without weighing down the narrative; at the same time trying to maintain a comic book structure while avoiding creating a novelization. To get a good sense of how visual mediums can be described, she highly recommends looking at scripts from comics, movies, and even plays. This will help find that balance between the technical and the narrative. These are all recommendations that we brought to our own process.

In this talk, McGee-Tubb refers to an article by Liana Kerr, titled "Describing Comics", as posted on *Broodhollow Wikia* (Lianakerr, 2015). In this piece, Kerr goes through her process of describing *Broodhollow* comics, as well as *Watchmen*, for her visually impaired friend. For comics like *Broodhollow* and *Watchmen* seemingly irrelevant details can turn out to be important later on for the story. It is details like this that should be included in a described comic book to help recreate an authentic comic book experience. Kerr sets out "to strike a balance between giving the reader information to make their own inferences and giving the reader an explanation" (para. 5). Kerr believes that visually impaired readers should be able to access all the relevant information that a sighted reader has. When describing, she also tries to include everything that is new or relevant in a logical order, and without repeating unnecessary information. She considers logical order to be similar to the order a sighted person reads a panel. She also tries to avoid repetition unless it is necessary. "I tend to assume, and hope that the reader will assume, that something remains constant until I indicate that it's changed" (para. 7). This is similar to how we have approached writing our described comic book; trying to find the balance between creating an authentic comic experience without getting too weighed down by describing everything in the panel. Other things Kerr takes into consideration include:

- tone/atmosphere of panel,
- expressions and body language (and how they related between each other),
- basic background description, and
- any relevant additional details—such as colors.

Kerr also feels that consistency is important, and makes sure that she uses the same, or similar, words or phrases to describe design elements. An example from *The Walking Dead* would be the grey and white splatter starburst in the background of intense scenes. It is important we describe

this the same way each time so the reader can pick up on the significance of this design element—it indicates a sudden action or emotion. As Kerr (Lianakerr, 2015) asserts in her own work; "My hope is that someone using a screen reader has the same emotional reaction to reading the phrase 'horizontal gleam' as a sighted reader does when seeing it in the comic" (para. 8). This goes back to creating that authentic experience where every panel is made up of choices by the artist and writer, and therefore should be transcribed into the described comic book.

Writing and Editing: Editing and Writing

An essential part to creating a described comic book is the routine of partnered writing and editing. For *The Walking Dead* we divided the comic into sections of five pages each, with one person editing their partner's previous five pages, and then describing five more pages before handing it back for the next round. This meant at any given time one person would be working on ten pages in total. This helped create a collaborative workflow where we were able to discuss our work within the same document we created. This also meant we designed the described comic book as we worked through each cycle. This type of workflow fostered experimentation and discovery of what worked, and what did not work. With two people on the project, each individual can bring their own opinion and perspective to the page while also catching editing mistakes that can be easily missed with a solo writer. Not only can a fresh perspective find errors that may be overlooked otherwise, it can also help create a breakthrough with a difficult description and even help with project exhaustion.

User Feedback

As mentioned above, we were able to get some user feedback from the grant-funded project we did through NNELS. One of the new hires volunteered to read over some sample pages from our *Walking Dead* reader and give feedback. While his responses have informed our approach and our documentation, we had to remain cognizant of the fact that it was the feedback of one person, and therefore it cannot be fully generalized.

At the beginning of a described comic book, we include a detailed section entitled "Producer's Notes", which provides information that is meant to describe the differences between the printed version and the version we are creating. Additionally, details which serve to orient the reader to the style of the work are included, since it is a unique medium. Our volunteer's feedback was valuable in the design of this section, and it helped us understand what would need to be conveyed to someone who may have never had the opportunity, or ability, to read a comic book, or graphic novel, before. The Producer's Notes include:

- information about how the text is structured,
- how page and panel descriptions are presented,
- common panel types and row configurations,
- comic book terminology,
- brief definition of points of view and angles,
- descriptions of speech bubbles,
- examples of text effects, and

- examples of sound effects and visual effects (motion lines, "graphic detail").

With respect to page and panel descriptions, the volunteer noted: "I didn't understand from the descriptions why an illustrator would choose one layout over another." Prior to hearing this comment, we had been unsure about how much comic theory to include in our Producer's Notes, such as the fact that portrait-style panels (known as vertical panels) are generally representative of a shorter period of time, or that borderless and "bleeding" panels can sometimes convey a sense of timelessness. With this feedback, it was clear that this type of information would be helpful in orienting the reader to this new type of text.

Another comment noted by our volunteer was on how to best organize the description of the elements in a panel; something that we have considered again and again, but there does not seem to be a perfect solution. Comic books can be read in two ways by sighted readers: (a) they can either be quickly skimmed, and the reader can get the gist of the story, or (b) they can be closely read, and the reader can pick up on nuance and notice small but meaningful things, or even things like continuity errors. With a described comic book, it is very difficult to give the reader the option of "skimming" because the order of description must be dictated by the narrative, and so it is not always possible to organize the description of a panel so that part of it can be skipped. In her presentation, McGee-Tubb discusses the idea of a hierarchical structure of panel description, leading to greater granularity (like clothing or backgrounds being on one level, and the action of the panel being on another) (Paciello Group, 2017), and while this is an important idea, we have found that it would be difficult to implement, especially when we are working to create a described comic book that can be easily read by any assistive device or e-reader that a potential user would prefer.

Gaining more formal feedback will be essential to the project moving forward, and the current lack of it is certainly one of the greatest limitations of our work.

Comics Empower: Business Case

While CBD is uncommon, "prose novelizations" have been around for a long time. As the name suggests, prose novelizations are books that take the story of the comic book and write it up in the traditional format of a novel. These share the story of the comic book, but do not convey any of the visual grammar that is a key part of the comic book experience, which is what our method is working to emulate.

A good example of the demand for described comic books is offered by Comics Empower, the "comic book store for the blind", which we introduced earlier in this paper. They created described comic books and also sold prose novelizations with music and full-cast audio from the company Audio Comics. In an interview, Guy Hassan, the founder, said: "We did a little poll after releasing Audio Comics, and it turned out that though people like both types, there was a large preference to the comic book experience rather than the movie experience" (Kingett, 2016). This gives us a small glimpse of the potential interest and demand in this unique medium.

Limitations & Implications

In the end, Hassan was not able to sustain Comics Empower as a business (Comics Empower, 2018), and the company had to close its virtual doors. This is not too surprising, as the work of

creating and sharing accessible books is often paid for, at least in part, by government grants, charitable donations, and even through the work of volunteers. There is a business case to be made, but it will take time to build interest and awareness for this kind of work. As we have mentioned previously, it would be valuable to conduct a study that shared described comic books with the intended audience and gathered a variety of general and specific feedback.

Just as Hassan noted that people enjoyed the comic book experience offered by described comic books, we also found that there was the potential for interest among people who had never considered the possibility of reading comic books. In order to help future NNELS production assistants work on creating described comic books, we created a sample described comic book to act as a training guide, in addition to the documentation we created and *The Walking Dead* described comic book. We were also able to get some feedback on this sample from the new hires during the grant-funded project, and one of them commented that "the [NNELS-Zilla] document is AWESOME! You guys have entirely changed my perception of accessibility for comics… I never even considered that it would be possible to have access to this genre as a blind reader. Bravo!" (D. Levy-Pinto, personal communication, March 31, 2018). Like the other resources that NNELS creates, described comic books are designed for more than just people who are blind; they are also created for anyone with a perceptual disability, which includes people with dyslexia and physical impairments that can prevent them from holding a book (such as advanced multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's disease). This opens the door wider for potential readers.

Conclusion

As noted by Kim Johnson, "NNELS allows for a new way of thinking about services for people with print disabilities" (2018, p. 119). This applies not only to the service model, but also to the innovations that we are working toward in areas such as CBD. The work is challenging and time-consuming, and we are very fortunate to have the ability to work on it as part of our work for NNELS. We intend to keep pushing and building interest and awareness in CBD, and hope that the momentum we build will lead to developments and advancements in CBD. Bringing a purely visual medium to people with visual impairments will make for a more equitable world, where all potential readers can access the texts they want, regardless of their traditional form. The project started off with a simple user request through NNELS and has grown to something more than we originally set out to create. We invite others to add to our work and help develop a set of standards and practices for CBD so anyone with a perceptual disability can enjoy this exciting medium.

Endnote

1 A working version of our documentation regarding comic book and graphic novel description can be found online on the NNELS training website here:
https://bclc.wiki.libraries.coop/doku.php?id=public:nnels:etext:comics

Appendix

Published Best Practices Guidelines on Audio Description and Described Video

- National Disability Authority: Irish National IT Accessibility Guidelines
    - http://universaldesign.ie/Technology-ICT/Irish-National-IT-Accessibility-Guidelines/
- Audio Description Coalition: Standards for Audio Description and Code of Professional Conduct for Describers
    - https://audiodescriptionsolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/adc_standards_090615.pdf
- Independent Television Commission: ITC Guidance on Standards for Audio Description
    - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OMLuHjXbNsVMYPus6LYddcwE3eXHfYt1/view
- American Council of the Blind: Audio Description Guidelines and Best Practices
    - http://docenti.unimc.it/catia.giaconi/teaching/2017/17069/files/corso-sostegno/audiodescrizioni
- Accessible Media Inc.: Post Production Described Video Best Practices: Artistic and Technical Guidelines
    - https://nbviewer.jupyter.org/github/a11yofficer/dvbp/blob/master/PP_Described_Video_Best_Practices.pdf

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