

Annotations for “Comics Beyond Sight”

(For the comic this annotates, please go here <https://spinweaveandcut.com/mitcomic/>)

PAGE 1

Title panel:

The title derives from Art Beyond Sight, a non-profit that has a long history of arts advocacy and [their resource manual of the same name](#). We spoke with Eliza Axel, president and CEO, to make sure they supported our title. Eliza enthusiastically approved, especially because her father, an MIT alum, and the Phi Gamma MIT “Fiji” fraternity supported Art Beyond Sight’s early research. While we have been leaders in initiating conversations about blind access in comics, this reference reminds us of the much more developed conversations that we have built upon tied to blind access to art museums.

Panel 1 (2nd box row 1): This panel introduces a fictional comic that Nick dreamed up, titled “Amazing Detective: featuring Blackout.” It appears throughout the piece, a comic inside a comic, which allows us to demonstrate the complexity of the comics’ form with a recognizable comics aesthetic. Our superhero Blackout is created to be just unique enough to avoid Batman copyright.

That cover itself is a reference to Amazing Fantasy #15, the first appearance of Spider-Man from 1962.

Panel 2 (3rd box row 1) and Panel 3 (4th box row 1):

A myth circulates that blind people live in darkness (think of [the pivotal scene](#) starring a sighted Al Pacino playing a blind man in *Scent of a Woman*, where he explains why he wants to commit suicide rather than accept his blindness, yelling repeatedly, “I’m in the dark here!”) These two panels play with this stereotype to support the social model of disability, where social and attitudinal barriers create the darkness, or the deficit, more so than the physical impairment itself (and in reality [only 18%](#) of blind people experience their blindness as darkness). An earlier draft had the first panel in all light and the second panel in full darkness, but we flipped this to avoid perpetuating the “blindness equals darkness” myth. On a related note: with an accessible comic, one doesn’t actually need any light to experience a comic – an example of [‘disability gain!’](#) To learn one perspective about why blind people care about accessing comics, visit Matthew

Shifrin's essay, "Panel by Panel: Comic Book Access for the Blind" :

<https://nfb.org/sites/default/files/images/nfb/publications/fr/fr35/3/fr350306.htm>

Panel 4 (1st box row 2): A page of our comic within the comic, starring superhero Blackout, exploded into all the different elements that go into a single page. First, we see just the composition sans any content. Next, we see only the characters from the page. Then, the backgrounds and setting, a layer of the text balloons, and finally the words and sound effects. By the final layer, the panel barriers have dissolved so the final details - "Boom!" "Idea: Realized" "Purrfect" - all escape off the page. If you're interested in thinking more about the complexity of comics and all they can do to mess with time and space, we recommend Scott McCloud's seminal text, [*Understanding Comics*](#), and Nick Sousanis's [*Unflattening*](#).

Panel 5 (2nd box row 2): The concept of "Access is Messy" is something Emily has been talking about for some time tied to her work in accessible arts and culture programming. While many in the field of design call for "universal design," the idea that we should build environments so that anyone should be able to access a space without needing an accommodation, the reality is that "competing accommodations" complicate things, where access for one group can create a barrier for another. Think of people who need guide dogs and people with dog allergies – there's no perfect space that makes their needs not conflict, but if we let access work be messy and design specifically for these very real needs, we can make it work in creative ways. To read more, [*Arts Access: Messy, Hard, Oh-So-Worthwhile Work.*](#)

Panel 6 (3rd box row 2): Early in our work coordinating conversations with blind experts on how comics might be made accessible to blind/low vision readers, Macarthur Genius Award winner and Amazon principal accessibility researcher Joshua Miele reminded us that access isn't one size fits all. We heard feedback from some blind people who want very literal translations of what's happening in a comic and others who really could care less about what the visual form was like, just seeking to be entertained by a good story. It often, though not always, was tied to when someone lost their sight. So even as we narrowed down the conversation about access to blind and low vision community, we still needed to consider how accessible comics might cater to these varying needs and perspectives.

Panel 7 (big box row 3): By showing all these different approaches to descriptive text, we were expanding on the concept of “no one size fits all,” as certainly you can poll blind end users and find people who would prefer each of these styles. These variations also speak to a divide in the field of audio description over how objective vs. subjective the describer should be. Early audio description prioritized objectivity. If you are asked to describe a face of Blackout looking out over the city from a rooftop, it was inappropriate to add that he wears a forlorn expression, for example, because that is making a subjective interpretation that inserts the describer’s point of view into the access. Now, a new crop of audio describers embrace the subjective. They argue that whenever you are choosing what to describe and what to leave unacknowledged, you are making subjective choices, so they might as well lean into that to make for a richer, more captivating text (for example: <https://sffilm.org/event/online-filmhouse-talk-the-art-of-audio-descriptions/>). This gets particularly challenging tied to describing race and gender, as we know these to be constructs that are more complex than we can derive with sight, and yet also saying things like “a light skinned person” or a “masculine presenting person” deprives the blind listener of important context that is socially relevant in media. Learn more on [Reid My Mind podcast here](#).

The cube shows another teaser from the pretend comic Blackout, which includes a cat-woman type character modeled on Felix the Cat. This animated cartoon from the silent film era [is credited with the visual icon of a lightbulb over the head](#) to signal the concept of a good idea. The lightbulbs show up throughout the piece because an “aha” lightbulb moment for Nick occurred when thinking about the fact that the lightbulb as idea is something known through visual vocabulary, so making that accessible not only requires an accessible form, but also an introduction into the visual lexicon that surrounds us.

From the earliest conversation we organized on making comics accessible, Nick had been struck by this example raised by one of the blind panelists of how lightbulb as ‘idea’ didn’t have any meaning to a blind person unless it was explained prior. He recounts:

I’d been wanting to use that lightbulb example all along. But it wasn’t until making an early sketch of a kid reading a comic - kind of mind-blown by its contents – that I noticed the head

of the figure I'd scribbled looked a bit like a lightbulb - and that sparked a good idea itself! This gave me a way to tie different panels across the piece together, I didn't have to draw a specific kind of person in that space - they can just be a stand-in for a person (in contrast to what we eventually see in the final panel). The fact that this loose drawing process leads to unexpected connections and discoveries is key to my approach to comics making, and it led to lots of things lightbulb (the bad guys, Felix the cat imagery, ...) in the whole piece. As I often say, "I'm really good at drawing badly!"

PAGE 2

Opening Panel

Audio Adaptations:

Our accessible comics collective has already discussed in detail the tactics and tensions for developing successful audio versions of comics, you can access the discussion here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufa2a10KKKM>

- Earcons – these refer to sounds that can be used to provide less intrusive markers in a story. For example, rather than a narrator repeatedly saying, "In the next panel," an earcon can be used, an appropriate sound introduced at the start to convey this information.
- Voice actors – we discovered a very clear consensus that voice actors should be used over synthetic voices whenever possible to enrich the experience of audio adaptations.

Related resources:

Marieke Davis's [Ember Black](#) – accessible comic created by blind cartoonist with [accompanying audio version](#) (on BandCamp)

Unseen – [audio-comic](#) about a blind assassin by blind author Chad Allen

Listen to [Marvel Audiobooks](#) – from Dreamscape Media

Tactile Renderings: Here is a link to a panel we organized that discussed tactile possibilities with the Accessible Comics Collective:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPpD-gGOZCA&t=1906s>

- First slab: For other examples of braille comics, see:
 - Mexican [comic in braille](#) – from Cool Hunting
 - <https://www.cnet.com/culture/life-a-comic-book-for-the-blind/>
 - Marvel makes braille comic about [blind football player](#)

· Second slab: The raised version of Felixa the catwoman was inspired by this presentation by [SF LightHouse's MAD Lab](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qi0bEMZCgkA):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qi0bEMZCgkA>

○ See also:

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/einarpetersen/a-brailiant-implant>

· Third slab: This is a direct reference to the [tactile comic "A Boat Tour" navigating Venice](#) by Max ([Info on BlindWiki project](#) that supported this)

See also: Benjamin Fraser – [scholarly article on Max's Boat Tour & tactile comics](#) – PDF

· Fourth slab: This is a direct reference to Ilan Manouach's [Shapereader Textured comic for blind readers](#)

See related:

○ Ilan Manouach's Shapereader for blind readers featured [on hyperallergic](#)

○ Article on [Manouach's Shapereader by Bill Kartalopoulos](#) on 50 Watts

· Raised cityscape:

○ This picture was based on several tactile displays that are in development. To learn more:

§ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1NvbiEpkMU>

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https://techcrunch.com/2019/10/31/this-tactile-display-lets-visually-impaired-users-feel-on-screen-3d-shapes/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xILmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAI8AIRH7no2s6jo7inZuVzllmA2yD5K_zoWkJaDuZWJrfVla_0l-rLrPejHcwml0KwXdLvGtmD2K9Ork8R_mmV6gVehObXFdD6lyeJ9eQ0p5Zmkhn8E8mvB1OCbIZCne50HSA0InJ0Gy4R6DLpftSQIRqRThhm95h5qH9FHml4_I

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<https://news.stanford.edu/2019/10/29/touchable-display-helps-blind-people-create/>

Assistive Technologies:

To see an accompanying panel discussion on emerging technologies, organized by the Accessible Comics Collective, visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gPDg82rGjg>

The phone is inspired by the newly released Vizling app. Learn more here: <https://vizling.org/>

The magnifier – thanks to Stanley Yarnell who reminded us what a common tactic this is for many in the blind community who view art from close proximity to utilize their partial sight. This is modeled on an illuminated magnifier like this:

<https://lssproducts.com/super-bright-stand-magnifier-8x/>

While magnifiers are used with print comics, we were intrigued by how there is still a translation that occurs, as magnified viewing means comics are broken into tinier sequences and bigger pictures cannot be taken in all-at-once. This issue connects to a broader aspect of comics, and quite particularly for Nick's work. While a comic might be intended to be read sequentially, there are always other kinds of connections being made - words to pictures, pictures to words, for instance, within a single panel - and then there may be different sorts of connections across the page that rely on that view and don't make sense if broken into little bits. (You might think of the second row of images on the first page, where elements from one panel continue into the next - how do you break that up neatly?). The experience of comics reading is constantly negotiating those two levels at the same time - close, sequential reading, and taking in larger swaths.

Map key: “Nothing About Us Without Us” is an important refrain used by disabled activists to call for greater awareness of the role disability expertise needs to play in all conversations that will have an impact on disabled people’s lives. While neither of us identify as blind or low vision, this comic was very much informed by this philosophy, after over two years’ worth of efforts to assemble the Accessible Comics Collective and organizing three symposiums that all centered on blind expertise. We were invited to create this comic with just over a month before it went to print, so this restricted the amount of blind expert quality control we were able to do. Fortunately, Stanley Yarnell and Cathy Kudlick, generously answered our last-minute pleas to help us troubleshoot specific aspects of the comic as we moved quickly to meet our deadline. For more on the importance of blind expertise, learn more here:

- [More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art](#) by Georgina Kleege
- Joshua Miele, “How Access Really Happens: Disability, Technology, and Design Thinking” The Longmore Lecture in Disability Studies (2016):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtKf45Oc_8A&t=1s

Panel 9 (page 2 row 2, panel 1):

For such a visually complex comic, an audio adaptation really felt like the only option. We chose to record it as a dialogue between us, rather than have a professional voice actor read the descriptions, because our two voices had mingled to guide all the illustrations and captions, so this felt like the best way to match the comic’s tone.

Panel 10 (page 2 row 2, panel 2):

The comics modalities pictured:

- Print comic (and just for fun, the boy reading this is an homage to the boy reading the pirate comic in *Watchmen*)
- Audio adaptation
- A computer with Zoomtext to magnify a digital comic
- A tactile or braille comic
- An app, modeled on [Vizling](#)