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*Flinders University*

**Shannon Sandford**

## ***“Loading memories...”: Deteriorating pasts and distant futures in Stuart Campbell’s *These Memories Won’t Last****

### Abstract:

The field of comics has undergone palpable shifts in print and digital publishing cultures, from newspaper strips and zines to hardbound graphic novels and works still emerging in the era of Web 2.0. Comics that leave behind the aesthetic trappings of print to embrace digital platforms and media are known variously as digital comics, download comics, hypercomics and webcomics. This paper adopts the term “webcomics” to denote a precise, hybrid medium combining the visual-verbal grammar of comics with the capacious potentials of digitality. Through the case study of *These Memories Won’t Last*, a webcomic by Australian artist and graphic designer Stuart Campbell (known by his pseudonym, Sutu), I aim to explore the ways Campbell engages sound, animation and other interactive elements alongside drawings that render the lived experiences of his grandfather, who suffers from late-stage dementia. This paper considers how webcomics might transform the stasis of word-and-image to explore and communicate subjects that sit on the outer edges of representation, such as memory, identity and trauma. It responds to a new generation of artists who harness digital technologies to expand and revise the comics form and considers the potential effects of this practice on creating, reading and interpreting life stories.

### Biographical note:

Shannon Sandford is a casual academic in the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Flinders University, South Australia. With research interests in graphic life narrative, new media, and visual cultures, her work explores the relationship between auto/biography and the increasingly mobile platforms, contexts and audiences of Web 2.0. She is currently investigating intersections between graphic representation and digital media through webcomics: an emerging and experimental medium that signals new contemporary practices of

self-display. Her work is published in *On\_Culture*, *TEXT*, *Textual Practice* and *Journal of Australian Studies* (forthcoming). She is affiliated with The Life Narrative Lab.

Keywords:

Webcomics, memory, trauma, life narrative, Stuart Campbell

## Introduction

The field of comics has undergone a palpable shift between print and digital publishing cultures, from periodicals and stapled magazines, newspaper strips and zines, to hardcover graphic novels and, more recently, the proliferating digital works emerging from the era of Web 2.0. Graphic works that leave behind the aesthetic trappings of print to embrace digital platforms and media are known variously as digital comics, download comics, hypercomics and webcomics, all of which signal different relationships with digital technologies, platforms and audiences. This paper adopts the term "webcomics" to denote a precise, hybrid medium combining the visual-verbal grammar of comics with the capacious potentials of digitality to expand and transform the mode and materiality of comics. Webcomics are a contentious subject among comics theorists and practitioners: while much scholarship has centred on fan practices, financial models of monetisation (e.g. Kickstarter and Patreon) and various modes of distribution, little engages with notions of hybridity, multimodality, or enhancement that lie at the crux of their formal experimentation.

A comprehensive history of webcomics is beyond the scope of this paper (see Garrity, 2011); however, it is important to ground the contexts and concepts later introduced with a precise definition of the medium. A recent glossary of critical concepts used in the Anglophone study of comics cites webcomics as:

more than just digitised scans – webcomics are structurally ADAPTED to the browser window and they make use of the inherent elements of a web page in order to enrich their presentation. They are often SERIALISED, much like NEWSPAPER STRIPS, but their digital nature allows them to be accessed and ARCHIVED much more conveniently. (Batinić, 2022, p. 350)

Here, comics scholar Josip Batinić articulates two important functions of webcomics – their *adaptation* to the screen and *enrichment* via the web page – that set clear terms for defining webcomics against competing forms of digital or digitised comics. Previous trends in digital comics publication include motion comics, a form manipulating the static art of comic books through paper-cut animation (Smith 2015), and layered panel digital comics known variously as Infinite and De Campi comics, in which a continuous narrative is staged in a single panel and enacted through changing speech balloons, characters and images (Johnston 2013). Importantly, what underpins Batinić's definition is the understanding that webcomics are not

merely traditional print comics copied and pasted into web browsers, but rather, works that incorporate the affordances, platforms and ecologies of the digital sphere into their very fabrication. In other words, webcomics function explicitly in the digital environment and use digital technologies which mix and crossover with properties of new media in order to push the limits of visual-verbal expression.

Drawing on the ways "digital technology offers new avenues of aesthetic experimentation" (Fenty et al., 2004), this paper considers what new media might offer the future of the graphic form. It takes a critical approach to the study of webcomics as a specific, rhetorical and discursive medium that reflects the shifting boundaries between graphic texts and digital modalities, centring multimodality as a key term of inquiry. Traditional print comics are of course always multimodal, that is, "comprised not only of linguistic elements, but also some combination of visual, audio (as represented visually), gestural, and spatial elements" (Jacobs, 2014). However, multimodality in webcomics signals a different set of possibilities for narratives informed by the complexities of the digital environment. For Dale Jacobs (2014), "the medium allows the potential for a greater degree of dialogue through the interactivity that can be included within the texts themselves ... the platform itself can be used in many different ways than those that are possible in print form". Jacobs's argument considers how webcomics, rooted in the basic structure of print comics, may expand, remix and/or adapt its form using the affordances of digital media such as animation, sound and motion.

Published in 2015, the webcomic *These Memories Won't Last* by Australian artist and graphic designer Stu Campbell (known by his pseudonym, Sutu) focusses on the lived experiences of his grandfather, Ladislav Szoke, a World War II veteran from former Czechoslovakia now residing in Australia. Accompanied by a soundtrack written by sound designer, Lhasa Mencur, and with programming assistance from Vitaliy Shirokiy, Campbell engages music, sound, animation and moving images to call attention to the particularity of digital technologies for creating powerful narratives grounded in the experimental literacies of the webcomics medium. Its structural outlay draws from the more recent mode of Vertical Scroll Comics or WebToons (named after the dominant South Korean publisher/platform which has largely popularised the form) that have rapidly emerged as a dominant mode for digital comics. *These Memories* articulates a short, auto/biographical narrative that recounts Szoke's battle with dementia, a condition that has permanently altered his perception of time and caused psychotic episodes during which traumatic flashbacks enmesh with the present day. By interspersing commentary of his grandfather's decline with humorous anecdotes from his childhood, Campbell's narration delicately maps the expanse of Szoke's life to poignantly reflect on memory and its loss.

Campbell is well-known as a webcomics creator who "uses art and technology in new ways to tell stories" (n.d.). His previous projects are lengthy, immersive and hyperrealistic virtual- and augmented-reality comics whose stories trade on the tropes of cyberpunk, space opera and fantasy genres [1]. *These Memories*, perhaps less complex in comparison, is one of Campbell's most acclaimed – in 2016, it was nominated for an Eisner Award in the category of Best Webcomic/Digital Comic [2]. While the webcomic draws from features of analogue comics –

such as the page, panel and gutter – in its composition, the addition of digital technologies pushes at the graphic form and ultimately subverts common practices of reading. The rhetorical and narrative effect of this work reflects on the fragile nature of memory: as readers scroll through the webcomic, words and images gradually fade into a hazy background. This “deterioration”, in Campbell’s words, attempts to emulate his grandfather’s memories and, in a broader sense, the haunting inevitability of his disease:

this mechanism creates a sense of urgency to read the story before time runs out. This format also corresponds to my grandpa’s predicament, every day he is falling deeper into dementia and all his memories are becoming lost. (as cited in Starr, 2016)

In this way, *These Memories* oscillates around the limits of expression and form, using a range of digital devices to interpret the past and signal the layers and complications of memory and reality. As a webcomic grounded in the rich multimodality of digital technologies and in complex storytelling subjects, it generates considerable insight around the medium-specificity of comics and the limits of self-representation. As I have argued elsewhere, webcomics which parse the possibilities and complexities of lived experience through their unique visual-verbal-digital idiom offer an exploratory and experimental new medium of life narrative (Sandford, 2021). While webcomics are by no means confined to auto/biography – indeed, the medium has proliferated in fictional genres including young adult, speculative, and fantasy – this paper pays attention to the ways life narrative in particular has been adapted to this medium. As such, the following draws from the disciplines of comics studies, new media studies and Life Narrative studies to reflect on the powerful visual narratives activated by webcomics as well as the practices of self-display mobilised by digital technologies.

This paper investigates how webcomics transform the stasis of word-and-image to explore and communicate subjects that sit on the outer edges of representation, such as memory, identity and trauma. Responding to a new generation of artists who harness digital media and Web 2.0 to expand and revise the comics form, it considers the potential effects of this practice on creating, reading and interpreting life stories. Analysing webcomics, in contrast to print comics, means holding awareness for what new media theorist Collin Brooke calls “the move from text to interface” (2009, p. 23), a transition that also captures the discursive forms of life narrative (historically marked by written auto/biographies) that now converge with the solipsistic, digital environment. As Jakob Dittmar points out, “digitally transmitted comics that are shown on-screen but are not supposed to be printed out can use additional layers of narrations apart from sequential juxtaposed images and texts” (2012, p. 88). These texts offer a unique set of possibilities not available in print comic strips or graphic narratives, possibilities that might be used to explore questions about the practices and aesthetics of self-representation in the digital domain: for instance, how do digital technologies call attention to the process of meaning-making? How can multimodality frame the project of re-telling or re-constructing the past?

## Interrogating "living connections": Trauma, memory and postmemory

Comics are a particularly useful vehicle for representing, imagining and interrogating memory: as Golnar Nabizadeh explains, "comics enact the relationship between storytelling and time so that the present speaks back to, and carries traces of the past in the words and images" (2019, p. 4). Nabizadeh recalls the basic structure of the three-panel strip to illustrate how comics condense and progress through time: perceived in their entirety (and in the Western tradition of left-to-right), the relationship between each panel helps enact a movement from past and present towards the future (p. 4). If memory studies addresses the question of how individuals and communities make sense of the past (Erll, 2008, p. 5), comics offers multiple ways in which the interstices between distinct moments in time can be exposed and explored. As Hillary Chute argues, "[a] form that turns 'time into space' through frames on the page, comics inclines itself to the layered, complex, and fragmented speech acts that constitute testimony" (2016, p. 250). Chute applies this analysis to documentary comics that depict traumatic histories and happenings of war, atrocity and genocide – themes also shared by Campbell's work, which visualises trauma's close ties to memory through its tenuous, mediated representation of Ladislav Szoke's post-traumatic flashbacks.

One can hardly discuss autobiographical approaches to memory, trauma and representation without highlighting Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a Holocaust survivor memoir that demonstrated the literary value of comics for exploring complex, serious issues. In *MetaMaus*, the behind-the-scenes story of his signature work, Spiegelman posits comics as a process of "choices being made, of finding what one can tell, and what can reveal, and what one can reveal beyond what one knows one is revealing" (2011, p. 73). Spiegelman's emphasis on hidden links and revelations is suggestive of the ways comics can explore and confront limits in memory by reconstructing lived and imagined experiences, or conscious and unconscious memories, in ways that accommodate narratives of trauma. Memory and trauma are often indivisible forces in autobiographical comics, perhaps because, as Joanne Pettitt argues, "[t]he use of images ... destabilises the hegemony of language" (2018, p. 174) by experimenting with the paradox of representing that which has been culturally inscribed as unrepresentable, spectral, or liminal. Graphic works that centre experiences on the edges of imagination create a productive and provocative space for autobiography, particularly as "[t]he life narrator depends on access to memory to narrate the past in such a way as to situate that experiential history within the present" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 22).

Scholarship that evokes the urgency of exploring memory and its connections to spectacle, trauma and lived lives often draws on Spiegelman's *Maus I & II*. Embedding his father, Vladek Spiegelman's, master narrative of surviving the Holocaust within his own experience of listening to the specifics of this story as an adult, Spiegelman "makes concrete the importance of the speaker-listener relationship in Holocaust memoir" (Versaci, 2007, p. 76). The visual style of *Maus* is credited as a significant influence on *These Memories*, as Campbell (who visited the Art Spiegelman exhibition in New York a year prior to creating the webcomic) has commented in interviews,

one of the things that struck me was a comment Art had made about *Maus* when asked why he chose to render the story the way he did... [He said] that the aesthetic choice contributed to the commentary on how the war reduced humans to something less. (as cited in Thomas, 2016)

The muted, yet detailed artistry of *These Memories* reflects on this notion of reduction, as Szoke's appearance as a gaunt outline rather than a character "filled" with colour or texture powerfully denotes the ways illness has literally depleted him of human warmth, emotion, experience and memory. In this way, the loss of humanity in the context of war and atrocity articulated in *Maus* is echoed and translated into a loss of humanity prompted by debilitating illness in *These Memories*, the latter relying on digital technologies, in addition to graphic illustration, to convey this key message both aesthetically and symbolically.

Like Spiegelman's doubled narration, Campbell's narrative is situated as an auto/biographical testimony framed by, and framing, his grandfather's reminiscence on his childhood in the former Czechoslovakia and his experiences as a soldier in World War II. A sense of how experiential memory and trauma is transferred between generations is captured by Marianne Hirsch's term "postmemory" which was first formulated in response to *Maus* and is now canonical to trauma studies. Postmemory refers to:

the relationship of children of survivors of cultural and collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch, 2001, p. 9)

Coined to discuss the connections and burdens that Holocaust survivors' descendants bear to this historical calamity, postmemory "is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation – often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible" (Hirsch, 2001, p. 9). In *These Memories*, Campbell imagines his grandfather's past trauma as linked to his own physical consciousness: a guiding motif in the webcomic is the thick ropes that float between panels and hang ominously mid-screen, that attach to objects lost by Szoke (that he suspects are merely stolen) and to people similarly forgotten (he often confuses Campbell with his cousin). In one scene, where Campbell visits his grandfather in hospital after a major psychotic episode, these ropes wrap around the entirety of his body, tangling at his feet before trailing back to his grandfather, who is seen holding onto the end. The literal "tethering" signalled here is a reminder that the basis of second-generation literature often attempts to make sense of the past, however fragmented and convoluted, by connecting to the family that came before (Fischer, 2015, pp. 3–4). It is also reminiscent of the flies that follow Artie throughout *Maus*, which enact a powerful metaphor for the dark family history, steeped in the mass atrocities of the Holocaust, that proves impossible to escape [3]. That is, both *Maus* and *These Memories* insist that the past is not the past, but rather, entangled

in present and future temporalities, and use the simultaneity afforded by comics drawing in order to push back on notions of chronology.

What Hirsch later describes as the "sense of living connection" to traumatic history and memory (2008, p. 104) is recorded in the visual and narrative design of *These Memories*. Alongside the blue rope runs a thin red string that weaves in and through panels and frames, at times shifting into the words of Campbell's narration. These twin strands serve as a metaphor for comics' inherent ability to juxtapose past and present temporalities within a single image or page – their interrelation makes legible the dual voices that mediate this auto/biographical narrative. The crisp, bright red string seems symbolic of Campbell's sharp intellect whereas the faded rope with fraying edges, that collects itself in knots and tangles around objects and characters, denotes Szoke's failing memory. These memory threads offer several more points of contrast: the young listener versus the elderly speaker; fast-paced digital versus slow analogue; even permanence versus transience, as the red string remains visible after the story has completely deteriorated. Themes of loss and ageing are similarly embedded in the affordances of reading, as we follow the red string by scrolling upwards while the thicker blue rope sinks towards the bottom of screen.

The symbiotic relationship between images, language and technologies in *These Memories* is central to conveying the fragmented, non-linear and unreliable nature of memory that constitutes the webcomic's major themes and aesthetic. The convoluted process of remembering and forgetting is introduced on the landing page of the host website: the individual words, "when you look back on your life what memories would you choose to share?" are displayed in concentric circles that fade and reappear in chronological succession, eventually replaced with the fast-flashing, "Loading Memories..." (Campbell, 2016). The "buffering" implied by this motion on-screen alerts readers to the personal archive of lived experience collected and contained within the webcomic and the fluid, digital framework that renders these images available for viewing online. Despite the strong suggestion of first-person subjectivity in *These Memories* – signalled by the self-reflexive "your life" and "you" – the title page of the webcomic centres the figure of Campbell's grandfather, pictured reclining in his armchair and dressed comfortably in house-slippers and a loose-fitting sweater. The byline of the webcomic that appears shortly after – "a small story by Stuart Campbell about his grandpa" – positions the story as a shared family history parsed through the author's perception of his grandfather (Campbell, 2016). Readers receive some of this history through the brief author's note hidden in the bottom-left corner of screen:

My grandpa, Ladislav Szoke was born in Hungary in 1922. He was fostered out to a Slovakian family when he was a child. At 21 he was drafted in to World War II. He was struck by a landmine and ended up in the care of the British Red Cross. Shortly after recovering he arrived in Australia as a refugee. He was sent to work on the Snowy Mountain Scheme as a migrant worker. His friend had heard they would be given English names upon registering for the work. His friend was very fond of the name

James but was given the name Peter. Grandpa, who wasn't fussed what name he was given received the name James. To this day he prefers to go by Jim. (Campbell, 2016)

As W. J. T Mitchell writes, "[m]emory is an intersubjective phenomenon, a practice not only of recollection *of* a past *by* a subject, but of recollection *for* another subject" (1994, p. 193). *These Memories* tests the concept of postmemory in a different cultural context (through flashbacks to war in Czechoslovakia) and centres a different generation (third, as opposed to second). However, the ways traumatic memories are transmitted, made meaningful, and preserved for future generations distinguishes the webcomic's mission as one intrinsically tied to postmemory. Hirsch has reflected on how mechanisms of identification with the past shift into global contexts: "[a]s a third generation grows to maturity and postmemory becomes increasingly dissociated from memory, we are left to speculate on how and what these images can communicate in the different contexts into which they will be inserted" (1997, p. 264). Books, photographs, film and other documentary material prove critical to the memory work performed by subsequent generations (Hirsch, 2008, p. 105); however, drawing offers a tangible means of (re)performing the past and materialising the slippages of trauma and history in ways that make evident, make legible. In one of the most influential essays on *Maus*, Joshua Brown asks readers to "consider the challenge Spiegelman faced. He had to 'materialise' Vladek's words and descriptions, transforming them into comprehensible images" (1988, p. 98). Brown's evocation of the word "materialise" is particularly provocative in the context of *These Memories*, a webcomic not material in terms of its physical form nor stable in its narrative – the following explores Campbell's deterioration code as a key strategy through which the visceral loss of memory and time is rendered.

### **Liminal spaces, narrative ruptures: Navigating ephemeral technologies**

Historically, memory has been conceptualised as the "core of factual truth" in autobiographical writing (Eakin, 2001, p. 290); however, broad perceptions of memory as a storehouse into which recollections are entered, encoded and retrieved also attract considerable scrutiny. As Elisabeth El Refaie observes, "forgetting is an essential function of memory" that "allows the system to avoid sensory overload and to adjust to ever-changing situations" (2012, p. 99). Comics excel at visualising the doubled nature of memory on the page: their ability to "hold the communicable in fruitful tension with the incommunicable" refers not only to how drawing can make the unrepresentable and traumatic legible, but also describes the frame-gutter dynamic that constitutes the form (Taussig, 2011, p. 100). In Scott McCloud's words, comics grammar exhibits "the dance of the visible and invisible" (1993, p. 205) by staging disjuncts between appearance and disappearance, word and image, and frame and gutter. As comics theorists and practitioners well know, the gutter is both a space of absence – a gap, blankness, or interval – and a space activated by the reader to project causality and/or establish narrative sequence between two or more panels.



Chute describes the gutter as “a thread of erasure inscribed in a sequence of repletion” that captures the ways comics can process, shape and mobilise the visual work of recounting trauma (2016, p. 36). Comics are “the invisible art”, as the full title of McCloud’s ground-breaking manifesto, *Understanding Comics* (1993), attests – a description that denotes both the medium’s unique ability to embed rupture and ephemera in its formal language and its position on the margins of cultural and literary awareness. As Nabizadeh points out, comics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century “were ephemera in a material sense – designed to last only a day or two after their publication in Sunday newspapers” (2019, p. 8). The physical deterioration of early comics is perhaps echoed by the technological dependence of webcomics, a medium at risk of becoming obsolete and unreadable with every advancement of the digital sphere. Campbell’s work is thus both a promise and a problem: it may signal a possible future for digital storytelling that results in hybrid, experimental mediums like webcomics, but it also exemplifies through form and theme the ways that these stories are rendered ephemeral, transient and disposable. We see this, for instance, in the deterioration code embedded in *These Memories*.

Campbell’s webcomic exemplifies the ability of comics to embed erasure within its structural form, both in the conventional sense described by Chute, where the appearance of panels is interrupted by the gutter, and through the possibilities introduced by digital technologies which, in this instance, enables images to automatically disappear as we read. His description of the project signposts the brutality of traumatic memory, which spreads unevenly onto the surface of his work, to acknowledge the limits of inscribing experience through visual representation:

the text and the images don’t always align, they’re travelling in different directions and whilst the scrolling mechanism allows the user to control the pace of the story it also sets in motion a deterioration code. Meaning, as you scroll, the story begins to fade away and you can’t go back. (as cited in Thomas, 2016)

Understandings of dementia and other illnesses impacting brain function are often culturally constructed around metaphors of “losing one’s selfhood” as a “synonym of ‘losing control’” (Johnstone, 2013, p. 26). These tropes enter *These Memories* in both content and form: through Campbell’s initial description of his grandfather as having “lost control of his body and his mind” (Campbell, 2016) and the ways that readers’ control over how the narrative unfolds is conditioned on constant progression. In other words, as dementia is an inescapable reality of Szoke’s life, readers are likewise bound by a narrative track that subverts common practices of reading, particularly, the slow and close deliberation necessitated by graphic texts. The unrelenting forward movement of the webcomic instils an urgent imperative to finish reading before the panels gradually fade and become irretrievable – a feature that reflects and trades on the ways invisible illnesses like dementia destroy brain cells over time. Such effects are further emphasised by the fact that readers cannot recover lost images by scrolling backwards, nor can they cease scrolling to avoid this effect, as these actions only increase the rate of deterioration.

Another strategy through which Campbell engages the absence-presence of comics is the overwhelming preponderance of blank space, which both invites an illusion of boundlessness

and limbo characteristic to Szoke's traumatic memories and infiltrates the panels to expose the fragmentary, forgotten links of Campbell's family history. Blank space is a powerful metaphor for the ways that memories, particularly traumatic ones, can be confused, unstructured and can enter life stories in oblique and often unconscious ways. Writing on the trauma of forced migration in graphic memoir, Catherine Appleton argues that "[n]arrative gaps also acknowledge that the representation has limits in accurately describing an experience" (2021, p. 540). Critical to understanding the vast, blank space that dominates *These Memories*, then, is its broader auto/biographical function to signal the narrative ruptures, inconsistencies and limits of Campbell's recollection of his grandfather's life. By inscribing the ruptures of his grandfather's memory through the physical presence of opacity, Campbell presents an archive of Szoke's memories that is ephemeral and transient. When readers cease scrolling, Campbell and his grandfather – along with signifying features of the webcomic such as words, images, panels and frames – gradually disintegrate into the hazy grey background meant to emulate the 'cloudiness' or 'fog' of memory. The digital reading experience, in this sense, emulates the effect of shifting through one's mind for a memory that cannot be grasped and becomes less and less attainable with passing moments.

Recent comics scholarship has considered the ways the "comics form literalizes the work of archiving: selecting, sorting, and containing in boxes" (Chute, 2016, p. 192) and produces "scaffolding for memories" (Ahmed & Crucifix, 2018, p. 3). Jared Gardner has explored comics *as* and *about* archives of history, popular culture and everyday lives through the works of Ben Katchor, Kim Deitch and Chris Ware, artists who create "archives in the loosest, messiest sense of the word – archives of the forgotten artifacts and ephemera of American popular culture" (2012, p. 150). According to Henry Jenkins, the sentimentalisation of everyday life, "results in people holding onto things that have outlived their usefulness because these materials remind us of other times ('the good ol' days'), other people ('the dearly departed'), or other aspects of ourselves" (2013, p. 301). In *These Memories*, Szoke's insistence that long-lost items (i.e., his watch and hat) had been stolen by nursing staff at the hospital, or by his own grandson, signals the contemporary cultural obsession with collecting and displaying everyday objects and their significance to understanding and representing our lives. These physical possessions are part of the ephemera suspended in the thick, unknowable space at the edges of the narrative that also play upon the connections and disparities between real (material) and fleeting (digital) representations of memory.

Notions of the archive are replete within Life Narrative studies: Nancy K. Miller uses the term "splines" to indicate how the archive draws attention to its own "missing narrative" by offering up objects and documents as invitations to trace, to verify, to piece together, limited information (2011, pp. 4–5). Conversely, Campbell's webcomic compensates for what is missing or unknown about his own family's history – disrupted by war and forced migration from Czechoslovakia to Australia – by literally eliding the past. By denying readers the possibility of travelling backwards to retrieve or revisit past images unless the browser is restarted, and the narrative track reset, Campbell reaffirms the ubiquity of forgetting as essential to the project of recovery: the pace at which the webcomic must be read to retain its

images indicates that forgetting is inevitable. This narrative effect not only captures Campbell's anxieties around his grandfather's failing memory but is used to critique popular understandings of memory as an archive of stable, stored moments that can be consciously probed and raided.

As Paul Arthur observes:

The digital revolution has had a more profound effect on biography and life writing than on any other branch of literature... Nothing from the past can rival the scale and speed of the Internet's unleashing of enabling technologies for researching and documenting lives. (2009, p. 56)

Digital interfaces have served as important access points for diaries and journals through the creation and development of online archives that ensure the accessibility, distribution and reception of material life stories in longevity. Krista Roberts (2017) speculates that "[c]lues to the human lives we lead now are integrated into digital forms; when a document is saved to a computer, that file picks up and retains user information" (p. 412). Roberts's context is one informed by the complexities of recorded, digital data relative to the process of "digitising" material manuscripts and archives; however, this is an important discursive context for understanding how webcomics, as hybrid texts consumed on computers, tablets and phones, mobilise different auto/biographical possibilities. In contrast to the immediate accessibility and simultaneous display associated with print comics (see Groensteen, 2013, pp. 75–76), bandwidth and connectivity are major determinants of how quickly *These Memories* loads onto the screen, while appropriate software is required for the various animative and sound effects to play. The power of technology to preserve auto/biographical stories and memories through a malleable digital archive is tested in Campbell's webcomic, which instead presents the inherent instability of digital platforms as an insidious threat to acts of remembering.

*These Memories* may be read as both an example of how self-representation might be enhanced by digital tools and as a response to the ubiquity of stories produced, posted and disseminated in the fluctuating digital environment. The webcomic activates broad contemporary anxieties around the fragility of memory, particularly those belonging to distant histories and past generations – anxieties that are compounded by the ephemeral nature of the Internet and the problems with preserving memory in the age of digital storage. As Campbell explains:

We are also relying on our devices as a form of memory. They store all our photos, contacts, reminders. But as devices die and software becomes outdated, a lot of these memories might be lost... Whether it is living online or in person, memory is hard to hold onto. (as cited in Starr, 2016)

Designed using HTML5 software, *These Memories* is itself tailored to existing technologies and therefore vulnerable to the rapid obsolescence of the Web. The longevity and functionality of Campbell's digital code (seven years old at time of writing), for example, may soon be

compromised as new, streamlined technologies emerge. Changes in digital licensing (i.e., ownership and copyright) and increases in site maintenance costs over time could result in the site being deleted entirely. As Campbell himself notes, the process of creating the webcomic was beset with technical difficulties, as large discrepancies between different browsers meant that the animation worked smoothly on one device and malfunctioned on another (Thomas, 2016). It is important to acknowledge here that more conventional webcomics posted on blogs and social media – where content is moderated and/or monitored – are perhaps equally susceptible to deletion and censure in various ways. However, in Campbell's webcomic, notions of erasure and transience are embedded in the recursive nature of traumatic remembering attached to Szoke's lost memories, in the cycle of presence-absence that constitutes Campbell's deterioration code, and in the ephemeral technologies used to create the animation, sound, music and motion.

Campbell employs digitally enabled tools to disrupt assumptions that, unlike memories, comics are archival, fixed and primed for acts of revisiting and remembering through their physical co-presence of word-and-image. His work is solipsistic, slippery and swims in murky waters to present potential characteristics of comics afforded by new media. In this way, *These Memories* engages what Magali Boudissa has termed the "amnesia" of the computer screen, which describes a new relationship between virtual panels that changes "at the speed of the reader's hand clicking" (as cited in Crucifix & Dozo, 2018, p. 581). For Boudissa:

The screen renews the narrative and aesthetic possibilities of comics by offering new dimensions to articulate panels: 'latent' temporality, infinite and malleable canvas, depth. Panels now possess an intermittent existence on the surface of the screen, creating a new poetics of appearance-disappearance. (p. 582)

Significantly, Boudissa signposts McCloud's concept of the "Infinite Canvas" as one of many "narrative and aesthetic possibilities" unfurled at the site of overlap between comics and digital interfaces. The "Infinite Canvas" suggests treating the monitor as a "window" that releases comics from the constraints of print (i.e., the page, the strip) and allows for vast, uninterrupted sequences of panels and frames (McCloud, 2000, pp. 222–223). Contrary to McCloud's radical vision for works laid out in endless, multiple directions, like other scrolling webcomics, Campbell's narrative is confined to a vertical column located at centre of screen. This layout nevertheless enables symbolic elements of the webcomic (i.e., the red string, the blue thread) to cut across borders in one fluid and uninterrupted motion, as digital platforms remove the necessity for panels and pages – structural components upon which the materiality of print comics rely for narrative composition.

### **A cacophony of sound and energy: These Memories as enhanced webcomic**

McCloud's (2000) "Infinite Canvas" encouraged creators to experiment with digital technologies to produce works enhanced by features characteristic of new media, such as

animation, music and sound effects. These features also categorise what Batinić has called “enhanced webcomics”, which “refer to all of these different varieties of webcomics which are ‘enhanced’ by the use of digital properties, tools, and effects and as a part of their form, and which thus attempt to ‘enhance’ user experience” (2016a, p. 81). For Batinić, webcomics are new media texts – they appropriate technological advancements more readily and seamlessly than non-enhanced webcomics (p. 81). We might categorise the distinction between enhanced and non-enhanced as webcomics that could exist in print (or, indeed, have been adapted into graphic novels or books) and those for which this transition would result in substantial losses in the reading experience. In contrast to webcomics that function in a digital environment yet do not necessarily employ digital technologies, *These Memories* interweaves these elements meaningfully into its narrative to address themes, concerns and fears common to memory, trauma and the passage of time. How these digital features can consciously bridge parts of the story punctured and obscured by loss reflects an important capacity of digitisation for the project of constructing life stories.

The unique composition of Campbell’s work, which assimilates varying signs (textual, visual and spatial) and elements of multimodality (music, sound, animation and motion), also articulates the complex demands memory makes on continuity, structure and narrative in the context of its experimental nature. In addition to the gradual disappearance of panels and illustrations in *These Memories*, animation is also contained directly within select panels to emphasise significant events in Szoke’s lifespan: for instance, his recollections of getting lost in the forests bordering his hometown, or of tricking his commanding officer by using wire to sew buttons to his uniform. The most compelling example – an emergency visit to the hospital which triggers intense flashbacks to World War II – draws not from Szoke’s memory, but from Campbell *imagining* his grandfather’s thought process during this psychotic episode. Here, the webcomic diverts from its conventional scrolling narrative and presents readers with a single panel through which action moves horizontally, rather than vertically, to map a deadly battleground scene. Explosives launched from tanks bathe the background in fiery red – Campbell’s most prominent use of colour – while gunshots rain down as tiny red specks mixing with the blood splatter of those hit. The foreground depicts Szoke in the present day, trapped in his armchair, being dragged backwards into the fray by an armed soldier whose appearance bears striking resemblance to his younger self. The visceral, sensory impact of this panel is compounded by coordinative changes in the soundtrack, which shifts from a lilting melody to emulate the diegetic sounds of battle: sharp gunshots, the high-pitched ringing of an explosion, soldiers yelling and screaming, all underscored by the increased tempo and volume of darker, more ominous music.

How the comics form makes it possible “to spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page” (Chute, 2008, p. 453) is a powerful means for life writers to re-construct traumatic memories that may resurface unbidden and unexpectedly. Here, the merging of two different moments in time (Szoke is ‘under threat’ on the battlefield and from the invasive medical environment) is conveyed by positioning both scenes within the same narrative space of the battlefield and the same, singular panel of the webcomic. Trauma finds

expression through a variety of modes in *These Memories*, including not only visual representations but the enhanced digital elements that help “produce rather than screen the effect of trauma” (Hirsch, 2001, p. 8). The experience of reading this enhanced webcomic inevitably and radically differs from reading a comic in print – in this way, navigating the constraints and possibilities of new media carries profound implications for visualising the solipsistic effects of traumatic memory.

In *These Memories*, words and images tell their own stories, receding and recurring sporadically, while the soundtrack underlying these movements modulates the pace of the narrative, building tension and revealing affect. This form allows for complete omission of textuality as well as a cacophony of sound and energy – a capacity that distances webcomics from dominant historical perceptions of comics as “a silent medium” (Sanyal, 2019, p. 215). Rather, Campbell engages sound to connote visuals – such as the diegetic gunshots and sirens that accompany traumatic flashbacks – or lack thereof, as the music gradually fades and ceases in sequence with the deterioration of images. The basis of the musical soundtrack is low-fi, haunting and melodic, but also shifts to accommodate narrative arc; for instance, as Szoke reminisces on his exploits in the military (memories which revolve around a clever prank played on his commanding officer), the musical track is infused with the strong regular rhythm of a military marching band. The trip to hospital is accompanied by the diegetic sound of ambulance sirens which coalesce with those of an incoming air-raid, intimating the intense and traumatic hallucinations that manipulate his sense of reality. Alternatively, fond memories of Szoke’s childhood in the former Czechoslovakia are imbued with a lilting, cheerful tone that is replicated across scenes in which he recounts these experiences to his grandson.

Perhaps the most poignant effect of non-diegetic sound occurs in the penultimate panels: in a startlingly rare moment of lucidity, Szoke tells his grandson, “too much of my life was spent watching friends die...what have I even lived for” (Campbell, 2016). This panel is separated into three key images, the background depicting a long shot of Campbell and his grandfather reading a newspaper in adjacent chairs, and two inset panels showing close-up perspectives of their faces turned towards each other. Their shared features (primarily, eye-shape and facial structure) draw implications of their shared fate, not only because Campbell will himself grow old but, as the headline of Szoke’s newspaper reads, because Australia remains (at time of the webcomic’s publication) embroiled in the controversial war in Iraq. The sound of crashing waves and distant echoes are cast against eerily melancholic music that underscores the solemnity of this revelation and the webcomic’s final image, which portrays Szoke losing grip on his memory thread and falling downwards out of frame, leaving the rope lingering in mid-air. Readers similarly find themselves receding into the silence that grips the screen, as the presence of visuals and audio slip from the narrative to emulate the ways memory slips from Szoke’s consciousness.

The capacity for digital screens, technologies and affordances to transform the aesthetics and practices of comics is a contentious subject in modern scholarship. While proponents of webcomics have embraced the possibilities brought by hybridity and multimodality,

trendsetting comics theorists have variously expressed their distrust of digital innovation. Thierry Groensteen has dismissed soundtracks in comics as a disruption to the visual field that prevents readers from imagining their own audio through gestural, visual and linguistic elements, such as dialogue bubbles, body language, text capitalisation and colour saturation (2013, pp. 70–71). While his work on “enhanced webcomics” remonstrated on the vast potentials of the Internet for new experiments in comics, Batinić has also expressed concern that “the final product stops being a comic and becomes a blend of different digital techniques” (2016b). For John Barber, animation threatens the reader’s ability to “control the rate at which information is absorbed”, a feature that is “inherent in comics; this is what separates comics from film” (as cited in Goodbrey, 2013, p. 195). Control is also emphasised in Daniel Goodbrey’s broad evaluation of digitised comics, in which he defines the conventions of comics by two key conditions: first, the dominant mode of progression is via space on the visual plane (i.e., page or screen); and second, the reader retains control over the pace of their advancement through the narrative (2013, p. 194).

While *These Memories* uses digital technologies to enhance the reading experience, it is important to acknowledge that elements traditionally reserved for comics (i.e., panels, frames, speech bubbles, gutters) remain at the core of the webcomic’s structural conventions. Moreover, despite the deterioration code that automatically times the disappearance of its narrative features, *These Memories* requires the physical interaction of scrolling to initiate sound, music, animation, motion and, more importantly, to *move* through the sequences of panels and images displayed on-screen. As such, readers are not without autonomy: Mencur’s soundtrack only begins once readers “click and scroll”, as Campbell instructs on the title screen (Campbell, 2016). Likewise, the animative properties of images which move horizontally in flashback panels or disappear entirely are respectively triggered by our level, and lack, of interaction. Ultimately, the reader decides through their own intervention how the story *for them* will read – they can progress consistently through the webcomic or risk a loss of their own, a loss of story that cannot be easily retrieved.

There are many ways to approach this webcomic and the information contained within and around it – while understanding the relationship between each panel in sequence is important, the inherent elements and affordances of the web page also enrich its presentation. In moments when *These Memories* is entirely devoid of word-and-image, after a short period of immobility, the screen itself acts as a kind of extra-diegetic panel that frames up the expansive, cloudy space occluding the readers’ vision. On Campbell’s host site, *These Memories* is bracketed by hyperlinks and other digital information with potential to influence the order and practice of reading. At the bottom right of screen, readers toggle options for audio and layout: they can mute or increase the volume of music as well as shrink the display to fit within the Internet browser or enlarge it to the full-size of the screen. The bottom left corner reveals an author’s note wherein Campbell explains the inspiration and format of the webcomic alongside acknowledgments of his contributors and industry funding. Significantly, perhaps, a black-and-white photograph of his grandfather is included beneath this blurb, a feature that “affirm[s] the past’s existence, its ‘having-been-there’” and lays claim towards the authenticity of the project

(Hirsch, 2001, p. 14). At the top of screen, readers encounter options for sharing the webcomic through email, Facebook and Twitter that, when clicked upon, lead to a smaller window programmed with a message to send to friends and followers: "These memories won't last – An interactive story about a grandpa losing his memory ... <http://goo.gl/kxPhfH> via @thenawlz" (Campbell, 2016).

Shaenon Garrity (2011) has observed that, "along with the appearance of new digital tools and the development of computer technology", creators have become "increasingly aware of the possibilities that lay before them". These possibilities, often embedded in the browser page, constitute important paratexts that, in conjunction with visual content, contribute to a medium-specific reading of webcomics. Options to read *These Memories* with muted sound, or outside of full-screen mode, may detract from the immersive experience enforced by the occlusive background (which in full-size, stretches to the outermost edges of the screen) and the shifting soundtrack (which emphasises narrative tone and direction). By encouraging cross-platform dialogue on social media – and tagging his personal profile (@thenawlz) – the interface of the computer screen imitates "the kind of relating across a threshold that is often described as interaction" (Hookway, 2014, p. 7), one that denotes the collapsing of boundaries between readers and artists/authors in the digital sphere.

## Conclusion

*These Memories* demonstrates the ways webcomics might attest to and imagine the slippages of memory through its experiments with the boundaries and conventions of the comics form. By absorbing and deploying a range of multimodal strategies, Campbell solicits the visual codes and transitions of comics as well as the properties of the screen to evoke the ephemeral alongside and within the archival. Drawing on the conceptual framework of postmemory, wherein images make their own material connection to past and present, this paper considers how Campbell is called upon to fill the gaps in his family history by visualising what cannot be explained in words by a character or narrator. It discusses the aesthetics and practices through which the deteriorating memory of Campbell's grandfather is embedded: for example, through the vastness of blank space that acts as a spatial metaphor for ruptures in time and in deteriorating content that signals modern anxieties around the deletion of life stories in our increasingly digital environment. Webcomics like *These Memories* are complex in the ways they deal with issues of memory, history, trauma and subjectivity through the potentials of multimodality. Ultimately, this paper is a site for thinking through what is built and what is elided from graphic representation in digital environments, and what broader issues around the real and the digital can be found or perhaps exceeded in this transition.

## Notes

[1] For example, *Neomad* is an interactive comic for Apple's iPad that builds rich Indigenous stories and storytelling practices into an epic science-fiction adventure narrative for children, while *Modern*



*Polaxis* shapes the story of a paranoid time traveller into an augmented reality graphic narrative accessible via specific apps.

[2] The Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards are annual prizes given in recognition of innovation and creative achievement in American comics. They are named after pioneering comics artist and scholar, Will Eisner.

[3] This scene refers to a section of *Maus II* titled "Time Flies": Artie is pictured wearing a mouse-mask, leaning heavily against his writer's desk, which is propped up on a pile of dead mice. While at the illustrative level, Artie appears to insert himself (a second-generation survivor) into the mass destruction of the Holocaust, on a textual level he reflects on the critical successes of his first memoir: "[a]t least fifteen foreign editions are coming out. I've gotten 4 serious offers to turn my book into T.V. special or movie (I don't wanna)" (Spiegelman, [1986] 2003, p. 201).

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