Anglica 33/2 2024
ISSN 0860-5734 (Print)
ISSN 2957-0905 (Online)
DOI: 10.7311/0860-5734.33.2.07

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The Networked Author: Looking at Contemporary Authorship Through Postdigital Comics[1]

Abstract: This article investigates contemporary authorship in the (global) English-speaking context, focusing on the shared creative practices of postdigital comics – those that bear the inscription of digital technologies and practices in unprecedented or renewed ways. In doing so, it proposes an original framework to discuss how the digital has brought forward novel network dynamics of comics creation beyond the single author, arguing for the identification, within this networked authorship, of (a) renewed forms and practices of 'collective authorship,' and (b) new types of 'distributed authorship.' In a conceptual reframing of this landscape, the article divides the former into 'collaborative' or 'participatory' authorship, and the latter into 'algorithmic' and 'rhizomatic' authorship, surveying and discussing their configurations.

Keywords: postdigital comics, authorship; networks, media archeology, generative AI, comics memes, comics apps

1. Introduction

With the publication of three English-language comic books made using generative AI (Ilan Manouach's *Fastwalkers*; Carson Grubaugh's *The Abolition of Men*; Dave McKean's *Prompt. Conversations With Artificial Intelligence*), 2022 appears to have marked a turning point for the comics medium. To believe the publicity blurbs, each one was the first comic made with (sometimes "by") an AI – each paratext emphasizing its non-human creation. However, and although technological advances catch the eye of the general audience and the press, changes in practices that occurred in the last twenty years have perhaps more extensively impacted

the whole life cycle of contemporary artistic and media products, both online and offline (or, better still, through the commingling of the two, what Floridi has called the "onlife"). Over time, this combination of changes in technologies and practices eventually has consolidated into new forms and aesthetic trends.

Hence, to understand this landscape, one must first reconstruct how digital culture and platform society (Van Dijck et al.) have animated a range of new practices and reframed existing ones, disseminating authorship and bringing together changes that have shaken the whole media landscape. The digital increasingly confronts us with new creative technologies (necessitating artists to pair with technicians or to engage with technology themselves), new audience dynamics (requiring creators to adapt to, connect with, and draw in their readers), and new forms of semi-anonymous, disseminated creation owing to the structures, affordances, and practices of the Internet. All of these dynamics move on an unprecedented global dimension, which is particularly salient for works in English. This draws attention to contemporary authorship as a ramified, collective, ever-evolving process, involving media objects that carry the inscription of ongoing technological shifts on all the different phases of their life, from creation to distribution, reception, and interaction.

In particular, I argue that the digital turn has unprecedentedly intensified the pluralization of the authorial figure. In this sense, and while this dynamic is not exclusive to it, comics provide a unique test case for rethinking and problematizing the concept of authorship through media, as they have displayed, in the course of its history, a multitude of structures and practices shared by both high-brow and low-brow narrative and figurative media, which have further proliferated with the digital turn.

In the edited issue of the journal *Authorship* she curated in 2017, entirely focused on comics authorship, Maaheen Ahmed presented an elaborated representation of this type of authorship, showing how it keeps together a network composed of a plurality of figures, including writers, illustrators, colorists, inkers, pencillers, and (incorporating an idea by Friedlander) editors. While Ahmed cleverly describes the boundaries of comics authorship as "porous" (3), this paper believes that postdigital artifacts call for a rethinking of the classical understanding of the author, seeing instead its figure as inherently pluralized – even more so than Ahmed suggests. The present paper thus aims to investigate what it calls 'networked authorship' – that is, the increasingly pluralized configuration of authorship – in postdigital comics, focusing on the evolution of comics' shared creation after the digital turn. The idea of networked authorship, then, not only deals with all creative figures discussed by Ahmed (see also Friedlander); rather, it encompasses, under the banner of the author, the instances that Emmanuel Souchier brings together under the concept of 'editorial enunciation,' that is, "the polyphonic enunciation of text produced or uttered by any instance likely to intervene in its conception, realization or production" (141) [trans. G.B.R.].

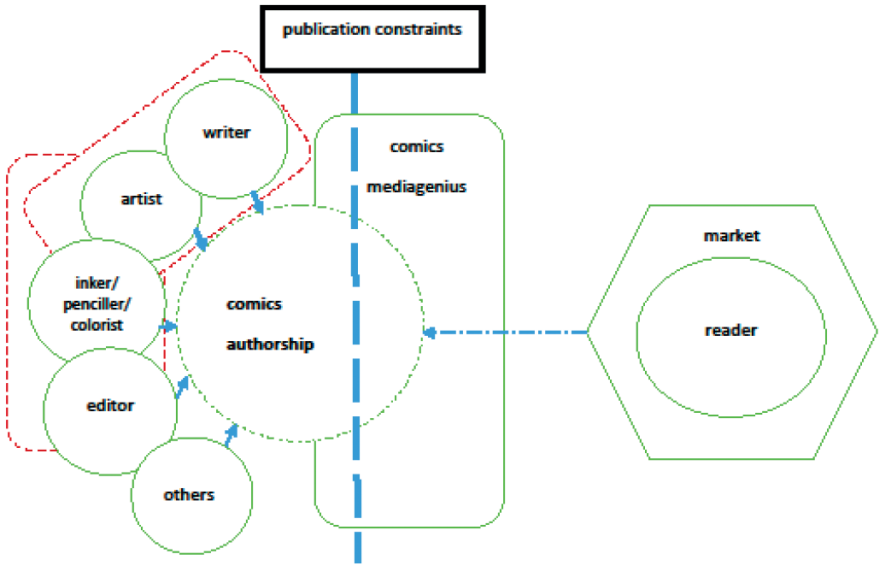

Figure 1. The (already pluralized) authorial configuration in prototypical comics (Ahmed). "Mediagenus" is "the inextricable intertwining of style and storytelling specific to the medium of comics" (Ahmed 3), a concept Ahmed draws from Philippe Marion.

This article thus suggests a different move from Hanna-Riikka Roine and Laura Piippo's idea of "human-technical assemblage" as a substitute for the idea of authorship to conceptualize agency of storytelling in digital media.[2] Indeed, it proposes two shifts in the notion of authorship in relation to postdigital culture: one (we can define it as 'passive') that urges to recognize the inextricable plurality of contemporary authorial configurations; and another (that we can consider 'active') that suggests not renouncing to the idea of author by removing it or multiplying the mediating instances outside of (and around) it. Instead, the article argues that we can see those mediating instances as participating in a collective authorial figure, a process encouraged by the disseminated and decentralized forms of postdigital authorship. While this can apply to all media objects carrying the effects of the digital turn, the article posits that these processes can be seen with particular clarity when looking at comics.

The concept of networked authorship in postdigital comics that this paper advances can be further broken down into four different categories:

(a) 'collective authorship', stemming from existing, yet renewed forms and practices, as those configured by (a1) objects that mobilize – and almost necessarily require – a considerable amount of technical and creative expertise (I will call

this 'collaborative authorship'), or (a2) practices that increase fans' closeness and involvement during the creative process (I will call this 'participatory authorship');

(b) 'distributed authorship', novel configurations that involve (b1) computational actors participating with peculiar saliency in the creative process (as in the comics written employing AI that were invoked at the beginning of the article: I will call this 'algorithmic authorship'), or (b2) configurations where the pluralized authorship is non-hierarchical, ramified, often expanding transmedially, anonymizing and merging creators in a synergistic configuration (I will call this 'rhizomatic authorship').

None of these ideas are unprecedented – in fact, more than two decades ago, Christiane Heibach proposed a reformulation emphasizing what she called "distributed authorship in the age of computer networks", aiming to account for an ontological shift that impacted both "connection between people by means of the machine" and "communication between user and networked machines" (5). Incidentally, although I refer here repeatedly to the idea of 'networks of authorship', I am not using the term 'network' in the technological sense of 'computer network' as Heibach does, or as it is used in the term 'network fiction' (Ciccoricco; Lutostański). Rather, my discourse can be accused of incorporating the 'network ideology' that, according to Bory, derives from the introjected imaginary of the Internet as infrastructure, and sees networks as "the main agents of social, economic, political and cultural change" (1). While I believe and hope that the terminology I have chosen represents a viable harmonization between different critical perspectives and vocabularies, and I understand the fallibility of such an endeavor, I must also point out that typically, when moving in an interdisciplinary space and considering perspectives from different media domains, most terms have already been used in various senses – often not compatible with each other – by different authors, and there is no way to engage with all of them and to propose a novel, unifying, universal standard.

In this sense, 'postdigital,' for the sake of this article, is not to be read as an aesthetic category relying on foregrounding the affordances of contemporary digital technologies, but as a set of novel or renewed practices that carry the inscription of an "epistemological and pragmatic shift in everyday life towards the use of computational systems to support and mediate life itself" (Berry and Dieter 1) which blurs the divide between digital and non-digital practices. Postdigital objects – comics, in this case – carry the inscription of contemporary digital culture, whether the finalized objects are digital or print. Although this shift typically impacts the aesthetics of these objects – resulting in hybrid works, stemming from peculiar materialities and circulations, subject to centrifugal shifts of themes, forms, and styles compared to prototypical ones – this will not be the focus of this article, which centers instead on the paradigmatic pluralization of the authorial figure.[3] In particular, the idea of 'networked authorship' in comics points to structures ingrained in postdigital practices through media and arts, reframing the ideas of

contribution and co-creation by accelerating, opening, widening, and rethinking creative processes.

Interestingly, the comics medium has consistently displayed these networks throughout its history, though constantly oscillating between them and opposite symbolical structures coalescing around "the myth of the solitary genius" (Stillinger). As Ahmed observes, "it is the figure of the singular author, and not a more holistic understanding of a potentially composite, fluid and fragmentary authorship, that reigns over the popular imagination, reinforced by both marketing strategies and critical discourses" (1). Yet this symbolic hegemony does not make it an absolute truth – on the contrary, I aim to point out how the cult of the single author is a remnant of an outdated set of socio-technological (and, consequently, legal) premises, and I argue for the need to renounce it in light of the configurations and dynamics engendered by digital software, platforms and infrastructures.

By analyzing networked authorship in postdigital comics, this article will thus connect comics with other media and artistic practices, foregrounding how the creation of contemporary media objects bears the mark of the digital environment, and advocating for a rethinking of contemporary authorship at large. But before we get to that point, we must take a step back.

2. Back to the Author: Networks and Author Theory

The concept of the author has long spanned literary (and media) history and has been approached with very overt polarizations, for historical and methodological reasons. The origins of this debate are quite known: the modern idea of the Romantic (or rather, industrial) author, creator, and owner of their works stems from, or at least thickens with, the invention of copyright in eighteenth-century Europe. Copyright was meant to prevent printers from reproducing unauthorized copies of a book without compensating its authors which was increasingly happening after the diffusion of the printing press.

Although a recent construct, the implications of this idea of the author were already heavily contested throughout the twentieth century; nonetheless, the concept is still quite alive nowadays. As Gray and Johnson observe, "whether we care about art or industry, creation or reception, production or consumption, text or theory, culture or aesthetics, or all of the above, the author naggingly reappears as a problem to be solved" (5). Indeed, while the post-structuralist legacy insists that the author is irrelevant, there are several reasons for its survival, primarily related to its function of limiting the proliferation of texts (Foucault): authorship is "about control, power, and the management of meaning and of people as much as it is about creativity and innovation" (Gray and Johnson 4). Moreover, the author function "matters [...] in the contexts of literary evaluation, interpretation, and stylistic attribution [...] legally and morally" (Meskin 19).[4] Also, the author

has consistently returned as a flesh-and-blood person in an ethical perspective, notably linked to the autobiographical pact (Lejeune) and to the ethical stance authors represent and embody at a time when marginalized identities reclaim spaces for artistic and personal expression: as such, the author returns "as a historical, political, national, social, gendered and sexed being" (Busse 56). In this sense, the analytical category of 'author' shows all its relevance: considering the author is the only way to overcome the paradigm of male, white, straight, cis, Western, bourgeois creators.

In sum, authorship matters in at least three different senses: as the ordering function and symbol of an industrial production apparatus, with the author traditionally subsuming the plurality of actors; as the overarching tension of the dynamics of participatory creation and interpretation; and as the entity in charge of the material and immaterial components subsumed in the agency of the act of creation. Yet, as anticipated, digital culture has eroded most prototypical configurations of authorship (see Murray 2018; 2019). One of the most evident reasons is the fact that many postdigital works are texts in the making (Gray 94), a process that does not necessarily end with a print publication. Another is the pluralization of human and non-human creative figures that the digital has propelled, which poses new problems concerning the classic ideas of creativity and intellectual property. However, few of these processes were unheard of before the digital turn; on the contrary, as Jonathan Gray reminds us,

> Nothing has a single author […] acts of authorship cannot be located in any one time or place, as instead they are always a process that occurs over time and across space. […] any text is always open, never concluded or complete, and thus any notion of authorship based on the assumption that the text has already been created is a problematic one. Instead, the text will continue to happen, requiring us to ask when it happens and who are the individuals, teams, and/or communities who are active in its creation at those moments (Gray 93, 107).

Gray thus advocates for a deferral from the question of 'who' to the questions of 'when' and 'how,' and for a reframing of the idea of single author to that of "clusters of authorship" in ever-changing flux, to foreground how authority is differently "managed, distributed, hoarded, and shared […] challenged, taken away, and contested" (108).

To map the plurality of authorial figures and consider non-human actors and their impact on production, this article proposes the idea of networks rather than clusters, stressing the spatial articulation more than the temporal. This owes to Bruno Latour's Actor/Network Theory (for applications of ANT to comics, see Stein; Etter) and Hayles' ideas of "cognitive assemblages" and "cognitive nonconscious" (2016; 2017; 2021). I believe that the network framework is more apt to deal with the dynamics of digital culture than other models established in literary studies, such

as Robert Darnton's idea of the "communication circuit", which frames the figures that mediate the life of books. While highly effective in describing book culture in modern France, and although having been updated and applied, amongst other objects, to webcomics (Benatti), one shortcoming of Darnton's perspective is that it concerns the post-object life of a finite text, focusing on what happens from the author onward, rather than everything that lies behind the process of creation. Similarly, I am advocating for a different positioning of the barriers between creation and reception than the one Henry Jenkins described through the figure of the *prosumer* (2006a; 2006b). Jenkins' ideas have been hugely influential in the study of fandom and participatory cultures, yet 'prosumer' identifies a type of contributor in a separate (and hierarchically inferior) position from the idea of author. Although some reworkings of Jenkins' framework – for example, Bruns' (2013) argument that a shift happened from *prosumption* to *produsage* – stress the agency of creators and the increased pluralization and de-hierarchizing of collective creation, they do assign to these figures a separated role from the author's. Instead, I aim to place these actors *within* the aegis of authorship. To do so, it is perhaps necessary to take another step back.

3. Is There an Author in These Comics? Comics Authorship as a Provocation to Author Theory

If authorship is a key entry point into examining how media culture works (Gray and Johnson)[5], comics are, in turn, an enticing object for such an investigation because, as Hatfield remarks, they offer "a unique ensemble of elements, few or none of which is actually unique to comics by itself. The combination is distinctive; the ingredients, though, are shared by other forms and traditions" (qtd. in Mitchell 239). Indeed, comics stand at the intersection of narrative and visual culture, borrowing practices, symbolic apparatuses, and production structures from other media (first and foremost, literature and cinema).

Nonetheless, comics theory has never reached a consensus on problematic or fluid notions such as authorship (Mitchell). This has repercussions on other concepts, such as those of style (Baetens and Frey) and graphiation (Marion), which are particularly relevant when considering practices of reuse and remixing (Crucifix). As Adrielle Mitchell states, "'authorship' is a slippery, polyvalent term no matter which medium you examine, but the medium of comics offers unique definitional challenges due to its remarkable diversity of structure, means of production, means of distribution, format, material, and number of creators" (239). Although some scholars have theoretically engaged with the pluralistic nature of comics authorship (Ahmed; Etter; Stein), most focus on reconstructing, from a philological perspective, the work of individual authors – whose cult is indeed very much alive in the practices surrounding comics, much on the model of film auteurism.

This reluctance to deal with the implications of the author function has meant that comics occupy a somewhat isolated position in transmedial theories that analyze authorship. Indeed, comics theory has largely integrated research on the active role of readers, participatory cultures, transmedia configurations, and so on. Yet, the dialectic between individual agency and its ramifications in a network of human (colorists, inkers, letterers, editors, and so on) and non-human (pens and brushes, graphics tablets, photo editing software, publishing platforms, etc.) actors is crucial for conceptualizing such elusive concepts. Moreover, although comics have showcased insightful mechanisms and strategies that often transferred to other media, their theorization has only partially contributed to adding perspectives to scholarship in those fields.

To establish a baseline of how comics authorship fluctuates and make the idea of networked authorship more tangible, I will thus sketch a condensed media archeological survey (Huhtamo and Parikka; Parikka) of the mechanisms of authorship in US comics,[6] setting the premises to observe the effects of the digital turn. I will isolate key moments from the medium's birth to contemporary times, relating them to configurations of its productive apparatus and the active role that comics audiences have played throughout the medium's history.

As said, since their birth, comics have displayed peculiar and heterogeneous configurations of authorship, which differentiates them from contiguous media and practices: the histories of literature and art in the modern era are paradigmatic in showcasing single authors; conversely, cinema settled on collective structures of creation based on a division of roles (screenwriter, director, cinematographer, and so on) that recuperated the author's aura by channeling it towards the figure of the director (although it does not refer explicitly to the idea of aura, see Grant on the role of *auteurs* in film authorship), and TV did the same with screenwriters/showrunners. Comics, instead, have experienced cycles of contraction and expansion of the authorial figure, oscillating between individuality and plurality, in the dual directions of collaboration and participation.

While the medium originated paradigmatically at the hands of single authors (creators and drawers of their works), as soon as comics began to be serialized, they strained ideas of authorship in highly peculiar ways.[7] A notable example is the Yellow Kid copyright controversy, involving one of the most famous early comics characters (the eponymous Yellow Kid, a poor boy living in a slum alley of New York City) and resulting in simultaneous and concurrent publication of the comic at the hands of Richard Felton Outcault, its creator, in the pages of William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal American* (since 1896), and those of George Luks, another artist, in the pages of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, which claimed copyright because Outcault initiated the series there in 1895 (see Meyer). Copyright issues stabilized in the 1920s with the rise of comics syndication (see Gordon). Distinct professional figures (writers, illustrators, colorists, and so on) emerged, enabling the rhythms required to create serial comics through

an industrial division of labor based on a more or less anonymous network of co-creators. Besides pluralizing the figures involved in their production, serial comics also foregrounded the interaction with their readers through the *dispositif* of the letter columns. Despite the columns' nature as hierarchical spaces, they offered readers a place to initiate dialogues with the authors, explicitly asking for changes to existing story arcs that were often incorporated in the comics (Gardner 2012).

This configuration remained paradigmatic for a long time. Not coincidentally, after unbounded experimentation, in this period the narrative and visual features of comics became standardized, consolidating their themes, imaginaries, formats, and practices, following a path that differentiated them from other national traditions (with which, nonetheless, an intense series of exchanges and mutual influences that eventually led to a convergence continued to take place). From the late 1960s onward, independent/underground comics foregrounded autobiographical themes and coalesced around the idea of countercultural *auteurs*, who would become the paradigm in the graphic novel format (Baetens and Frey). Yet single authors of underground comics coexisted with the cases where (as for Pekar in the autobiographical *American Splendor* series) one writer would coordinate many illustrators; the birth and affirmation of the graphic novel coexisted with the renaissance of superhero comics (with cult writers such as Moore or Miller absorbing the symbolic capital of collective authorship), opening to a multifaceted continuum of configurations (on this topic, see Williams and Lyons). While this dialectic was mirrored by an oscillation between the serial form and the book, from the late 1990s, a porous distinction can be drawn between (prototypical) single-authored graphic novels and (prototypically) tailored serial comics (Baetens and Frey).

4. Containing Multitudes: Postdigital Comics and Authorship

This relatively stable model has been questioned anew by the digital turn, through a renewal of practices of collective authorship and the unfolding of new distributed forms of creation, involving both human and non-human actors.

The digital turn showcases the convergence of numerous kinds of authorship across contemporary media: algorithmic, combinatorial, or random processes of creation that spread through the spheres of art and literature; experiences of collective writing whose unprecedented global reach was made possible by the Internet; the intensification and aggregation of practices of participation and fanfiction; communities coalescing around authors that voice their instances and claims; and production apparatuses that require a plurality of (creative, visual, technical) skills scattered across a multitude of figures. Most of these works are characterized by an inherent "processurality" (Ensslin 34), existing in various forms at different moments in their becoming, though resulting in diverse outcomes: texts

that do not aim to be published in print, serial narratives in the making (on and offline), works that only unstably materialize (e.g., the print-on-demand format), and the double-lived texts that long exist digitally, but only acquire a stable form once printed, often coexisting and overlapping with their digital incarnation. Although most of these works still aim for a final printed form, they generally reach it as the final step following an online serialized publication, which allows audiences to build and consolidate their loyalty, a social capital that the artists can leverage when entering the established dynamics of the publishing field (Busi Rizzi and Mandolini). This seriality allows creators to receive and incorporate in their works valuable information both in terms of feedback on what had already been done and concerning the audience's desires and hopes for future developments. All those *processural* texts are thus shaped by a multitude of figures participating in their meaning at different stages and with different intensities.

Postdigital comics hence offer a map of, and a reflection on, the practices that are most notably reshaping and challenging the traditional idea of authorship through the media. As suggested, I propose distinguishing between (a) 'collective' and 'distributed' authorship. The first designs forms of creation that maintain some hierarchy or core in the distribution of authorial roles. They result from the implications and repercussions of the digital on (a1) collaborative and (a2) participatory processes of creation. 'Distributed authorship' (b) instead encompasses forms that have looser hierarchies, or no core at all (rather stemming from a disseminated path that may or may not allow establishing its origin); I divide it into (b1) algorithmic creation (where a significant share of the creation is computational, prototypically employing generative AIs), and (b2) rhizomatic creation – scattered co-authorship radically pluralizing the processes of ideation and circulation of texts, as in the case of memes or in multi-authored narrative ecosystems.

5. Collective Authorship: Renewed Practices, Productive Structures, and Representation Instances

Within collective authorship (a), I propose distinguishing between collaborative and participatory practices. Those that I consider as renewed *collaborative* practices (a1) of comics creation mainly concern the new hybrid forms of digital comics experimenting with format, multimodality, and interactivity.[8] These comics call for technical skills requiring novel digital literacies (e.g., animation, programming, user interface design, web development), and their authorship can be negotiated in very different ways. I will briefly consider two cases that show, in different ways, cracks in the figure of the single author: the tablet and smartphone apps *Phallaina* (2016, Android and iOS, formerly a website) and *Florence* (2018, Android, iOS and PC).

Phallaina is a fascinating example in this context for three reasons: the work is labeled and marketed as a comic; it is attributed to a single author, Marietta Ren,

with the support of the Small Bang studio and France Télévisions – Nouvelles Écritures, whose site hosted the non-app version of the comic, and the production team is entirely French. In truth, *Phallaina* is not exhausted by the idea of 'comic': it is a "digital graphic novel" (Ren) in the form of a long, uninterrupted horizontal progression of black and white hand drawings, meant to be read on mobile supports. The story, punctuated by a geolocalized soundtrack and parallax effects, progresses when users actively scroll right (hence the French label of *bande défilée*, which roughly translates into "scroll comic"). *Phallaina* is thus an object that enlivens different affordances and requires various types of design expertise to be created. Although the discourse on *Phallaina* frames it as single-authored (as befits self-contained, intimate comics narratives, prototypically *auteur* material), merely assisted by two industrial, collective entities, one can easily retrace its main co-creators: creative director (Pierre Cattan), executive producer (Alexandrine Stehelin), assistant director (Martin Bessin), sound designer (Côme Jalibert), engine developer (Christophe da Silva), and animator (Julien Baret). They are joined by the figures who created the site (working for France Télévisions – Nouvelles Écritures) and The Oïkos agency, which was responsible for creating an adaptation in the form of a fresco installation, exhibited at the Angoulême International Comics Festival in 2016.[9] Rather than the solitary comics author, we are thus witnessing a collective authorial team that primarily distribute their labor according to technical skills. However, as a recent article by Mark Singer reminds us, to think of a clear separation of creative roles is naïve to say the least, because ideas and constraints coming from the various figures and stages of creation are always integrated in the course of a work's realization. Moreover, *Phallaina*'s instability in authorship is mirrored by its instability in terms of market placement and profitability, which suggests considering experimental digital comics as a "medium of attraction," "unassimilated, interdisciplinary, seamed, participatory" objects (Rouse 100), (still) in search of a consolidated set of affordances and features to settle among mainstream consumption.

In this sense, it may be interesting to see *Phallaina* dialoguing with *Florence*, another narrative app, this time marketed as a video game adopting the comic form[10]. Through twenty chapters, *Florence* tells the intimate, minimal story of its eponymous protagonist. One at a time, vertical rectangular panels (digitally hand-drawn, mostly wordless) occupy the screen, alternating with inset panels. To progress, the reader/user must perform apparently trivial actions, such as rearranging diegetic objects (which nonetheless aim to mirror the protagonist's emotional state), and tapping on the arrow that emerges after each sequence concludes, unfolding a slide movement to the next panel, as if scrolling. While *Florence* presents itself as a hybrid object having much in common with comics, it was marketed as a video game and credited to the Mountains Studio (developer) in collaboration with Annapurna Interactive (publisher). This entails a different prototypical configuration of authorship, calling into play inherently plural structures. In principle, the creative part behind a video

game ultimately rests in the hand of the developer, which suggests attributing authorship to the Mountains Studio team: creative director (Ken Wong), producer (Kamina Vincent), lead programmer (Tony Cocoluzzi), programmer (Sam Crisp), composer (Kevin Penkin).[11] As it often happens with video games, though, the authorial figure in the general discourse about the app is largely absorbed by the publishing company: Mountain Studio is mentioned less often than Annapurna, and the names of the specific people working on *Florence* (similarly to those working on the technical aspects of *Phallaina*) are rarely reported. Surely, in theory, Annapurna, being the publisher, did not partake in *Florence*'s creative process:

> [b]eyond funding, Annapurna offers the full range of support expected of a publisher, which could be summarized as *everything other than making the game*. Dealing with digital distributors, porting to different platforms, and quality assurance – all crucial but grueling parts of the development process – are taken on by the publisher (Parker, 153, my italics).

Nonetheless, keeping Annapurna out of *Florence*'s networked authorship seems dismissive for two reasons. First, because, having published and produced over the years praised indie video games (e.g., *What Remains of Edith Finch*, 2017) and animated films (the Netflix adaptation of *Nimona*, 2023), Annapurna has a distinct "curatorial aesthetic" (Parker 138). Second, because this aesthetic is not only a matter of homogenously choosing the video games to publish; instead, "business and creative decisions are informed by Annapurna's extensive industry experience and knowledge" while still "ultimately rest[ing] in the hands of developers" (Parker 136). This type of contribution can only be placed outside of authorship if we adopt the single author model; but it clearly has to be considered part of a structure of networked authorship from the perspective of this article.

In the face of two similar storytelling strategies, the two works thus adopt two diverse positionings (*Phallaina* as a comic, *Florence* as a video game), enacting different, yet similiar opacifications of the authorial figure: in the name of the aura of the *auteur*, the discourse around *Phallaina* isolates Ren from the technical team that, it is implied, merely translated her idea of a comic into a digital hybrid; the discourse concerning *Florence*, instead leaning on the conventions of its medium of choice, credits the team in charge of development, yet foregrounds its publisher. Ultimately, both cases can be reframed considering the collective, networked structuring of their authorship.

Incidentally, *Phallaina* is a clear example of another dynamic concerning postdigital comics. As mentioned, the creative team is entirely French. Nonetheless, one of the preliminary options the app's game-like interface offers is choosing language between French and English. On the one hand, this is interesting because the figure of the translator is traditionally a silenced part of co-authorship – in *Phallaina*, one of the few persons whose name is not explicitly credited. On the other hand,

Figure 2 and 3. The videogame-like configuration of *Phallaina*'s interface, and one comics-like screenshot from *Florence*'s gameplay.

it is interesting because bilingualism is not an uncommon feature in these objects: digital comics from non-Anglophone contexts, especially more experimental ones, consistently offer a second language option (almost always English). This means that a constellation of objects from across the world leverages digital affordances to present narratives that are at once global and local, designed to intercept a broader audience than their national one, thus circumventing the slower processes of rights acquisition and translation that characterize the institutionalized publishing apparatus. Far from being a trivial difference, this possibility enshrines a crucial symbolic change, in which the transition to the *lingua franca* of the contemporary (postdigital) cultural market takes place before – and with the aim of – achieving notoriety, and not because of a success that has already occurred. This translates into a galaxy of English texts created by non-native speakers to reach a *glocal*, multicultural audience, holding together diverse imaginaries through the glue of Anglophony.

Changes in digital practices have similarly reconfigured *participatory* practices of creation (a2) by compressing their temporal dimension and expanding their spatial scope, allowing for immediate outreach to a much larger and geographically dispersed audience than before. Moreover, through digital platforms, participatory processes have forged a renewed, closer relationship between authors and audiences, which has become particularly salient in the case of minority identities. This is an evolution of what Skains has called the "demotic author": someone who participates in a community, eschewing the established top-down communication flow "in favor of publishing platforms that permit and encourage feedback and conversation, such as blogs, fanfiction communities, and social media" (2–3). Once such communities consolidate, practices of co-creation, participation, and funding may unlock; and thanks to the twofold relation of loyalty and identification these works weave with their audiences, they often become bestsellers.

Indeed, from the shift to platform economy (that is, particularly from 2010 on: Busi Rizzi 2023b) onward, not only new digital platforms hosting comics (Webtoon, Tapas, and so on) have emerged as driving forces, publishing at rates and in ways previously only possible to major comics studios. Instead, comics authors have leveraged funding platforms (Kickstarter, Patreon, etc.) to reconfigure power dynamics and symbolic configuration within the publishing field. Social media platforms have thus become a crucial gateway for the spread and success of comics, solidifying an author's reputation and enabling them smooth transitions to print by virtue of their accumulated social capital (i.e., of their loyal fandom). In many cases, the work these authors create has a strong mandate of representation, dealing with minority and diversity issues, from feminism to critical race theory, from LGBT+ to broader political issues. This constitutes a growing body of comics production, where authors give voice to the communities that refer to them, interacting intensively via social media and often receiving economic support through crowdfunding. Thus, despite appealing to a rather classical concept of authorship – based on the "principles of originality, ownership, and ethical accountability" (Helle 117), these authors primarily incorporate the demands and wishes of their communities. This becomes a way to circumvent the status quo and impart a centrifugal thrust to the existing power dynamics of the medium's publishing apparatus, appropriating the symbolic capital (Bourdieu; see also Beaty and Woo) and the visibility that has been historically denied to those communities.

Two particularly salient examples are *Check, Please!* by Ngozi Ukazu (2013–) and *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman (2016–). Both works are young adult *Bildungsromans* centered on the homosexual romantic relationships of male teenagers: in the case of *Check, Please!*, Eric Bittle and Jack Zimmermann, during the four years the former spends at the fictional Samwell University in Massachusetts; in the case of *Heartstopper*, Charlie Spring and Nick Nelson, two students of the fictional Truham Grammar School in the UK. Ukazu's *Check, Please!* began as a webcomic in 2013, extensively using transmedial storytelling

(by creating real social accounts of the protagonist, and remediating the reading protocols of various social media platforms in the webcomic). In 2015, Ukazu launched a Kickstarter to publish the first print volume, which quickly obtained $74,000; in 2017, a second crowdfunding was launched to back up the second volume, grossing $400,000, one of the most successful Kickstarter campaigns concerning comics. Soon after, the rights to *Check, Please!* were bought by First Second Books, an imprint of Macmillan. Notably, both the digital and print formats were nominated for and won major comic book awards: Reuben, Harvey, and Eisner. Oseman's path is not radically different, though rather peculiar: she debuted at age 16 with a novel, *Solitaire* (2014), with HarperCollins. After its publication, Oseman decided to develop two secondary characters, Charlie and Nick, first through two e-book novellas and, in 2016, by releasing *Heartstopper* as a webcomic on Tumblr, Tapas, and (later) Webtoon. In 2018, Oseman started a Kickstarter campaign to finance a limited edition of the first print volume of the series. Shortly thereafter, she closed a deal with Hachette Children, which is publishing all the series volumes (whose rights, in turn, were purchased by See-Saw Films and adapted into a two-season live-action series distributed by Netflix: 2019, 2021).

The cases of Ukazu and Oseman tell us two things: first, the authors' mandate of representation with respect to the topics they cover need not be one of complete overlap. Ukazu is a black woman to whose sexual orientation we are not privy, and Oseman, also a woman, has professed to be an aromantic asexual; but both have been found credible, by their audience, as authors of the vicissitudes of male, white, queer teenagers. The second consideration concerns indeed the theme of LGBT+ relationships, which has historically been extremely marginal in the mainstream media landscape, but which is now gaining momentum precisely by following progressive paths of institutionalization such as those described here. When moving to established markets – print comics and, possibly, streaming services or film studios interested in buying and adapting their works – authors bring the social and symbolic capital acquired through their digital consolidation, using it to reach figures and audiences traditionally exclusive to the mainstream. As both cases show, the same publishing apparatus that would never have spontaneously deconstructed its own ideology becomes, in true neoliberal spirit, the first to welcome and foreground these themes in-house when they prove productive in economic terms – as evidenced by the rapidity with which both Ukazu and Oseman found a contract with two leading English-speaking publishers. Whether this is a path to conquering hegemony in a positive, Gramscian sense, or yet another demonstration of the ability of contemporary capitalism to neutralize and reabsorb all tensions and contradictions within itself, only time will tell.

6. Distributed Authorship: Decentralized Configurations, Scattered Creation, and Heterogeneous Styles

Technological progress and novel digital practices have, in the last years, further complexified the existing mediascape, giving rise to new types of distributed creation, which I propose to divide into 'algorithmic' and 'rhizomatic.'

I propose to call *rhizomatic* authorship a more radical declination of participatory practices. In this sense, fanfiction is not a fringe practice of authorship, but a relatively stable (and hierarchical) process of deriving new peripheral texts from a central hypotext. The novelty of rhizomatic authorship lies instead in works growing into different objects, often aleatorily, by decentralizing and resignifying original texts.

I want to start by considering a fringe case between this category and participatory authorship, which I have just discussed. The case in point is Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck* (2009–2016), which began as an already complex single-authored webcomic: vast, labyrinthine, multi-layered, featuring audio and animations, it was strongly indebted and inextricably linked to video games and Internet culture. Gradually, though, *Homestuck*'s storyworld further expanded into a participative narrative ecosystem – transmedially, originating videogames and books, and textually, incorporating a vast constellation of fantexts into its canon[12].

Since the beginning, Hussie requested and rewarded audience participation, in a highly dynamic relationship that resulted in a deep user interaction with the author and the story, whether creative, emotional, or hermeneutic. Exchanges were carried on through official forums and online polls and evolved into a constellation of fan websites devoted to complementing, expanding, and explaining the webcomic: *Homestuck*, especially in a post-object reading, would be barely comprehensible without its Wiki, Subreddit, Discord, and forums. Moreover, Hussie welcomed the fans' use of *Homestuck* as a template, allowing them to open to a novel (although affiliated) semiotic galaxy, wider than the original object. This encompasses thousands of *Homestuck*-related narrative and artistic contents hosted on existing sharing platforms (ArchiveOfOurOwn, DeviantArt, Tumblr, Livejournal, Fanfiction.net, and so on), and more on websites created and managed by the fan community, aggregating fan-made webcomics (MsPaintFanAdventures), fanart (MSPABooru), themed roleplaying (MxRP, Cherubplay, and Trollplay), an unofficial, parallel soundtrack (The CoolandNewMusicTeam), a social media (Gigapause) and a real-life version of the diegetic, fictional instant messaging app Pesterchum.

These practices have, through time, merged and hybridized canon and fanon. Growing collaborations ensued between Hussie and fan creators, many of whom progressively contributed to the official webcomic soundtrack and its animations. When Hussie founded the What Pumpkin Studios, many were co-opted into its

creative team, which, through a triumphal Kickstarter campaign grossing $2300000, produced two video games (*Hiweswap* I, 2017, and II, 2018) and two spinoffs (the *Hiveswap Friendship Simulator*, 2018 and *Pesterquest*, 2019). Meanwhile, an official collective webcomic sequel entitled *Homestuck^2: Beyond Canon* debuted, while VIZ Media published the whole original comic as a six-volume paperback collection and *The Homestuck Epilogues*, a 640-page long, bifurcated prose story. This intricate network of objects sharing the same storyworld configures a nexus of distributed textualities rather than the prototypical model of transmedia narratives, consisting of a center expanding towards peripheral content. While the discourse concerning *Homestuck* still frames Hussie as its single author (a position he happily holds, having enacted over the years a fair amount of gatekeeping), its fantext prompts a decentralization that dismisses the hierarchizing idea of a core manned by the author, revealing instead a plurality of texts across media stemming from collective, participatory writing processes. The best model to account for the evolution of *Homestuck*, then, is that of "narrative ecosystems": open systems, distributed and disseminated, that may be produced by very different narrative instances (Innocenti and Pescatore 170), the initial core of which (e.g., setting and characters) was only partly designed in advance, allowing it to expand and change – even radically – in time.

Memes offer a more radical example of these decentralizing processes. I will consider here the example of *Batman slapping Robin* (or *My Parents Are Dead*), a single-panel image well-described by its name (see fig. 4). Although memes' formal structures and mechanisms of meaning are firmly inscribed in the language of comics, I do not want to suggest that all memes are comics – on the contrary, most of them evidently overflow beyond the field. *Some*, however, are based on templates in the form of comics, which is particularly salient when considering authorship.

The *Batman slapping Robin* panel originates with a story entitled "The Clash of Cape and Cowl! (Part I)", featured in DC's *World's Finest Comics*, n. 153 (1965). *World's Finest Comics* was an anthology series that mostly featured spinoff, team-up adventures of Batman and Superman; in this story, set in an alternate reality, Batman believes that Superboy (and consequently Superman) is responsible for his father's death. Based on information held on the Comics Grand Database[13] – in another instance of opacification of the author, the original issue does not list contributors – the story was written by Edmond Hamilton, penciled by Curt Swan, and inked by George Klein (colorist and letterer are unknown); Mort Weisinger was the executive editor, and Edward Nelson Bridwell his assistant. The story has been translated into several languages and reprinted in the US several times – most notably, in the *Showcase Presents: World's Finest* series (n. 3, 2010), in *DC's Greatest Imaginary Stories* (n. 2, 2010), and *Batman and Superman in World's Finest: The Silver Age Omnibus* (n. 2, 2019) – by uncredited translators.

Although it may be that several other reprints have not been indexed so far, it is curious to note how this little-known story suddenly regained popularity

and reprints in the 2010s. The explanation lies, in fact, in the parallel path of the *Batman slapping Robin* meme, which started in 2008, when it was posted on the SFWChan website. Compared to the comic panel, the meme displays an altered text, obtaining an easy (but effective) punchline. The panel was reblogged several times, mostly without modification, on Tumblr and other platforms until, in 2009, the Batman Comic Macro Generator website was launched, allowing customizing the speech bubbles in the panel. Since then, the meme has been featured on several websites, aggregating variations at the hands of individual users: most notably, the *Batman Slaps Robin Comic* Facebook page, created in 2010, the *Batman Slapping Robin* Quickmeme page, and the Subreddit /rBatmanSlap, both launched in 2012.

Figure 4. A short genealogy of *Batman slapping Robin*: the original comics panel, the original meme, and a variation by the author of this article through the Imgflip meme generator.[14]

A spontaneous generative process of the Internet (Wiggins), memes, far from being contained by social networks and aggregators, reverberate and spread along all channels and platforms, quickly losing all direct filiation towards the original material, in a process that reassigns new, continuously renegotiated meanings to its object. *Batman slapping Robin* is thus, at the same time, a cultural object that carries *in nuce* the authorship that initially generated it (here Gray's idea of temporal clusters of authorship returns), the many authorial entities that continuously rewrite its dialogues, and its self-standing structure or matrix of signification (here, the idea of assemblage is again salient), based as much on the multimodal charge of the image itself (one character slapping another character), as on the further meaning that real-life encyclopedias activate. Provided that one knows something about the two characters, indeed, every time we see the panel, even in isolation, we see Batman slapping Robin, an unusual gesture that does not characterize the normal relationship between the two good-willing superheroes – usually based on family-like dynamics, although to some extent authoritarian and asymmetrical, and with more than a hint of sexual tension. The scene grafts onto it an act of unrestrained violence, implying an uncontrollable outburst, born of an unexpected

harsh contrast. All authorial entities – original creators, final creators, and *creative structure/matrix* – therefore partake in decentralizing and scattering the panel's very signification and authorship.

This leads to my last category, *algorithmic* creation. While pointing, to a certain extent, to the increased role of digital mediations in contemporary comics creation at large (comics industrial apparatus has indeed digitized most of its creation and distribution phases, aiming at shorter, more controllable processes), I will focus on comics made with AI. In these cases, artificial intelligence co-participates in the creative process, responding in a way only partially predictable and controllable to the prompts it receives and the material through which it is trained. Although evolving frantically, generative AI outputs are still, to some extent, uncontrollable and glitchy, their use in sequential narratives subverts and loosens classical narrative structures, plot progressions, and styles (Etter), pointing toward a broader rethinking of established aesthetic categories and foregrounding a centrifugal movement toward less prototypical types of comics.

As mentioned several times, technology and materiality significantly intersect with authorship and style. Philippe Marion influentially subsumed under the term 'graphiation' the entanglement of creative forces that emerges in comics creation from a combination of intentional preferences, material constraints, and unconscious intuitions. According to Marion, graphiation owes both to singular, distinctive characteristics, and socialized, learned choices. Graphiation thus reflects how "the hand, the body, in short, the whole personality of an artist is visible in the way he or she gives a visual representation of a certain object, character, setting or event" (Baetens and Frey 132). In this sense, it is both a "socialized act involving many codes and constraints" and "the reflection of a personality, a body or an unconscious" (Baetens 152) that bears the trace of the chosen tools, supports, and techniques – in short, of its materiality.

In AI-generated comics, original art is synthetically created by computational models based on neural networks trained on text/image pairings (Busi Rizzi 2023a; Wilde; Wilde et al.). Some systems (in particular GANs, generative adversarial networks) can be used locally and trained on specific datasets; but in the case of (the current TTIs [text-to-image]) AI, which require an amount of computing power for the training process currently beyond the reach of most actors, vast amounts of data are scraped from the Internet and processed to couple images with descriptions. The output images originating from AI's latent spaces are not drawn or collaged, but created from scratch from transformative processes based on the memory of vectorialized representations of this training data, which could be considered an example of synthetic graphiation. Hence, in itself, the process that generative AI uses, which some view as contradictory to individual creativity (and subsequently, authorship), refers to a new phase of the networked memory that has always characterized art creation. Indeed, art has always relied on existing works, authors, and schools to create novelty,

in "[a continous dialogue] between the past and the present, with each new movement or style emerging as a response and a consequence to what came before, at the crossroads between individual and collective style, originality and reuse" (Busi Rizzi 2023a, 240; see also Lamerichs). At the same time, and while reusing has always been part of fan tactics concerning the free sharing, reproduction, and remix of existing material, the creation process of generative AI stems from an extractivist logic that commodifies the practices through which common users exploit the Web – by browsing, downloading, appropriating, and recirculating the immense material it hosts (Busi Rizzi 2023a). This clearly lies behind existing users' practices of remix and creation of derivative works.[15] In this sense, AI-generated images foreground the way new works and individual authors are always connected to existing works and a multitude of other creators; every output by a generative AI carries within it the potential inscription and trace of all the previously existing works through which the AI was trained – and, at the same time, of none specifically.

The generative mechanism questions the concept of the author differently from the examples seen so far, forcing us to ask what makes an author *an author*. Historically, art and literature follow the principle that Leah Henrickson called the "hermeneutic contract": "readers believe that authors want them to be interested in" and "to understand their texts" (4). Henrickson brings attention to the way intention resurfaces through an unresolved point of what William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley notoriously dismissed as "the intentional fallacy": while we cannot know the exact intention behind a work, we nonetheless believe by default that there must be one, or that if it is lacking (as in the case of avant-garde techniques appealing to randomized processes of creation) the lack itself is intentional, pointing to and reflecting on its own absence. This principle does not fully apply to the process of synthetic generation of artworks; yet, it is still early to say whether and how AI-made art will eventually find a way to align to these criteria – interest and understandability – or cause a rethinking of these premises.

Additionally, generative AIs challenge authorship as they seem quite versed in replicating the style of specific artists. Most illustrators try to oppose this by leveraging copyright on training data, but what appears to be a defense mechanism against the unauthorized use of online material may become a trap for individual artists if they do not fully own the reproduction rights to their work. The mechanism could indeed potentially be used not only by the artists themselves, but by all other stakeholders (publishers, online platforms) who own rights to their work, allowing for third-party exploitation of their art. The process seems thus capable of leading to paroxysm, rather than eroding the industrial production chain and the current creative economy of comics as we know it, concentrating the market in the hands of a few actors.

Moreover, when considering the AI-generated graphic novels mentioned in the opening of this article (*Fastwalkers* by Manouach, *The Abolition of Man* by

Grubaugh, and *Prompt. Conversations with AI* by Dave McKean), it stands out that their human creators – a conceptual artist, a painter, and an experimental visual storyteller – are backed up by a consistent cultural capital, which distinctly positions their works. This draws attention to the uneven distribution of computation, connectivity, cultural and economic resources that are required not only to create and train these AIs, but even merely to use them. In this sense, while one can opine that the ability of generative AI to enable anyone to create visual works is a profound democratization of the creative process of comics, it is also, in some ways, a technical and political opacification of the asymmetries of this process.

Figure 5. A comic portraying a solitary author at his desk, in the style of Adrian Tomine (realized by the author with Midjourney.).

Certainly, though, generative AIs are new actors – somewhere between a tool and a creator (Bolter) – participating in a new type of networked authorship. I argue that recognizing this status is a fundamental step in advocating for a rethinking of the legal and economic framework regulating intellectual property and copyright to

prevent the system from hegemonically subsuming this technology, taking control of the whole field of art labor at the expense of viable conditions for creators.

7. Conclusions

This article has laid the groundwork for a conceptual reorganization of contemporary authorship, considering the mutations in the author function brought about by the postdigital condition.

In analyzing authorship and its postdigital trajectory by focusing on comics, the article suggested that the effects of the digital turn call for a rethinking of the very idea of author. This implies seeing authorship as a network of human and non-human actors, displaying the impact of postdigital practices through renewed configurations (involving technology-driven collective structures and intensified participatory dynamics) or new ones, multiplying and decentralizing the author figure through disseminated creation or computational processes.

The landscape sketched in this article calls for, on the one hand, further reflection on what these changes in the author's figure entail in terms of distinction (Bourdieu) and aura (Benjamin), and what the fallout might be for existing conformations of labor (Brienza and Johnston). On the other hand, it suggests that changes in themes, forms, and styles are ongoing, pointing to a loosening of narrative structures and a centrifugal drift of established aesthetic categories, dynamics which the article has only touched. Most objects discussed here are indeed increasingly unrealistic, glitchy or quirky, endlessly remixed and resignified, transmedially distributed, or medially hybrid. As always happens, formal changes eventually align with changes in authorship, reflecting new creative practices into new aesthetic configurations. These topics resonate in the contemporary media landscape and are gaining increased visibility in research, as demonstrated by the essays in this thematic issue. The hope is that the reconceptualization provided by this contribution will help to further explore these processes and changes.

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Notes

1 This work is supported by an FWO (Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek-Vlaanderen/Research Foundation – Flanders) senior postdoctoral fellowship (1284024N).

2 Roine and Piippo's understanding of assemblages is in turn clearly indebted to Hayles' influential idea of "cognitive assemblage" (2016). While diverging from these positions, this article nonetheless shares their stress on networks of creators, the human-technical entanglement that characterizes contemporary digital culture, and nonhuman agency.

3 While the term is still undergoing a semantic oscillation, most critical positions agree on the key role of digital technologies and practices, the link between 'postidigital' and complex networks of authorship, and the hybrid, often glitchy nature of postdigital objects. For different uses of the term 'postdigital' than the one discussed in this article, see Jandrić; Cascone and Jandrić; Cramer and Jandrić; and the other articles in this special issue.

4 Incidentally, the part about evaluation and interpretation designs (quite exactly) the authorial figure of which Roland Barthes was advocating the death in his 1968 essay.

5 While this contribution focuses on the medial implications of recent changes in the authorial function, much has been written on the role of transmedial authorship in relation to the diegesis of these texts. For a recent critical overview of those topics, see Thon.

6 Comics traditions worldwide differ, and so does the evolution of the author figure. Certainly, a transnational recognition would result in a different unfolding of the latter - but this falls outside the scope of this article.

7 These tensions traverse the very birth of US comics: see Gardner (2017).

8 For a taxonomy of digital comics and a discussion of their relation to print ones, see Busi Rizzi 2023b.

9 https://screendiver.com/directory/phallaina/.

10 On the continuum between comics and video games, see Backe; Goodbrey; Busi Rizzi (2024).

11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=xeeGa6a706c.

12 For an overview of the concept, see Innocenti and Pescatore; for an analysis of *Homestuck* as narrative ecosystem, see Busi Rizzi (2020).

13 https://www.comics.org/issue/19596/.

14 https://imgflip.com/memegenerator/Batman-Slapping-Robin.

15 While this process clearly calls into question the legality of reuse and the very availability of dataset images, this is too broad and ongoing a debate that will not be addressed here.