# Fun Palaces Comic Maker: An Interview with Matt Finch

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The Fun Palaces Comic Maker is now online. The Comic Maker is an online tool that allos the user to drag and drop pre-designed characters and props into a comic strip story of the user's own devising.

In this interview Dr Ernesto Priego talks to Dr Matt Finch, who conceptualised the Comic Maker. Dr Matt Finch discusses the concept behind the Fun Palaces Comic Maker, providing insights into the technical and cultural challenges faced and the potential for comics for public engagement in galleries, libraries and museums.

## Keywords
Australia, Comics, Fun Palaces, Libraries, Tools, Literacies

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**Ernesto Priego (EP):** *You conceptualised the Fun Palaces Comic Maker, inspired by Emily Medley's original Fun Palaces illustrations and based on Panel Lottery by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden. Can you tell us about this initial concept stage?*

**Matt Finch (MF):** In 2014, I devised an activity called Comic Book Dice at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) in the Philippine capital, Manila. We took Abel and Madden's game - which involves juxtaposing individual comic panels to tell multiple stories - and added a three-dimensional riff. Players are given a cardboard cube; they draw a picture on each face of the cube, then roll it like a dice and tell a story using the images which land face-up.

The idea I pitched to Fun Palaces was to create an online comic activity along these lines. It would be playful, unintimidating, and focussed more on the power of juxtaposing images than on technical drawing skill.

The State Library of Queensland kindly loaned us Phil Gullberg and Tania Yat from their innovation space, The Edge. As our digital team, Phil and Tania looked at creating an online version of the dice activity, with players drawing, scanning, and uploading their own images as content for a massive global game of Panel Lottery. Obviously that would be a huge technical challenge and very dependent on the scanners and other resources available in each location. Phil hit on the idea of breaking down the Fun Palaces poster into visual components which we could use for a drag 'n' drop comic maker, and Tania excerpted elements from the Fun Palaces poster art to feature in the game.

**EP:** *Was the process very straight-forward or what kind of human or technical challenges did you face?*

**MF:** It took a while to find the right team to deliver the goods but our partners in Queensland have been

incredible, sharing their creativity and putting in a great amount of effort. We were also helped hugely by Sandy Mahal who found us a host for the Comic Maker at short notice.

The thing is, people easily grasp the concept of Fun Palaces: free opportunities for people to try their hands at the arts and sciences as participants, not audiences, in communities outside of the usual city-centre culture circuit. It fits very well with both digital humanities movements such as Open Access, plus the very collegial, welcoming, and hands-on world of comics. So we didn't really lack for volunteers!

**EP:** *How would you describe the Comic Maker's target audience (if you think there's one; you might prefer a different terminology), and why do you think it was important to have comics making represented in Fun Palaces in this way (i.e. online)?*

**MF:** Comics culture chimes well with the Fun Palace ethos of "participants not audiences", seeking to break down the walls between "artists" and "everyone else". One thing that's always struck me about comics creators is how willing they are to share advice and techniques; how keen they are for new people to practice their artform.

It's wonderful that comics makers are, by and large, so generous and open. Maybe that has something to do with the marginalisation of comics, at least in English-speaking cultures? Comics people welcome new recruits!

The variants of Panel Lottery epitomise this warm, welcoming side of comic book culture. These "games" have their own art history: Comic Book Dice comes from Abel and Madden, who in turn were riffing off Scott McCloud's *Five Card Nancy*. McCloud himself referred back to a Usenet post and saw the whole thing as an *homage* to Dada! But all of them are about taking the fear out of creating comics; turning artmaking into a game which is friendly and fun.

For people who get really stressed about drawing, like me, Panel Lottery activities remind us that comics are, at heart, as much about the sequence of images as the line on the page - and anyone can make them. Dulwich Picture Gallery used the dice at a street fair: we basically sat back and people wandered over of their own accord to make comics without our guidance!

So Fun Palaces' digital Comic Maker was about welcoming people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. The drag and drop approach removed any anxiety about drawing skill, without reducing the importance of the visual component.

Making an online game was as much about reaching an international audience as exploring the digital medium in itself - "the world's largest game of Panel Lottery" - but it also let us do things that you can't achieve with pen and paper, or cut-up comics on a desktop. You'll see more of that as the Comic Maker evolves in 2016.

There's another team at MCAD in Manila, who worked on the dice session there. They've made their own online version in parallel to the Queenslanders. It should be out soon - it's a comic making game tied to the MCAD collections. I love this diversity, this proliferation of ways of playing, ways of making comics, ways of coding and design.

**EP:** *A two-tiered question here. What are the competences that you expect the Comic Maker could help users develop, and what specific uses do you anticipate users will give it?*

**MF:** This isn't a lesson plan! One of the things that's most important about Fun Palaces - and comics! - is that they offer a space for what Scott Eberle calls " wild play" (2010). The structures of the Comic Maker help people to tell their own stories and to be fearless creators. As with the live-action roleplays I've run in Australia and New Zealand, I believe that successful engagement with this project should bring satisfying outcomes which the organisers didn't design or foresee. We look forward to being surprised!

**EP:** *I totally understand. It seems to me like you did have a plan there, though...! Perhaps we comics lovers tend to take for granted the inherent (deceptively simple) complexities of the comics medium, even on its most "basic" (for lack of better term) examples... The Comic Maker allows for certain actions to take place, but not others. I'm interested in these constraints, that we can call technical, or formal. We talked elsewhere that the Comic Maker has a pre-set comic strip panel layout... Is it fair to say the reasons behind this were technical, rather than pedagogical, or formal?*

**MF:** Entirely. You have to bear in mind this was made under quite tight limits of time and resources, so most of the constraints were practical ones.

Five panels gives you some elbow room to make a decent-sized story with a beginning, middle, and an end - plus the opportunity to throw in a few swerves if you're so inclined. You can definitely expect the game to develop in different ways further down the line.

Our Comic Book Dice players in Manila started making walls and pyramids and columns out of the dice to tell their stories, using whatever number of boxes they had to hand. Abel and Madden's game, when you play it on a wall or large noticeboard, can turn into a kind of flowchart, with storylines running in parallel. I'd love to see this digital version evolve in that direction too.

**EP:** *So are there any plans for further development? You know, I have started dreaming of something like ComicLife, but web-based, open source, simpler and free... I also wonder if you have plans to make the source code available?*

**MF:** There's stuff in the pipeline but I can't say too much about it just yet... What does excite me is the number of web designers who got excited about making their own riffs off Panel Lottery. I think this diversity of teams and approaches, grassroot games-making taking place in Australia, the UK, the Philippines, deeply entwined with the idea of comics and sequential art and community outreach, can only be a good thing.

**EP:** *Indeed. I know this is second nature for you but could you elaborate a little bit about why community outreach is important for libraries and what role you see comics playing within it as a key piece of an outreach strategy?*

**MF:** Libraries have never really been about shelves: they're about access to knowledge and culture in whatever form. We've been living in a post-shelfy world for at least twenty years now! The Missions of the Public Library set out by UNESCO and the international library association IFLA back in 1994 don't even mention the word 'books', although they talk about reading and literacy alongside play, self-directed learning, and all forms of cultural performance. Great library thinkers of today like RD Lankes focus on librarians as facilitators of knowledge creation. It's not about the shelves around them or the bricks and mortar that house them.

In addition to this, the real shift today is arguably towards participatory culture. Libraries and other cultural institutions need to make sure they're giving communities the widest range of options to create culture and knowledge.

No child chooses where they are born or who they are born to, which is why we provide state schooling. We also have public hospitals because nobody chooses when they get sick or injured. Public libraries provide communities with a similar kind of equity when it comes to engaging with the arts, science, culture, and knowledge - whether as creators or consumers - but it's also necessary to proactively engage with people outside of your own walls; to find new partnerships and new opportunities.

This year's Fun Palaces event includes workshops run by London comics retailer Orbital Comics, and previously I've worked with teams on library-hosted comic conventions and even librarians embedded inside comic book stores.

Now, when transport and telecommunications are better than ever, there's really no excuse for cultural institutions to hide within their own walls and wait for "audiences" to come to them.

How do comics fit in to all this? They're a simple yet powerful way of manipulating the visual and verbal in an age which bombards us with all kinds of media. You can draw comics in the sand with a stick, or make them on a website built by people on the other side of the earth. The comics community is by and large a warm and welcoming one which has often been at the margins of respectable culture. Now that comics are becoming such a big deal, I think it's a chance to keep that generosity of spirit and say: everyone an artist, everyone a scientist, everyone a comic maker.

**EP:** *Finally, I know there must be loads but could you please share with us some other sources (books, comics, etc.) that have inspired your work, not just for the Comic Maker but for everything you've done in/with/for libraries?*
**MF:** Ahahaha, where to begin? Individual events steal inspiration from zombie movies or steampunk or the *Fifty Shades of Grey* craze or even kaiju movies and *Pacific Rim*. It's also worth raiding old TV shows and movies.

I'm obsessed with the boundaries between everyday life and the worlds of dream and fantasy and story, the spots where they're permeable, the spots where they host a kind of liminal space between them. So obviously a lot of sci-fi and fantasy, and cinema as the ultimate almost spiritual expression of that, but also Alice Munro's books are everything to me. To my mind no other prose writer so thoroughly evokes the world she has imagined, and this 2014 article on her work and artistic listening helped me work out what my creative process was, too.

The Fun Palaces Comic Maker is at http://comic.funpalaces.co.uk/. Readers can find out more about Fun Palaces here.

### References
The comic strips created with the Comic Maker are collected and shared at funpalaces.tumblr.com (after moderation, see Acceptable Use Policy and small print at http://funpalaces.co.uk/fun-palaces-comic-maker/). The Comic Maker was created by Talia Yat and Phil Gullberg of the State Library of Queensland from a concept by Matt Finch.

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### Note
All other in-text hyperlinks were active at the time of drafting and publishing this interview [2 October 2015].
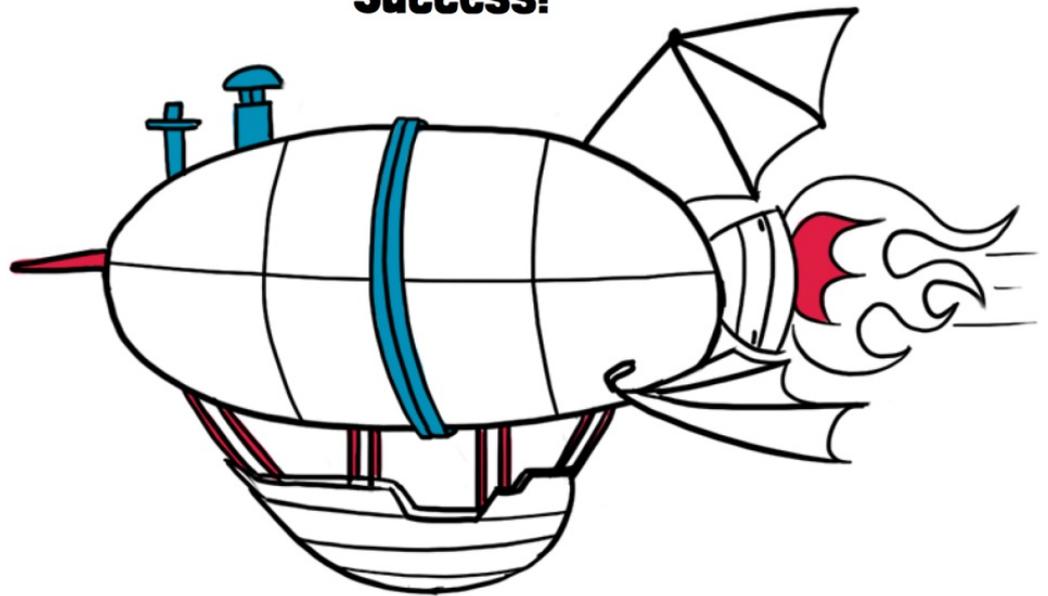
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