

# THE SIKORYAK PERSPECTIVE – INTERVIEWS WITH A GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATOR OF NOTE

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## I INTRODUCTION

The following is a selection of transcripts from a long-distance interview of Robert Sikoryak,<sup>1</sup> delivered for the Comic Contracting Conference, in Dec 2017 at UWA. It is divided into six segments:

1. Introduction by Prof Andersen
2. Question One
3. Question Two
4. Question Three
5. Live Interview transcript
6. Conclusions from Prof Andersen

This unusual format will require some context. R. Sikoryak is an illustrator and an author. He's not a lawyer, he's not a regulator and he's never been in that space and I confess although I'm a big fan of comic books I've never heard of him until about six or seven months when he released this amazing novel called 'Terms and Conditions' which is really, really interesting. With this book, Robert did something astonishing in the eyes of legal simplifiers and designers. He may not have intended it, but he did. In essence, he took the extremely tedious 20,669 words of the iTunes terms and conditions (which are some of the most well-known AND never read end-user licence agreements in the world!) and he turned them into speech bubbles in a graphic novel that's divided into different imaginary parts.

There are no other words in that book except for the ones that come from the iTunes terms and conditions. They are in sequence, and he's made it fit into four chapters of interwoven stories with people all dressed like Steve Jobs. This may sound odd. It IS. But it is also fun and has had a fascinating effect. After that book came out it became a best seller, which means that more people have now read the terms and conditions of iTunes than ever before thanks to Robert. But

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Sikoryak is an accomplished American cartoonist. He is the author of Masterpiece Comics, Terms and Conditions, and The Unquotable Trump. Website: <https://www.drawnandquarterly.com/author/r-sikoryak>

Robert is not an academic and does not wish to write about the perspectives of legal design – I very much DO. So he kindly allowed me to interview him and transcribe it, live at the 2017 Comic Contract Conference, so that everyone interested in legal design and visual contracting can benefit from his experiences.

Hence, I asked him three questions and he filmed a response to those questions. The transcripts are below. Following that, excerpts of the live interview he gave in front of the conference audience. I think you will find this insightful, albeit a bit different.

Without further ado, let's get to the three questions.

## II QUESTION ONE

A *This graphic novel on iTunes is such an eye opener for end user licence agreements everywhere. What inspired this? Was it a conscious decision to start an end user licence agreement revolution?*

Robert Sikoryak: Hi. Thanks for having me. My initial inspiration for this project was, in a way, the state of comics today. Especially in the United States, there's been an incredible growth of the variety of the kinds of comics that are being made in terms of content, in terms of genre, in terms of the form. From web comics to graphic novels, and many more permutations have arisen. I grew up with newspaper comics, and comic books – that's usually the kind of work that I like to parody but I wanted to sort of reach out and expand my horizons a little bit and play with different kinds of comic story telling. So the challenge was really for me to make a new kind of comic.

I usually adapt literary classics, as in my book 'Masterpiece Comics' which will take long novels like Crime and Punishment and boil them down to very short comics. So, for instance, my Crime and Punishment comic is 10 pages long and it's drawn in the style of a Batman comic book. So, I try to be faithful to the source material, but I like my visuals to add an ironic element or an absurd element. So, this project is in that realm – it's an extension. I really wanted to make a long form comic. That was my main goal when I was thinking about what I should do. And when I was thinking about using a long text, because I like to adapt, I thought, what is a long text? And it popped in my head that the iTunes Terms and Conditions are a very, very long text.

So, I love the idea of taking something very long. And also, like a lot of the novels I've adapted, it is very long and people feel guilty that they haven't read it. So that amuses me, that has some connection to what I was doing, previously.

But in this case, the idea was not to condense it, but to use all of the text and include every word. What was liberating about it was because the terms are very dry and repetitive, people don't have any emotional attachment to them and also there is no plot, no character that people identify with, or that people love, so it gave me a lot of freedom because I didn't feel obligated to illustrate the text as it exists. Instead I was able to add visuals that had no apparent connection to the text. And as I say that was very liberating. I decided early on that I wanted every page to be in the style of a different famous comic. So, I've chosen comics from over 100 years of comic books and webcomics and so forth, and I've redrawn them and I've dressed the main character in the Steve Jobs outfit. That was the other thing that got me really excited. By choosing the iTunes terms and conditions, I was able to take advantage of the fact that Apples' spokesman for so many years wore a very particular outfit; glasses, black turtleneck and jeans – so you could always recognise him. So, I've dressed all characters in the story as Steve Jobs.

They all have their own adventures. They all have their own stories. But they're all dressed as him. So, as you read the book you make the connection that it's one character going through all these adventures, although clearly – sometimes he looks like a child, sometimes he looks like a monster, sometimes he looks like a Japanese samurai, but in all of them he is reciting the text. So, I think I hit upon something that people have really responded to, which is great.

It was not my conscious decision to start a revolution of any kind, but I did want to shake up my own approach to comics. I'm grateful people have responded to it so positively and I do hope it will encourage people to think differently, no pun intended, but I want them to think differently of how they can make comics. And you can certainly do more of this kind of thing with legal agreements. Even as my comics visually reference other comics that you've seen, I'm also interested in seeing sort of how people can take the form farther. So, from the conceptual angle, you can do a lot with new texts, for sure.

### III QUESTION TWO

A *Could you see this sort of concept working for terms and conditions deliberately made to fit the format?*

I absolutely think that this concept could work for terms and conditions that were created specifically to fit the format of comics. It's very different from what I had in mind, but there's a million different permutations to play with and I'd

love to see them all. Part of the joke of my book was that the iTunes text was not made to be illustrated, and that was very liberating for me as someone who usually would illustrate a text very faithfully. In this case I was able to approach it without feeling that I had to be faithful to the fans of the original text, but I could go my own way. Comics can get very literal sometimes, so you have to figure out ways to keep the reader interested and surprised, and I think by not worrying so much about the visuals and text perfectly aligning, it gave me some latitude.

One of my most fun responses to my ‘Terms and Conditions’ book has been someone telling me, “I was looking at the pictures and I got caught up in them, and then you made me read it! You made me read the text!” So, they wanted to appreciate it as a visual art object, but they ended up getting caught up in the narrative of the visuals and that lured them into reading the text. So certainly, any pictures combined with text – if they’re provocative or beautiful or even puzzling, it can sometimes really pull the reader in, which I think is great.

As far as building it from scratch, I think you can definitely find a smart way to make the words and the pictures complement each other without getting too repetitive or too literal but there are plenty of smart artists out there and I’m sure there are smart lawyers – I don’t know that many lawyers, personally – but I’m sure there are also some smart lawyers who could hash out a way to do this really effectively.

#### IV QUESTION THREE

A *What’s next for you, will you work on something similar?*

I’m always working on more comics, and I’m always interested in finding new ways to tell stories in comics, or to relay information in comics. So I have a few projects I’m working on right now. I’m actually going to be doing an adaptation of *Moby Dick*, which is a novel I love dearly, and that people do have a real emotional attachment to. So that’s going to be a difficult project, but I’m looking forward to doing that. My most recent book just came out this month, it’s ‘The Unquotable Trump’ and this is a different way of taking real world elements into comics. This takes actual quotes from Donald Trump and puts them into parodies of different comic book genres and it’s a way of drawing attention to the absurd, outrageous, offensive things he’s said.

I hope my work is, kind of, effective on a few different levels. I want it to be funny, but I do also want to make a point. I’m concerned about the philosophical

and moral quandaries that are present in great literature, and in presidents that I don't agree with, and also in legal texts. So, I will continue to make different comics and play with different forms. I would say the one last thing that I recently finished that I'm really proud of is: I did a retelling of Homer's *The Iliad*, the Greek epic poem, I've adapted it into the form of a puzzle comic strip that's very popular in America called "The Jumble." So, my version is both a word puzzle with cartoon images that also tells the entire narrative of *The Iliad*. So, you have to solve the puzzles to understand the plot. But it is actually the whole plot of the story, condensed. But the point is that I love playing with different forms, I love playing with different visual ideas. I'm not sure what my next project will be after *Moby Dick* but it may be another agreement. It might be more political work – I'm not sure. But I certainly will not live long enough to do all of the things that inspire me and give me opportunities to play with different forms.

#### V LIVE INTERVIEW – QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Camilla Anderson: We have been able to connect with Robert live, and despite the time difference he has kindly stayed up to connect with us. Does anybody have a question for Robert? Cause I have a killer one. Ok, I'll start. So I have a room full of lawyers, and graphic artists and engineers who all think what you did with the iTunes conditions is absolutely awesome and we know you did it as a graphic illustrator but we're seeing so much potential here and so a lot of us are wondering whether you might be interested in collaborating on more of stuff like this if we help simplify the wording. Do you think you might want to illustrate some of it?

Robert Sikiryak: Oh yeah, sure – I'm up for anything.

Camilla Anderson: He said yes! That's awesome, that's really exciting. Because the next challenge for us lawyers, is that if we're going to make any fun law, is getting people like you to make it fun. I think I said fun three times but that'll do it, right? So how would we go about that do you think? A good collaboration; lawyers and graphic illustrators?

Robert Sikiryak: Well it's interesting. When I was doing the pre-recorded video talk it was hard, it's hard talking in a vacuum, I felt like I stumbled a little bit. What I was trying to say was it's good to have people involved in the process the whole way. When I retell a piece of literature, or even with the iTunes terms and conditions, I look to see what cartoonists in the past have done. You know, like the way they tell stories, the way they break down panels, so I always try to use the structures that already exist. So, I think if you're going to build something

from scratch, the best thing maybe is to find a group of collaborators who are willing to get feedback along the way as they're going, to find out what is going to work in the new format, what would not be repetitive, or as I said not be too literal. As I said, literal comics sometimes can be really crushing.

Camilla Anderson: So can the literalness of law, I can assure you, the literalness of law can be equally as crushing.

Robert Sikiryak: Sure, sure. So, I'm always trying to find that balance. It's funny, when I do illustration work for people, sometimes they'll send me the script and I'll just illustrate it. And that's fine if that's the job, but sometimes if people aren't used to writing comics, then their writing can be ridiculously verbose, which is kind of what I was making fun of with my book. But if you really want to make it fresh – if you really want the ease of communication, then I think it's great to have the collaborators in on the process together.

Camilla Anderson: That sounds very sensible. So, I've got Robert De Rooy in the room. He's got some experience with comic book contracts. He has a question.

Robert De Rooy: Hi. I've got two questions. Firstly, I would like to know what you mean when you say contracts can be very literal and my second question is when you adapt the text of say for example a book to a comic, what is the process that you follow? Do you script it then story board it? What is that process in getting words to pictures?

Robert Sikiryak: The literalness, I think I was referring more to the comic side than the writing side. There are a lot of non-fiction books that have been adapted into comics and often what happens is that there's a big block of text and the drawing just re-illustrates what the text is saying – so it can be kind of redundant. So that's the issue. Sometimes that is actually really effective, it sort of underlines the importance, but if you're reading a long book where that happens a lot, it just becomes tedious. You either don't need the pictures or you don't need the words because somehow they're telling the same story. So that's the literalness that I'm trying to push against, one way or the other.

And as far as the way I proceed to adapt a story into a comic, that's a whole other approach. I tend to work on the writing and the drawing at the same time, so I'll switch back and forth between writing bullet points that I want to illustrate, but also doing very small thumbnail drawings of what might happen from panel to panel. I have big binders of work here in my office, I'm seeing if I have anything here that's very convenient to show. I have binders of work that gathers all my sketches and drafts together, I really like to go back and forth between the two

parts of the process. I know there are some people that will write a full script first – but I actually like to resolve the words and the pictures at the same time. What I thought was fun about illustrating the itunes terms and conditions was that I had no choice. I just had to illustrate what they gave me. Of course, they didn't give it to me personally, I took it from their website. I just decided to do it on my own. So, in that case I just ran with what they wrote– which I knew was very verbose and unwieldy, and that was kind of the fun in doing it.

Robert De Roay: Thank you.

Camilla Anderson: Do you have a special process in identifying bullet points of what you think is the key or the essence of the story?

Robert Sikiryak: No. It's just a matter of reading the text again, and again, and again. Usually, like I mentioned in one of the videos, when I take a long novel and boil it down to a 10 or 14 page story I'll often look at what other adaptations have done. So, I'll watch movie adaptations, I'll read other comic book versions. I'll even look at the books that we have here called Cliffs Notes, I don't know if they have them over there, but they're study guides for kids who are cramming for exams.

Camilla Anderson: Yeah, we're familiar

Robert Sikiryak: So yeah, I'll even look at those. Sometimes they don't have the best solutions, but they have a solution. So, I like to look at every permutation and decide on what's most important. The other thing that's really valuable for me is what sources I'm combining. For instance, when I drew Crime and Punishment as a Batman story, I focused on the points in the novel which are most related to Batman. I was trying to tell the story strictly from the viewpoint of a superhero comic. While I didn't change what was in the book, I selected those elements that would support my premise. It's a back and forth kind of thing.

Camilla Anderson: That makes a lot of sense. Thank you. So, we have a question from Thomas Barton here who resides in California.

Thomas Barton Yeah, really fascinating work and thank you so much for staying up all night to take our questions. Thank you.

Robert Sikiryak: I'm so excited to talk to people about this stuff.

Camilla Anderson: We're so excited to have you here in video, so thank you.

Thomas Barton: I'm interested in objective and subjective and artistic licence and expression. To what extent do you think that when you illustrate any work of literature that you're editorialising or you're offering your own kind of slant or vision or emphasis of themes - do you consider yourself to be objective

standing apart from literature or do you see your role as communicating something significant like a literary critic. Do you think that it's inescapable that you act as a critic and the expressions you put on people's faces or the comic theme that you adopt for a given portion? How does that work?

Robert Sikoryak: That's a great question and that's a big question. But I think one of the reasons I like doing adaptation is I don't really trust adaptation. I shouldn't say that I don't trust it, but it's really hard to make one that's interesting. Someone once said that an adaptation is like a lover because they can be faithful, or they can be beautiful. It's hard to do both in an adaptation. You can be very literal minded and lay it all out, and it can be sort of satisfying to deliver the story that you like. But that could also be very tedious. Or, an adaptation that takes real liberties can be exciting and new, but you wouldn't want to use that to write a book report from, because it might have changed everything around.

So, for my comics – in a way I'm trying to do both, because I'm editorialising on the subject by the choice of the images. In trying to make a connection between the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* and the protagonist of Batman comics, that's obviously taking a stand and trying to make a point. On the other hand, when I choose those sources I try to be faithful to both, and that's where the absurdity comes in. Because I don't change the plot of *Crime and Punishment* to make it more like Batman, I just say, "No, I think these things belong together." And that kind of happens with any adaptation at some point, because people always bring their expectations or their editorialising to whatever they do. So what I'm trying to do is take the position of a Batman comics writer, and simultaneously take the editorial position of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and put them together. But I let them fight it out, so I'm watching them and trying to figure out how they fit together, and how they don't fit together. And that's how my work becomes funny – other times it might even become poignant. Sometimes the two things that I choose can work together very well, but when they don't, I still let them be what they are, knowing that the combination is absurd, and they don't belong together, but I still insist. I try to apply it from both sides.

Szhan Plandowski: What's your favourite graphic novel right now? What are you reading? Cause I see you have quite a lot behind you. Do you like [Meta mouse]?

Well I do a lot of research, and I read a lot of comics, so let's see... the new graphic novel I'm reading is "My Favourite Thing is Monsters," it's the graphic



novel that everyone seems to be reading right now. It's very good and it's a style that I would like to work with sometime – I don't know when, but it feels very different than any comics that I've seen. And the other thing that I'm reading is Dick Tracy. I'm working on a detective parody, and when I do one of my parodies I avidly read and reread the source materials. So I'm reading the classic Dick Tracy strips that are all back in print, all the stuff from the '50s and '60s. It's very brutal, very American. It was hugely popular and it's really good. So those are two things. I try to read contemporary stuff, but I'm often stuck in the past reading for reference.

Camilla Anderson: I think that's such a lovely question because if we lawyers are going to tear down silos we need to know that comics often aren't just comics. There is a plethora of different styles, writings and approaches and we have to get to know a little bit about that if we're going to be tearing down those silos and work with illustrators. So, thank you Szhan for your question and thank you Robert for your time. Can we all please give Robert a big hand!

## VI CONCLUSION

I thank the reader for indulging what is an unusual format for sharing research in law. However, it seems the most accurate way to depict a budding relationship between two silos; law and comic art.

This interview was significant to legal designers for a number of reasons. First of all, it reminded us that as we work in different silos we overlap, often through coincidence. Robert never set out to shake up the legal industry, but his work has certainly helped to do that. I keep asking him questions to get him to talk about the way he uses law in comics but that's not at all how he sees it. He's just doing comics. And as his answer to De Roy's question clarifies, he has no process for identifying the main points. He just immerses himself. In the iTunes book, he just happens to be using a lot of legalese as a vehicle for fun, outlining the initial distance between those silos; the lawyer's perspective and the comic book illustrator's perspective. How very thought provoking and worth sharing.

For me, the most startling aspect of these interviews was the retention of those boring words, in the context of images. People are contacting Robert saying "you made me read my iTunes terms" because his pictures have made the words accessible – even though there is such stark (and deliberate) contrast between them. "Even though I didn't want to read the text you made me read it!" It's a great way to make your clients accidentally read what you've prepared even if they

didn't want to. I think that is a very valuable, albeit accidental, contribution to the discussion of the value of images in law.

It was also very valuable to hear the questions asked and the answers given. The interaction of legal innovators with a comic artist brought some important issues to the forefront. Barton's question about the editing of text with images opens a new can of worms for legal designers, one which we have covered from other perspectives in other projects.

In the end, however, in Robert Sikoryak's own words, he is just a comic book writer having some fun with some legalese. But how many people can say that they're having fun with legalese? 😊