

Transcript for Audio Adaptation of Beyond Comics: A Highly Visual Case for Blind Access

(to listen to this Audio Comic, please click here

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/wclej5w7e977vkd/Audio%20Comic.mp3?dl=0>, the visual comic along with annotations and other info is here: <https://spinweaveandcut.com/mitcomic/>)

N: Hi, I'm Nick, I drew and co-created a comic in the June 2023 edition of MIT Technology review titled, "Comics Beyond Sight: A Highly Visual Case for Blind Access."

E: And I'm Emily, I collaborated on the words and ideas with Nick. You are listening to an audio translation of our print piece. Our readers of the print comic most likely begin taking in the two-page spread as a whole before diving in, panel by panel. So, we'll start you off in similar fashion with an overview of what this is all about before we get into the specifics. [lead in music plays] When you look at the print comic altogether, well, I'll boast for you Nick: I just think it's so visually compelling! It lures you in because there's a lot going on. At times, your drawings are very detailed and realistic, almost like scientific diagrams, and elsewhere there's plenty of imagination and creativity that escapes realism.

N: Thanks, Emily! So to describe the overall piece: it's a two-page comic in black and white, with lots of small details in the larger panels that allow a sighted reader the freedom to break out of a linear path and explore the visuals that capture the eye. Page one has two rows of three panels each and the bottom half of the page is one large illustration. Page two has a large illustration as the top two thirds, and one row of two images below it. As is typical for my work, the layout is a bit untraditional - panel walls breakdown, images connect across panels – most of this comic would be difficult to view a single panel after another, their interaction in non-linear directions is key to the meaning.

E: Another thing to note before we dive in: Throughout the comic you will hear repeated references to "Amazing Detective: featuring Blackout." It's a comic inside a comic, which allows us to demonstrate the complexity of the comics form with a recognizable comics aesthetic. For example, whenever we are showing strategies for accessing comics non-visually, we demonstrate these in images with our superhero Blackout, who looks suspiciously like Batman but more owl-like in silhouette so as to avoid copyright, and the cast of the Bad Ideas Gang. The first Bad Ideas member is the leader, Bad Idea, dressed in a dapper suit and bowler hat, he holds a stylistic walking stick as his weapon, a lightbulb attached to the tip. His thought bubbles are always shaped like lightbulbs. Bad Idea also has a henchman, who wears a black mask over his eyes, and a lightbulb on his shirt. Most villains have a henchman like this - not much personality, just a body for Bad Idea to boss around. Lastly, we have Felixa, dressed as a wide-eyed catwoman who attacks with accessories she carries in a carpet-bag purse.

N: Yeah, let's get more into what the comic actually is now, and to do so, let's bring in some help.

[the light twinkles of a Xylophone rising in pitch]

E: You just heard the contribution of our audio producer Shaina Ghuraya.

S: Hey everyone!

N: Shaina's audio additions allow us to enhance the audio form, just as color can add depth of meaning to images. When you hear Emily's voice, you'll know that she's reading the written caption text. When you hear me, I'll be providing the visual descriptions from my illustrations.

[a brief bar of synthetic music]

E: Comics Beyond Sight: A Highly Visual Case for Blind Access. Ideas and words by: Nick Sousanis and Emily Beitiks. Drawings by Nick Sousanis.

N: We are looking straight on at a figure with the head of a lightbulb and two human hands holding a comic book in front of most of its torso, its bulb brightening the surrounding area while taking in the newest issue of "Amazing Detective: featuring Blackout," from which light seems to emanate as well.

E: Comics take us places.

N: Same picture, but the lightbulb no longer illuminated, the comic's cover blacked out except for a thin wisp of a question mark.

E: But if you can't see their contents...those places are closed off. How might comics be made accessible for blind and low vision readers?

[synthetic music with an enigmatic tone]

E: Comics are a deceptively complex network.

N: We're showing a page from our comic within the comic, starring the superhero Blackout. On the far left, we are shown the entire page but it is nearly edge on toward the reader, right next to this and somewhat obscured by it is the same page but now we are seeing only the panel layout - the arrangement of blank panels with no content within. The next slice from this comic, and now it's established that we are being shown an exploded diagram of the comic where, each type of content displayed on its own slice, features all the characters who are on the page, though it is no longer also included in the page frame, so they are all floating without panel or

background. Next elements from the backgrounds are displayed, and then word balloons, sound effects, and the words, make up the remaining elements shown.

E: Elements interacting in linear and non-linear ways.

N: The limits of the third page dissolve so Blackout and accompanying text-as-sound details escape off the page. [An explosion] [A male voice actor:] "Idea: Run" [a female voice actress:] "I need my bag of tricks" All these sounds as written words culminate in a spiral of text that leads into the sight of a single isolated eyeball.

E: Even sound and time made visual.

N: The nerve from the eye becomes a cord that enters into a densely tangled web of cords which form the shape of a human brain.

E: Access is necessarily messy.

N: A lightbulb with text curving around the top and bottom creates the shape of an eye's outline, the lightbulb as pupil and the word "idea" formed in the bulb's glowing filament.

E: That this

N: the lightbulb

E: means 'idea' is a visual concept.

N: The untangled cords escape the brain and lead into the next panel, each connecting to power up 9 different light bulbs, varying in shape and size.

E: One size does not fit all, each person's needs and preferences vary.

N: The bottom, slightly more than half of the page lacks a defined panel border and is visually-busy, with multiple layers of activity going on in the same space. In the background, and actually running under part of the last tier of panels, is a page from the Blackout comic though almost none of it can be made out as it is occluded by panels and all the content in this part of the page.

E: Consider, putting an image into words

N: A cube is situated so that it presents three of its faces, all with the same picture showing: an illustration with Blackout, in bodysuit and large black cape, as he soars down from the sky over three members from the Bad Ideas Gang: Bad Idea, his henchman, and Felixa the catwoman. As he descends, Blackout says, [a gruff superhero masculine voice] "Lights out!" With a hardened face, the henchman exclaims, [said with concern] "Not him!" Blackout has whipped a spiky throwing blade, the shape of the Blackout symbol, to slice open the sack slung over the

henchman's shoulder and cash trails behind; Felixa in a full cat bodysuit holds a carpetbag and says, [in playful tone] "mmm...I need my bag of tricks..." Bad Idea, leader of the crew and dressed in suit, tie, and bowler hat, says, [with a hint of kitsch] "IDEA: RUN!" All three have light bulbs patterned on their clothing. From each of the six faces of the cube, three visible and three obscured, text boxes extend to provide six alternative styles of describing the panel, though the descriptive text can only be partially read behind captions and the cube. Labels illustrate a description style with a teaser of that style in the box.

E: "The Minimalist,"

N: A masked caped figure says "Lights out!" Below, three figures on the street: a person says "Not him!" A lady in a catsuit - says, "mmm...I need my bag of tricks" and another figure says, "IDEA: RUN!"

[swoosh sound]

E: "poetic license,"

N: [tense music building] A dark night in an urban setting, **our chiseled superhero, Blackout, descends from the sky, his black cape filling the frame like open wings as he drops his catchphrase, "Lights out!" The first villain, his face showing his disdain** for Blackout, says "Not him!" But Felixa the catwoman shows no signs of fear...

E: For the art lover

N: [suspense music] At the center top, a superhero fills the space, **illustrated in the aesthetic style of superheroes from the late 1970s and early 1980s, Blackout wears a mask shaped with a great horned owl's silhouette. His etched lines and shading radiate darkness out of his body through the extension of his cape.** A man with a tight grimace...

E: Striving for objectivity

N: [subtle synth chords in the background] The hero is flying in the top of the frame above three persons. **A feminine-presenting person in the center wears a black cat costume and holds a carpet bag purse while saying, "mmm...I need my bag of tricks..." A masculine presenting person with light complexion** wears a lightbulb on their shirt

E: Radio drama

[A feminine voice:]Our hero Blackout swoops down onto the street.

"Lights out!"

An enemy gasps!

"Not him!"

A woman in a cat costume stands alert.

[meow]

“mmm...Need my bag of tricks...”

Another enemy panics.

“IDEA: RUN”

E: Everything but the kitchen sink.

N: In the middle of the frame, a light-skinned woman in a black form-fitting bodysuit with a lightbulb on it has **big cutouts in her mask to create the appearance of oversized eyes encircling her own, which appear as the oversized eyes’ pupils. Her tail is alert and upright behind her, her facial details small and feminine, and she holds a patterned carpet bag. Her word bubble reads, “mmm...need my bag of tricks!”** a man wears a suit patterned in lightbulbs, a tie with a tiny Felix the Cat picture on it, and a bowler hat with a lightbulb on it. He has deep sunken eyes surrounded by [music fades into transition beats]

E: There’s no one right answer.

N: in a separate caption at end of the page:

E: (And this is only a single panel!)

N: The upper two-thirds of this page are drawn to appear as a scrolled piece of parchment, an illustrated topography map, like something at the start of a fantasy book. At the top near the map’s compass,

E: There are many potential paths to navigate.

N: Arrows suggest three directions. The first path leads to the land of audio adaptations, on the map’s coast, a mermaid emerges from the water with text

E: voice actors

N: written across her face and torso, a word bubble drifts from her to say “dialogue.” The mermaid’s tale emerges out of the water to reveal text

E: Rich description

N: Sounds as images and words fill the water, and float off into the sky as words become clouds [bubbles]

[ambient sounds]

[immersive sounds]

E: Audio adaptations convey drama.

N: Now exploring the central path leads to the “tactile” region, the comic begins to gain elevation, portions emerge into 3D and raise from the page to reveal snippets of comic panels

with braille and raised textures. It's essentially like four increasingly taller slabs. The first has the indication of some comic panel borders extruding from its surface, and within one panel the words "tactile comics" are written in braille. The next slab features a cropped look at Felixa from the same image as the cube, her drawn outlines are raised, the black of her costume is also raised in a dot pattern to indicate solid black, and there is raised braille identifying her lips, eyes, and cat ears. The next slab features raised ovals that are like simplified speech balloons, and abstract symbols within the ovals, and other symbols distributed across the surface. This is an homage to the comic made for blind readers "Venice Boat Tour" by the cartoonist Max. The final slab has four sections of raised abstracted patterns (not so different than some you might feel on the bottom of a tennis shoe or hiking boot. These different patterns create meaning of their own, and reference the conceptual comic for blind readers Shapereader created by Ilan Manouach. Two fingers rest upon this surface, feeling the patterns.

E: Tactile renderings allow thinking in pictures.

N: Two life-sized fingers enter from outside the comic's wall to touch the tactile region. Below the tactile elevated mountains, a city created by raised pins, like refreshable braille but with a bigger grid. The third path...

E: Assistive technologies break down barriers to grasp the comic's original form.

N: A phone vibrates [vibration sound] and sounds emerge [cell phone alert ding] The screen showing a digital page view of the Blackout comic. A low vision magnifier rests so that it escapes out of the map's boundaries. Through the magnification, a close up shot of two panels from Blackout, the villain pleads "no," Blackout counters "yes."
In a corner of the map, embedded in a storm cloud, the sun just visible behind it with a rainbow arcing outward

E: New horizons to be explored.

N: A remaining element of the map, an ornate map key with one bit of guidance for all who utilize the map:

E: Nothing About Us Without Us.

N: Two adjacent pictures: on the left, a sketch with dark shading shows Blackout's profile and grave expression next to right, a textured raised outline of this same Blackout profile. It's a complicated tactile form to imagine having much meaning to the touch.

E: There's no neat one-to-one mapping. For instance, what works visually may not to touch.

N: a caption box extending beyond the map to the lower third of the comic page (visually, this helps ease the reader out of the map area, and into the final set of panels)

E: For access is an art of translation - its own creative journey.

N: The bottom row of the comic, the first chunk of material features two crossing paths that are acting as caption, as panel, and as art, layered on top of the other, each ending in a comic modality (and creating an arrow pointing forward in the negative space between them): the first strand's text...

E: This comic takes deliberate advantage of the visual affordances comics offer - densely layering ideas in ways only comics can do.

N: the words on the upper path end in a miniature picture of the print comic. The second path...

E: To make an accessible version, we preserved the meaning of the drawn comic - with words and sounds to find its own path.

N: This leads to a QR code, with the words "Listen Here" framed around it to create a 3D effect, enticing the sighted reader to join. The QR code links to: spinweaveandcut.com/MITcomic where this audio version is found.

E: Both aim to provide a distinct experience.

N: The final panel

E: Everyone deserves access to the places comics take us.

N: Four children in a shared space all are experiencing comics, each with a different type of lightbulb overhead, all glowing and activated from their own comic modality. A black child with glasses sits with legs criss-crossed and reads the print copy of Blackout. Behind him, an Asian American child wears headphones and holds a device that shows a still of Blackout. The back of a third child with light long hair and thick eyeglass frames uses a digital magnifier to view a page of Blackout. The fourth, a white girl at a desk, looks straight ahead as her hands explore a tactile comic in front of her. In front, a hand from an otherwise unseen fifth person holds a phone using an app to access the Blackout comic, sound escaping from it [Computer voice: "Closeup on Bad Ideas Gang as..."] Taken together, a room of active comics experiences for all.

E: With multimodal tools, comics can go beyond sight!

[transition synthetic music]

N: So, listener, we took a visually complex comic and tried to translate it to create an audio version. So is what you just listened to an audio comic?

E: Disability activists and scholars call for "interdependence" as an underrated cultural value. We can build a stronger community by each bringing our strengths to the table and asking

others to support our limitations. Print comics are all about this too - the interdependent relationship of words and images. They are in a dance together, striving for balance. Too many words, and your illustrations feel tacked on. Too few, and your message may be lost or misinterpreted. The balance may be off sometimes in a panel, but a good comic achieves it in the complete work. When we translate comics into non-visual mediums, the images and words often need to be uncoupled, and in doing so, we have to ask, have we been able to retain what makes a comic a comic?

N: In his seminal work, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud calls comics a “mono-sensory medium, [that] relies on only one of the senses to convey a world of experiences, but what of the other four?” By joining us for this audio version, you still got a mono-sensory experience, but here, the blind person’s perspective was prioritized by default - it’s all words and sounds. All visuals must be described in detail to make sense. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but how many do you get before you put your listener to sleep with visual details that really don’t carry much interest beyond the visual realm? And how do you convey things that don’t fit together on the comics page in the linear way that audio necessarily must be? When we make the shift of one modality to another, the translation raises big questions that cut straight into what both comics and access are all about, questions that drew me as a comic artist to work on this project to begin with.

E: And the reverse for me - as someone who works in arts access but has no comics background. We joked a lot while doing this about how bizarre it was that we were developing such a highly visual comic to teach about nonvisual innovations in comics. And your artistic style is highly complex, you often play with breaking free from the traditional comic form, but when you do that stuff, it all just makes non-visual access even more challenging. Describing, say, a *Peanuts* comic with Charlie Brown and Snoopy would definitely be easier. But your style is who you are as an artist and that matters. Access doesn’t mean we want you to compromise that, especially because what you achieve with illustration is a really compelling way to make complex ideas digestible. That’s a different kind of access that matters too - your work accommodates our sighted readers!

N: Ha, hopefully! The goal with my work and getting students to make comics, was bringing access to big ideas through the comics form. But in working visually in this way, I recognize that I left out a set of readers entirely. It’s a difficult but important challenge to translate from one medium to another. In all the conversations we’ve been hosting to explore how to do that, I’d like to see us find new approaches to doing it and nudge mainstream comics makers to get on board. That kid who wants to read Spider-Man should be able to!

E: Our collaboration on this project allowed us to demonstrate a key takeaway - that the translation is best achieved by holding the needs for access and the vision of the artist in balance, and in conversation. The field of accessible comics is still really young with lots of opportunities for improvement and innovation.

N: Thank you for listening to this experiment! We invite your comments and questions as we continue to explore this exciting terrain.

E: Thank you to Art Beyond Sight for supporting our title derived from their work. Thanks to our cameo voice actors Cheryl Green, Matthew Alaniz, Ajani Murray, and Thomas Reid. Thank you to Shaina Ghuraya for serving as audio producer for this project. Thank you to Stanley Yarnell and Cathy Kudlick for sharing your blind expertise with us. A big thank you to Yue-Ting Siu, our former colleague and collaborator, and lastly to everyone else who presented at, or participated in, one of our programs from the Accessible Comics Collective, where we have learned so much.

[end music fades out]